



Touchstones Project

a monthly journal of Unitarian Universalism

June 2022

A Prophetic Imperative

Wisdom Story



Introduction to the Theme

The term the “prophetic imperative” in our tradition goes back to the 1977 dissertation, *The Prophetic Imperative: Unitarian Universalist Foundations for a New Social Gospel*, by Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert. It was published in 1980 by the UUA. Gilbert’s major revision, *The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice*, was published in 1992 by Skinner House Press (second edition, 2000, available through the UUA Bookstore). (A study guide for the book is available at http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/lfd/propheticimperative_guide.pdf)

Given the social, political, economic, health, racial, and environmental challenges that exist today, the prophetic imperative has taken on increased importance.

“Prophetic” refers to the tradition of the Hebrew prophets in the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew scripture, figures like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Micah. According to Erich Fromm, “The prophets believed that the meaning of life is the struggle for justice in community.” Gilbert notes that the word “prophet” originally applied to individuals, but his intent has been to apply it to congregations. This begins with a congregation understanding itself as a community of moral discourse. Gilbert took the word “imperative” from the book *The Radical Imperative* by John Bennett, noting that the word, for him, involved “a sense of urgency to live out the ethical implications of religious faith.”

Gilbert’s purpose was to encourage Unitarian Universalists to construct a new Social Gospel in which social responsibility is intrinsically related to the religious quest and the work of a congregation. The original Social Gospel was a religious movement in America that began around 1870 and continued

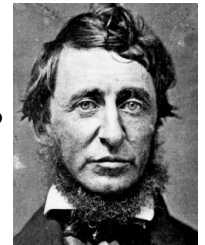
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Prophets of Peace

from *Tapestry of Faith*, adapted

In the middle of the 19th century, a frenzy of support for the Mexican-American War swept across America. But a small minority, including some ministers, scholars, and abolitionists, saw the war as an act of violent aggression against a weak, neighboring country. Abraham Lincoln, then a congressman from Illinois, called the war immoral.

Henry David Thoreau also thought the war was wrong. He refused to pay taxes because of it. However, it was illegal to refuse to pay taxes, so Thoreau was arrested and jailed.



Thoreau chose to remain jail to make a public statement rather than pay the taxes and a fine to get out. Thoreau’s friend, the Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson, came to visit him in jail. Emerson asked why Thoreau was allowing himself to waste away in jail when he had the money to pay the taxes. Thoreau responded saying, “The question is not what am I doing in *here*, but what are you doing out *there*?”

Thoreau’s tax was paid by a relative who could not tolerate his imprisonment, and he was released. Thoreau’s experience led him to write his essay, *Civil Disobedience*, which explained why it can be necessary to disobey an unjust law.

Sixty years later in South Africa, Mohandas Gandhi got a job. Raised in western India, he studied law in England. Although allowed to work as a lawyer, Gandhi discovered that he lacked full

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Prophetic Imperative & Repairing the World

Without a prophetic imperative, it is not clear that there would be sufficient motivation to repair the world. We are blessed, therefore, that so many people, motivated by a prophetic imperative, work tirelessly to bend the moral arc of the universe toward justice. Sometimes progress is not especially visible, since the work is grounded in the grassroots, but it makes a difference. Consider racial justice, climate justice, electoral justice, reproductive justice, and more. And, not trivially, it is often darkest before the dawn. Let us join the prophetic women and men of ages past by courageously confronting, as they did, the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

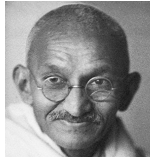
A Theme-Based Ministry Project

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Repairing the World

(Continued from page 1) **Wisdom Story**

rights in South Africa, whose laws treated all Indians as second-class people and black Africans, the majority of the population, much worse. When the government passed a law requiring all Indians to register with the police and be fingerprinted, Gandhi refused to obey. He was arrested. While in jail, Gandhi read Thoreau's essay, *Civil Disobedience*. It inspired him to not give up, even when the challenges seemed much too high to overcome.



Gandhi dedicated his entire life to the principles of nonviolence and civil disobedience for social change. In India, his peaceful leadership encouraged the Indian people to protest and persist until their country won its independence from British rule.

