

## **By Their Associations**

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 16 September 2007  
Chip Roush 16 September 2007

FIRST READING James Luther Adams was born in Washington state, in 1901. He was perhaps the most influential Unitarian Universalist theologian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, teaching at Meadville and then at Harvard. This is excerpted from an address Adams presented at the University of Padua, Italy, in 1962, shortly after serving as a Protestant observer at the Second Vatican Council.

"In 1927 in the city of Nuremberg, six years before the National Socialists came into power, I was watching a Sunday parade on the occasion of the annual mass rally of the Nazis. Thousands of youth, as a sign of their vigor and patriotism, had walked from various parts of Germany to attend the mass meeting of the party. As I watched the parade, which lasted for four hours and which was punctuated by trumpet and drum corps made up of hundreds of Nazis, I asked some people on the sidelines to explain to me the meaning of the swastika, which decorated many of the banners. Before very long I found myself engaged in a heated argument.

Suddenly someone seized me from behind and pulled me by the elbows out of the group with which I was arguing. In the firm grip of someone whom I could barely see I was forced through the crowd and propelled down a side street and up into a dead-end alley...

At the end of the alley my uninvited host swung me around quickly, and he shouted at me in German, 'You fool. Don't you know? In Germany today when you are watching a parade, you either keep your mouth shut, or you get your head bashed in.' I thought he was going to bash it in right there.

But then his face changed to a friendly smile and he said, 'If you had continued that argument for five minutes longer, those fellows would have beaten you up.'

'Why did you decide to help me?' I asked. He replied, 'I am an anti-Nazi. As I saw you there, getting into trouble, I thought of the times when in New York City as a sailor of the German merchant marine I received wonderful hospitality. And I said to myself, "Here is your chance to repay that hospitality." So I grabbed you and here we are. I am inviting you home to Sunday dinner.'

This man turned out to be an unemployed worker. His home was in a tenement apartment...To reach it, we climbed three flights up a staircase that was falling apart, and he ushered me into a barren room where his wife and three small children greeted their unexpected American guest with astonishment...Within a period of two hours I learned vividly of the economic distress out of which Nazism was born. From this trade-union worker I learned also that one organization after another that refused to bow to the Nazis was being threatened with compulsion. The totalitarian process had begun. Freedom of association was being abolished...

A decade later in Germany I was to see...the belated resistance of the churches. At this juncture I had to confront a rather embarrassing question. I had to ask myself, 'What in your typical behavior as an American citizen have you done that would help to prevent the rise of authoritarian government in your own country? What disciplines of democracy (except voting) have you habitually undertaken with other people which could serve in any way directly to affect public policy?'"

SECOND READING Patricia Monaghan grew up in Alaska, in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century. A Quaker poet, she is also on the faculty of DePaul University, in Chicago.

### The Tiniest of Prayers

Paper burns easily. It does not take a bomb to destroy these words, nor an explosion to drown a voice in a silent room. It does not take the world's end for prayers to be unheard. Smaller violence suffices. But as you read this, ten thousand poets are raising their pens. A million songs are being chanted into the precious air. When all we have's so temporal, so fragile, small prayers must suffice. We pray on paper

that the world does not yet end: we act in concert to sustain it. SERMON How many of you appreciated Rev. Kevin and I sharing part of our working covenant, during the Resumption service last weekend? How many think that time could have been better spent, doing something useful in the service? How many of you would like me to define the word “covenant” better, in the first place?

I am certain that many people use the word “covenant” the same way they would promise—that is, a binding agreement or declaration. Those of us in the religion business agree with that, but we give it a little more kick.

How many of you ever made a promise as a kid, and added something like, “cross my heart and hope to die” to indicate how serious you were, about whatever it was, that you were promising? We already knew, even as kids, that sometimes promises get broken. So we used extra language, to show that this wasn’t just any promise.

Professor David Bumbaugh, when he explained his understanding of “covenant,” drew a triangle. The two points at the base of the triangle are two people; a promise would be the line connecting the two. Professor Bumbaugh added a vertical line, to show that a covenant involves the two people *and their shared highest values*. The resulting triangle is a promise with kick.

You might \*promise\* to take the garbage out, or to add paper to the copier, but if you say, “I swear, by all that I consider holy, I will...do whatever” you, and the people who hear you, may be more likely to take it seriously. You might call that line in the middle “god,” or “the sacred” or “our highest human values,” or you could see in it life and death, our ultimate concerns, like a child’s “cross my heart and hope to die,” or a movie character, swearing on “my sainted grandmother’s grave.”

