

“What Endures?”
First Church in Boston
May 25, 2025

“What Endures: the AUA at 200”
Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

When my grandmother was born in 1922, her parents named her Betty Lou. As I *remember* the story, her doctor gave a rose bush to my great-grandmother, a variety also named Betty. Planted and replanted from house to house, the bush still blooms in my mother’s garden 103 years later. Anticipating that I will become the next caretaker of the rose, I have planted roses for the last decade or so, hoping to learn what I need to know to help a rose bush endure.

Like the Betty rose linking generations, memories are living tendrils that entwine the present, past and future. While memories can flicker, not all memories are fragile. As the story of [Willifred Gordon McDonald Partridge](#) reminds us, memories can be fiercely resilient, suddenly emerging with vibrant color, scent, and sound within and around us.

On this eve of the anniversary of the founding of the American Unitarian Association (AUA) on May 26, 1825 in Boston, what might we remember of our own story as a church?

Do we remember the financial pain of May 1825? The First Church records of 1824 and into 1825 make clear that the Society was in debt due to necessary repairs to the building they had just moved into seventeen years earlier.

Or do we consider how the Revolutionary War was still personal memory to many—not yet codified into the histories we tell day. A stone for a monument had been laid in Concord the month before and another would be laid in Bunker Hill in June. Survivors of the battle were expected to attend. In other words, they were building monuments of their memories so that future generations—*like us*—might remember their experiences and values.

Also that May, the Federal Street church with its famous Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing, gathered for the fifth time to hear a “Berry Street Lecture” to promote Unitarian thinking. And yet, that same Channing refused to join the newly formed AUA, fearing the power of institutions over the free thinking of individuals. After the recent years of religious friction and fracture among the liberals and conservatives of Boston, Channing was not the only one skeptical of joining an association.

Days after the May 26 formation of the AUA, the June 4, 1825 issue of the weekly Boston-based *Christian Register*, included a notice for a meeting of “The Bible Society of Massachusetts” to be held on Thursday, June 9, at 11 o’clock at the First Church. Beyond these particulars, the announcement added *“As this is one of the few religious societies remaining, which is entirely free from a sectarian bias...it is hoped, that we can feel interested in a cause, which does not exclusively favour our sectarian peculiarities.”* Decades later First Church minister Rev. Nathaniel Langdon Frothingham remembered this schismatic time writing, *“We have loved to dwell within ourselves, and disliked to implicate our concerns with those of other churches, or with any associations of men.”* Trying to stay out of the fray, First Church chose isolation over association.

In the same moment, the younger Henry Ware, minister of the Second Church in Boston was chief among those who formed the AUA and served in its leadership for many of its earliest years. An essay written in [1900 for the *New England Magazine*](#) explains, neither Ware nor Ezra Stiles Gannett, Channing’s Associate minister, were *“sectarian in aim or method; but they wished to work with those who thought as they did, and they wished to have an opportunity of doing something to aid the cause which they had at heart, the restoration of the simple religion of Jesus Christ.”* (Vol. XXII. No. 3. May 1900, p. 329) In other words, they just wanted to organize themselves with others to do some good in the world.

As a congregation today with a story older than the nation or the city itself, what do we choose to remember? As an institution that includes the mergers with multiple congregations—including that of Ware’s Second Church, whose stories do we chose to tell today? What endures in the records tucked into shelves at the Mass Historical Society? What has been lost to the choices of earlier generations on what to archive or not? What different choices could we make today in what we choose to remember? What might we choose to memorialize in our moment for future generations—and why?

“What Endures: Meeting This Moment”

Rev. Mary Katherine Morn

Thank you, Stephanie, for this invitation to be part of today’s service. I’m grateful for your ministry and the ministry of this congregation that has been nurturing my spirit this last year.

And it's been a year when my spirit has needed much. Your warm welcome, this inspiring space, the words and prayers of Stephanie and Lindsay, and the many gifts of music were received and cherished by me. Thank you.

And I love the question about what endures. I'm also interested in the implicit question: how do we ensure that what is worthy endures? Especially when we are living in times when so much is collapsing or under threat of collapse. Does that sound overly dramatic? Suddenly, it seems, we can't count on what we've counted on before. My experience of this, though, and maybe yours, reveals a privileged life--This moment we are having to meet is like many other moments.

My current work reveals this tension. At the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee we partner with communities around the globe working for human rights and we support just and equitable humanitarian response in times of disaster. The collapse of democratic systems is old news to so many of our partners. The devastating impact of climate change has **already** displaced communities UUSC works with.

And further, again and again those communities have rebuilt, created new systems for sustaining life, and toppled centers of autocracy and abuse. Always things are dying and new things are being born.

Still, the changes around us right now, in this nation and on this planet, are shaking us. What can we count on? What is called for from us?