Near the time of Gandhi's death in 1948, a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. began his own nonviolent movement. America was supposed to protect citizens' rights and opportunities, but in many places and in many ways, rights and opportunities were denied to African Americans.



While some wanted to seek change through violence, Rev. Dr. King spoke passionately about making change through peaceful means. He joined non-violent marches and demonstrations to show others how. People listened and watched. As more people followed King's example, the Civil Rights movement grew more powerful. Like Gandhi, King led peaceful protest for change.

Martin Luther King, Jr. found inspiration in the guidance of Jesus to love one's enemies, but he learned about civil disobedience from the writings of Henry David Thoreau. He believed he could achieve change peacefully, because of the ideas and example of Gandhi.

Thoreau, Gandhi, and King: three prophets, in different times, in different places, sought power through peace.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveconnects/session8/power-of-peace>

Prophetic Foundations

In his book, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square*, Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, Paul Razor offers nine theological principles to inform the prophetic work of Unitarian Universalists.

1. *The fundamental unity and interdependence of all existence:* As Razor writes, "There is no separation between us and them; we are us." This "us" includes all countries, all peoples, all species, and the planet itself. This assertion recalls Martin Luther King, Jr.'s term of "an inescapable network of mutuality." As King noted, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
2. *The transforming power of love:* As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." The idea that love is a form of power is significant. The truth is you cannot change minds if you do not change hearts first.
3. *The inherent worth and dignity of all persons:* This is our first principle. It is not a platitude. It is a way of being in the world, the bedrock of right relationships. Every person has a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is at the core of the prophetic imperative.
4. *Freedom is not morally neutral:* It can result in goodness or evil, and everything in between. Freedom is the freedom to choose. It can be freedom from, but it is also freedom for. Let us be on the side of love, knowing that being is not enough. We must also act.
5. *Rejection of moral dualism:* We do not have a corner on moral superiority. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, "...the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every being. And who is willing to destroy a

piece of his own heart?"

6. *Commitment to social justice:* The idea of letting justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream is to bring life-giving water to the least among us that they may participate in the gifts and blessings of life, rather than being excluded.
7. *Cooperative power:* It is power-with, not power-over; persuasion, not coercion. But it is power. As Frederick



Douglass said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will." The further reality is that it power must be organized to be effective. While Gandhi and King practiced non-violent resistance it was fundamentally a form of organized power.

8. *The church as a free covenanted fellowship:* The free church is a powerful vehicle to live out the prophetic imperative. The covenant enumerates the promises that members of a free church make with each other. This is the internal covenant, but there is also an external covenant, which consists of the promises that the free church makes with the world.
9. *Principled theological openness:* Unitarian Universalism has always understood truth to have a lowercase "t," not a capital "T." As James Luther Adams wrote, "revelation is continuous," which means that everything can be called into question. This theological openness is illustrated by the fact that our tradition draws from many sources.

Source: Touchstones

Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: “How does our faith hold brokenness, injustice, and suffering? Clumsily.



Gingerly. Tenderly. Bravely. Lovingly. Reverently. Humbly and deliberately. Imperfectly.” Victoria Safford

Day 2: “I’m no prophet. My job is making windows where there were once walls.” Michel Foucault

Day 3: “A prophet is not someone with special visions, just someone blind to most of what others see.” Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Day 4: “Never surrender your hopes and dreams to the fateful limitations others have placed on their own lives. The vision of your true destiny does not reside within the blinkered outlook of the naysayers and the doom prophets.” Anthon St. Maarten

Day 5: “When you are a child, you are yourself and you know and see everything prophetically. And then suddenly something happens and you stop being yourself; you become what others force you to be. You lose your wisdom and your soul.” Jean Rhys

Day 6: “...let us be artisans of hope, artisans of wonder, working with the clay of human longing, of our capacities for greed and indifference, exclusion and fear, as well as for generosity, courage, forgiveness, and resilience.” Sharon Welch

Day 7: “May we all have the eyes to see, the ears to hear, and the hearts to burn with holy, human fire.” Dan McKanan

Day 8: “A prophet is the one who, when everyone else despairs, hopes. And when everyone else hopes, he despairs. You’ll ask me why. It’s because he has mastered the Great Secret: that the Wheel turns.” Nikos Kazantzakis

