

Confronting Powers...and Evil: Prophetic Women and Men
 Steven Epperson, Parish Minister
 December 14, 2008
 UCV

Do you remember the movie “Jean de Florette” made back in 1986? A remote property in Provence is inherited by a kindly Parisian man who settles on it with his young family not long after the First World War. He hopes to make the land profitable by growing fodder and breeding rabbits for market. The plans, while unconventional for the region, are sensible and up-to-date. Unbeknownst to him, however, two scheming farmers who covet the land, have previously blocked up and hidden a fresh source of water, a spring on the property, that could have provided an abundant and reliable stream to irrigate the land and guarantee the young family's success. It's excruciating to watch as tragedy unfolds. No rain, backbreaking labour, harsh southern winds—the crops wither, the rabbits die, the kindly man from Paris, cursed with a hunchback, nature's indifference, and the malice of neighbours, perishes and his family loses the land.

We know full well how essential water is as a source for life—for loosening obdurate earth, conveying life and nutrients to water hungry plants and animals, for mitigating the harsh edge of relentless parching heat, and for freshening and uplifting heart and soul. Without the life-giving, soul-healing touch of water, the land withers, skin cracks, the heart sinks.

Our spiritual life, our religious tradition and community, and their flourishing, are as dependent upon vivid, animating multiple sources of wonder, knowledge, story, ritual, example, and morality—we are as dependent upon these sources for our living tradition as plant, animal and human life, and their flourishing, are contingent upon flowing, clean, distilling, swelling sources of water.

Last month, we began our exploration into what Unitarians call the “Sources” of our “living tradition.” During that worship service, I claimed that the basic, seven “Principles” of Unitarianism function, as core beliefs do in all religions, to identify the essential problems and ideals of human life, as well as providing the essential means—the institutions and practices—to achieve our ideals; those that are of ultimate worth and importance to us. Moreover, I asserted that we can have and experience a considerable degree of confidence in the relevance and authority of our beliefs, our principles; confidence because of the dazzling depth and range of the “Sources” we call upon as Unitarians to make our religious life vividly alive and trustworthy. As water is essential for life, those “Sources” are essential for our living tradition; they enable us to build, critique, deepen and renew an authentic religious and ethical life for ourselves and our community.

We began, last month, with the first source of “the living tradition”: that 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 which create and uphold life.” It's a good place to start. Without beating around the bush, we claim that direct experience with transcending mystery is an essential part of the human endowment, and is within reach and available to each of us. We're saying that there is something much greater than the imperious self and the bare surface appearance of things that moves beyond, within, and through us; a transcending mystery, affirmed in all cultures, fills us with rapturous amazement and conveys life creating, affirming, and transforming insight and power. I told you that I was afraid that when I became a Unitarian, with our reputation for privileging reason and decorum, I feared that living wellspring of direct religious experience would dry for me. It hasn't. I hope it never will.

Now we describe the Second Source of “the living tradition we share” as follows: “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.” Imagine in your mind's eye, try to picture this: what do you see when you hear the word prophet, that is, with a “p” h.” Dusty, far away, ancient landscapes?

Flowing beards, sandals, grumpy dispositions? Uncanny ability to foretell the future? Wrath of god? What about a fellow on the sidewalk in magazine cartoons carrying "The End is Near!" on a placard over his robes? For me, growing up in a Mormon culture, these clichés were complicated by a cadre of "latter-day prophets": mostly aged white men in suits sitting up on a raised platform in the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City who, during televised speeches at General Conferences, usually said things that made me feel guilty or rebellious about just about everything I was feeling and thinking.

Imagine, then, my shock and grave excitement, when in university courses in religious and Biblical studies, quite different, edgy, provocative and passionate figures, women and men, emerged from sacred stories and writings of scripture and history. For example, there was the ethical monotheism proclaimed by the Hebrew prophets; individuals who seemed far less concerned with foretelling the future, and instead, stood up and *forthtold* what they passionately felt about the immediate will of the divine to establish justice, equity and peace in this world. Consider these words of Hannah in Book of Samuel in the Hebrew Bible:

Talk no more with lofty pride/ let no arrogance cross your lips...
The bows of the mighty are broken/and the feeble are girded with strength...
Men once hungry will hunger no more...
He raises the poor from the dust/lifts up the needy from the ash heap,
Setting them with nobles/granting them seats of honor...
For not by might shall a man prevail. (1S2: 1-9)

