

Wedgwood: Fired By Faith

Rev. Craig M. Nowak
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society
October 8, 2023

On a Saturday evening in 1790, at a private exhibition in the home of Sir Joseph Banks, people gathered to view the results of a daring feat of the ceramicist's art. In attendance were such influential figures as the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds and the historian, writer, and politician, Horace Walpole. A contemporary account of the event said of the object on view, "It is most exquisitely finished...equal to the original..." (Brooks 147) The "original" to which the reviewer refers is a masterpiece of ancient Roman cameo glass known as the Portland Vase, which first arrived in England in 1778 and is now housed in the British Museum in London. The vase on view in the home of Sir Joseph Banks on that Saturday evening in 1790 was a copy, modeled in a type of stoneware known as Jasperware, by the now legendary ceramicist and potter, Josiah Wedgwood.

Some two-hundred and twenty years later, Wedgwood's copy of the Portland Vase is better known than the ancient glass original that inspired it. Less well known to many, if not most, is the significant claim Wedgwood's religious and philosophical beliefs made upon his life and the way they influenced his imagination, work, and relationships.

In many ways Wedgwood's life demonstrates two crucial points made in our readings this morning... Elandria Williams' assertion, "If we believe in the promise of our faith, we must continue pushing forward." And Jonipher Kwong's observation that,
"Faith without works is dead
But works without faith is just as lifeless."

Josiah Wedgwood was born into a world, pregnant with great political, religious, and philosophical angst and human possibility. The Enlightenment or Age of Reason, as it was also known, had ushered in a progressive spirit with emphasis on the values of freedom, democracy, and reason. The humanism of the Renaissance had carried over into the centuries that followed with it an increased interest in scientific inquiry. By the mid-18th century the invention of the steam engine clearly marked the start of the industrial revolution. Politically, the era witnessed Enlightenment values carried to their logical ends in the form of revolution in America and just over a decade later, in France.

In England religious unrest and persecution had eased somewhat after most religious nonconformists, that is, non-Anglicans, were granted the right to hold public

worship...most that is, except Catholics and Unitarians or Dissenters as they were called. (Howe 142)

Josiah Wedgwood was born into a family of potters. Although his family owned and operated their own pottery works, they were desperately poor. Josiah's mother, Mary, was the daughter of a Unitarian minister, the Reverend Samuel Stringer, who, according to Wedgwood biographer Brian Dolan, taught her that, "knowledge based upon reason, experience, and experiment was preferable to dogma." (Dolan 34-35) Widowed when Josiah was just nine years of age, Mary took it upon herself to impart this central principle of liberal religion to her family.

The death of his father forced Josiah to give up school to help with the family business. As a teen Josiah became an apprentice to his older brother, the established way people of his social class learned their trade. Having internalized another principle of his Unitarian faith which emphasized resourcefulness and adaptability in the face of change, young Wedgwood was eager to make something of himself.

His ambitions and life were threatened when he contracted smallpox. Though he survived, he suffered permanent damage to one of his legs. Despite the pain and added hardship that accompanied it (pottery making is a highly physical job), Wedgwood fulfilled the obligations of his apprenticeship and became a master potter.

Shortly thereafter Wedgwood entered into a junior partnership with the noted potter, Thomas Whieldon, where he began to experiment with glazes, clays, and shapes. There, Dolan notes, "Josiah's ambitions were informed by the religious...principles preached by his Unitarian minister grandfather. He had been taught to believe that there were resources within nature that could benefit those educated to identify and use them." (Dolan 44)

Indeed, Wedgwood, as a religious liberal firmly believed in salvation through education and learning as well as empowerment and personal growth. Sinfulness was seen as the product of ignorance, imperfection, or immaturity rather than an inherent state. Wedgwood applied this understanding not only to himself, but to the workers at his pottery works.