Day 9: “Prophetic love requires discipline, humility, and practice.” Kate Lore

Day 10: “Your masters ...have taught you to idolize reason, drying up the prophetic capacities of your heart!” Umberto Eco

Day 11: “We can always be sure of one thing—that the messengers of discomfort and sacrifice will be stoned and pelted by

those who wish to preserve at all costs their own contentment. This is not a lesson that is confined to the Testaments.” Christopher Hitchens

Day 12: “Prophetic churches minister to the community as it is while reminding the community of what it could be.” Adam Gerhardstein

Day 13: “There are prophets, there are guides, and there are argumentative people with theories, and one must be careful to discriminate among them.” Peter Brook

Day 14: “The prophetic church presents a vision that compels us to act.” Paula Cole Jones

Day 15: “Then he raised his voice in a prophet-like challenge that I knew would live with me forever: ‘Don’t ever give up in freedom what we would never give up in persecution!’” Nik Ripken

Day 16: “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” Walter Brueggemann

Day 17: “But why? Why do you need prophets to tell you how you ought to live? Why do you need anyone to tell you how you ought to live?” Daniel Quinn

Day 18: “Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a scepter but a hoe.” Bernard of Clairvaux

Day 19: “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” Matthew 7:15

Day 20: “Yet has there ever been a religion with the prophetic accuracy and reliability of science? ... No other human institution comes close.” Carl Sagan

Day 21: “Some people believe the alternative to bad religion is secularism, but that’s wrong.... The answer to bad religion is better religion—prophetic rather than partisan, broad and deep instead of narrow, and based on values as opposed to ideology.” Jim Wallis

Day 22: “Ideas combined with courage can change the world.” David Litwack

Day 23: “There are two ways of being a prophet. One is to tell the enslaved that they can be free. It is the difficult path of Moses. The second is to tell those who think they are free that they are in fact enslaved. This is the even more difficult path of Jesus.” Richard Rohr

Day 24: “Ezekiel and his fellow prophets have become my heroes. They were fearless. They literalized metaphors. They turned their lives into protest pieces. They proved that, in the name of truth, sometimes you can’t be afraid to take a left turn from polite society and look absurd.” A.J. Jacobs



Day 25: “And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:2

Day 26: “As a teenager, I always intended to do my homework. But when the supplicant dead come to you for justice and you also have occasional prophetic dreams, life tends to interfere with your studies.” Dean Koontz

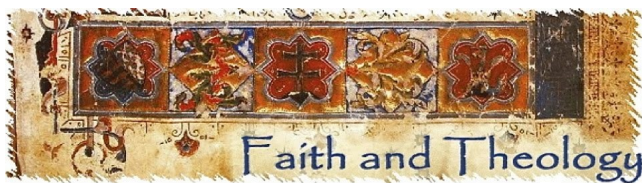
Day 27: “One thing about change hasn’t changed: it still fascinates some people, frightens others, and provides a good living for a prophetic minority.” Warren Wiersbe

Day 28: “Any work we do within our congregation is bound to affect our work outside its walls.” Carol Caouette

Day 29: “May we lead, not lag. May we reclaim the voice of our prophetic faith.” Kat Liu

Day 30: “Prophecy is a poetry of change, social, political, moral, spiritual.” Allegra Goodman

Day 31: “Every minister worthy of the name has to walk the line between prophetic vision and spiritual sustenance, between telling people the comforting things they want to hear and challenging them with the difficult things they need to hear.” Timothy Tyson



Faith and Theology

Prophetic Vision

The prophetic imperative requires a prophetic vision if we are not to perish. Interlocking oppressions are very powerful, but there are also interlocking virtues that are even more powerful. The following 16 elements/virtues of prophetic vision are adapted from the book *The Soul of Politics: Beyond "Religious Right" and "Secular Left"* by Jim Wallis. He writes, "it is the moral failure of our powerful institutions and the ethical poverty of our successful elites that ...create the need for new visions and possibilities." What follows are sources of progressive power.

Conversion: Making the Poor a Priority—Appropriate concern about the upper 1% and the 0.1% points to extreme income and generational wealth inequality, which is born by the poor, people of color, and women to varying degrees. The symbol of an economic pyramid is apt because Pharaohs in every age have waged class warfare. The grievances of the poor are justified. And now, globalization, the so-called economic panacea, is being called into question. Investing in people and leveling the playing field can make the poor a priority.

