

# Prophet and Loss

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07/25/04

Lighting the Chalice (#560, Dorothy Day – slightly revised)

People say, what is the sense of our small effort?

What is the sense of that tiny flame, lit week after week?

They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, light one flame at a time, take one step at a time.

A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.

No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.

There's too much work to do.

## Reading ()

*Excerpt from "The Relevance of the Prophets For Us Today," in **For the Love of Life** by Erich Fromm*

If we want to discuss the relevance of the prophets for us today we have to begin by asking a few questions. Are the prophets still meaningful for anyone?...Or to put the question differently: *Shouldn't* they be meaningful to everyone today? Or to go even a little further: *Shouldn't* they become relevant for us again precisely because they are regarded as irrelevant? Because we live in a time that has no prophets but needs them?

[T]he prophets are not determinists...They are seers but not foreseeers...They are soothsayers...in the sense that they say the truth, for that is quite literally what a "soothsayer" does. The truth they speak is that [humans] can choose and [have] to choose between alternatives...Not only do they show what the alternatives are, they also actively warn against the choice that [will] lead to destruction. They protest

against that choice.

[The prophets] are relevant...because...the choices we face today are essentially quite similar to the ones people faced at the time of the prophets. We, too, have to see what the alternatives are; we, too, have to choose. And if we want to have some sense of what the relevance of the prophets for us is, then we cannot occupy ourselves exclusively with current events; we have to really *read* the prophets. They make extremely relevant and, if I may say so, extremely exciting reading, and they have much more to tell us about the contemporary world than do many news reports that claim to be up to the minute and to show us the present as it is—but do not *illuminate* the present.

*From "The Prophethood of All Believers," in The Essential James Luther Adams*

A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in human history of human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church. We have long held to the idea of the *priesthood* of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life and that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free persons...[W]e need also a firm belief in the *prophethood* of all believers. The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through their discussion the [kind of] thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional) with the intention of *making* history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the [prophethood of us all] can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.

We live in a time that has no prophets, but needs them, says Erich Fromm.

He wrote those words in 1975. I can only believe that our need for prophets has grown. And yet, I ask myself, how would I know a prophet if I saw one?

Part of the problem is deciding what a prophet is. It's a heavy title, not easily worn by the living. The word "prophet" is even skirted within the text of the Unitarian Universalist source I want to talk about today, when we say, *Our living tradition draws from words and deeds of **prophetic women and men** which challenge us to confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.*

Prophetic women and men. I like that. It sounds a little less lofty; a little less distant; a little less remotely religious than *prophets*. And still, we are left with the question: what qualifies as prophetic? Well, to follow some of my impeccable circular reasoning, it must have something to do with *prophecies*, right? Prophets prophesy prophetic prophecies. (Sounds a little like Dr. Seuss, I know.)

We don't seem to lack prophecies in the present age, do we? We have the Left Behind series of books and movies about the end of the world. Best-selling authors are claiming that Bible codes about 21st Century people and events were intentionally embedded in the Hebrew Bible when it was written many centuries ago. Heck, there are prophecies in the checkout line at the grocery store. Good old Nostradamus seems to be waiting for us every other week on the cover of *The Weekly World News*... and this week, I'm happy to report, even Mrs. Nostradamus got on the cover with her prophecies...and here we have NASA predictions for the exact timing of the end of the world...but, ignoring for a moment the absurdity of these particular examples, is this what we mean by prophecies? prophets those who can *see into the future*?

Erich Fromm would say, "no." A prophet does not predict an inevitable future. A prophet is a *seer* not a *foreseer*. Though I run across phrases in the press about "prophets of doom" or "prophets of hope," that strikes me now as a misguided way to talk about prophets. All prophets are prophets of doom *and* prophets of hope. They hold out alternatives to us, and speak to the consequences of our choices.

So, maybe Nostradamus and Miss Cleo, for all of their talents, do not qualify for the title of prophet, and perhaps "seeing into" an inevitable future has little to do with the "prophetic women and men" we are talking about as vital sources of our tradition...And yet, there is still something about what and how a person sees that opens the door to prophetic words and deeds. I think it has more to do with the present than the future.