The workmen at the pottery works at that time were largely uneducated, poor, and often itinerates with a penchant for rowdy behavior and drunkenness. Wedgwood sought to address this by working closely with the workmen so he could teach them and help them refine their skills. Each morning he would sit alongside them at the workbenches demonstrating what he needed and expected them to make. While this practical approach undoubtedly helped his business as much as it benefited the workers, it also demonstrates

that Wedgwood appreciated the reality of interdependence, recognizing his own self improvement was linked to the self improvement of the workers. An understanding not readily admitted nor shared by the aristocratic political and social establishment of the time. Wedgwood in fact despised the existence of the aristocracy. He even refused to produce wares bearing the owner's coat of arms/family crest, commenting that the crests used to adorn such pieces were "as useless as Crest wearers." (Dolan 73)

Wedgwood's business and social ambitions however, often overrode his distaste for the aristocracy. Porcelain was a luxury in the 18th century and the aristocracy most able to afford it. Thus Wedgwood accepted commissions from nobles and even earned the honorific appointment of "Her Majesty's potter." (Dolan 147) from Queen Charlotte. Wedgwood realized that such recognition would help his business which in turn would help him improve society, a sentiment echoed by a later Unitarian industrialist, George Courtauld (core-told), who said, "The aim of business is to provide for the wants and comforts of the world." (Dolan 45)

Wedgwood's liberal faith inspired inquiry and curiosity in him and taught him the value and interdependent nature of relationships. Through his friendship with a fellow Unitarian, Thomas Bentley, Wedgwood was introduced to the Lunar Society, "a small club of pioneering natural philosophers, doctors, and manufacturers...who passionately believed that their work (discoveries) would make the world a better place." (Oxford) Their name came from the fact that their monthly meetings were held on an evening closest to the full moon to aide in travel by night. It was here that Wedgwood met the noted Unitarian minister and chemist Joseph Priestly as well as Erasmus Darwin, with whom he would one day share the distinction of being grandfather to Charles Darwin. Among these men, Wedgwood found himself immersed in a world of creative and fascinating discovery which only served to undergird another deeply held principle of liberal religion, that of faith in human potential.

As he approached mid-life Wedgwood's business style, from his marketing to modernization of manufacturing methods and humane treatment of his workers had given him an edge in the emerging industrialization of the nation. In 1771, having survived a leg amputation just four years earlier, Wedgwood, "following a moral code of conduct preached by his Unitarian 'brethren', that wealth became "valuable" when it enriched the community, not merely the individual." (Dolan 194-195) embarked on the creation of a factory and home he envisioned as the future of manufacturing.

Dubbed Etruria, it was a place where Wedgwood's business savvy, devotion to scientific inquiry, and his Unitarian ideals became truly interwoven. Here, Wedgwood introduced the practice of division of labor spawning the birth of job specialization. He installed a steam engine to supply power. And he implemented a number of workplace

rules to increase cleanliness and safety in the factory to help protect the health of his workers. Indeed, Dolan notes, Wedgwood, “embraced every new invention or design that worked to save potter’s lives...and believed that new factories and machines could be built on principles informed by science and medicine to make them healthy places to work, generating a revolution not only in new products and consumer spending but in laboring class standards of living.” (Dolan 244)

At Etruria, Wedgwood worked to improve the standard of living of his workers by providing them with education, training, and health care. He constructed a village with housing for workers and their families, compensated them better than his contemporaries, and, under a plan developed by the Unitarian minister and scientist, Joseph Priestly, he implemented a full retirement plan. (Dolan 205)

Such offerings in Wedgwood’s view were essential to building up and improving the lot and character of the lower classes and made good business sense in an industry traditionally fraught with high turnover of laborers in search of better wages. Wedgwood furthered expressed his liberal religious and philosophical values by taking women in as apprentices, although according the Wedgwood Museum which I visited on a recent trip to England, “he had to pay the men more to accept the females as apprentices.”

Despite Wedgwood’s belief that “the principles of mercantile freedoms should extend to social freedoms to create, in essence, a more egalitarian society,” (Dolan) Wedgwood’s approach to ensuring the creation of such a society was at times paternalistic and unsophisticated. For example, he installed a time clock and fined workers who were late. And although he introduced fixed work hours, high safety and cleanliness standards, he also had, as one historian at the Wedgwood Museum notes, “a list of forfeits covering alcohol, graffiti, promiscuity and immorality” that he imposed on workers. Not surprisingly, these were met with occasional resistance in the form of protests or strikes.

