

A stroll in Northampton: Remembering Jonathan Edwards

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

On October 5, Jonathan Edwards turns 300. From my vantage point in Northampton, where he preached the Great Awakening and served as pastor for 23 turbulent years, it is tempting to imagine bringing him back in a time machine. But how to translate this man of God, who balked at the liberalizing Half-Way Covenant of his grandfather Solomon Stoddard, to a town that is now “open and affirming” at every turn? What nerve tonic could I give Edwards to steel him for the shock of discovering that a Polish National Catholic church sits on his homestead?

Except for the happily named Edwards Church, the homage paid to him at the First Churches, and laudable efforts by the Historic Northampton Museum and the Forbes Library to make him better known, there are few signs of our great-souled pastor, philosopher, scientist, psychologist, theologian, prophet and paterfamilias. No statue like that of John Winthrop in Boston or Sojourner Truth in Florence, Massachusetts, is to be found, and there’s little in the way of graven images to attract a visiting idolater. Nonetheless, on a warm September day I set out on a Jonathan Edwards 300th-birthday pilgrimage.

Beginning at the Bridge Street burial ground, I visited Edwards’s cenotaph and memorial stone, prayed at the graves of his beloved daughter Jerusha and her fiancé David Brainerd, and delighted to find the patriarch Solomon Stoddard holding court between teetotaling diet reformer Sylvester Graham and anarchist Daniel Dyer Lum. Standing amid these fallen prophets, I couldn’t help noticing the fading inscription on a nearby stone: “For dust and ashes / Loudest Preach / Man’s Infinite Concern; Thus Shall our Mouldering Members teach / What now our Senses Learn.” In fact, it was growing increasingly hot in the sun, and I had imprudently let myself become dehydrated and faint with hunger. What a fine irony it would be, I thought, if I were to pass out on one of the Puritan gravestones, surrounded by winged death’s heads.

Dust and ashes, sin rampant and grace triumphant—no American thinker has given us deeper instruction on these matters than Jonathan Edwards.

No one has surpassed his evocation of beauty reflected in creation (the “sweet mutual consents” of all lovely things with God) and consummated in heaven. He perfected the art of thinking in types (“the silkworm is a remarkable type of Christ, which, when it dies, yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing”). He made a grand and revelatory, though unfinished, synthesis of Calvinist doctrine with post-Newtonian science. He sounded the depths of the great paradox: regeneration is a divine gift, immediately and personally felt, yet the affections are notoriously fickle. To receive this divine gift is our life’s true goal, yet no effort can bring it near us.

Continuing down King Street toward the Edwards family elm, I passed a science and nature store where Edwards would surely delight in the fossils, prisms and skylight inscribed with Psalm 19:1. Edwards was a zealous natural philosopher. He studied rainbows, light rays and the coherence of atoms, and submitted to the Royal Society his observations of how spiders sail aloft on glistening lighter-than-air strands, fulfilling God’s design and happily disporting themselves in the process. “Hence the exuberant goodness of the Creator, who hath not only provided for all the necessities, but also for the pleasure and recreation of all sorts of creatures, even the insects.”

In the sovereign good pleasure of God, evident in each insect and atom, resides all being, all hope—and all desolation. To lackluster Laodiceans, scientist Edwards would turn shepherd of souls and sound the alarm: “Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak . . . you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of: there is nothing between you and hell but the air; ’tis only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.” Newton, Locke, Berkeley and the Cambridge Platonists provided a cloud of scientific witnesses for his biblically rooted belief that only the power and mere pleasure of God holds matter together, only the consciousness of God makes things real. Unreality is our basic condition and corruption unto death our constant peril. To be exiled from Being is torment unending, and this is where we abide even now if we are bereft of God. Yet after the jeremiad comes the good news: “Now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open.”

I returned to Main Street and took a break, reading the local paper at a cafe near the Edwards Church, and my eyes fell on an ad from the Unitarian Society: “A Different Trinity: Respect. Freedom. Justice.” Jonathan Edwards offers us the original Trinity, a living, paradoxical, loving, exuberant, demanding personal God who inscribed his name in the book of nature, delivered us out of Egypt, sacrificed his beloved Son, revealed the laws that free us from enslavement to ourselves, and who in every age sends his Spirit to accomplish “Surprising Work.”

Translated to heaven, Edwards is nearly untranslatable to the Northampton of 2003. But if he were alive today, he’d surely be a Red Sox fan; he’s well acquainted with stirring revivals that burn themselves out. Revive us again, Jonathan Edwards, and make your birthday ours.