

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
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Revelation Is Not Sealed
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During the 1930s, Unitarian minister, theologian and activist James Luther Adams was visiting a friend in Germany. He referred to his friend as a liberal, and his friend immediately responded “Please do not call me a liberal. That word is taboo here. And besides, I am not a liberal.” Adams was taken aback, trying to understand how his friend, a distinguished philosopher and a writer whom he considered to be a leading progressive, could be so willing to deny — or could apparently be afraid of — the word “liberal”.^[1] As Adams’ biographer Max Stackhouse notes, though, there has been a decades-long and many-sided attack on liberalism. Between the thirties and the seventies, according to Stackhouse, the list of those who have joined in that attack includes fascists, communists, orthodox and neo-orthodox Christians, university intellectuals and anti-intellectual conservatives.^[2] In more recent years we could add the religious right as well as talk-radio and television “news” hosts who exploit fear and small-mindedness for personal and corporate gain.

Following his rude awakening in Germany, according to Stackhouse, Adams “recognized the ambiguous roots and character of liberalism, acknowledged the accuracy of *some* of the criticism, and proceeded to sort the gold from the dross.” ^[2] Speaking on such topics as “The Liberalism That Is Dead” and “On Being Human — The Liberal Way”, Adams tried to understand the “general idea” of liberalism as a progressive force that “promote[s] liberation from tyranny, provincialism and arbitrariness” and “contribute[s] to the meaningful fulfillment of human existence.” He also saw the need to clarify the difference between liberal religion and secular liberalism, particularly political liberalism. In our own time we would do well to remember, as some put it, that Unitarian Universalism is *not* the religious arm of the Democratic Party. In Adams’ terms, “liberal [religion] must protest the confusions of liberalism itself”, taking on in particular what he named “the idolatry of ‘possessive individualism’”, a smoke-screen that he claimed conceals “a new authoritarianism of corporate economic power” and refuses to bear “responsibility for [its] social consequences” or be accountable for “the character of a society that requires, or at least comfortably tolerates, the built-in poverty of almost one-third of the populace.” ^[1]

Somewhere along the way, I guess, Adams remembered the story of David and Goliath.[3] This is a story with which most of us in this culture are familiar, at least in broad terms. Goliath was this giant of a man, heavily armed and armored, and a bully, too. David was little more than a boy; he had a knack for writing songs and his biggest responsibility was looking after his family's sheep. Any sensible person would expect Goliath to beat David to a pulp, but of course that's not what happened. David use a sling to scare off the wild animals that would otherwise prey on his family's sheep, and with a single shot of a stone to the head, killed Goliath. The story has become a quick way of framing any account of a small, apparently weak person or group winning against the might of big business, city hall, uncaring HMOs or greedy banks.

But did you catch one particular part of the story as Joanne told it earlier? "David went to a stream nearby and found five smooth stones, put them in a pouch around his waist, and with his sling he went to Goliath." [4] Five smooth stones. That's what David used to beat Goliath. In fact, he only needed one stone, and the Israelites were able to overcome the superior force of the Philistines. So somewhere, as I say, Adams remembered the story of David and Goliath. In his mind David stood for liberal religion while Goliath was those forces that would either corrupt or destroy liberalism: the fascists, the communists, the religious right and so on. What, then, were to be the five smooth stones, any one of which could serve to defend liberal religion against the forces attacking it?

Well, our responsive reading [5] from a few minutes ago hints at many of them. Four of them I'll name as follows: freedom; justice; virtue; and hope. They can stand alone, but they're stronger when each builds upon each other.

For instance, in terms of freedom, relationships between individuals are at their best when they rest on free and mutual consent, not on coercion. Justice is then "the achievement of freedom with respect to material resources as well as with respect to spiritual resources." Since it only makes sense to talk about a person being good in the context of their freely chosen relationships, it only makes sense to talk about virtue as a property of society, not of individuals. Or, as Adams stated it: "A purely private religion is purely irrelevant." And yet the human and cosmic resources for personal and social transformation justify ultimate hope. In this, Adams was a Universalist, too, writing that "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 towards the ultimate victory in the promise and fulfillment of grace." [1]

So that's four of the five smooth stones, any one of which provides plenty of fodder for a sermon in its own right. But what about the other smooth stone, the one that Adams actually listed first? Well, it has a simple name, known to us thanks to Samuel Longfellow: "Revelation is not sealed." [6]

The word "revelation" usually makes people think of the last book of the Christian Bible. That book has been popularized as a scary piece of writing, full of "the doom that threatens like thunder", supposedly predicting the end of the world and the "rapture" and other things that aren't actually in the Bible. Williamsburg's Jennifer Ryu will demystify the Book of Revelation when she swaps pulpits with me at the end of this month, but for now I want to mention something that comes right at the end of that book, right at the end of the Bible itself, that for centuries supported the belief that revelation *is* sealed.