That’s why Kevin and I use covenantal language—to indicate how seriously we take those promises we make to each other. We aren’t talking about whose turn it is to buy lunch, or even being good coworkers; we’re discussing how best to serve this congregation, and the hundreds of people who find nourishment, and solace, and inspiration here. By using the word, “covenant” we keep ourselves aware of the larger picture.

Our colleague in Grand Rapids, the Rev. Dr. Brent Smith, says that it isn’t just Kevin and I, but all the members of the congregation, who have a covenantal relationship.

We are not a creedal tradition, so joining our church is not an assertion that we believe all the things on a given list. We are a covenantal tradition. Joining our congregation means that you promise to walk with the other members as we journey through life’s ups and downs together.

Smith also says that our free church tradition is not a “freedom from” but rather a “freedom toward.” It’s true, there is no civil or church hierarchy with authority over this congregation, but we are not free from the influence of other individuals. Our highest values—compassion, peace, justice, truth—are only discovered within relationships with others. A woman who is totally by herself has no need for compassion, because there is nobody to whom to show it, or from whom to receive it.

One of our highest values is that revelation is ongoing, that nobody knows the ultimate truth, about life, the universe and everything. We are therefore open to learning other pieces of the truth, from other people. That’s a covenantal relationship: We promise to walk together, and explore and learn together. We consent to the possibility of being influenced by the other members.

Our central Unitarian Universalist freedom is not a freedom from, it is a freedom toward. It isn’t about freedom from civil interference; most religious organizations in the U.S. have that. It isn’t about freedom from church hierarchy; most Baptist and UCC and other congregational churches boast of that. It is about our freedom to explore the deepest questions of life in \*covenantal relationship\* with the other seekers and pilgrims around us.

So, just to belabor this point a tad bit more, the quodlibet we just sang was an example of our “freedom toward” attitude. Each of us sang our own song, we did not lose our individuality. But we remained open to being influenced by the others. Had this been a “freedom from” situation, we would have started when we wanted to, and sang as fast and as loudly as we wanted to, in whatever key we wanted to. That isn’t freedom, that’s chaos. Our freedom toward allowed us to keep our individuality while singing in

relationship with each other, paying attention to, and being influenced by, the key, and tempo, and volume and starting and stopping points of the others.

So, the members of this congregation have essentially made a covenant together, promising, by all that they consider holy, to support each other, and celebrate with each other, and explore the myths and values and purposes that make our lives more meaningful. AND...not only can we make our own lives more meaningful, we can actually prevent tyranny, at least according to James Luther Adams, in our first reading.

Of course, service organizations like the Rotary, and the League of Women Voters, and the American Civil Liberties Union also stand between the citizens and their government. Governments, like most living entities, seek to grow and expand and increase their power. Citizens must guide, and sometimes rein in, that growth. Even book groups and quilting circles may function as conduits of information and resistance if a government should try to take away our civil liberties.

All of those groups could do that, and churches should, too. Churches ought be able to do it better, because they have more resources and a more powerful, spiritual grounding from which to challenge authoritarianism.

And, much like Germany 70 years ago, the schools and the service organizations *and the churches* have not done enough to prevent the erosion of our civil liberties.

Adams is probably right, that an active and informed citizenry, working together through voluntary associations, is the best way to prevent tyranny.

I do want to stop tyranny. And I want to stop hunger, and poverty, and AIDS, and pollution, and global climate change, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and homophobia and sexism and ageism and classism and ableism...and I want to spend some time at home with my wife!

Does anybody else feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of good causes that need help, and the limited amount of resources we have to share?

That is the genius of Adams' voluntary associations; there are groups that focus on hunger, and poverty, and war. There are people passionate about each and every one of these issues, willing to advocate for social change. So on a country-wide scale, Adams might be right. But that doesn't help me decide if or which of the many good causes might be the best choice for my time and money and energy.

I have two suggestions for us; one on a congregational scale, and one more personal.

Many congregations use a form of the "Rochester model," pioneered by the Rev. Dick Gilbert at the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York, to choose one major social justice topic to explore and act upon each year. They may start with 15 or 20 good candidates, at the beginning of each spring, then they whittle them down, little by little, until the congregation finally votes on which issue they want to take up. The following year, there are adult education classes, and classes for the children and youth, and panel discussions and book groups and fundraisers and opportunities to actually do real service based on that one, congregationally-chosen topic.

Of course, other activities go on as well, the Tuesday lunches and mitten trees and gift-buying for the Women's Resource Center would still go on. But a huge amount of focused energy would be aimed at one specific issue. So we learn a lot, and understand things better, and we make a more significant impact.

