

JLA - James Luther Adams

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Reading - (Patricia Burr)

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I can't help but recall the words of my ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School, Dr. James Luther Adams, who told us that when we were his age, and he was then close to eighty, we would all be fighting the "Christian fascists."

He gave us that warning twenty-five years ago, when Pat Robertson and other prominent evangelists began speaking of a new political religion that would direct its efforts at taking control of all major American institutions, including mainstream denominations and the government, so as to transform the United States into a global Christian empire. At the time, it was hard to take such fantastic rhetoric seriously. But fascism, Adams warned, would not return wearing swastikas and brown shirts. Its ideological inheritors would cloak themselves in the language of the Bible; they would come carrying crosses and chanting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Adams had watched American intellectuals and industrialists flirt with fascism in the 1930s. Mussolini's "Corporatism," which created an unchecked industrial and business aristocracy, had appealed to many at the time as an effective counterweight to the New Deal. In 1934, *Fortune* magazine lavished praise on the Italian dictator for his defanging of labor unions and his empowerment of industrialists at the expense of workers. Then as now, Adams said, too many liberals failed to understand the power and allure of evil, and when the radical Christians came, these people would undoubtedly play by the old,

polite rules of democracy long after those in power had begun to dismantle the democratic state. Adams had watched German academics fall silent or conform. He knew how desperately people want to believe the comfortable lies told by totalitarian movements, how easily those lies lull moderates into passivity.

Adams told us to watch closely the Christian right's persecution of homosexuals and lesbians. Hitler, he reminded us, promised to restore moral values not long after he took power in 1933, then imposed a ban on all homosexual and lesbian organizations and publications. Then came raids on the places where homosexuals gathered, culminating on May 6, 1933, with the ransacking of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. Twelve thousand volumes from the institute's library were tossed into a public bonfire. Homosexuals and lesbians, Adams said, would be the first “deviants” singled out by the Christian right. We would be the next.

Sermon

James Luther Adams was close to eighty when he warned Chris Hedges and the rest of that ethics class at Harvard Divinity School about the rise of Christian fascism. It might have been surprising, to those who only knew James Luther

Adams in his very early years, that he would find himself at Harvard Divinity School. When he originally embarked on the path that led him to Harvard many years before, it had occurred in a way that Adams himself described as "one of the great surprises of my life."

You see, born in 1901, Adams grew up in a fundamentalist household. His father, originally a Baptist minister, converted and became a minister of the Plymouth Brethren, though he would accept no money for his ministerial work and spent his life farming. His mother was a dedicated believer in that faith, too. James says his father was "as otherworldly as the head of a family could possibly be," and he recounts how his father would tuck him in at night, reminding the young James that they may not see each other again on this earth as the Lord could come that very night. But James also describes his father as "a man of principle," and he grew up admiring his father's dedication, while rejecting the type of faith that would tolerate no questions or rational discourse. James, in rejecting his father's faith, became enthusiastically *anti*-religious, deciding, he writes, that it was his "mission to attack religion in season and out." This he did in a course he was taking on public speaking at the University of Minnesota, fashioning every one of his assignments to be vicious assaults on religion, and making them, he writes, as vicious as possible.

But after one of the classes, James went to speak with the professor about his lack of future plans. Though James was already profitably involved in business at the Railroad, and though he might have chosen a career in law, neither of these were satisfying to Adams. His professor interrupted the befuddled young man: "You *really* don't know what you're going to do? I've known for months." And we can imagine a pregnant pause here as James wondered what it could be that the professor knew. "You are going to be a preacher!" the professor exclaimed.

Though James was flabbergasted at the moment, and more than a little embarrassed to have his professor say this in front of a class of fundamentalists that he had been criticizing, the arrangements to attend Harvard Divinity School were made within six weeks. (pg. 88-89)

So, if Adams had continued in his parents' religious tradition, chances are good he would not have ended up at Harvard Divinity School. Far too liberal, tainted by secular concerns. *And*, if he had followed his seeming disgust with all things spiritual, he probably would not have ended up at Harvard Divinity School. Far too conservative, stuck in meaningless religious discussions. James ended up taking another way. I won't say the middle way, because that implies some kind of compromise and promotes this notion that *moderate* is good and *passionate* is somehow suspect. James, it seems to me, did not compromise...rather, he sought out the way which would elicit his best, and most passionate efforts in working toward the transformation, not only of individuals, but of society. He sought out the way that would allow him to be "a man of principle" like his father, while holding onto a faith that not only allowed, but invited examination and re-examination in service to the truth that can never be fully explained but which calls us ever onward to new discovery and interpretation. For him, that took form as Unitarian Christianity; and for us, he left an amazing legacy of theological work that helps to illuminate just what it is we're doing here in this congregation and in liberal religious congregations across the world.

He gave us, for example, the "five smooth stones of liberalism" in which he clearly describes the principles of liberal religion.

1. Revelation is continuous. This means that, unlike those faiths which state that revelation of truth ended with the writing of the scriptures they use, Unitarian Universalism believes that revelation of truth is ongoing. New truths can arise with the dawn. Old truths can be revised in light of new insights. Furthermore, this means that truth is never captured once and for all. Though we can move toward it, we can never quite catch up. This, ideally, keeps us open to new understandings while keeping us humble enough to acknowledge the partial nature of those understandings.

