

Transforming Liberalism

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach

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Oh, how many emails did we exchange over my topic for today! Over how many months! More than I can count. You even sent me a set of questions in advance—a first in all my years of UU ministry. There was curiosity about my having preached in the Unitarian church in Prague, several years ago—I think you found my sermon still out there in cyberspace, and wondered what it was like. Well, that will come up in our post-service discussion—and Barbara, whose Czech genes bounce at the very mention of Prague, will have her say, too.

There was also much interest in my little book, *Questions for the Religious Journey*. I'm delighted that folks are still reading this book, first published twelve years ago. How come? I think it's because the book strikes a nerve among UUs who so often (as I think I say on page 1) know far better what they do not believe, than what they do. It asks the reader to say Yes to basic questions of faith--and some of you wanted to know how a UU today could pull it off. For instance my thoughts on the matter of prayer, and your question whether prayer presumed “a personal God.” You don't mess around, you go for the jugular.

So I'll begin with something I first heard from Paul Carnes, the UUA President back in the 1970s and a great mentor of mine in my first ministry, in Buffalo. George Bernard Shaw's character, Lina (she is no sophisticate) is asked by Lord Summerhayes, “Why do you pray?” She answers, “To remind myself that I have a soul.” Well, friends,

if we do not pray, how shall we remind ourselves that we have souls? The exchange contains an insight into the close relation between religious practice and belief. Are we so alienated from the traditional language of religion that we cannot use the word “soul”? Your question sent me back to see what I’d said in my *Questions* book. This, in part: “A God who is impersonal will finally become sub-personal, something less than worthy of our ultimate concern as human beings, as persons. The God we seek and give our devotion to must include our most personal concerns. . . .” I finished that paragraph with a definition: “God is that which enables the personalization of life.” (p. 46)

So we are talking about a religious vision, and using the only language we have. What is the central task of our religious community? We could put it this way: To remind ourselves that we have a soul. And even this: To remind our social and political culture that it must have a soul. Not an easy assignment, given our propensity to mumble when it comes to speaking, I mean speaking for ourselves, of faith. This seems to be the liberal’s disease, suffered by the whole tribe. Need any more proof that we are, by and large, Democrats?

But what cure is there? It will cost us something, if only our pride, to overcome it, for it means overcoming ourselves. It means transforming liberalism itself. James Luther Adams says that a liberal religion is, by definition, a self-critical religion. The very opposite of a religion incapable of doubt and dialogue, deliberation and decision, allowing change from within. Transformation. Socrates famously said, “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Adams said, an unexamined faith is not worth having. So let’s get started.

We must transform liberalism from its long-standing rationalist, individualist, and secularist captivities. We must become a deeply rooted religion again. The alternative mission for Unitarian Universalism is one that the sociologists will readily assign us: to be a religious decompression chamber, or say, a way-station for those passing from fundamentalism to the golf course. Given our culture, there's a very large reservoir of such folks out there. It's a job that could keep us going for a long time. And we have drifted in this direction, for various reasons, for a long time, now.

Some of us have been rowing, also for a long time, against the drift. The drift that I call: loss of sacred tradition. I grew up Unitarian, in Richmond and in Cleveland, and I loved the sense of being a free spirit in a wonderful company of free spirits that I gained in these communities, and especially in LRY, the old Liberal Religious Youth. Growing up Unitarian and celebrating our union with the Universalists (our proudest boast was, we did it first! – long before the merger that created the UUA in 1961)—this was heady stuff. But adolescent self-discovery must give way to self-discipline and serious study. “When I was a child, I thought as a child” – “but” – you know what our old nemesis St. Paul said: when I grew up, singing mildly sacrilegious and scatological songs wasn't quite enough, any more.