Compassion: From "We-They" to "Us"—Wallis writes, "The listening that leads to compassion is the beginning of understanding." The fragmentation of a "We-They" mentality can never lead to creativity or compromise, both necessary to addressing societal problems. In America the motto *E pluribus unum*, "out of many, one" is the ideal of "Us." Wallis observes that, "The walls divide us, but they don't protect us."

Community: A Moral Economy—In Canada, a unifying reality is the 1982 *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, as is the *Bill of Rights* in America. Each articulate a moral basis for community, but community is undercut when governed by an immoral economy. We cannot create a viable community writ small or large if it is not grounded in a moral economy, one reflected in laws and budgets.

Reverence: Honoring All Creation—

ently is our only salvation. Global warming is a cataclysmic reality perpetuated by our species. Joanna Macy has long advocated a

Great Turning that envisions reverent co-existence with all of creation, and David Korten would have us expand our definition of community until an *Earth Community* is made real as expressed in our seventh principle.

Diversity: From Integration to Pluralism—Integration in North America is assimilation into a white, Anglo-Saxon identity, which, if you are a person of color, is a violation of self. Wallis recounts, the little girl weeps, saying, "I am ugly. The young woman asks, "Why do you say that?" And the little girl replied, "I'm ugly because I'm black." The dominant white culture understands neither beauty nor justice. Diverse communities of resistance must also be communities of engagement that practice pluralism.

Equality: Beyond Inclusion—Equality of opportunity means nothing to those who cannot take advantage of opportunity. Ask people of color who fight barriers every day that whites never encounter, ask women who are paid less for doing the same work as men, ask the poor who are undercompensated to enrich others, or ask people with disabilities for whom each day is another experience in exclusion. As Wallis writes, "Equality is a sign of transformation." Ask all who are discriminated against what equality should look like. Their answers will be enlightening and disturbing in equal measure.

Peacemaking: Real Security—The illusion of peace and of "never again," has been ruptured by Putin's war in Ukraine.

But the illusion of peace is punctured daily by gang violence, hate crimes, domestic violence, police action, and more. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace," lamented the prophet, Jeremiah. Peace is not just the absence of war; it is also the absence of violence. Peacemaking must be a daily spiritual practice.

Justice: The Hunger That Heals—Wallis writes, "When we are hungry, we become increasingly concentrated on relieving our hunger. ...The movement

from social concern to a hunger for justice has both spiritual and political significance. ...When hungry people learn to share the bread of hope together, a new kind of community becomes possible and the first fruits of justice can begin to be enjoyed. ...The day when a substantial number of [the] middle-class... have moved from social concern to a hunger for what is right will be the day when justice becomes more possible...."

Contemplation: The Inward Journey—The inward journey of contemplation is a start for prophetic witness and action. Jesus spent 40 days in the desert, the Buddha sat in meditation for 49 days under the Bodhi tree, Thoreau spent two years at Walden and journaled continuously, Martin Luther King, Jr. was in a Birmingham jail for 11 days where he wrote his famous letter, Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison, Vaclav Havel was in jail for 4-1/2 years, and Gandhi was imprisoned in South Africa 4 times for a total of 7 months. In contemplation, we confront essential questions: What is the world calling us to do? What is our vision for the future? What commitments can we make, what actions will we take?

Courage: Taking the First Step—Wallis tells the story of a black youth choir on a weekend retreat at the Highlander Center in Tennessee. They were in the chapel when it was surrounded by members of the White Citizen's Council who were carrying torches and shotguns, shouting slurs, and ordering the youth to leave the chapel. Then the lights went off. One teenager started singing to the tune of *We Shall Overcome*, "We are not afraid. We are not afraid. We are not afraid today. Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe that we shall overcome some day." As the other choir members joined in, the white supremacists finally left in disgust.

Responsibility: How Change Begins—The etymology of the word responsibility includes "accountable for one's actions." Wallis writes, "Taking personal responsibility is important in a society where blame always belongs to the next person...." Absent responsibility and accountability, there is no leadership.

