

Augustus Conant
The Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson-Doyle
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All of what we know, really, about Augustus Conant,
we learned from the biography of him by Robert Collyer.
There are few versions of this biography –
the title page for one you see here,
with the inscription:
to Dave Wiessbard and the UU Church of Rockford,
with Regards, Alan Deale.
Dave, who was the minister here for 27 years, and Alan, who was here for 12,
and I, are all successors to the Rev. Conant,
we stand Rank by Rank,
and today, on Augustus' 200th birthday,
we remember honored days and names we reckon,
days of comrades gone before,
lives that speak and deeds that beckon.

When Lindsay Bates, the minister at the Unitarian Society in Geneva,
suggested that we both preach about Augustus on this day,
I said sure,
without really knowing more than a paragraph's worth of history about the man.
He left Geneva, came to Rockford, was here 4 years, enlisted as a chaplain
in the civil war, died.

And I didn't really know what shape this sermon would take –
I didn't want to do a eulogy for the man,
nor that particular species of memory, a hagiography –
let us lift up this very human being and make of him a saint.
It's hard to avoid the hagiography in this case
because Collyer's biography is in that mode:
how great he was, what a good and decent man.
A "True American Type", as the subtitle of one edition reads.

It was when I got near the end of the biography and read that letter to his daughter, written from Elizabethtown,
Kentucky:
"For once in their lives, they had an opportunity to hear a little plain preaching on the subject of slavery, and I had
an opportunity to preach without hindrance, or fear of molestation, to slaveholders in a slave state."

It was then that a mode and model was suggested:
a little plain preaching.

Augustus is a fancy name, but he was a simple man.
His journal entries, which are reproduced in the biography,
give a picture of a straight-forward, clear-thinking, do-er.
He did not, it appears, perseverate.

Here are some typical entries, from when he was the minister in Geneva:

- Wrote on a sermon, read Neander, and made a wheelbarrow.
- Wrote a sermon on Episcopacy. Built an ice-house.
- Finished sermon, and haying.

Here are 5 entries from November of 1849:

- Nov. 12th. Went to Elgin with father, to build a cupola for the church.
- Nov. 22nd. Worked at cupola.
- 23rd. Raised cupola.
- 24th. Hung the bell.
- 25th. Preached in the church.
- 26th. Finished the cupola, and went home.

There's also a great entry from May 12, 1836. "Married Betsy Kelsey. Weather very fine and sunny."

It's almost sublime, isn't it, how direct he is?

And you can see as he learns and decided to follow his call to ministry.

In 1836, he is farming, newly married,
making wagons and helping build homes and making coffins.

In 1838, he picks up and reads a Unitarian magazine,

as many of you did in your lives,

oh, this is the religion that believes what I have always believed.

He preaches in his home to a small meeting.

He is invited to deliver a July 4th oration,

and accepts. He speaks against slavery, causing great controversy.

He goes to Chicago and meets with prominent Unitarians.

His wife and children encamped with his parents, he goes to Harvard and returns home 2 years later, to Geneva,
starts a Unitarian Church.

This land you see here is prairie and wetland near the Fox River, near Geneva.

This is the church in Geneva – when it was first built in the 1840's, it extended just the first three windows. In

1855, they added on two more,

and though it has new paint and carpet and lights,

this is pretty much how it has been for 160 years.

.....
A little plain preaching.

A sermon of Augustus' is included in the book,
and he did what we are instructed not to do now:
he numbered his points.

So, for today, I'll follow his example.

Three things from this life, this teaching,
these deeds which beckon 'cross the span of time,
three things for us to know and learn and do with our lives.

Three things which are true, again, today for our time.

1. Live Simple.

Our lives are so complicated sometimes.

We consume so much, buy so much, use up so much.

We've got all these things to do and things to connect us.

You take something that seems simple:

make it a loaf of bread:

but the wheat is from Nebraska and the sugar from Hawai'i

and then there are all those ingredients you can't even pronounce,
and it got made with machines,
some of which were built in Ohio and some in Korea and some in Mexico,
and then it got wrapped in plastic bag –
and don't even get me started about what it takes to make a plastic bag –

and put on a plastic crate,
and put on a truck – the parts for which came from all over the world,
and driven – powered by oil taken out of the ground in the Gulf of Mexico or North Dakota or Russia or the
Arabian peninsula,
driven to the store,
scanned by a computer,
picked up by a customer,
scanned by the computer again,
driven – again, oil –
to a house.

Then you put butter on it – and that's a whole other story.
Where the butter comes from.

These are the “simple” things –
the rest of everything is even more convoluted.
It isn't just that the world is deeply interconnected,
that product lines have many beginnings and ends,
it is that we have so many ways of living to choose from,
so many media choices,
so many theories about what's true and what's isn't,
so many cultures and stories and people.

Some of that is a good thing.
It's good to have choices,
and we value the diversity that comes with variety.

But sometimes we are completely overwhelmed.
Sometimes it feels like we don't really know what's important.
Sometimes we feel like we don't have a center to hold onto.

