

Reading and reflection given at UUCE, January 4th, 2009

My Religious Experience

There came a great white light to shine round about me.
And I walked in this light,
And my footsteps were firmer than they before had been.
And I rejoiced in this light and in the ease it gave me in walking.
And I rejoiced in the soul peace it gave me.
For I could now see that God is good.
That he is good for something
For much
Undoubtedly for more than I can comprehend.
This light came from the published sermons of Theodore Parket which
I now read for the first time.
Then came additional light from other sources, for up to this time,
I had not known Channing or Emerson or James Freeman Clarke
or Edward Everett Hale.
I doubt whether Paul rejoiced more in the light that came to him
than I rejoiced in this.
Then came light from another and different source.
Shall I say from a lower source?
It did not seem so to me.
Darwin's wonderful discovery was revealed.
And I saw God, not only in the soul of man, and the evolution of a planet,
but in the tiniest insect flying through the air, the tiniest blade
of grass.
This great universe was doubled to my comprehension.
My faith in God was increased.
Then Richard Proctor told me of the wonders of the stellar universe
And Tyndall of the wonder of radiation.
John Ruskin told of the ethics of the dust
And Matthew Arnold of the best that has been thought and said in the
world
Martineau of the reasonableness - the Godlikeness - of it all.
It was a life wonderful in its opportunities that had been given me.

Rev. Stephen Peebles, c. 1909

Unitarian Beginnings in Eugene

Those words were written a 100 years ago by the Rev. Stephen Peebles, founding minister of this church. It's 2009 and all this year we're going to be celebrating our centennial. This morning I'm going to tell you about some of the events that led up to the first Unitarian church service in Eugene, held on September 18th, 1909 and I'm going to introduce you to a few of the remarkable people who founded this church.

The first decade of the 20th century saw the population of Eugene triple, from about 3000 to 9000, the most rapid rate of growth this city has ever experienced, growth that moved the town from eighth to fourth largest in Oregon. Several of these newcomers would play important roles in the establishment of the Unitarian Church.

Now there were already Unitarians in Eugene. The earliest of these, as far as we know, was a physician named Andrew Patterson who arrived in 1852. Finding the residents of the area so healthy there was little need of his doctoring skills he turned to surveying and in 1854 he laid out the first streets in Eugene. Patterson street is named after him. He died in 1904 and so did not live to see a Unitarian Church in Eugene but his widow, three of his daughters, his son-in-law and three of his grandsons would all be charter members of this church.

In January of 1909, the country was awaiting the inauguration of a new president just as we are today. That president was William Howard Taft, a Unitarian. Religion then as now was a factor in elections and in 1908 the local papers had run articles explaining Unitarianism. This had piqued the interest of a 19 year old University of Oregon student named Benjamin Harrison Williams, a native born Eugenean, and the second of three sons of a prominent local lawyer.

Ben would play a central role in the early years of this church but it was newcomers who would do the actual organizing. The first of these I want to tell you about is Stephen Peebles whose words I used for this morning's reading. He was born to Quaker parents in Ohio in 1844. His mother, a school teacher, probably gave him his only formal education and may have instilled in him the passion for learning that shaped his life. We don't know when he discovered William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker and other 19th century Unitarians but after he moved to Colorado, where he farmed and taught school, he started gathering neighbors on Sunday so he could read the words of these Unitarian ministers and others to them. In 1890 he heard about a Unitarian minister in Denver named Samuel Eliot and took 11 of his neighbors to hear him. Eliot was so impressed by Peebles that he became his mentor and in 1892 arranged for him to be ordained. His ministerial activities thereafter are described as missionary work in Colorado. Samuel Eliot went on to become the president of the American Unitarian Association

and in 1906 he wrote to the Rev. William Thurston Brown, field secretary for the Rocky Mountain Department of the AUA, urging him to pay a visit to Peebles. "I can never be other than glad for the brief call on that brave spirited, noble-hearted, clear-minded soul, Mr. Peebles... I have met few men like him," Brown wrote to Eliot. "Of course, he does not live altogether in the world of 1906, as you and I know it – but no one enters more feelingly or with greater personal satisfaction into the world of thought in which walked the great thinkers and leaders of our noble communion. I was quite shamed at my own lack of knowledge in some of the spheres he discoursed upon.... ...he is a man whose moral sense has kept pace with his intellectual growth. Of course, one can not help seeing that it is only a peculiar situation that he can fit into – and no one sees that better than he...." Peebles would find that "peculiar situation" in Eugene where he moved in the winter of 1908 1909 to live on his son's farm south of Goshen. He was 64 years old but not yet ready to retire from the ministry. So he wrote to the Rev. William G. Eliot, minister of the Unitarian Church in Portland for help in starting a church in Eugene and was advised to get in touch with Rose Osburn who, with her husband Frank, was proprietor of the Hoffman House hotel and restaurant in Eugene. There's a picture of Hoffman House, which was at the corner of Broadway and Willamette, on the wall in the foyer.

