

## READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

History, it has been said, is theology teaching by example. It is on the manuscript of human history that people have written their theological reflections on the meaning of it all. Theology grows out of concrete human experience.

While some look to God as a transcendent historical actor, many of us will affirm what can be called “horizontal transcendence,” looking to no God either within or beyond history as a point of reference. A possible point of reference is the “Beloved Community of Earth,” a vision that transcends our meager efforts, a goal that extends beyond our lifetime, a concept so noble we do not confuse any reality with that ideal, a goal that commands our allegiance.

For example, we may recall Jonathan Schell’s book *The Fate of the Earth*, a passionate warning about the possibility of nuclear annihilation written about the most dangerous 1980s of Ronald Reagan and the “Evil Empire.” It was a work so powerful because it was so theological. It was fundamentally an eschatological book, dealing with the ultimate end of things. It placed our peace efforts in an ultimate context—a frame of reference that is truly transcendent. It is strange that it took a secular writer like Jonathan Schell to point out the theological implications of what we are doing to ourselves. We can barely cope with our personal deaths; now we must contemplate the death of the species at our own hand—by our choice end the human project—either in nuclear holocaust or environmental calamity. We have taken unto ourselves the power once reserved to God.

With the end of the Cold War the threat of nuclear annihilation has receded and has been replaced with the danger of ecological catastrophe, global overpopulation, ethnic conflict, and poverty both at home and abroad. But finding our place in the context of history is no less a theological challenge.

This macro-cosmic realization can translate into a micro-cosmic psychic, moral, and spiritual numbing. The facts seem so overwhelming, the prospects so bleak, the possibility of improving them so remote, that people are

tempted to hide their heads in the stultifying sands of a consumer culture to eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Ernest Becker even suggests that shopping becomes another form of suicide.

On the other hand, we can be moved by such a sober picture to a realization of the historic nature of our task. We are no longer only solitary, anonymous bits of cosmic dust, but creatures who can help save the species. Such reflections greatly concentrate the mind.

We who work to change the world and move toward the Beloved Community of Earth are too often preoccupied with our finite endeavors, which are dirty with the everyday, dingy with the prosaic, somehow separated from our cosmic connection. We desperately need to learn to “caress the details,” as Vladimir Nabokov would say, to live with the partial fulfillment of the Beloved Community of Earth, recognizing we are finite creatures who aspire infinitely. Our task is unfinished, just as the Cosmic Creativity continually unfolds. We need to learn to think globally, even cosmically, and act locally.

We are part of a reality greater than ourselves, co-creators of the Beloved Community of Earth. We participate in a process larger than ourselves, we affirm our responsibility to add the stubborn ounces of our weight to the human project we call history.

The Talmud says, “Would that they had forgotten My name and done that I commanded them.” In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And we are authors of the word. We are co-authors of the world with the Nameless One. There is a cosmic connection, and we are part of the warp and woof of it. We may be cosmically alone, but we are humanly together, in service to that which is greater than ourselves.

That is the macro-picture. The micro-picture is how we see ourselves in the light of everyday existence. To what can we give allegiance that will help us become historical actors? How can we appropriate the history that made us in order to help fashion our own history?

The come-outer syndrome is also a come-inner syndrome. If Unitarian Universalism is an institutionalized heresy, then it means people consciously choose affiliation with it. For a large number of our members this choosing has meant leaving the faith of their fathers and mothers. While we make light of the process of the "great rejection" by saying we are a decompression chamber for getting rid of the Baptist Bends, or that we are the gateway from Methodism to golf, it can be a very painful experience. And if 85 percent of our members are come-outers, this means there may be a great deal of pain in our midst.

Choosing a new religious community is never only an intellectual process. Thinking one's way into Unitarian Universalism for many is not difficult. This is the religious community for which they have long been looking. But giving up the security, the symbols, the feelings about a church or other religious tradition in which one has grown up can be emotionally difficult.

In our human "quest for certitude" it can be frightening to let go of beliefs and institutions that have heretofore anchored one in religious security. If our point of departure is really creating a religious community to facilitate the process of credo building and not creed, then that is a dramatic change.

There is sometimes a feeling of great anger that accompanies leaving one religious tradition for another. We all know of people who have chosen the Unitarian Universalist as a way out of some bitter experience with their own church. It is important to allow that anger to be released and dealt with before one can constructively work on a personal theology.

The late Unitarian Universalist Association President Paul Carnes once said, "The rebel is never free." If the embrace of Unitarian Universalism is only an escape from one's religious past, it is inadequate. Theological definitions of what one does not believe are hardly an adequate faith by which to live. In Fromm's terminology, it is our task to move beyond a "freedom from" creed (and dogma) to a "freedom for" credo.

It is important that newcomers (as well as some old-timers) come to terms with their reli-

gious past if they are to use the religious present creatively. People need to be helped to look at that past critically, both in the sense of its inadequacy and in the sense of appreciation for what has been learned. If one can get beyond fear of freedom and anger at the past, one can see in one's religious past values and practices that no longer make sense, as well as memories that are to be cherished and values that continue. Angus MacLean's autobiographical chapter, "An Honest Backward Look" from *The Wind in Both Ears* should be required reading for all Unitarian Universalists.

The "great rejection" must evolve into the "great acceptance" of a new tradition, keeping what was meaningful in the old. We cannot put on a new religious history as a coat, but we can learn to immerse ourselves in it and be thereby enriched.

### Background Reading

Buehrens, John A., ed. *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*. 3d ed. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999, pp. 57-71.

Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.