Jean Paul Sartre once compared the experience of reading William Faulkner to riding backwards on a train. The future is unseen, the present is a blur; it is only what's past that is in focus. I think that is often how life is; many of us are riding that train in that very situation. Prophetic women and men attempt to bring the present into focus; they report details of the landscape while it rushes past, and in so doing give us clues as to where we are headed. In that sense, they are visionaries, and it is no wonder that we often don't seem to recognize them as prophets until they're dead. It is only then that what they've seen is coming into focus for us.

But once we are imparted with something prophetic...what then? We are allowed to see more clearly. And we are challenged...to confront *evil*.

And here also, implicitly, there is a philosophy about where evil is located and how it grows. *Powers and structures* of evil. We are not confronting evildoers, nor are we even confronting people with evil intentions, necessarily. But evil exists, nevertheless. It feeds on power, and it thrives in structures, structures built by people who seek to fulfill certain aims, sometimes even very understandable aims. It matters that we treat prisoners humanely. It matters that we not suspend the rights of selected groups of people in this country. It matters that we not continue to exploit the poorest among us. It matters that we reveal the number of civilian casualties. It matters that we seek justice and not revenge. It matters that we seek to proclaim what is true, and not spend time crafting coercive lies.

If, in fulfilling our aims, there is no regard for justice or compassion; if there is no regard for the

consequences of our stated mission on the lives of people; if morality becomes subservient to the oh-so-understandable aims, the structures are evil and must be confronted.

Now that doesn't, on the face of it, seem too difficult to understand, but there is, of course, great difficulty in carrying this out. Because, you see, we do not, (as much as we may want to cast it in these terms today), we do not confront the powers and structures of evil from outside; we live *inside* these structures; we rely on these structures; as much as we hate to admit it, we perpetuate these structures.

As people caught in these structures, we feel helpless to change things. The wheels of commerce that we've set in motion, for example, feel completely beyond our control, and we sometimes seek refuge from our own accountability in despair. "What can I do? I didn't create this. I didn't make the rules. I'm simply one of millions who are just trying to get by."

"No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible," [says Stanislaus Jerzy Lee](#). No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible. I know how that snowflake feels, just along for the ride. I know that avalanches wreak destruction; I know that someone could get hurt, will get hurt, in fact, I can see them just ahead in the path of this avalanche that I'm riding, that I'm part of, but not, am I, not really, I'm just one snowflake...so what am I to do?

"No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless," says Dorothy Day, "There's too much work to do." But if we don't hide in total despair, we can sometimes try to isolate our conscience from our daily lives.

Justice and compassion are all well and good, but that's got nothing to do with business...The transforming power of love sounds swell, but it has no relevance when you're dealing with terrorists... Those things belong to religion, a person's inner spiritual life, but they cannot realistically be priorities in public life...the real world operates by a different set of rules.

Theologian [Dorothe Solle writes](#), "We are afraid of religion because it interprets rather than just observes. Religion does not confirm that there are hungry people in the world; it interprets the hungry to be our [family] whom we allow to starve."

Let me read this quote again, replacing the word 'religion' with 'prophetic women and men'.

We are afraid of prophetic women and men because they interpret rather than just observe. Prophetic women and men do not confirm that there are hungry people in the world; they interpret the hungry to be our [family] whom we allow to starve.

That begins to give us a taste of the challenge that is posed by prophetic women and men.

And if we don't hide from that challenge in total despair, and we're willing to work at integrating our priorities and principles into all aspects of our lives, if we make an attempt at action, sometimes we can be incapacitated by the sheer complexity of the issues at hand. Much of that complexity is inherent in the

difficult realities of politics and economics and plurality, I realize, but some of that complexity is actually manufactured within us, I believe. To confront structures of evil, structures that just happen to be holding us up, we are bound to confront our own complicity in the evil that has resulted. There is a great desire, an almost self-preservational instinct, to close our eyes to the results of our complicity in order that we may continue our lives. "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it," [says Upton Sinclair](#), in his straightforward way. When our salary, when our way of life, when our status in the community, when our continued comfort, when our view of the world depends on our not understanding it...

And the prophetic women and men that we pay tribute to in the words of this section of our principles and purposes come along and, through their words and their deeds, they speak to us, and they speak so clearly that we cannot *not* understand it. They challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil, to free ourselves from the cogs in the machinery of "the way it is," as painful and painstaking and delicate as that operation might be. They call us to something higher, better...they challenge us...to confront.

