

READING FOR SESSION 6

There is a story about the first officer to cross the Remagen Bridge in World War II. He was a Nebraskan named Karl Timmerman. A reporter called Timmerman's mother at the Goldenrod Café, where she worked. "You son Karl has just crossed the Remagen Bridge. Do you know what that means?" the reporter asked.

"I know what it means to me," Mrs. Timmerman replied. "Is he hurt?"

"No. He's not hurt. But listen to this. Karl Timmerman was the first officer of an invading army to cross the Rhine River since Napoleon."

"Napoleon I don't care about," the mother said. "How is my Karl?"

Against the backdrop of world events with their cataclysmic proportions we live out our own lives. In the context of historic happenings, we assert the meaning of our own being. In the face of famous people, we dare to believe we are important in the great scheme of things. After a while we may become benumbed by it all and withdraw into our private cocoons. We are once more becoming isolationist, afflicted with moral myopia and compassion fatigue. Like the title of a recent book we ask, "Who cares about apathy?"

Yet try as we might, we cannot quite sever the cord between our personal lives and the larger world. And we attempt to make some sense out of the confusions of our time, some way to figure out what it means for us. It is not easy, and so we leave it to the experts. Then we criticize them when they fail, as they so often do. We should, however, seek some understanding of the larger stage on which we play out our brief parts. We do it not only for our own sense of spiritual well-being, but also because from time to time we may act on what we have discovered.

Some years ago on the British science fiction series *Dr. Who*, the hero was asked, "Do you think your puny efforts can change the course of destiny?" He replied with a canny wink, "I just might tamper with it."

Who was he to think he could change the course of destiny? Who are we to think we can "repair the world," as Judaism expresses its moral mandate? Fewer and fewer people even ask the question. More and more people are retreating from the public realm. In a nation of legendary volunteerism, the pool of volunteers is drying up.

A cartoon printed in the *Washington Post* illustrates our predicament: One character says to another, "I'm tired of pretending to care about everything. I didn't create poverty or AIDS. Racism isn't my fault. Why should I worry about it? I refuse to go on pretending. . . . I don't care. I never did and I never will!" After the speaker leaves, the other character thinks to himself, "Militant apathy—the ultimate freedom."

Apathy is a kind of freedom *from* responsibility. Our rampant individualism drives us to claim this kind of freedom for ourselves. We acquire and hoard both resources and time. What used to be considered greed—one of the seven deadly sins—is now touted as what makes America tick. More and more of us ask "what's in it for me?" and spend more and more of our time as couch potatoes, computer fanatics, and health-club addicts. Unfortunately human beings wrapped up in themselves make mighty small packages.

Then, too, certain kinds of volunteerism challenge the way things are arranged in our culture. Many of us are not truly persuaded the world should be differently ordered. However, one cannot read Jonathan Kozol's *Amazing Grace*, for example, without experiencing rising anger at the way things are. For instance, the seventh richest and the poorest census tracts in the nation are but nine stops apart on an eighteen-minute subway ride between East 59th Street and Brook Avenue in New York City. But where are the demands for a complete overhaul of the American social system in which most of us are so relatively comfortable?

Of course entering new and unfamiliar terrain entails a degree of risk. We're not used to conditions of privation and danger. For the most part inhabitants of the Unitarian Universalist world are rather secure.

And we are discouraged from volunteering because we are not really sure it will do any good. The media assault us daily with massive social problems that overwhelm our capacity to cope with them emotionally or to do anything about them. We suffer from paralysis by analysis. Or in the cynical words of the playwright Bertolt Brecht, "The man who laughs has not yet been told the terrible news."

However, some respond to what Harvard's Robert Coles names "the call of service." Why do

they do it? Why do they volunteer to serve when they could be watching reality TV, *ER*, a police drama, or Monday night football? Coles' book *The Call of Service* offers several moving personality portraits: One is of a young black student, Dion Diamond, who takes leave from the University of Wisconsin to do civil rights work in Louisiana. He is jailed on grounds of "disturbing the peace" for attempting to integrate a restaurant. Coles visits him there and wonders out loud, "Dion, your ideals and values apart, I'm wondering why you keep at this, given the dangers and the obstacles." Coles is stopped in his tracks by the young man's three-word reply: "The satisfaction, man." Diamond goes on,

I'm meeting some really fine people. I'm listening to them tell me a lot about their lives. . . . Isn't that enough—isn't that a good reason to feel satisfied? If you can spend some of your life doing work like this, then you're lucky! There may be a sheriff out there waiting for me with a gun, but if he gets me, I'll die thinking: Dion, you actually did something—you were a part of something much bigger than yourself, and you saw people beginning to change, right before your eyes, and that was a real achievement, and that's what I mean by satisfaction. . . . I tell you, this is a real privilege; I am doing something useful with people who are the salt of the earth! Every day I thank my lucky stars—I thank God—for the good fortune to be here. . . . The way I see it, this is the most important educational experience I'll ever have.