Integrity: The Quality of Leadership—Integrity consists of a constellation of character traits that includes honesty,

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She is Malala

Malala Yousafzai Malik, born in July 1997, was named after a Pashtun heroine, Malalai, who helped the Pashtun defeat the British in the 1880 battle of Maiwand. She lived with her father, Ziauddin, and her mother, Tor Pekai, in Mingora, a town in the Swat District in northwest Pakistan. Malala's father ran a school beside their home where she would go when she was a toddler and act as if she was a teacher.

In 2007, when Malala was ten, the Pakistani Taliban (aka Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP) gained control of the Swat valley. Girls were banned from attending school, and dancing and watching television were forbidden. Ziauddin was forced to close his school. By 2008, the TTP had destroyed 400 schools. Malala and her father spoke out for the right to education, especially for girls, despite death threats. In 2009, as the TTP became more oppressive, Malala began writing a blog in Urdu for the BBC.

In 2011, she received Pakistan's first National Youth Peace Prize and was nominated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu for the International Children's Peace Prize. This was when TTP leaders decided to go after her.

On October 9, 2012, a masked gunman boarded the school bus Malala and her friends were on and shot Malala and two of her friends.

Critically injured, Malala was moved to a hospital in Birmingham, England that specialized in military injuries. She spent 4 months recovering. Her family joined her in Birmingham, where they still live.

The world was outraged by the TTP's attempt to kill Malala. In the weeks after, over two million people signed a "right to education" petition. The National Assembly swiftly ratified Pakistan's first *Right to Free and Compulsory Education Bill*.

In 2013, Malala and her father founded the Malala Fund to raise



awareness about the plight of girls who are denied an education, and oppressed in other ways. It works to empower girls to raise their voices to demand change. A 2020 graduate of Lady Margaret Hall at the University of Oxford with a degree in in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, Malala serves on the Board of the Malala Fund.

In 2014, Malala was a co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. In her acceptance speech, she said, "I am not a lone voice, I am many. I am Malala. But I am also Shazia. I am Kainat. I am Kainat Soomro. I am Mezon. I am Amina. I am those 66 million girls who are deprived of education. And today I am not raising my voice, it is the voice of those 66 million girls."

Malala is the inspiration for a female superhero, a teacher, Mrs. Jiya, who is also the *Burka Avenger*. The avenger uses the burka to protect her identity as she fights for justice and education. (A trailer about this animated award-winning Pakistani series is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PZYvSXtWIAQ> and 34 episodes are on YouTube with English subtitles at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOOkZbztV5LM4-VMNjbg5IQ>)

Source: Touchstones

Family Activity: Going to School

Watch these two videos with your children: *School The World: Journey* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bWVAEU6SOc> (2:31) and *Scenes from schools around the world* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=at2gAjtsgtk> (3:25). Discuss with your children what the schools that you attended were like, then imagine with them what your life would have been like if you had not been able to go to school, and how that would affect them. You may also want to read and discuss *Malala's Magic Pencil* by Malala Yousafzai, author and Kerascœt, illustrator or watch it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVgtqDDXWVg> (10:09)

Dreams Deferred

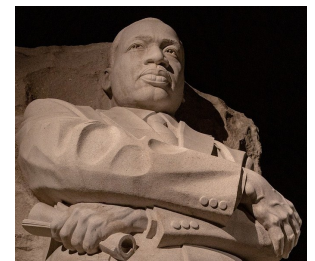
The profession of a prophet is not without peril, and yet it is an essential role. In each generation, we need those who will speak truth to power, who will advance ideas that will create a society that is more just. Civil rights activist (and World War II veteran who fought in the Battle of Normandy) Medgar Evers said, "You can kill a man, but you can't kill an idea." This explains, in part, the power of prophets. Their vision and their words endure and inspire.

Medgar Evers was killed in June 1963 by Byron De La Beckwith, a white segregationist and founding member of Mississippi's White Citizens Council. Beckwith was tried twice, but was not convicted by all white juries. Years later, in February 1994, a third trial resulted in a conviction and a life sentence. Justice delayed, but not denied.

Jesus said, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own relatives, and in his own house."