After surveying the blood soaked rise of the Roman empire to supremacy in the ancient world, the Roman historian Tacitus asserted the "the gods are on the side of the stronger." The Hebrew prophets proclaimed just the opposite; in spite of everything, all evidence to the contrary, they called out that the heart of God is on the side of the weak; that the concern of the divine is not for the mighty and the successful, but for the downtrodden and the lowly, for the stranger and the poor, for the widow and the orphan. "Your hands are full of blood," Isaiah said, "wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil from your doings and from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." (Is. 15-17)

Hypersensitive, grave, fiercely feeling, ears and hearts attuned to the silent agony of the plundered poor, the dispossessed, for families and towns broken down by the scourge of war, prophetic voices cried out with a kind of moral clarity for which we thirst and hunger. And it was not just in the Bible that I discovered this powerful, alternative reading of history and being; and again, I am so grateful for university courses in religion that opened up a new world for me; and now, for a faith tradition that claims the words and deeds of prophetic women and men as an enduring source for its ethos, its visionary orientation both for the individual and the community. No not just in the Bible do we find truly prophetic voices. Listen to these words from the *Qur'an*: "And we created the heavens and the earth and everything in between them for justice." (Q15:85). And what does justice look like? It is expressed concretely here and now by those "who give of their wealth night and day, secretly and openly...to relatives and the poor and the travelers and the needy; and for the purpose of liberating the enslaved." (Q2:275, 177) Nor does the *TaoTe Ching* offer just seemingly impenetrable sayings like: "The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao...the unnamable is the eternally real...darkness within darkness. The gateway to all understanding." (TTC 1) No it gets gritty, concrete, prophetic, and *forthtelling* as well:

Be aware when things are out of balance. Stay centered in the Tao.
When rich speculators prosper while farmers lose their land;
When government officials spend money on weapons instead of cures;
When the upper class is extravagant and irresponsible
While the poor have nowhere to turn—
All this is robbery and chaos.

It is not in keeping with the Tao....
 I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion.
 These three are your great treasures.
 Simple in actions and in thoughts,
 You return to the source of being.
 Patient with both your friends and enemies,
 You accord with the way things are.
 Compassionate toward yourself [and others],
 You reconcile all beings in the world. (*TTC* 53, 67)

To make it through the day, I have cultivated a certain callousness. Every morning and evening, I walk between Powell and Keefer on Main Street. I stand on the corner of Main and Hastings and Cordova waiting for busses to take me to and from work. Every day, I read the news in several papers and websites. You know what I see, and what it takes to not go mad. Thick calluses on the one hand, and on the other, the belief that innumerable deeds of kindness and charity are at work, that decency radiates day and night. If I was to cross paths with a prophet on Main Street and my travels to and fro; if he were to lock me with his eyes and take my measure...what a reckoning there would be! Steven! Your standards are too modest; your sense of injustice too timid; your moral indignation impermanent; there is no extenuation for your culpability....

There are two Abrahams in scripture, though I was raised and groomed to see only one: the Abraham who prospered because of his deference and faith, the Abraham who took his son Isaac to the summit of Mt. Moriah and raised a knife to take his son's life, because God had commanded it to be done. And for this he is revered as the father of the faithful in three world religions (!?) There is another Abraham, of whom little is said; a story about him rarely told. It seems that one day God had decided to utterly destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He revealed his plans to Abraham. And then something unusual happened. Abraham talked back to God. It seems he may have learned something; gained some wisdom, some insight. He talked back; he pled and argued with God that such destructive violence was incommensurate with justice and incompatible with mercy.

That there are two Abrahams, one wiser, deeper than the other; that there is a book courageous enough to present both—this is very important to me. On the Mt. Moriahs of my life, sometimes I've failed to say "no;" to talk back. My calluses are too thick; my faith too ready to see a silver lining. But if Abraham was given another chance to stand his ground on the foothills above the Cities of the Plain, so too, we are given another chance to find our voice to argue with God and man. An argument in word and deed based upon the clear moral demand of mercy and justice running deeply within us like subterranean springs of pure, life-giving water of which prophetic women and men have spoken across cultures and down through the ages.