Augustus went to Boston, to Harvard,
and met all sorts of important people.
It was high culture.
The Unitarian aristocracy.
The Boston Brahmins.

And after his two years was up (now it is 4, by the way, on top of a Bachelor's, which Augustus never got),
he went home to the prairies and rivers of rural Illinois.
When he wanted bread, he cut the wheat, trashed it, and made it himself.
When he wanted butter, he built a churn, milked his cow, and made butter.

You might say, oh, that was a different time.
Who wants to walk from Detroit to Chicago nowadays, anyway?

Yet people all over the world –
some with the choice, and some who don't have a choice,
are living simple lives.

They may or may not be baking their own bread and building their own cupolas,
but they are trying to be closer to the land,
trying to do more themselves.

“live simple” is actually a bit of a misnomer,
because what we are actually talking about is being “less specialized.”
Being able to do more than one thing.

It’s also about weaving deep connections with a particular place –
the place you live.

When Augustus came to Rockford, he was 46,
and he had lived in Geneva, with the short break for Harvard,
since he was 23.

He didn’t really like living in Rockford.

It was fine, he said, but he missed the people and places he knew so well.
Neighborhood, locality, connections.

Live simple is a misnomer,
for it isn’t simple.

But directness, connection, a sense of place.

These things make for the good life,
and in a world of peak oil and climate change,
living locally, being robustly connected to the people near you,
getting closer the land – baking your own bread, if you will,
these things will be necessary and worthy.

They also produce, as Augustus’ own journals,
and as plenty of evidence before our own eyes shows us,
a better life.

Less frantic, more grounded.

Less disconnected, more fulfilling.

Less ugly, more beautiful.

This land is beautiful.

A life lived in harmony with the land and with others,
that is the beautiful life.

An object – a bench, a quilt, a flower garden, whatever it is,
something made with your own hands,
has a beauty to it, an elegance and joy.

It is pleasing to the soul.

The local, diverse but more simple life,
is beautiful and pleasing to the soul.

2. Reformation is better than punishment

The portion of the letter written by Augustus Conant
to Rev. Clarke in which he discusses sacrifice and repentance
well captures a central teaching of our faith –
not just 170 years ago,
but today, too.

The orthodox doctrine, Paul’s doctrine,
is well know:

God requires a sacrifice as atonement for the commission of sins.
The sacrifice of Jesus, on the cross, thus atones for our sins,
and make us clean in a new life.

This doctrine is preached in almost every Christian Church in the world,
now as it was then.
Every time someone says that Jesus died for their sins, this is what they mean.
Vicarious Atonement, it is called.

Every time you hear someone say that this moment of suffering is a test of God,
a trial, or a punishment for their mistakes, this is what they mean.

And it is on this point that our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors diverged from other Christians, more than six
generations ago.

First, we said and say, sin is its own punishment.
Your soul shrivels with greed,
your life grows dark with fear,
your passion is distorted in anger.
You might get short-term pleasure,
but the true joy, the true beauty of the good life is lost to those who seek pain and injustice.

Second, we said and we say, God is a God of Love.
We are merely finite, and the wrong we do is finite.
But God is infinite, and God's love is infinite.
And Love is the primary and essential characteristic of God.
Not sappy sentimentalism,
but the powerful love with prods and encourages us to human fulfillment,
the love which comforts in despair and which transforms us when we cannot
transform ourselves.
It is not a love that casts out.

Therefore, there is no hell.
Therefore, no one had to die to atone for our mistakes.
Therefore, reformation and repentance is better than punishment and alienation.
Therefore, the question is not, "what shall we do to assure a future life of bliss?", but instead, "what shall we do to
make this world, the one we live in now, together, better and more beautiful?"

This is the essential idea of Unitarianism and Universalism,
it was the content of the Western Messenger which drew Conant into this faith,
it was the content of his sermons and his writing,
it is what we still hold true to this day.

There was a time, around 1900, when we thought that everyone was about to agree with us,
and that Unitarianism and Universalism would be no longer necessary as distinct traditions.
But alas, the conservatives and the orthodox awoke,
and are wakeful still.

They preach today, at churches down the street, across town, and around the world,
that sin is punished by God in an afterlife,
that a carpenter's son and a prophet of love had to bleed out on a wooden instrument of death as a sacrifice for our
wickedness
and that, therefore, if you suffer in this life
it is because you have not believed correctly,

or because God is testing you.

We do not believe that.

More. We reject that entirely.

We affirm, with Augustus Conant and Rev. Clarke and all the preachers and leaders and people of our living tradition,

we affirm that, though people sometimes make mistakes,

they are good and worthy of respect,

that whatever is ultimate and holy, call it god or something else or nothing at all, aims us toward beauty, kindness, and wisdom,

we believe that justice is about restoration and not about punishment,

and we believe death and pain and suffering are tragic,

and that no one should have to suffer to be redeemed.

Conant preached that from this pulpit in 1857,

and we believe it still,

though now as then, the world 'round us may disagree.