Unitarian Universalist minister Clinton Lee Scott captured the complex relationship that society has with its prophets. He wrote, "Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision. It is easier blindly to venerate the saints than to learn the human quality of their sainthood. It is easier to glorify the heroes of the race than to give weight to their examples. To worship the wise is much easier than to profit by their wisdom. Great leaders are honored, not by adulation, but by sharing their insights and values. Grandchildren of those who stoned the prophet sometimes gather up the stones to build the prophet's monument. Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision."

Dr. Vincent Harding called Martin Luther King, Jr. an "inconvenient hero." It was a twist of a phrase from a poem by Carl Wendell Himes, Jr., whose sentiments reflect Scott's observations. Himes wrote, *Now that he safely dead*



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New Ways Of Being And Acting

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until 1920. It focused on social reform to address urban problems, especially those associated with working conditions, calling for an end to child labor, a shorter workweek, safe conditions in factories, and a living wage. In our tradition, involvement in the Social Gospel movement was led by Unitarian minister Francis Greenwood Peabody. In 1880, he became a professor at Harvard Divinity School and began teaching courses in social ethics. Universalist minister Clarence Skinner, who became a professor at Crane Theological School in 1914 and later its dean, published *The Social Implications of Universalism* in 1915, which articulated a Universalist Social Gospel.

Another key figure was John Haynes Holmes, a Unitarian minister, who was called to the Church of the Messiah in 1907, which changed its name to the Community Church of New York in 1919 under his leadership. Holmes was not only prophetic in word, but also prophetic in action. He helped found the NAACP and the ACLU.

In its own way, the *Humanist Manifesto*, published in 1933, took up a theme of the Social Gospel, noting in article 14 that, "A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible."

Relative to a new Social Gospel, Gilbert contended, "The Unitarian Universalist Church lives under a 'prophetic imperative,' a religious mandate for the corporate address of the church to the systemic problems of the communities in which it lives." His perspective was amplified through the adoption of the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources in 1985. The second source draws from the "words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." This source

- ◆ Calls us out of ourselves and into the world;
- ◆ Calls for words, which is to say, public witness, and deeds that involve

- concrete actions in service of justice;
- ◆ Articulates in a profoundly compact manner a theology of evil; and
- ◆ Calls, not for "faith, hope and love" as elegantly summarized in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, but for justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

The term prophet has traditionally referred to an individual. James Luther Adams, the most theologically influential individual in the 20th century in Unitarian Universalism, argued for a broader and more powerful understanding of the prophetic role in his 1947 essay, *The Prophethood of All Believers*. Adams, a theologian, social ethicist, and professor, wrote, "We see the prophet as one who stands at the edge of a community's experience and tradition, ...viewing human life from a piercing perspective and bringing an imperative sense of the perennial and inescapable

struggle of good against evil, of justice against injustice." Adams continued, "...the prophet shakes us out of our pride and calls for a change of heart and mind and action. With fear and trembling the prophet announces crisis and demands ethical decision here and now."

Adams noted that the symbol of prophecy was aptly captured by a crucifix reportedly on an altar in a church in Toronto. At a distance, the figure on the cross looked like a question mark. The question mark stands in judgement of the ways in which we act that are life-denying rather than life-affirming. Adams suggests that we misunderstand the role of prophecy if we limit it to that of a critic. He notes that a prophet is a "foreteller," who is focused on future events, as well as a "forthteller," who "interprets the ultimate meaning of life." This "forthtelling" is to respond in creative ways to the question mark.

For Gilbert and Adams, the role of foretelling and forthtelling is not limited in a prophetic liberal church to a chosen few. It is the collective responsibility of members to discern "where to" and "why" and "how." This commitment gave rise to Adams' call for a church to be a Prophethood of All Believers. When this happens, new

ways of being and acting emerge.

Unitarian Universalist minister George Kimmich Beach has devoted a good bit of his career to making the works of James Luther Adams available to succeeding generations. The culmination of this work is his 2005 book, *Transforming Liberalism: The Theology of James Luther Adams*, in which he weaves together Adams' words within his own interpretive framework. Beach notes that, "The core of Adams' thought is rooted in the idea of a prophetic theology." This prophetic theology is embedded in the crucible of covenant, which is composed of a constellation of prophetic virtues: "justice, steadfast love (also called kindness or mercy), faithfulness, truthfulness, righteousness, and peace."