We create a sense of meaning when we invest something of our life in that which will outlast it—serving a cause, befriending the friendless, standing on the side of justice. It is energizing to think that we have tampered with the world and, however slightly, made it a better place. Looking back, those who were active in the civil rights and peace movements carry with them a sense of having participated in something terribly important, which even now has at least the potential to give them moral energy.

Many who volunteer to help others or work for a cause talk about a deep sense of gratitude—a clearer appreciation for their own blessings, merited or not; thankfulness for the opportunity to serve, to make a difference in peoples' lives, to repair the world. And volunteering can make us

aware of our own moral and spiritual growth, a rare education in a self-indulgent culture.

But retreat from the public realm is a pervasive phenomenon despite attempts to re-ignite the fires of American volunteerism. While honoring and encouraging volunteer service, our belief in "justice, equity and compassion in human relations" may be expressed as social service or as political advocacy to change systems and bring justice closer to reality. To illustrate one dimension of the potential difference, let's look at the late Mother Teresa—by all accounts the most famous volunteer in the world. Unitarian Universalists would not agree with her on many issues, her adamant opposition to abortion and family planning chief among them. She dealt compassionately with the poor, but refused to use her influence to attack the causes of their misery. Her life of service to "the least of these" is a strong challenge to our liberal "do-goodism" but does not suffice. When we see injustice, we may well feel a civic duty to annoy the unjust.

Margaret Sanger stands in contrast to Mother Teresa. She was a public health nurse who day after day visited poor women who were plunged into despair by unwanted pregnancies. "These were not merely 'unfortunate conditions among the poor' such as we read about," Sanger writes. "I knew the women personally. They were living, breathing human beings, with hopes, fears and aspirations like my own."

Sanger tells the story of Mrs. Sachs, a twenty-eight-year-old woman who suffers from septicemia as a result of a self-induced abortion. The woman's doctor warns her that one more pregnancy could be fatal. She begs the doctor to tell her what she can do to avoid the pregnancy. The doctor says, "Tell Jake to sleep on the roof." Mrs. Sachs begs Margaret Sanger, "Please tell me the secret, and I'll never breathe it to a soul." Sanger is haunted by the request but does nothing. Three months later Mrs. Sachs becomes pregnant, attempts an abortion, falls into a coma, and dies.

Sanger leaves the deathbed scene and walks the streets. That night she decides that she cannot go on like this, merely witnessing human suffering: "I was resolved to seek out the root of evil, to do something to change the destiny of mothers whose miseries were vast as the sky." The Planned Parenthood movement grew out of Sanger's compassion for one suffering soul.

The two basic questions we must ultimately

ask are these: What should we do and why should we do it? We should try to repair the world, because in so doing we repair ourselves as well. The word *volunteer* is from the root *voluntas*, or choice, and *velle*, or wish. We don't have to do it; we do it because we want to. We are Unitarian Universalists bent on changing the world. We do it because it is part of our ministry as people of liberal religious faith. We do it because we know that if we are not involved in the solution we are part of the problem.

We are called then to look outward by looking inward. Do we think our puny efforts can change the course of destiny? Like Dr. Who, we might at least tamper with it. We do well to remember a Jewish legend of the "*lamed-Vovnik-Tsaddikim*," the thirty-six righteous people by whose merit the world survives. In every generation there are these thirty-six secret *tzaddikim*, saints. Nobody knows who they are, but were it not for their lonely example, the world would crumble.

George Templeton, an observer of nineteenth-century Unitarians, puts it prophetically: "They are sensible, plausible, candid, subtle, and original in discussing any social evil or abuse. But somehow they don't get at it." Whether or not Unitarian Universalists in the twenty-first century "get at it" is a matter for debate, but it is true that the struggle for justice has been at the heart of liberal religion.

In his essay "Society and Solitude," Ralph Waldo Emerson speaks of the need to both cultivate one's own spirit and help build a better world: "We must keep our head in the one and our hands in the other. . . . These wonderful horses need to be driven by fine hands in order to keep them an effective team." Emerson points out the need for a delicate balance between spirituality and justice.

We tend to think of spiritual matters as private, belonging to that personal and untouchable zone of the soul whence comes our strength. Social justice, on the other hand, is public, what we do in the world. Some suggest the two are not only different but opposite. Social action is both a product of our faith and the expression of it and is therefore essential to our spiritual health. We can no more remain outside the public realm of peace- and justice-making than we could absent ourselves from Sunday worship. Promotion of "justice, equity and compassion in human relations" is as vital as "acceptance of one another

and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." Neglect of either is unthinkable.