2. All relations between person ought ideally to rest on mutual free consent and not on coercion.

"All are responsible," he writes, "for selecting and putting into action the right means and end of cooperation for the fulfillment of human destiny." You are here because you wish to be here and not because you were forced to be here.

3. There is a moral obligation to direct our efforts toward the establishment of a just and loving community. "A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief," writes Adams. "It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility; it robs us of our birthright of freedom in an open universe; it robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members; it reduces us to beasts of burden in slavish subservience to a state, a church or party--to a self-made God." (pg. 35)

Adams did not believe in an individualistic spirituality that never required getting one's hands dirty in the work of the world. His experience had taught him that religious communities could render themselves impotent in the face of evil. He traveled in Nazi Germany before the war, visiting and talking with many religious leaders, some who resisted, some who collaborated, most who remained silent. He asked himself a tough question, a chilling question that we may ask ourselves:

"What in your typical behavior as an American citizen have you done that would help to prevent the rise of authoritarian government in your own country?" (pg.181) What have you done to stem the tide of Fascism there?

You see, his call to establish a just and loving community is no wimpy, disingenuous invitation to join the armies of compassion. This kind of work calls for prophets and, for Adams, the prophetic church was the only church.

He wrote:

A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for 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...we need also a firm belief in the prophethood of all believers...The prophetic liberal church is the church in which person think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to 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 all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways. (pg. 112)

Which leads us to #4: I've heard this expressed as "Good things don't just happen, people make them happen." Adams said it this way: the faith of the liberal must express itself in societal forms, in the forms of education, in economic and societal organization, in political organization... The faith of a church is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions--social, economic and political--of the common life.

The other piece that is implicit here and is made explicit elsewhere in his writings: the power of voluntary associations; the power of groups; the power of congregations in action. "The creation of justice in the community requires the organization of power. Through the organization of power, liberated persons tie into history," writes Adams.

James Luther Adams highlighted the importance of our voluntary associations, the groups we choose to belong to and the reasons we join, by paraphrasing Jesus and saying, "By their groups shall you know them." And I began to wonder about the power of groups; the importance of community; the yearning for connection that answers to higher ideals and desires than the individual's desires.

I thought of the reporting that's been happening regarding the Amish response to a devastating tragedy in their midst. Their response to the family of the man who murdered their children.

Forgiveness. Members of the families of girls who had been killed went to sit with the family of the shooter, to offer what comfort they could. A whole nation sits in shock, not only because of the incident--the sad fact is that we've already seen similar incidents--but because of the response of this community.

On the Saturday Early Show, a midwife from the community who, I believe, had helped to deliver some of the girls who had been killed in the tragedy, was interviewed. The interviewer asked what many interviewers have been asking all week: How--*how*--could the Amish families bring themselves to express this forgiveness, so quickly, so compassionately?

In her answer, she pointed out that the individuals have a community behind them, a community that teaches and encourages forgiveness and that supports them in practicing that behavior. And I caught a glimpse of what James Luther Adams may have been calling for. Love, rather than violence or self-interest or greed, can be the uniting factor for a community. We can not only build each other up in the practice of love, but we can do our best to transform the society around us. Religious community not only satisfies our spiritual needs, but encourages us in the practice of love when, individually, we may not have the strength or the will. Religious community is not only responsive to the individual, but is responsible to the society to carry on the message of transformation when the individuals cannot carry it anymore. When we cast our visions of this congregation into the future, we are not only expressing our individual desires for how it will take shape, but we are necessarily imagining how it will best respond--and not only respond, but help to shape--the society around it. We are exercising our prophetic powers.

Adams saw the dangers implicit in even his formulation of liberal religion. He saw that revelation being open and ongoing and understanding being necessarily partial could mistakenly provide an excuse for some to avoid responding to the signs of the times, to throw up their hands and say, "We really don't know the whole truth...who am I to say?" He did not, nor can we, accept that justification. He recounts a German telling him that, under the Nazis, you either keep your mouth shut or you get your head bashed in. Adams added that in a democratic society, the nonparticipating citizens bash their own heads in. (pg. 193)

One of the things that thrills me about James Luther Adams, for all his criticism of our liberal

congregations, is that he undoubtedly believed that we can make a difference. Indeed, his criticism was so direct and fierce because he did not want us to squander our legacy.

Which leads to the fifth and final smooth stone of liberalism:

We hold that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. As clear as Adams could be about the dangers; as devastating as his experience was in seeing the all-too-often silent submission of the churches to unjust institutions; as hard as it seems for all of us, as we go about looking for ways to make a difference in a world full of turmoil, violence, and callousness...still, he held this view. "The affirmative answer of prophetic religion, which may be heard in the very midst of the doom that threatens like thunder, is that history is a struggle in dead earnest between justice and injustice, looking toward the ultimate victory in the promise and the fulfillment of grace. Anyone who does not enter into that struggle with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark and thwarts creation as well as self-creation."

Put another way by Martin Luther King, Jr., who paraphrased Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

The image of "five smooth stones," by the way, comes from the story of David and Goliath. He found five smooth stones with which to arm his slingshot. Goliath seems to grow a little bigger and fiercer each day...but James Luther Adams says...I say...we say, don't underestimate David.

page numbers refer to The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses edited and introduced by George Kimmich Beach, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1998.

another primary reference: "The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism" by James Luther Adams, a pamphlet reprinted from On Being Human Religiously and distributed by the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.