In contrast to the dour portrayal of the Hebrew prophets, Adams was called the "smiling prophet" because his understanding of the nature and power of prophecy was informed by hope, creativity, authentic love, judgement and forgiveness, spiritual freedom, the possibility and power of a change of heart, the impulse to mend our ways, and our ability and desire to heal and renew broken covenants. To this, Adams added the leavening power of humor.

Adams believed that prophetic theology could only be advanced through the free church and liberal democracy, which is why he labored for many years to "transform religious and political liberalism into a realistic, resilient, and indeed transforming cultural force." Beach concludes, "Prophetic faith yields a theology of hope. It means proclaiming in the face of present injustice, a justice to come, and in the face of present hatred and fear, a peace to come—both as moral commitments and as articles of faith. It means knowing that the sin of religion is 'cheap grace,' offering spiritual comfort without 'the call to make some new sacrifices.'"

Our tradition draws from many sources including, "Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." Let us become those women and men.

Source: Touchstones



(Continued from page 4) **Faith & Theology**

being respectful, generating trust, exercising responsibility, keeping promises, helping others, and being driven by a sense of pride. Without integrity, a leader dwells in darkness, as do those who follow her or him. The absence of integrity is lethal.

Imagination: To Have a Dream—Wallis writes, “Imagination means the ability to invent the future, guided by core values, and unrestrained by present ideological assumptions and structural status quos. In particular, imagination requires that we go beyond the frozen systems of thought, politics, and social organization that have governed us for so long.”

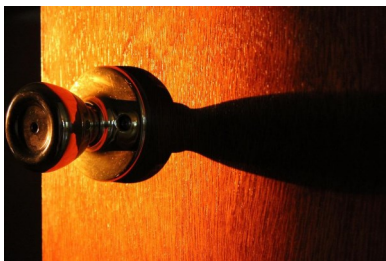
Reconstruction: From Protest to Power for Good—Protest is an important element in a prophetic vision. The point of protest is both “No” and “Yes.” If it is only “No,” then protest is destructive at worst; ineffective at best. But when it is also “Yes,” it points to a better way of being that others can support. When it is both “No” and “Yes,” protest builds and organizes power to challenge and disrupt the status quo to serve the common good.

Joy: A Sign of Life—Emma Goldman’s quote, “A revolution without dancing is not a revolution worth having,” is a creative paraphrase from her 1931 autobiography, *Living My Life*. It suggests that there must be joy in what we do, or how we do it will be compromised. When the “common good” becomes the “good that is common,” joy abounds.

Hope: Doorway to the Future—Wallis writes, “hope is not simply a feeling of a mood or a rhetorical flourish. Hope is the very dynamic of history. Hope is the engine of change. Hope is the energy of transformation. Hope is the door from one reality to another.

...Between impossibility and possibility, there is a door, the door of hope. And the possibility of history’s transformation lies through that door.”

Source: Touchstones



On Tyranny

In a 2021 *AmericasBarometer* poll, 73% of Canadians indicated that they were satisfied with the way their democracy was working. In the U.S., the level of satisfaction was 53%. A 2022 NPR/Ipsos poll found that 64% of Americans believe U.S. democracy is “in crisis and at risk of failing.” America’s slide toward authoritarianism has intensified given the support for Trump’s Big Lie by 58% of Republicans. Voter suppression/nullification legislation, banning books, the January 6th coup attempt, the packing of the U.S. Supreme Court, and selected Court rulings since 2010 are undermining democracy and essential individual rights in the U.S., including personal decisions involving reproduction.

A new global shift toward authoritarianism has been growing for 16 years as tracked by Freedom House and detailed in their 2022 report: *The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule*. Our 5th principle’s commitment to the democratic process calls us to act to defend and strengthen democracy. If we need more motivation, consider the Ukrainians who are defending their country and democracy against a brutal tyrant admired by a past President. Saving democracy is a prophetic imperative.

Timothy Snyder’s 2017 book, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, offers 20 strategies to oppose tyranny. Just 128 pages, it is sobering and wise. As a review notes, it “is a call to arms and a guide to resistance.” Snyder, a Professor of History at Yale University, begins each chapter with a strategy, briefly stated, then uses history to explain why it is important. Chillingly, it appears that the U.S. slide into authoritarianism is much further along than obvious. Following are a few of Snyder’s strategies.