Now that's another interesting choice of words, I think. Earlier I said something about fighting against evil, but that's not what it says here. We are challenged to confront powers and structures of evil, and we come bearing not weapons but gifts: justice, compassion and the transforming power of love. We do not seek to crush the structures of evil, but to transform them. After all, these structures are made up of people, aren't they? People just like you and me. People who are worthy of justice, compassion, and...

The transforming power of love.

This is a mighty claim; this is an impractical claim; this is a powerful claim and an unreasonable claim and here it sits, at the very foundation of what we have claimed as our tradition. This is a claim made by people who dare to interpret those who suffer as our family. This is the challenge put forth by the words and deeds of prophetic women and men.

And it is a challenge that, by being here, by being a part of this congregation, we have taken up. When I read the passage from James Luther Adams, speaking of the prophethood of all believers, in which he says, "The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through their discussion the [kind of] thinking that the times demand." I thought, wow, that could have been a description for the discussion hosted by the Social Action Committee today before the service. I congratulate them on bringing this together.

And it is not so important that we all come to complete agreement on any particular issue...fat chance anyway, right? The important thing is that we recognize the importance of interpreting the signs of the times in the light of our principles; that we not be afraid to ask the hard questions; that we risk debate and disagreement because of the importance of this task; that we listen to each other and weigh what we've heard against what we've come to know; that we respect one another even in disagreement; that we support each other in carrying the action generated from this process into the world; that we do our

best to confront the powers and structures of evil; and that we take part, bravely, unashamedly, in the transformation of the world. This is an exercise in addressing issues in *prophetic* terms, not in the tired, divisive speech of newscasts, but in terms of what we all hold to be good and true and sacred. It is an attempt to engage, in the words of James Luther Adams, our own *prophethood*.

Erich Fromm suggests that we really *read* the prophets. He is speaking specifically of the Hebrew Prophets, and though you may have your own list of prophets, I would chime in with him in his suggestion. Whomever those people are who you've found to be prophetic; whomever those people are who allow you to see more clearly, who open up choices, who challenge you to act, return to them... listen to their words again. I have found that, whether it's Jeremiah or Theodore Parker or Albert Einstein or Martin Luther King or Bob Dylan, those people do *illuminate* the present for me in a way that newspapers and magazines and television and Internet forums cannot. Sometimes it seems that the concepts of *Liberal* and *Conservative* have grown to obscure all other categories of thought; it is easy to imagine them as primal forces of good and evil at war since before the creation (good and evil defined by which side you find yourself on, of course). It is all-too tempting to objectify the other side, and then lay the problems of the world at their feet. So it is good, through the words of the prophets, to step outside that dichotomy, to hear outside of that language, to reacquaint ourselves with what really *really* matters...and to realize what we can do.

And keep an ear open for our present-day prophets. I disagree with Erich Fromm when he suggests that there are none. If we fail to recognize them, it may be that we wish to avoid the very real challenge that they pose. [Dorothy Day once said](#), "Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed that easily." I think the same could be said of prophets as she said of saints. We put them on a pedestal so that we can get them out of our way. We honor prophets of the past because they don't (or at least we think that they don't) directly challenge us. We honor their efforts, but somewhere in the back of our minds we might be thinking, "Well, of course slavery was wrong. Well, of course women deserve equal rights. Well, of course children should not be working in factories..." And on and on and on. We believe that they were prophetic because we agree with them, and we are convinced somewhere inside ourselves that we would have been on the right side if we had lived at the time of whatever particular prophetic voice we are honoring. I don't know. I'm not so sure about myself anymore. I would like to think that I would be on the side of good all the time, of course, but I think it is all too easy, in looking back on another time, to underestimate the tenacious way that evil holds onto the structures we have built, how it grows into every niche of the way things are, how it hides in a disguise of inevitability. I've been made aware again and again of just how entwined my life is with the structure of foreign and domestic policy that exists right now, with the structure of economics that exists right now, with the structure of race relations that exists right now, with the structure of priorities that exists right now in this country, and I know that it's not so easy to stand firmly and completely on the side of justice, compassion and the transforming power of love. It takes practice. It takes community. It takes memory and it takes hope. It takes the inspiration and celebration of the words and deeds of prophetic women and men.

**Closing Words #701 (James 1:22, 25)**

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers.

Those who look into the perfect law,

the law of liberty,

and persevere,

being not hearers who forget

but doers who act—

they will be blessed in their doing.