No wonder I was attracted to James Luther Adams, even before I entered theological school (straight out of college, as we used to do in the good ol' days). I'd heard him speak at a big LRY youth conference in Indiana, and I was fascinated. Imagine: a famous Unitarian professor who was interested in what we thought, and wanted to challenge us! Who took us seriously! He talked about J. D. Salinger's new novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and asked, Did we consider ourselves members of “the

Silent Generation”)? (Some of you remember the 1950’s, I think.) So when Adams moved from Meadville, the Unitarian seminary in Chicago, to Harvard Divinity School, I followed him there. Literally.

You see, I’d begun to ask, with no little sense of urgency, What do we believe? And soon recognized that to answer this question, I must first ask: And what do I believe? Now, those of you who’ve read my little book on basic religious questions will note a red thread running through the labyrinth of Beach’s brain: the book, written many years later, is still asking us the same question: What do we, and what do I, believe? What are my ‘yesses’, my affirmations? The original title of this book (the one that my editors rejected, when the second printing was being prepared) was this: *If Yes is the Answer, What is the Question?* Within this convoluted question lay the central accent of the book: Negation we know all about; affirmation remains an unlearned skill. To affirm is also to articulate. And to articulate is to have a language of religion which is also “a language of the heart,” as A. Powell Davies called prayer. Is religion is the inclination of the heart, toward wholeness? Yes.

So this has been my lifelong quest: for a faith that is as anchored as it is liberating. What I discovered is this: that to be truly liberating, and not just a clever negating, it must also be firmly anchored. I guess that during my ministries I was naïve. For instance, I remember the time I was saying our children should learn about “our cherished traditions.” I got some very ambivalent responses. One man asked, “Well, okay, ‘traditions’—but do they have to be cherished?” I stammered, “Well, yes. Why else would you want to teach them?”

My ongoing work with Jim Adams led, in time, to my editing several books of his essays and to writing about this thought. The Minns Lectures that I gave in 1999 were titled “The Parables of James Luther Adams.” A woman asked, “The men’s lectures? When are you going to give the women equal time? So I clarified things: “That’s M I N N S, named for Miss Susan Minns, of Boston, who many years ago endowed an annual lecture series by “a Uniatrian minister in good standing.” How I slipped in under the wire I’ll never know.

Speaking of which, once a New England matron asked Jim Adams, “Dr. Adams, from which branch of the Adams family do you come?” He replied, “The po’ white trash branch, ma’am.” In fact his people had migrated from Pittsylvania County, in southside Virginia, to of eastern Washington State, where he grew up on a farm.

The final form of my “Parables of JLA” lectures was my book with a title that can be read two ways: *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams*. Did Adams set out to transform liberalism, or is his theology a liberalism that is transforming? As Shakespeare’s Prospero says to the aptly named Miranda, “Both, both, my girl!” The book is full the stories, the parables, the lively rhetoric, for which he was famous. I argue, in fact, that Adams exhibits a kind of “parabolic imagination,” the very thing we need, if we are to transform liberalism, and to have a liberalism that is transforming. Did I say parabolic imagination? A definition: “God made humans,” a Hassidic rabbi said, “because He loves stories.”

In a short essay titled “Why Liberal?” published in a journal he had himself founded, Adams cited four defining elements of religious liberalism. He followed up in

the next issue with a sequel, “The Liberalism That Is Dead.” Ouch! The sequel dealt with the distortions and trivializations of the same four elements of liberalism.

First, he said, liberalism holds that truth is not static but dynamic, changing with the times. But this insight has often been reduced to a relativism that makes the very concept of truth meaningless.

Second, liberalism is devoted to the principle of voluntary consent in human relations, freedom as a consensus-forming process. But often we have reduced freedom to think your own thoughts and do your own thing. Consider the one dogma of our undogmatic faith: “individual freedom of belief.”

Third, liberalism means commitment to a just and inclusive democratic community. But too often we smugly think we’ve achieved it already, and have only to bestow our enlightenment on others.