The prophetic Abraham who said no, even to the face of God, was supremely important to the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Crucial as well, to prophetic religious communities like our own, willing to intervene in human history for the sake of social justice even though, or particularly because we do not share the supernatural worldview and confidence of the Hebrew prophets. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant tried out the following thought experiment, an experiment known by, and important to the reforming Unitarian Transcendentalists of the 1830s-50s. Imagine, Kant said, that you are summoned before an unjust ruler, and given a choice. The ruler intends to execute an innocent subject fallen afoul of his regime, but there is still some semblance of law in the land, and it demands the appearance of just procedures. Someone must write a letter denouncing the innocent person, bearing false witness to a capital crime. You are commanded to do it. Should *you* refuse, the ruler will execute *you* instead for treason.

Though we do not know what we *would* do, all of us know what we *should* do: refuse to write the letter though it cost our own lives. And all of us know that we could do just that—whether or not we would

crumble in the end and submit. In this moment, says Kant, we know our own freedom, in a breath of awe and wonder. Not pleasure, but justice can move human beings to deeds that overcome the strongest animal desires, the love of life itself. And contemplating this is as dizzying as contemplating the heavens above us: with this kind of power, we are as infinite as they are. To the skeptic who says that moral and ethical behaviour is only relative; or who asks why should we confront powers and structures of evil with such shoddy, culturally determined goods, each of us can imagine at least one person, someone from sacred stories or contemporary history, who we believe defied death, imprisonment, and ignominy to do what is right. Holding on to the image of one such person—a prophetic woman, child, or man is a way of preserving an image of humanity, for such examples provide a glimpse of human dignity nothing else can replace—and thus it lifts us out the world of mere ego and surface things into realms humanly transcendent. (For Kant's thought experiment and the subsequent analysis, I have borrowed shamelessly, from Susan Neiman's *Moral Clarity...*, pp77-82)

In the time remaining I want to share one historical example of prophetic witness; the story of a woman who confronted powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love. Her name was Dorothy Dix. She was born in 1802 in Hampden, Maine. Her father was a hell-fire and brimstone preaching itinerant minister; her home life so grim and neglectful that she ran away at age 12. Two years later she opened and ran a school for girls, first in Worcester, and then Boston Massachusetts. It was there in the early 1820s that she became a Unitarian. In 1841, she discovered her true vocation when, in teaching a Sunday school class for women in the East Cambridge jail, she discovered that the authorities had packed a group of mentally ill people into filthy, unheated cells where they were neglected and mistreated. She promptly secured a court order to provide heat and make improvements in the treatment of the imprisoned.

For the next two years, she read all the available literature on mental illness and treatment facilities; and then travelling alone across the state, she ventured into places: jails, lock-ups, almshouses, and cellars, places where no respectable woman would dare go to investigate first-hand, the pitiless, execrable conditions in which the mentally ill were confined and abused.

Based on the data she gathered and her observations, she crafted a report to the Massachusetts state legislature so powerful and damning that the legislature was shamed into action: they allocated funds for the expansion of the State Mental Hospital, and for the provision of humane and medically useful treatment of the state's mentally ill. During the next decade, Dix repeated her efforts, and convinced legislatures in eleven states to build or improve hospitals and asylums for the mentally ill. And in 1854-56, she carried her mission to 14 countries in Europe, where she helped instigate a series of improvements, and the building of hospitals in one country after another.

Powers and structures of evil, the systemic abuse and neglect of the least, the forgotten, the powerless, that is what Dix confronted with service, education, witness and action powerful enough to identify individual symptoms and structural causes that lay at the root of an intolerable regime of abuse and neglect. Powerful enough to move minds and hearts, enact policy, and bring concrete, systemic change.

It is wonderful to be able to embrace a Hosea, a Lao-tzu, a Muhammad, a Dorothy Dix, a Lotta Hitchmanova, a Terry Fox, a Martin Luther King, as examples of what human beings are capable. We share with them a common humanity and a moral compass graven on our hearts. May we take heart and inspiration from their words and deeds! They give us courage; they tell us we can change, that life gives us another chance to climb down from the Mt. Moriahs of our lives and stand, as best we can, before god or nature and humanity with renewed resolve to draw liberally from the second source of our Unitarian tradition. May we be challenged and respond, when called, to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.