Towards the end of his life Wedgwood became involved in the anti-slavery movement. Wedgwood viewed slavery as an affront to the Unitarian belief in the God given human potential for self improvement. True to his belief that people are to use their gifts for the benefit of the wider world, Wedgwood used his now considerable wealth, fame, and talent to produce the equivalent of today’s cause related ribbon or wrist band: a ceramic cameo image of a kneeling African man in chains inscribed with the words “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?”

Although today the representation is often critiqued as feeding into a larger, problematic white savior narrative, the cameos themselves were widely distributed and became the “poster” image for the abolitionist movement in England. Wedgwood also took part in another now frequently employed method of both liberal and conservative

religious protest, the boycott. Wedgwood participated in a boycott of sugar to protest the slave trade.

By 1790, the year Wedgwood's copy of the Portland vase, and the enduring symbol of Wedgwood to this day, was exhibited at the home of Sir Joseph Banks, Wedgwood had experienced a stunning change of fortune from his humble beginnings. Now among the wealthiest men in the country, Wedgwood had lived his belief in self-improvement to an end unimaginable to most people in his day.

Wedgwood had experienced multiple hardships and setbacks but in a world just entering the liminal space between the dusk of the aristocratic past and the dawn of a more democratic future, he prospered. Bolstered by the Unitarian beliefs and values imparted and embraced by him and his family, and the support of other Dissenter friends including members of the Lunar Society, Wedgwood embodied a new vision of life as experiment, an opportunity for improvement rather than predestined and unchangeable.

Living into his vision, Wedgwood revolutionized sales, marketing, production, and labor relations in the hopes of creating a world better than the one he had been born into; a hope partially fulfilled. Although a perfectionist, he was not perfect, something that frustrated him to no end in his quest for self improvement and the improvement of others. His was the dream, in some sense, of every religious liberal: to create "heaven" on earth, not for oneself alone, but for all people. Josiah Wedgwood died at home on January 3, 1795.

Elandria Williams' reminds us, "We must embody the changes we wish to see and not just say that we believe in the changes." Josiah Wedgwood did just that. Thus he could never be accused of faith without works nor of engaging in works without faith. Indeed, Wedgwood, the man and his pottery were fired by faith. Though his fame today rests largely in the fine pottery and porcelain that bears his name, and to a lesser degree the fabulous wealth he accumulated in his lifetime, his greatest achievement may well be the fact that Wedgwood did not separate then seek to balance his secular and spiritual life, but rather worked to integrate the two, realizing that always and in countless ways the one informs and reflects the other. Interconnected, they are ultimately inseparable and thus shall render, as they did in Josiah Wedgwood, a life that preaches more loudly than one's lips.

May it be so
Amen and Blessed Be

Sources Consulted/Cited

Brooks, Robin. The Portland Vase: the Extraordinary Odyssey of a Mysterious Roman Treasure. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004.

Dolan, Brian. Wedgwood: the First Tycoon. New York: Viking, 2004.

Howe, Charles A. For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe. Boston: Skinner House, 1997.

McKendrick, Neil. "II. Josiah Wedgwood and Factory Discipline1." *The Historical Journal* 4.01 (1961): 30.

Meteyard, Eliza. The Life of Josiah Wedgwood, from His Private Correspondence and Family Papers ... with an Introductory Sketch of the Art of Pottery in England. London: Hurst and Blackett, 1865.

"Oxford DNB Theme: Lunar Society of Birmingham." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Web. 2 Dec. 2010. <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/themes/59/59220.html>>.

Stoddard, By Scott. "Josiah Wedgwood Flat-Out Prospered - Investors.com." *Stocks, Investing, Business, and Finance News - Investors.com*. Web. 27 Nov. 2010. <<http://www.investors.com/NewsAndAnalysis/Article/506370/200909171740/Wedgwood-Flat-Out-Prospered.aspx>>.

"The Wedgwood Museum – Learning – Introduction." *The Wedgwood Museum*. Web. 1 Dec. 2010. <http://www.wedgwoodmuseum.org.uk/learning/discovery_packs/2179/pack/2184>.

Uglow, Jennifer S. The Lunar Men: Five Friends Whose Curiosity Changed the World. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002.