

The First Smooth Stone: Revelation Is Continuous ©

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“Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human.” That is a quote from James Luther Adams, probably the best-known Unitarian Universalist theologian of the 20th century. Adams didn’t start out as a Unitarian Universalist. His family worshipped with the Plymouth Brethren, a fundamentalist Christian community. The Brethren did not consider themselves a denomination; they organized themselves as a loosely affiliated network of like-minded communities of faith. (Sound familiar?) They also did not believe in any kind of ordained hierarchy; they practiced the Reformation ideal of the priesthood of all believers. (Sound even more familiar?) The Bible is the sole source of authority for their faith; an inerrant Bible read literally. They are premillennial fundamentalists, meaning that they anticipate a literal 1000-year reign of God which will be inaugurated with the Second Coming of Jesus. (Not so familiar!) So how did this child of the Plymouth Brethren come to be the pre-eminent interpreter of liberal religion in the 20th century?

His journey away from the religion of his childhood began, as these things often do, with a pretty dramatic repudiation. In college and early adulthood he embraced scientific humanism as the only philosophy that made sense. But like many of us, he gradually worked his way back to religion, to a spiritual home that he could live with. To our great good fortune, that home was the liberal Christianity of Unitarianism at the time.

Adams went to Germany to study theology. Germany in the 1930’s had produced many of the most well-read theologians of the day. He studied with those masters. But he also studied the signs of the times. He lived in Germany during the

rise of the Nazis; he could observe firsthand the embodiment of evil, not as some theoretical concept but as a very powerful movement with a very human face. He saw, to his dismay, leaders and followers in the Lutheran Church turning a blind eye to this evil. Worse yet he saw people who called themselves Christians rationalizing and even embracing Hitler's vision. He also watched the development of the Resistance; many of the resisters also used their faith to justify their decision and fortify themselves for the huge risks they took.

After World War II, academic theology turned on liberal religion. Detractors argued that liberalism could offer no adequate explanation for totalitarianism, for the Holocaust, for nuclear weapons, for the state the world found itself in. Some gloated as orthodox theologians predicted the death of religious liberalism. But wait! Max Stackhouse, commentator and editor of Adams' work, opined that "(religious) liberalism is sometimes at its best when under pressure, for then it must decide what must be fought for, preserved, and renewed, and what must be jettisoned." That is exactly what James Luther Adams set out to do. He wanted to respond to the critique, to save liberalism from being dismissed by the academy. You might also say that he wanted to save religious liberalism from itself. He strenuously worked to sort out the enduring essence of our liberal faith from unhelpful and mistaken accretions. He clearly critiqued what he thought of as the wrong turns liberalism had made: the primary error being the idolatry of the individual at the expense of the common good. He then set out to identify and elaborate on the true essence of liberal religion; what he called the progressive element of liberalism. In his words that is "to promote liberation from tyranny, provincialism and arbitrariness and thus to contribute to the meaningful fulfillment of human existence."

Adams' liberal theology has multiple dimensions. He emphasized the importance of remembering and staying connected to historical roots, writing that "no philosophy of life, no religion, can remain viable unless it possesses a sense of depth, a sense of breadth, and a sense of length (or continuity) in history." Adams constantly reminded his readers of the importance of what he called associational structures; he insisted that good thoughts or beliefs are insufficient without effective form. "The genuinely human is found in the twin reality that we are both social creatures – requiring relatedness to be whole – and creative agents – capable of making significant choices about that relatedness. We are, in short, associational beings with wills." (I love the way he uses words!) He also frequently reminded us that while the use of reason is essential to the practice of liberal religion, we must make room for reason to be enlivened by spirituality. You don't have to believe in God to be spiritual, but you do need to believe in something. Something that is of ultimate worth. Something worth fighting for. Something worth living for. A commanding, sustaining, transforming reality that transcends the everyday.

Out of all of that work came an essay called "*The Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion*." The title, of course, is a reference to the biblical story of David and Goliath. In the story, David carefully chooses five smooth stones and places them in his pouch before he goes out, armed only with a sling shot (plus his wits and his faith) to confront the terrible Goliath. Some metaphors really do transcend their times! So, this sermon is the first in a series of five – one for each of the smooth stones that Jim Adams carefully placed in our pouch so that we could continue to face down the Goliaths of our own times. Each metaphorical stone represents an essential core belief or practice of our liberal faith.

"Religious liberalism depends first on the principle that revelation is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus

nothing is exempt from criticism.” The first smooth stone, the first core idea that provides the foundation upon which Unitarian Universalism is built. Revelation is continuous and that is good news, my friends. Mighty good news. It is news that this weary world needs to hear again and again. Revelation is not sealed. We can still learn, and evolve, and improve. There is wisdom still to be garnered, changes still to be made in the way we create and recreate our always imperfect human communities. We have not been abandoned, left alone to our fate – condemned to grind out lives of quiet desperation until some magical second coming.