Fourth, finally, Adams said, liberalism means an ultimate optimism for the human prospect. But this “principle of hope” has become, among us, a belief in perpetual progress through reason and science. Yet sooner or later we find that we must deal with the facts of tragic and irremediable loss, and with the necessary inward turn on heart and mind that allows us to renew hope, in spite of everything. We are great problem solvers, but 9/11 (for instance) is not a problem to be solved; it is a day to be remembered (as we did once again this week) with “with the tears that clarify the eye toward charity.”

Howard Nemerov’s marvelous phrase recalls us to the religious task, giving a place and a time to “the tears that clarify the eye toward charity.”

Adams concludes his critique with these words: “The liberalism that is dead is the liberalism that does not call for decision, that does not see that the divine spark in a

person rises into flame only through the recognition of the need for a change of heart. . . . Only where there is sincere recognition of incompleteness and failure, only there are the spirit of liberalism and true religion to be found. Hence the liberal expects to hear over and over again: Liberalism is dead. Long live liberalism!”

Okay, you say, suppose we “transform liberalism.” But as Barbara likes to say, “Be specific and you’ll be terrific.” Specifically how?

Looking at the 200-plus year history of liberal religion in America, I see three great ages: a Jeffersonian age, an Emersonian age, and then—well, no one figure stands out here—call it the Humanist age. (What follows is pedagogy in the manner commended by James Luther Adams: Tell a lie, and then qualify it. Or more finely stated: Stake out your main point first, and then enter your caveats and qualifiers.) So here are some “lies” of over-simplification:

Thomas Jefferson is our first great hero, an avowed Unitarian (even if he never did never did join a Unitarian church.) He was a man of the Enlightenment, the age of reason, and believed (as he said) that a rational understanding of religion would sweep all ancient superstition before its path and, by the time of his death, “all young men would be Unitarians.” We chuckle, for how could so wise a man be so wide of the mark? To Jefferson it was “self-evident” that there was one divinity, “nature’s God.” That was part of his faith in reason. He also revered Jesus, a Jesus who conformed to his sense of what an eminently good and reasonable moral teacher would be.

We love Jefferson precisely for his over-the-top confidence in humanity, and we tend to forgive him for his intellectual and moral lapses. He reminds us of what liberal religion essentially is: the Protestant response to the age of the Enlightenment, the age

that gave us science and democracy and human rights. Rationalism becomes, then, our liberal legacy, and its polar opposite, the whole realm of religious feeling—love, humility, ecstasy, thirst for the infinite—our problematic. So we get stuck with tired old tags like “God’s frozen people.”

Enter Ralph Waldo Emerson, our second epoch-making hero. Even if he did quit our ministry! In Emerson we see the emergence of the age Romanticism. Transcendentalism arises specifically as a critique of rationalism. Now the cool ideals of rationality, clarity, and universality are replaced by hot feeling, by intuitive knowing, and by the uniqueness of individuality. We love Emerson’s ringing words, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist.” But he was not sexist about it—but welcomed Margaret Fuller and other women into the Transcendentalist circle. We love, and are deeply marked still today, by the liberating force of Emerson’s iconoclastic thought: Forget the Bible, he said; read Nature as your Bible, and read it for yourself. He had a keen sense of the sacred as imminent in this present world. But sacred tradition? He never went so far as Henry Ford, who said, “history is more or less bunk,” but he gave us a big push us in that direction.

Emerson’s heroic individualism remains our legacy, and by the same token, our difficulty with institution-building. Following Emerson, many Unitarians simply cut their Christian apron-strings. He championed the individual, against the suffocating conformism of small town life. But by the end of the 19th century, urbanism and the industrial revolution had radically altered the nation. Darwinism in biology and Social Darwinism in society—the economic survival of the fittest—were in the air. A generation later the Humanist Manifesto (signed by many leading Unitarians) said it

directly: since all real knowledge is scientific, truth belongs to the secular realm. Sacred tradition is hereby cancelled.