The author of the Book of Revelation, who identifies himself as "John", [7] includes the following warnings at the end:

"I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." [8]

Serious threats, indeed. Now as the Christian Bible was standardized over the course of the first four centuries of the Common Era, there was some appeal to choosing Revelation as the last book, even though it may not actually have been the last one to be written. The early bishops even debated the book's authorship and authenticity, but I guess it was just too good to pass up as a conclusion to the Bible as a whole, the intended implication being that John's warnings apply to the whole thing, not just the last part of it.

For a medieval culture where the Bible was the only guaranteed source of truth — at least as it was officially interpreted by a hierarchy of duly ordained priests — the idea that revelation is sealed went without saying. In today's world, though, I think we're missing an appreciation of how truly revolutionary it was for our liberally religious forebears to claim that in fact revelation is instead continuously revealed, that the meaning of life has *not* been fully captured and the book of truth has *not* been closed.

Our closest cousins in faith at the United Church of Christ actually made this idea into an advertising campaign a few years ago, with the slogan “God Is Still Speaking”. You may have seen the corresponding banner outside a number of congregationalist churches, including Warwick UCC on J Clyde Morris Boulevard. The banner features a large comma, which is apparently inspired by something that comedienne Gracie Allen wrote just before her death to her husband George Burns. “George,” Gracie wrote, “never place a period where God places a comma.”

For our part, you can find the idea that “revelation is not sealed” in the form of the Six Sources of Unitarian Universalism. “The living tradition we share,” it says at the beginning of our grey hymn book, “draws from many sources”, the first of which is “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life”.

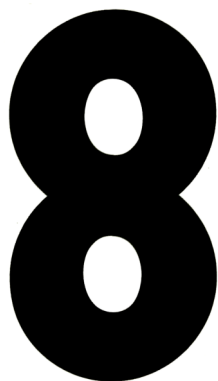
Our living tradition is, perhaps first and foremost, an experiential faith. It is based on our experience of the world as human beings, letting nothing go unquestioned given our own experiences of the world around us. And that’s really where any claim that any book contains “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” runs into trouble sooner or later, because sooner or later someone is going to experience something that isn’t mentioned in the book or, worse, that doesn’t agree with the book.

Within the Unitarian half of our religious heritage, the revolutionary principle that revelation is not sealed was largely developed and promoted by Transcendentalists such as Samuel Longfellow. They claimed that religious truths could be found not only in scripture but also in the world around us, particularly the natural world. If anything, they argued, scripture was secondary to nature: it is actually the divine inspiration that comes to us through our senses and is refined by our thoughts and emotions that leads to the human creation of scripture as a way to record religious truths.

Now some people, I’m sure, would distinguish between our everyday experiences of things we simply haven’t seen or heard or felt or thought about before and the revelation of genuinely new truths. My suspicion is that that’s a false dichotomy, that there’s not such a clear distinction between new human experiences and realizations on the one hand and new truths in some cosmically transcendent sense on the other.

To try to show you what I mean by this, I’d like to do a quick experiment with you. I’m curious to see if this works with you all or if it’s merely a sign that I need new

glasses! I'm going to show you a shape and — without thinking about it or looking around to see what other people are doing — I want you to raise a hand if it looks like the shape is upside-down. Everyone got that? If the shape I show you looks upside-down, raise your hand. Here we go.



Does one half of this figure eight look bigger than the other half?

This figure eight is actually symmetrical, but when Joanne and I were putting up the new service title and date on the Warwick Blvd sign, we noticed that the eight looks like it's upside-down. Okay, that in itself isn't an Earth-shattering revelation, but I had always thought that I could tell when a figure eight was upside-down — on a gas station sign, for instance — given that the loop at the bottom of an eight is supposed to be slightly bigger than the loop at the top. Now I find out, though, that a symmetrical figure eight looks like it's upside-down anyway — at least to a few of us! That's strange, but not, as I say, an Earth-shattering revelation.

But then, is an apple falling from a tree an Earth-shattering revelation? What if Isaac Newton had truly believed that there wasn't any genuinely new physics to be figured out? Would his experience of an apple falling from a tree, as legend has it, have led him to the revelation of his theory of gravity? Is noticing that different birds on different tropical islands have slightly different beaks an Earth-shattering revelation? What if Charles Darwin had truly believed that each species of bird had been created like that and that any differences were merely the whim of a creator? Would his study of the Galapagos finches have helped lead him to his theory of natural selection, the principle of evolution that not only makes sense of the *entire* field of biology but also provided much of the motivation for the democratization of old, class-based societies?

Now I have no delusions of grandeur that would suggest that this business of a symmetrical figure eight sometimes looking upside-down might lead to a revolution in neuroscience, say, but it *is* in such apparently trivial observations that many scientific

breakthroughs begin. To claim that everything we need to know is already written in a book, if only we could figure out how to read it correctly, or is already in the mind of some enlightened guru or supreme leader, past or present, is to kill progress before it's even begun.