3. Slavery is wrong.

A little plain preaching. Slavery is wrong.

Augustus was an abolitionist, he believed slavery was wrong, and should be ended.

It was this sentiment, opposed by too many in the Geneva congregation, which brought him to Rockford.

The Unitarian church here was happy to have an anti-slavery preacher.

Which is to say, the concern of this congregation for racial justice is not new.

Augustus Conant fought for it then, and so did Dr. Kerr and Dr. Connolly, and so did Jack Mendelssohn and Alan Deale and Tony Perrino and Dave Wiessbard and so do I. I'm proud to stand in that line, though I'm sad we're still fighting and haven't already won.

What I hope you see today, though, is that Augustus' commitment – slavery is wrong –

is deeply connected to the first two points:

live simple, and suffering is wrong.

Conant's version of living simply is interdependence –

you and your neighbors, you and your family, you and the land, you work together.

You support each other.

What one needs, the other might give,

but next time it might be the other way.

Interdependence, mixed with independence –

that you don't depend for your basic existence on things you don't understand, processes in which you don't participate, or processes which depend on violence.

Slavery, on the other hand, is based on oppression.

Not interdependence and mutual respect,

but commoditization and violence.

We look back now and think,

how could anyone have supported slavery?

But they did.

They said, oh, it's complicated.

They marshaled arguments economic, constitutional, and biblical.
Conant saw it with his own eyes, judged it wrong, and said so.
Simple.

It was also his commitment to the god of love,
and to the notion that no one must be sacrificed for another,
which gave the theological underpinning of his argument on slavery.
One of the specious arguments for that “peculiar institution”
was that Africans were descended from Ham, one of Noah’s sons,
who had sinned, and thus all the line was cursed.
This, of course, is absurd, and Conant’s theology made clear
that no God worth devotion or respect would work that way.

Slavery, as a legal, sanctioned practice, is long gone.
But something like slavery lives on today in our time –
when workers are locked in factories for days at a time,
when violence and death are used to bust unions around the world,
when the world’s poor have no food but what they can get by picking through garbage dumps,
when coyote’s and smuggler’s lock immigrant teenage girls in basements,
and charge at the door,
then slavery is still happening.

If we saw it with our own eyes, we would know it was wrong, and we would say so.
Many do, every day.
But more voices ought be raised.
If the 99% are to be allied together, then we must count these modern enslaved people as part of us, part of our
99%.

Conant found slavery wrong because he knew in his heart
that no one is supposed to suffer on behalf of someone else’s greed.
That seems like a principle we can get behind,
yet many today do suffer for someone else,
or for the idea that they must be cursed by God to suffer so,
and thus it is fated, and we should not interfere in God’s plan.

You hear this theology at work today.

The gay teen suffers because of God’s will,
not because adults refuse to punish and stop bullies.

The landless Chiapan farmer suffers because of the impersonal forces of history,
not because a very particular rich multinational wanted the land.

The Indian Dalit suffers because the Gods ordained it so,
not because having a permanent underclass serves the economic needs of the upperclass.

We say no.
We say, all people are worthy,
and no one – no one – not you, not the person next to you,
no one should have to suffer for someone else’s pleasure,
or because of someone else’s mistakes.

They do, we know, but they shouldn’t have to,
and we resolve ourselves,

this day,
this day we resolve ourselves, once again,
to make the world better than it is,
to fight for what is right, what is just, and what is beautiful.

Lives that speak and deeds that beckon.
From across the span of time,
our forefathers and foremothers still have something to teach us.
History moves on, the technology changes,
and the challenges and hopes of a new era
replace the old.

Yet, the human condition does not really change.
We are pulled by a multiplicity of forces and impulses.
We are dazzled by the fancy and complicated,
yet we feel content and happy when we live in harmony with the land
and with our neighbors.
Simple things: a walk along the river, a meal with friends, a good story –
these things are worthy and beautiful.

We feel an urge for revenge against those who do us harm,
and we think that if there is something ultimate and powerful,
that force, that deity, will get revenge for us, will punish the wicked,
yet revenge never feels as good as we think it will,
and restoration, the healing of the broken, forgiveness and mending,
this is better, this satisfies the soul, this brings hope.
And in our clear-headed moments, we know that no power worth respect,
no divinity worth love, would be a petty tyrant.

And, yes, we feel and urge to control the lives of others.
A sense that we know what's best for them,
and, fancy that, what's best for them is to serve our needs;
and, also, we feel a urge to look away –
to say, well, that's someone else's problem.

But deeper in our soul, stronger in our heart,
is the knowledge that all people are brothers and sisters,
that no person should be subject to another's will,
that no person should suffer for the pleasure of another,
and we know that, no matter who we are,
and no matter what controversy it might cause,
it is for us to say so.

The human condition doesn't change, not really.
And so these lives of bravery, of courage, of moral sentiment,
these ancestors of ours,
they speak to us still,
calls us to be, as the song goes, "monarch and creed defying"
fighting for freedom, for love, for justice, and for life.