Rose was born Rosa Zwickel in 1859 in Nuremburg, Germany and immigrated to the US at the age of 11. After the death of her first husband she, with her two young sons moved to Portland in 1890, where she worked for the Oregonian as a typesetter. There she met and married, Frank Osburn, another typesetter and a native of Lane County. During the 1890s both Osburns were active in the typesetter's union, serving as secretary and treasurer of that organization. It was also in Portland that Rose probably became acquainted with Thomas Lamb Eliot, founding minister of the Portland church and father of the William G. Eliot to whom Peebles would write for help. It was likely he who would have known the Osburns and suggested Rose's name to his son.

I hope you're not getting confused with all the Eliots. Thomas Lamb Eliot is the Eliot for whom the Pacific Northwest District's Eliot Institute is named and is not to be confused with his son William or his distant cousin Samuel Eliot whom we've already met in Denver, or for that matter with Charles Eliot, then president of Harvard, or T. S. Eliot, the poet, or any of the other famous Eliots all members of the same family!

But back to our story. Peebles got in touch with Rose Osburn who suggested he talk to Dr. Jean Du Buy, who like her was a German immigrant. Unlike Peebles, who had little formal education, Du Buy probably had way too much. He earned a JUD, which is a kind of double doctorate in both canon and civil law, from the University of Heidelberg. Then he immigrated to the US where he earned a Phd from Yale. He then attended Yale Divinity School for a year. Finally, in 1895 at the age of 30

he stopped taking classes and began a life as a kind of itinerant scholar. He taught for a year or so at one institution after another for the next 12 years. One year was spent at Meadville Theological School which is now part of Meadville-Lombard, the Unitarian Universalist seminary in Chicago. During the academic year of 1905-1906 he was one half of the philosophy department at Stanford University. The other half was the famous philosopher and psychologist, William James, who was taking a sabbatical year from Harvard. They were both there in 1906 when the great San Francisco earthquake struck with sufficient force that it threw James out of his bed in Palo Alto. We don't know why Du Buy came to Eugene. He seems never to have taught at the University of Oregon but he spent the rest of his life here.

So Peebles got together with Du Buy and the two men decided to hold a series of Sunday afternoon discussions on comparative religion at Dr. Du Buy's home at the corner of 11th and High. Between 20 and 30 people attended those meetings 100 years ago this winter to hear lectures on the different religions of the world. At one of the meetings someone asked Peebles for a definition of God. There was a dead silence. Then Mr. Peebles after careful thought said "When you see me you see God, and when I see you I see God."

The person who remembered this exchange 25 years later when he was interviewed for a church history was a Scotsman named Dugald Campbell. He and his wife, Agnes, who was usually called Nanny, were both born in Campbelltown, Scotland. Dugald grew up on a tenant farm where his family raised sheep for the Duke of Argyll. The Campbells were evicted from the farm following a bank failure in 1879 and in 1881 Dugald and a brother immigrated to the US soon to be followed by the rest of the family. They settled in North Dakota where Campbell raised Argyll sheep and cattle on a 6,000 acre ranch. He made one return trip to Scotland in 1896 where he apparently renewed acquaintanceship with Nanny Gilkison. In 1898 she too came to America and the two were married that year in Chicago. Two children, Ian and Flora, soon followed. It was the desire for a better education for these children that led Nanny and Dugald to move to Eugene in 1908 where they built a house on Fairmount Boulevard that still stands today and is owned by our own Eve McConnaughey. Dugald had been raised a Presbyterian and had even helped start a Presbyterian Church in North Dakota but according to family legend, he walked out of a Presbyterian Church service one Sunday announcing that he couldn't belong to a church that believed babies were born sinful.

After one of the Sunday afternoon meetings, Du Buy asked Campbell to stay behind to talk to Peebles about starting a Unitarian Church. These three men then went to Rose Osburn to arrange an organizational meeting at the Hoffman House. Now Rose, in addition to knowing Thomas Lamb Eliot, the first minister of the Portland church,

also new the second minister, Earl Morse Wilbur. Some of you may recognize that name. In 1909 he was President of what is now known as Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, the Unitarian seminary he had started in 1904. He would become even more famous later when he wrote what is still the definitive history of Unitarianism. Rose arranged for Wilbur to come to Eugene in May of 1909 where he met at the Hoffman House with Peebles, the Campbells, the Du Buys, and a dozen others. They agreed to start holding Unitarian Church services that fall with Peebles acting as minister until a permanent minister could be found.