#3 Beware the one-party state. As Snyder explains, “The parties that remade states and suppressed rivals were not omnipotent from the start. They exploited a historic moment to make political life impossible for their opponents.” Based on the erroneous belief that the 2020 election was stolen,

Republican-led state legislatures have enacted voter suppression/nullification laws designed to help them steal elections. The 2022 vote turnout must be overwhelming against them to prevent a steal.

#6 Be Wary of Paramilitaries. Snyder writes, “When the men with guns who have always claimed to be against the system start wearing uniforms and marching with torches and pictures of a leader, the end is nigh.” White supremacists marched in Charlottesville and killed Heather Heyer, and a failed coup organized by a defeated President involved paramilitaries and over 100,000 protestors. This coup attempt resulted in the death of 9 people, with 140 officers injured. Hopefully, the *U.S. House Select Committee on January 6th* will reveal the truth so safeguards against any future occurrence can be put in place.

#10 Believe in Truth. Snyder writes, “To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle.” The previous President made 30,573 false or misleading claims during a period marked by fake news, alternative facts, bogus conspiracy theories, and lies amplified by some media outlets. As Snyder concludes, “Post-truth is pre-fascism.” Our 4th principle commits us to seek and speak truth.

#19 Be a Patriot. Snyder asks that we set a good example of patriotism for future generations. He distinguishes between a patriot and a nationalist writing, “A nationalist encourages us to be our worst, and then tells us that we are the best.” He continues, “A patriot, by contrast, wants the nation to live up to its ideals, which means asking us to be our best selves” and having high expectations for one’s country.

Snyder concludes. “The danger we now face is of a passage ...from a naïve and flawed sort of democratic republic to a confused and cynical sort of fascist oligarchy.” Democracy is fragile, but precious, our only guarantee of freedom. We are the “check” to restore “balance,” and the common good.

Source: Touchstones

Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion Prophetic Imperative

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: "A true prophet, I suppose, is like a good parent. A true prophet sees others, not himself. He helps them define their own half-formed dreams, and puts himself at their service. He is not diminished as they become more. He offers courage in one hand and generosity in the other." *Mary Doria Russell*

Chalice Lighting: (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page one.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

Reading: "In his little speech to Alice, Humpty Dumpty sketches the future of human hopes.... Humpty Dumpty was a prophet, a man who spoke truths the world wasn't ready for. For all ...are eggs, in a manner of speaking. We exist, but we haven't yet achieved the form that is

our destiny. We are pure potential, an example of the not-yet-arrived. ...Humpty Dumpty is ...a fallen creature. He falls from his wall, and no one can put him back together again.... It is our duty as human beings to put the egg back together again."

Paul Auster

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. What does the term prophetic imperative mean to you? Do you agree that freedom implies responsibility? Why or why not?
2. How could you be called to take up the prophetic imperative in your own life? What would have to change?
3. In terms of past and present prophetic voices, who do you admire? Why?
4. How have your ideas about the imperative of justice-making changed over time? What has prompted these changes?
5. Do you agree, as Jesus said, that the poor will always be with us? Why or why not?
6. Many activists, especially those educated in liberation theology, conclude that we must adopt a preferential option for the poor and powerless in society. Do you agree? Why or Why not?
7. In terms of your congregation, what would it mean to become a *Prophethood of All Believers*? Is it possible? Is it something that you would support?
8. How do we put the egg back together?
9. In terms of a prophetic vision, what elements or virtues are most important to you? Why?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice: (Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words: Rev. Philip R. Giles (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

Still a Dream

(Continued from page 5) **Faith & Theology**

*Let us praise him
build monuments to his glory
sing hosannas to his name.
Dead men make
such convenient heroes: They
cannot rise
to challenge the image
we would fashion from their lives
And besides,
it is easier to build monuments
than to make a better world.
So, now that he is safely dead
We, with eased consciences
will teach our children
that he was a great man ...knowing
that the cause for which he lived
is still a cause
and the dream for which he died
is still a dream,
a dead man's dream.*

The prophet is an inconvenient hero because truth cannot be easily ignored.

Source: Touchstones

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