Activist and educator adrienne marie brown speaks to the change and the challenge of these times, and she wrote this in 2017: *we are living in impossible times. If it were fiction it would be critiqued as hyperbolic. If it were nightmares we would never sleep. ...our visions are ropes through the devastation. ...look further ahead, like our ancestors did, look further. Extend, hold on, pull, evolve.*

Our visions are ropes that hold us and lead us to what is yet realized. But as Stephanie has already reminded us, our vision must be grounded in what we have learned from our ancestors, their wisdom and their short-sightedness. And it's not always easy to tell the difference.

In 1841, in Baltimore, Rev. Theodore Parker preached an ordination sermon asking this question. The Transient and Permanent in Christianity. Parker challenged the congregation to hold firmly to what is truly permanent in religion, and shake off the fixed notions that we have grown beyond, or that no longer serve us, what is transient.

Anyone, who traces the history of what is called Christianity, will see that nothing changes more from age to age than the doctrines taught as Christian, and insisted on as essential to Christianity and personal salvation. What is falsehood in one province passes for truth in another. The heresy of one age is the orthodox belief and "only infallible rule" of the next...

Parker went on to challenge much of the establishment Unitarianism of his day, with his radical theology and his social progressive efforts, including his efforts for abolition, which included helping to fund and later defending John Brown's efforts to start a slave insurrection in Virginia.

We celebrate his wisdom and his work for reform and justice. What we often forget is that Parker was reviled by most of his colleagues during his lifetime. He went too far. He flaunted law enforcement's efforts to maintain order. He is asking too much, too fast. This is a humbling reminder for us today as we are challenged by all that is lost, or all that is at risk, all that must give way to something new. So especially in times of great change, we all long for something that is timeless and will hold us, if we hold on. But what is the right rope to hold?

Parker said it is "the eternal truth of God." Whew, I'm glad that's cleared up. I like your way of saying it better, Stephanie, "to organize ourselves with others in order to do some good in the world."

I would say it is love, Divine Love. Or maybe (capital "L") Life and the love that makes the flourishing of Life possible.

We can meet this ordinary and extraordinary moment by faithfully working to protect Life and Love in the face of all that would tear it down. To call for human rights for all people. To remember that because our vision is limited, we need the wisdom of memory and hope that is fired in the gift and discipline of community. And that even though we will fail, again and again, each of us and all of us can take one small next action for the sake of love. And that is not a small thing.

Here, held in the hard-won memory and hope of this community, we *Look further ahead, further still. Extend, hold on, pull, evolve.* Together, may we discover the love that calls us. The love that holds us.

"What Endures: Tomorrow?"

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

Thank you Mary Katherine for being part of today's service and for reminding us of Parker's challenge to shake off what no longer serves us, even as we hold fast to what is eternal.

So much has changed since the founding of First Church in 1630 and the creation of the American Unitarian Association in 1825. One great change was the merger of Unitarians and Universalists in 1961.

To the Unitarian heritage of a free and reasoned faith, Universalism brought a legacy of a deep and broad love. Universalist [Olympia Brown](#) is known as the first woman to achieve full ministerial standing recognized by a denomination. As we heard a moment ago, Brown believed that her Universalist faith merited loyal work and sacrifice. A vision of inclusive love may not bring immediate results, she acknowledged. And yet, she urges the ongoing work of centering Love in ever new applications.

Today is the 5th anniversary of the killing of George Floyd. For many, Floyd's brutal death awakened the need to dismantle racial prejudice in policing and more broadly to assert "Black Lives Matter." This was an application of Love that insisted on the worthiness of Black lives. And sadly, I read this morning that conservatives are attempting to revise the story of Floyd's death as the result of his ill health, even suggesting that his killer be pardoned.

The past is not only behind us. Rather, the tendrils of the past, present, and future continually entwine in a living river of memory and story. In this moment, how we choose to remember the past conveys our sense of what we hope endures and what is transient. Moreover, the stories we tell today impact the directions we move into an unknown future.

When you imagine the future, what do you hope endures for our descendants? Community? Freedom? Democracy? Justice? An inclusive and equitable Love? When I think about caring for my grandmother's rose, I do not feel confident that I can keep the bush alive amidst changing the climate and my own divided attention. But I will try! However, even if the rose bush dies, the gifts of Life and Love received from my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother's care will still remain.

We are all descendants and ancestors. The tendrils of Life and Love bind together the generations, even amidst great changes. In our moment, we face different challenges than

our ancestors in 1825 or our descendants will in 2125. None of us can control the future, but we can choose to move together in mutual love, joining with others to do some good in the world. Associating with others within and beyond the walls of this church can strengthen this shared work. Ever entwined with the past, present, and future, may we *“Extend, hold on, pull, evolve”* as we help Life and Love to flourish.

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.