So it was that the first service was held that September at the Hoffman. In early October a temporary board of four members, two of whom were Dugald Campbell and Ben Williams, was selected to run the church until it was formally organized. In January of 1910 the first regular minister, Arthur Hayes Sargent arrived. On four successive Sundays in February and March 42 people signed the membership book as charter members and on March 6th they voted to apply for membership in the American Unitarian Association. Bylaws were adopted and the first board of trustees was elected. That board included Rose Osburn as vice president, Ben Williams as secretary and Dugald Campbell as a trustee.

This church was extremely fortunate in those early years in having two friends in high places, Samuel Eliot in Boston who helped finance the first church building on the corner of 11th and Ferry and Earl Wilbur who helped find ministers. With their help and the work of many other extraordinary men and women this church survived and grew and is still here a 100 years later. You will be able to learn more about this history from the activities planned for this year by the Centennial Celebration Committee and by reading the new church history which the Archives Committee expects to publish later this year. This morning all I have time to tell you about is what happened to the half dozen founders I have mentioned today.

Peebles served twice more for a total of about six months as interim minister of this church. He remained in Eugene until 1918 when his wife died and then he moved back to Colorado to live with his daughter and son-in-law who was the sheriff in Grand Junction. He died there in 1926 at the age of 82. He considered the founding of the Eugene church to be the proudest achievement of his work as a minister.

Jean DuBuy gave some lectures to the young people during the early years of the church but he never became a member and soon disappears from the church records. He died in Eugene in 1945.

Ben Williams was elected student body president of the University of Oregon for the 1909-1910 school year. He also was a pole vaulter on the track team. He served on the Board of Trustees for most of the first decade of the church's existence except for a year spent in Portland and

service in World War I. He eventually earned a PhD and became a professor of Political Science at the University of Pittsburgh. He wrote many books and papers some of which are still in print today. He wrote a letter on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of this church giving his recollections of our beginnings. He died in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1981.

1909 was a sad year for Rose Osburn because her older son died that summer at the age of 28. That was also the year that Rose and Frank completed the building of the Hotel Osburn, then Eugene's finest hotel. It occupied much of the block where the county courthouse now stands across from the park blocks in downtown Eugene. For the first dozen years or so of the church's existence the Annual Meeting would be convened after a Sunday service and then immediately adjourned until the following Thursday at which time everyone assembled at the Hotel Osburn for a banquet prior to electing new board members and conducting other church business. Rose and Frank liked to travel. They made at least one trip to Asia and two to Europe. During the trip in 1924, which was going to be a trip around the world, they were summoned back from Paris by the death of Rose's surviving son. He was 40 years old. Frank died two years later in 1926. Rose served continuously on the Board of Trustees from 1910 until 1927 at which time she was made an honorary lifetime member of the Board. She died in 1937 at the age of 78 and her old friend, Earl Morse Wilbur, conducted her funeral service.

Dugald Campbell too, served on the Board of Trustees, from 1910 until 1927, and was then also made an honorary lifetime member of the Board. Dugald and Nanny were more than a little successful in educating their children. Flora earned an MD degree from the University of Oregon Medical school in Portland and Ian earned a Phd in geology from Harvard. He went on to such a distinguished career that the highest award given by the American Geological Institute is called the Ian Campbell Medal and there is a peak in the Sierra Nevada named Mount Ian Campbell.

Dugald and Nanny also kept the tradition of Sunday afternoon salons alive and the gatherings in their home on Fairmount Boulevard became legendary. Dugald died in 1937 and Nanny just a few months later in 1938. They were both so well known and loved in Eugene that their deaths resulted in editorials in the local papers in addition to the usual obituaries. Here is an excerpt from the editorial that followed Nanny's death:

"It is not given to many men to realize and appreciate how fully a wife may enfold herself in her love for her husband.... Men should be very humble in the face of so great and sacrificial a blessing..... In 1908 the Campbell family moved to Eugene, to the great good fortune of the city... They were such a couple as a fortunate person may encounter once in a long lifetime. Dugald was a positive but infinitely kindly man, a man of

thought and courageous expression. Nannie was the gracious hostess who poured countless cups of fragrant tea for the stream of friends who came regularly of Sunday afternoons.... Dugald was the counselor, pundit and guide; Nannie was the confidant.”

Earlier, in 1922, Cora Andrews, the first church historian wrote about the Campbells: “...one family we know in music – in money – in constant attendance, in personal thought and care have been, through all the dark days and bright days, discouragement and hope – failure and success, just steadily the heart of the church.”

The Campbell story does not end with their deaths. In their wills they left a little under \$900 to the church to be administered by the AUA in Boston. That’s about \$13,000 in today’s money. We have been receiving a small quarterly dividend from that money ever since. Thus the Campbells have been supporting this church for the last 100 years and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

This rich legacy of Nanny and Dugald and the other founding mothers and fathers of this church is now ours to hand on to future generations with the hope that a 100 years from now, they too will say with a heritage such as ours, how can we keep from singing?

Gil Osgood – January 4th, 2009