

Ambulatory Luminaries

Did you ever notice that the numerous rooms off the Ambulatory of our church are named after (you might have guessed) various Unitarian or Universalist luminaries? This is the sixth of several articles that will attempt to shine a light on who these Ambulatory Luminaries were and why they merit the honor of being named to these locations. About the ambulatory

William Ellery Channing, 1780-1842 (Room 8) by Toni Gold

William Ellery Channing was the foremost Unitarian preacher in the United States in the early nineteenth century and one of Unitarianism's leading theologians. He is the first of our Ambulatory Luminaries born in the United States. Channing was known for his articulate and impassioned sermons, public speeches, and as a prominent thinker in the liberal theology of the day. He rejected the Calvinist doctrines of total depravity and divine election.

Channing was called as pastor of the Federal Street Church in Boston in 1803, where he remained for the rest of his life. He served on the Board of the Harvard Corporation, 1813-26, and worked toward the 1816 establishment of the Harvard Divinity School. He lived through the increasing tension between religious liberals and conservatives and took a moderate position, rejecting the extremes of both groups.

His famous "Baltimore Sermon" of 1819, entitled "Unitarian Christianity," explicated the distinctive tenets of the developing Unitarian movement, one of which was the rejection of the Trinity. Other important tenets were the belief in human goodness and the subjection of theological ideas to the light of reason. In 1828 he gave another famous sermon, entitled "Likeness to God." The idea of the human potential to be like God that Channing advocated as grounded firmly in scripture, was seen as heretical by the Calvinist religious establishment of his day. It is in this address that Channing first advocated the possibility for revelation through reason rather than solely from Scripture.

He expressed sentiments as much appreciated by the orthodox as by liberals in his audience. But Channing went on to pronounce a spiritual and intellectual manifesto which voiced the germ of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendental movement. "I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, while consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself."