That's where another of the sources of our living tradition comes in, namely our Fifth Source: "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit." Idolatry, particularly in a religious sense, means the worship of false gods, but more broadly it means the excessive attachment to or unquestioning veneration of *anything*. Whether it's the idolatry of "possessive individualism", as James Luther Adams named it, or the idolatry of a particular scripture or a particular person or a particular decade in history or a particular economic doctrine or a particular news channel, you get the picture that idolatry is not a good thing, I hope. And what is the antidote to idolatry, the smooth stone that can strike it down? Well, it's that revelation is not sealed.

Revelation can come from our direct experience of the world around us. It can come from science and the experimental method, which is really just a fancy way of experiencing the world around us. It can come from the human imagination, from poetry and from stories such as the piece of science fiction by Kurt Vonnegut that is the subject of the high-schooler's Sunday service later this month. It can come from the conversations we have with one another, from the questions we ask ourselves; next Sunday I'll try to answer some of *your* questions on topics of religion, faith, spirituality and so on, so please send them to me — by e-mail, on Facebook, by telephone, in person, via pony express.

Revelation can, in other words, come from many different places and in many different forms. One of my favorite sources of revelation, in fact, is the humble fortune cookie. Growing up in England I somehow heard about fortune cookies, even though Chinese restaurants there generally don't provide them; for that matter, restaurants in China don't provide fortune cookies either. I guess I sensed that I was missing out on something, though, and when I got to the United States, I adopted the habit of collecting most of the fortunes I received, some of which present deeper truths than others. Every so often I clear out whatever drawer or tin or wallet I keep them in, but this morning I'd like to share with you some of the fortunes I've collected recently.

I've written them up on strips of paper. I'm going to pass them around and, if you're willing, I'll invite you to take one and read it out for all of us to hear.

Accept something that you cannot change, and you will feel better.

Pure logic is the ruin of the spirit.

To make dreams real, first you have to have them.

No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he only had good intentions.

The will to do, the soul to dare, is yours for the taking, if you prepare.

Our purpose in life is not to get ahead of other people, but to get ahead of ourselves.

Dance like no one is watching.

There are no ordinary moments.

Statistics are no substitute for judgment.

A dream is just a dream. A goal is a dream with a plan and a deadline.

Do what is right, not what you should.

Nothing is more difficult, and therefore more precious, than to be able to decide.

We will not know the worth of water 'til the well is dry.

Prejudice is the child of ignorance.

Do not mistake temptation for opportunity.

A closed mouth gathers no feet.

A conclusion is simply the place where you got tired of thinking.

A fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject.

Hearty laughter is a good way to jog internally without having to go outdoors.

The road to riches is paved with homework.

Help! I'm being held prisoner in a fortune-cookie bakery!

The fortune you seek is in another cookie.

Today is probably a huge improvement over yesterday.

Every exit is an entrance to new experiences.

If you think we're going to sum up your whole life on a piece of paper, you're crazy.

Someone has Googled you recently.

It is easier to resist at the beginning than at the end.

How much deeper would the ocean be without sponges?

Silence is virtual. Especially at dinner time with telemarketers.

You will read this and say, "Geez! I could come up with fortunes better than that!"

You are not illiterate.

Fact of the day: you just read a fortune cookie.

Good advice will be given to you. Do not ignore it!

Warning! Do not eat this piece of paper.

The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense.

Always borrow money from pessimists. They won't expect it back.

All things are possible — except for skiing through a revolving door.

Failure is not an option. It's just a nagging possibility that helps you stay focused.

If a tree falls in a forest and it hits a mime, will he make a sound?

Before you criticize someone, walk a mile in their shoes.

If they get angry, they're a mile away and barefoot.

Thank you for your participation, and may the wisdom we have heard and the humor we have enjoyed abide with us in the days and weeks to come. And let us remain open to revelation, in whatever form it comes. For, in the words of priest and prophet James Luther Adams, "With all the realism and tough-mindedness that can be mustered, the religious liberal [*can*] hear and join the Hallelujah Chorus — intellectual integrity, social relevance, amplitude of perspective, and the spirit of true liberation offer no less." [1]

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- 1: James Luther Adams, “Guiding Principles for a Free Faith” (ed. Max L. Stackhouse) in *On Being Human Religiously* (Unitarian Universalist Association, 1976)
- 2: Max L. Stackhouse, introduction to “Guiding Principles for a Free Faith”
- 3: The Children’s Focus included a retelling of 1 Samuel 16–17.
- 4: 1 Samuel 17:40 (in the language of the Children’s Focus story)
- 5: Reading 591, “I Call That Church Free” by James Luther Adams in Unitarian Universalist Association, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Beacon Press, 1993)
- 6: Hymn 190, “Light of Ages and of Nations” by Samuel Longfellow in *Singing the Living Tradition* affirms that “revelation is not sealed” and “truth and right are still revealed.” It is also notable for being one of the first hymns to fully recognize non-Christian religious traditions — Jacqui James (ed.), *Between the Lines: Sources for Singing the Living Tradition* (Skinner House Books, 1995)
- 7: Revelation 1:1
- 8: Revelation 22:18–19