Revelation is continuous. That is good news because it means that there is hope still for humanity. Hope for better understanding, hope for more effective social structures, hope for all of us to do effectively the work that Jewish tradition calls ‘tikun’ – the repair of the world.

Just as Adams recognized that the challenge of events in the mid-20th century demanded that liberal religion return to its roots in order to reinvigorate itself, we recognize that as the task of our age. Fundamentalism, terrorism, greed on a grand scale, tyranny, poverty, an unbelievably powerful backlash against progressive gains. I could go on. These challenge us today to do the work of revitalizing our theology, jettisoning that which is inadequate and articulating and holding on for dear life to that which is of enduring value.

That revitalization is not just a job for ministers or academics. It is a job for all of us. Unitarian Universalism is a religion of the people, for the people and by the people. We are all prophets, called to speak the truth forcefully and to call people back to a life aligned with our values. We are all priests, charged with caring for each other and for bringing comfort and words of hope to our communities. And we are all theologians, privileged with the task of being on the lookout for unfolding truth. To believe in the continuity of revelation is to believe as an article of faith that we need to be continuously paying attention; to be

mindful of those lessons that the universe is trying to teach us; to be on the lookout for the subtle and not-so-subtle signs of the times that might reveal to us the truth of our current situation.

We are prophets, priests, and theologians all. One more thing – if we are all people who believe that revelation is continuous, then we are all agnostics. Not in the narrow, technical way we sometimes define it – as somebody who has doubts about the existence of God. I mean that we are all agnostic about everything. We are open to new ideas and new interpretations of our life experiences on every front. Agnosticism is sometimes interpreted as a skepticism, or even a cynicism, about life. But if we believe that meaning has not been finally captured, that nothing is complete and everything is open to criticism – that is a different kind of agnosticism. That is a faith stance that allows us an open-minded approach to the search for truth. It allows us, impels us, to question even our most deeply held and beloved positions. It prods us to be constantly guard against idolatry. It encourages us to experiment with new ideas, but always with a critical eye. It demands that we pursue our religious path ever conscious of the fact that we just might be wrong.

We who challenge the claims of orthodoxy, who assert that the canon is never closed, that nothing should ever be carved in stone and left unchallenged, we too are susceptible to a kind of arrogance. I call it the arrogance of evolution, of assuming that we are more evolved than people with a different world view. We could, if we are not careful, make the mistake of getting comfortable with the idea that we are better educated, smarter, or righter than others. And you know what? We could be wrong.

Another arrogance we are susceptible to is the arrogance of assuming that we Unitarian Universalists are the only ones asserting that revelation is continuous. Lest you be tempted by that arrogance let me acquaint you with the United Church of Christ, whose catchy slogan these days is, “God is still speaking.” You can

subscribe to their daily devotional service, called “Still Speaking.” Every day a brief devotional piece arrives in my email inbox from them. Reading it and considering its meaning is a small piece of my spiritual practice. Even though we may not all be comfortable asserting that God is still speaking, we can recognize that like us they are saying that in every moment the universe speaks to us if we will only listen.

Let’s be humble agnostics. Like Robert Fulghum’s friend - the one who was into simple ignorance yet dedicated his volunteer time to social justice and was willing to risk his life to save the life of a child. He is to my mind a perfect example of the kind of humble agnosticism I’m talking about. Live life fully and with gusto, without ever believing that you have Arrived – with a capital A – at the truth. Skeptical and realistic, as Fulghum described him. Not cynical and pessimistic.

Jim Adams warns, “Idolatry occurs when a social movement adopts as the center for loyalty an idol, a segment of reality torn away from the context of universality, an inflated, misplaced abstraction made into an absolute.” All the evils we can catalog – the evils of both the 20th and 21st century – are examples of idolatry. All those ‘isms’ grow out of misplaced loyalty, of mistaking the part for the whole, of separating off a slice of revelation from the great jumble of diverse and colorful ideas that have emerged so far out of the human quest for knowledge.

The antidote for idolatry is to believe and to act on the assumption that revelation is continuous. Our good news. The news that people seeking relief from the pain of violence and bigotry and greed need desperately. They need hope. We need hope. We all need to know that there is more to this life than we have so far been able to access. Revelation continues to unfold as our lives unfold. Embedded in that unfolding is the possibility of greater wisdom and understanding. “We find ourselves,” says Adams “to be historical beings, living in nature and history, and

having freedom in nature and history. The forms that nature and history take possess a certain given, fateful character, and yet they are also fraught with meaningful possibilities.” That is good news - that we live lives fraught with meaningful possibilities. He goes on to say, “We put our faith in a creative reality that is re-creative.”

We are living in a time of great challenge. It seems that we barely catch our breath from one crisis when we are already on to the next. That is reality, in part. The Goliaths are real. They are big and scary. But we have our pouches, with those carefully chosen stones. In the story of unfolding revelation, the ending is not yet written. We can, like David, stride out onto that plain full of hope and a vision for a better and safer world. A world that will be realized through our efforts and our faith in the future continuously revealed. Let it be so.