Over the next few months, we'll decide whether or not we want to take the "Rochester model" for a trial run next year. And I will offer an adult RE course on Dick Gilbert's book, *The Prophetic Imperative*, which outlines his understanding of social justice work, in February.

On a more personal scale, I offer the words of Rabbi Michael Lerner, who wrote a book with the ambitious title *Surplus Powerlessness: The Psychodynamics of Everyday Life... and the Psychology of Individual and Social Transformation*.

It begins: "When we \*feel powerless\* for any extended length of time, we tend to become more willing to accept parts of the world we would otherwise reject. We act in ways that go counter to our best visions of who we are and who we can and want to be.

Powerlessness corrupts...

We tell ourselves that although we really aren't living the lives we want to live, there is nothing we can do about it. We [tell ourselves that we] are powerless."

Rabbi Lerner makes a distinction between real powerlessness and surplus powerlessness. Real powerlessness comes from the fact that we do have less money and less political power than the politicians and generals and corporate presidents have. Surplus powerlessness arises from our own feelings of despair about that situation. Surplus powerlessness arises from—and amplifies—our real powerlessness.

The powerful, of course, understand this, so they use it to their advantage. They flood the media with stories that make them seem more powerful, and their enemies seem not only powerless, but pathetic and a little weird for trying to oppose them. If a person sees all those news stories, she may begin to think that she is the only person who feels as she does, so she may stop trying. He may quit using even the little power he does have, succumbing to his surplus powerlessness.

Furthermore, surplus powerlessness and the stress it creates in us has been shown to lead to exhaustion and real physical ailments. It can be a vicious spiral.

Fortunately, Rabbi Lerner offers us a way to free ourselves from surplus powerlessness. Oversimplifying a little bit, he suggests that real, authentic relationships in groups with other human beings can lift our spirits, and restore our health and hope. As we discover that there \*are\* other people who share our concerns, as we take even small steps working on those concerns, we can feel more hopeful and more energetic. Our surplus powerlessness evaporates, and even some of our real powerlessness can fade, as we exercise and increase whatever amount of power we do possess.

As this second Iraq war began to appear inevitable, five years ago now, I felt depressed and appalled and ashamed and powerless to stop it. Then a friend invited me to an anti-war march in Chicago. As we know, that march did not prevent us from starting a war, but seeing the thousands of other marchers lifted my spirits enough to keep going, and increased my spiritual energies for work elsewhere.

The hymn we'll sing later this morning was written by the women of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. The English government had decided to house nuclear missiles at the RAF base there, and thousands of women protested. Many of those women stayed, and set up a camp just outside the base. Now, most people would have told them that they were not only misguided, they were outright foolish. There was no way they were going to beat the British military. But some of them stayed. Some left, replaced by others; some were there for a long time. Almost three years into their vigil, the local town council evicted them. By nightfall, many of the women had sneaked back to their camp. In 1991, after ten years of ongoing protest, the missiles were moved away from Greenham Common. The women did not give in to their feelings of surplus powerlessness; and they were therefore able to exercise the power they did have.

Joining other people in voluntary associations, especially forming authentic, open, covenantal relationships with those people does change us and can change our world.

Sometimes, as I walk around our church building, I might see Greg Boothroyd, washing our many windows with a giant smile on his face.

Or, I'll see the quilting group, piecing together an exquisite quilt, and piecing together peoples' lives, with their ministry of hand-knitted shawls and lap robes.

Max Old Bear helps to fold the orders of worship on Friday mornings, and occasionally graces us with his violin while he's waiting. The volunteers in our Tuesday lunch program will help feed 25 or 30 or 52 hungry homeless people, cooking and serving and cleaning up—and they go away feeling enriched by the relationships they experience there.

Our members and friends deliver meals to the sick or healing; and raise money for dozens of charities; and volunteer for dozens more. We discuss books and movies; and attend women's groups or the men's group; and we lead activities in the religious education program.

The pastoral care team ministers to the whole congregation, including each other; time seems to pass differently, during their meetings, because their compassion and concern is so tangible.

After services, at coffee hour or sitting here in the sanctuary, I watch people connecting, talking, sharing the important stories of their lives, and consenting to be open to the influence of each other.

And with all of that, with all the amazing human moments that I do get to witness, what really astonishes me is that there are hundreds and thousands of other moments that I don't see, that maybe nobody else sees, except the people involved.

Of course we get discouraged; yes, we do fall prey to our pride or our shame or our surplus powerlessness occasionally. And if we can make the effort, to connect with another member of this extraordinary voluntary association, there are plenty of hearts and minds here to help inspire and encourage us.

So may we be.