By the time I was in college, in the 1950s, B. F. Skinner's "behaviorism" had become the ruling school of psychology. Skinner was deeply serious about the social and economic challenges facing the world; we will not solve the world's ills, he said, until we rid ourselves of pre-scientific thinking. The title of his book, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, said it all: Freedom and human dignity are NOT scientific concepts. Sorry, folks, but even these precious ideas must be set aside as illusions, if we are to exercise the kind of social controls that will be needed to save humanity from itself. Ouch! And what is left of liberalism once we consign human freedom and human dignity to the dustbin of pre-scientific thinking?

Reading Skinner's book was for me one of those "but the king has no clothes on" moments. We had gone from rationalism, to individualism, to secularism—each one the bright shining star of progressive thinkers in their time. We call it "the modern era." Our era, the liberal era. But each of these are losers in the long phylogenetic history of religion. For they are principles of criticism, not creativity. They leave us knowing far better what we do not believe in, than what we do. Having progressively dispossessed ourselves of anything that might transcend us, we feel spiritually bereft.

As a grape grower I've learned that making wine is easy; growing grapes is hard. (Mind you I didn't say good wine!) Just so, debunking religion is easy, creating religion, authentic meaning, stick-to-your-ribs faith, is ever so hard. Only a tiny handful have managed to create a profound, sustaining and self-sustaining tradition of faith in the whole history of humanity. In his *Anti-Memoirs*, Andre Malraux reflects on all he has

seen in the 20th century, and says: “That the world has never changed so much in a single century (except by destruction) is a fact with which we are all familiar. . . . [But] how many centuries is it since a great religion shook the world? This is the first civilization capable of conquering the entire planet, but not of inventing its own temples or its own tombs.”

A reaction to hard-edged humanism, sometimes called “scientific humanism,” sometimes “secular humanism,” was bound to set in. I have lived through these transitions. To put it a little sharply, we went from believing in nothing in the 1960s, to believing in everything in the 1970s (you know, everything from Transactional Analysis to Tarot Cards). And we’ve been trying to decide our identity as Unitarian Universalists ever since. Sometimes I think we’ve settled for none of the above: the box labeled “diversity.”

Some UUs have taken to calling themselves religious humanists or mystical humanists; I have called myself a Christian humanist—for I think that our central liberal values, like spiritual freedom, like love and mercy and justice, are rooted in the Bible. All of us are reaching for a framework that can contain and nurture our spirituality, our souls.

These are transformations of heart and mind that I believe we must seek if our religious liberalism is to be renewed in our present age:

First, from rationalism to imaginative vision, or what I call in my little *Questions* book, “parabolic vision.” Parabolic vision is a way of seeing the world through metaphor and story. Life is like any good story: the meaning is obscure, or baffling, or troubling (in the way that inexplicable tragedies are troubling), and these things challenge us, heart

and mind. Sometimes we are given (without knowing how or why) an ecstatic sense of insight. This was Emily Dickenson's prayer: "Prove true, imagination, oh, prove true!"

Second, from individualism to the covenanted community, for community and person come into being together, and sustain each other, and reform and renew each other. The Jewish sage Hillel the Elder said it ever so simply: "Do not separate yourself from the community."

Finally, from a secularism, forever debunking, forever casting off the past, to remembering and celebrating the traditions of human spirituality that remind us that we have a soul: an inward point of transcendent connection. I am saying, let us re-appropriate a language of transcendence, and feel free to use it in one another's presence.

This is how Jim Adams did it. He asked: What is at work in human history that is creative and sacred and sovereign? After long study he answered, "the community forming power." And proceeded to speak to us in myriad ways about this simplest and most profound understanding of God. And what of all that lies beyond human history, the evolving cosmos? What creates and sustains and transforms the world and all that is? He drew on his parable-telling powers, and his community-affirming faith, and called it "the covenant of being." Something like one of Alexander Calder's dynamic and delicately balanced and delightfully beautiful mobiles.

So, friends, as Jesus would say, concluding a famous parable: Go and do likewise. In word and deed give fresh and lively expression to your faith. Do so liberally, and be glad.