As spiritual beings we need to overcome our narcissism, our nonstop celebration of self. The consumer society is devoid of meaning. In a materialistic age happiness keeps receding. The self-indulgent life becomes a spiritual bore. Authentic spirituality means breaking away from our egocentricity.

The personal and social dimensions of life are not in competition but rather two halves of a whole; they create and nurture one another. Social responsibility has too much centrifugal force; it needs balance from the centripetal spin of inward spiritual experience to bring us back to the center from which wholeness comes. Solitude and community, spirituality and social justice, are not in competition. The further inward we explore, the more we touch what scholar Huston Smith calls the water table of our common humanity. The more the unseen moves us, the more we understand the hidden bonds of community. "Religion," it has been said, "begins in mysticism and ends in social action." To be is to be for others. To be is to be of use in the world.

Many of us experience "compassion fatigue," but we find our patience strengthened by the words of Douglas Smithall Freeman: "Most of the world's useful work is done by people who are pressed for time, or are tired or don't feel well."

While we arrive at our political positions through reason, they are also full of convictions and passions. The experiences are transforming because people feel deeply and are committed enough to put their lives on the line. It is spiritually exhilarating to realize that in one's own small efforts, one is part of a great living stream of reformers, a great cloud of witnesses who seek to create the Beloved Community on earth.

One such reformer was James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister who was murdered in the hate-filled streets of Selma, Alabama, where he had gone to participate in Martin Luther King Jr.'s campaign for voting rights for African Americans. Unitarian Universalists were urged to gather for the memorial service, at which King was to speak. Many dropped everything and went to Selma. They marched nervously through a cordon of Alabama troopers armed with long truncheons that they pounded into their hands with intimidating force. Despite the fact the marchers were unarmed and at the phys-

ical mercy of the troopers, many felt like members of a liberating army as they approached the Brown's Chapel compound to be greeted by the cheers of black residents and their supporters.

The sanctuary was filled to overflowing with a great crush of bodies. King's eloquent eulogy and the singing of "We Shall Overcome" with a cantorial descant of the Jewish prayer for the dead were simply overwhelming. It was a mystical moment—calling to mind Theodore Parker's words that "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The gathered worshipers felt that they were participants in the very making of history. There was a feeling of oneness—every race and religion was represented—shirt-sleeved farmers with sweat on their faces were there with nuns in full habit and clergy in every imaginable liturgical garb.

In moments like this we learn once again that there is a reality greater than ourselves, a "creating, sustaining, transforming reality" of which we are a part. While it transcends us, we are part and parcel of it—co-creators with it, in a limited but vitally important way. This power speaks to us through people of prophetic fire who constitute a creative minority; it speaks to us in the lives of ordinary men and women and children; and from the depths of our own hearts when we pause long enough and thoughtfully enough to hear and heed.

As we negotiate the new millennium we will need to do some serious soul-searching and some serious world repairing—the two go hand-in-hand. We of the liberal religious faith are slowly but steadily being marginalized, overwhelmed by a confident fundamentalist political theology that threatens to utterly engulf us. However disparagingly we may speak of the religious right, it has tapped into something very deep, giving its followers a spiritual rootedness in a dogmatic faith and a sense of purpose grounded in an absolutist politics.

We who eschew dogma and reject absolutism will need to work harder than the denizens of the right, for our faith demands more of us. We need the power of conviction even in the face of our ultimate uncertainty about the nature of reality and right and wrong. While it is perhaps better to be vaguely right than absolutely wrong, the very nature of our faith requires deeper convictions.

The times are dire, but then people who live under the prophetic imperative are always worried. Comedienne Lily Tomlin recently said, "No matter how cynical I get, I can't keep up."

We need to be mindful of the prophet Jeremiah, who even as he warned of imminent doom and approaching foreign invasion, bought a piece of land as a sign and symbol of hope.

Consider these words by the late Nick Cardell, a Unitarian Universalist minister who campaigned to close the School of the Americas, a training facility for Latin American police and military personnel who have been implicated time and again in violation of human rights in their home countries. For his civil disobedience at Fort Benning, Georgia, Cardell was sentenced to six months in jail. Reflecting on his experience, he writes,

Sometimes I'm asked how or why I got involved in this cause. One easy answer is because what we do to each other is my business. These people—victims and victimizers—are my people. And there is also a very personal need. When I was a youngster I scratched my initials into the middle of the highest steel girder on a bridge leading into and out of New York City. No one knows it is there. But I do! In my adult life I have wanted to find life-affirming ways to write my initials on the tree of life. As poet Mary Oliver put it: "I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."