

ANDOVER-NEW LONDON MARCH 26, 2017 DAVID ROBINS

THE CHALLENGES OUR THEOLOGIES FACE

My first religious memory is at age 5. I was in Sunday School class, clicking spoons together.....and singing Onward Christian soldiers, while we marched in a line down the hallway. For some reason, this theology didn't stick.

My first spiritual memory comes from my curiosity about the nature of God. Around the age of 5 or 6, I asked my mother "Who is God?". She told me that God is Love. That theology comforted me and stuck with me.

But my theology failed me last November, and I was lost, untethered, adrift. My theology went silent. I despaired at its inadequacy and wondered how and when and if my theology would be resurrected.

My basic theology of love and justice sustained me through difficult times. Through griefs, deaths, losses, presidential impeachment hearings, and wars. It sustained me through my activism for peace, environmentalism, LGBT rights, women's rights. It sustained me through my parents' struggles with disabilities. After my theology failed me last November, I realized that I had failed to nurture my theology both spiritually and within religious community.

Being in religious community with you this morning reminds me that it was about this time of year, around 1980, when my wife, Jean's, and my love of Unitarian Universalism led us to lead a worship for a small group of people in new London who were interested in starting a Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. I feel as though I've come round to complete the circle as we worship again with you this morning, thirty seven years later. We left New Hampshire in 1985 to move to Illinois to be near extended family and for professional opportunities. But Jean was very unhappy to leave the mountains and the people where she is spiritually at home.

I looked at the web page for the Kearsarge Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, and saw that in a timely update of your mission statement, October of 2016, you decided to religiously engage in deepening your understanding of the world in which we live, deepen your understanding of the challenges we face as citizens of this state this country and this world, to contemplate the place of your personal theologies in meeting these challenges, and to be a voice of reason, peace and social justice in our community. (paraphrase)

Our personal theologies are the world that lives in us, and in the last three months we've probably been trying to deepen our understanding of the world of our personal theologies. I could try to

minimize the nature of our different theologies by saying that a common keystone among us are love and justice. But we, like most UU congregations are organized around the preposterous idea that we covenant to be together in religious community without the benefit of one, commonly agreed upon creed or theological underpinning. No one else does that, at least not quite as we do. I don't think that makes us better than any other religion, just differently challenged to be respectful, less judgmental, more self-critical, and unconditionally loving. But, perhaps that is just my particular theology speaking.

I have not been attending a congregation since I retired and my theology has taken a beating and lacked the supporting, strengthening and renewing from others.

My particular theology has been knocked down in the prior four months. My theology looks like a 98lb weakling. Bullies have been kicking sand in my theology's face. No amount of muscle building equipment or training is going to make my theology look like Olympic Nordic skier Kris Freeman, who grew up skiing around here. But my personal theology does get a workout. It lifts weight, the weight of

Despair

Failure

Flaws

Mistakes

Inaction

Regrets

My theology lifts a lot of weight. Sometimes my theology goes by the name of creative interaction, sometimes Love or compassion, sometimes spirit of life, sometimes god. When Carolyn McDade wrote the hymn, Spirit of Life, she was at a very low point spiritually, emotionally. The hymn was her prayer, a prayer of petition. Spirit of Life, come unto me. I am in need.

My personal theology has been challenged to meet the emotional and spiritual challenges in the world inside me, and in the world around me. I floundered until I was reminded that who and what I love is my stream of life, my stream of spirit that sustains me and guides me.

My personal theology resonates with Walter Brueggemann's words: "the prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth, in a society that lives in illusion,

To grieve, openly and without shame, in a society that practices denial,

To express hope in a society that lives in despair,"

And to love recklessly in a society that tries to foster fear and distrust.

These are the ways in which a personal theology rises to meet the challenges in our inner and outer worlds.

I was at first surprised to read the word “theology” in your mission statement. New England is the most unchurched, agnostic part of America, and theology is a word that comes from two ancient Greek words meaning the study of god and religious belief. I was reminded of a sermon preached by Deanne Starr, the District Executive for New Hampshire and Vermont Unitarian Universalist congregations some 35 years ago, “the Crying Need for a Believable Theology.” In his sermon he said that he could no longer believe in the old theologies because they were exclusionary and unscientific, and humanism was not his cup of tea.

Instead, he found in the laws of thermodynamics, a belief that what we are made up of is eternal, and the belief that out of our own disintegration, new configurations of what is eternal, are born. While it may seem as though the universe doesn't care about us.....it is continually, cyclically, chemically reorganizing itself into new life. Watching nature teaches me this. He called this Religious Naturalism, but it has a simpler name....Pantheism. In simple terms, it means that the universe and nature, the forces that create, sustain and guide me, hold my reverence and my love.

We just have to look at the changing seasons to uncover reverence. The vernal equinox appeared, right on schedule, on March 20. In other words, the first day of spring. Have I grown a bit tired of winter? Yes. Perhaps you are ready for warm weather, planting your garden, going for long walks. Perhaps you felt a slight uptick in your spirit in the last week, noticing a tiny change in weather. The earth has spoken with the vernal equinox. Spring is on the way. Yet, the challenge I must face is that winter may not be done with us, and I must find some spiritual tools with which to face more winter, mud season, perhaps sudden snaps of freezing weather. I must find patience. I must challenge myself to find joy, equanimity, peace of mind, a sense of humor, regardless of wind and weather.

Friends tell me I should just toughen up, and I do feel tough enough through most of the winter. At the vernal equinox, however, I begin to feel vulnerable, expectant, my spirit open to the blessings of Spring, even with experience telling me that the earth may crush my spirit with more winter. I should not take more winter personally.

After all, I am of the earth. I am the earth, with eyes, ears, nose, voice, body... with consciousness and soul. Like you, I want to be a good steward of the earth. So, "self care is never a selfish act. It is simply

good stewardship of the only gift I was put on earth to offer to others.”
Parker Palmer.

Since last November some of my friends have reminded me that they count on me to bring them hope, some uplift of the soul and spirit that will float their boat on the rising tides of disheartening disruption and loss. I don't know if that makes me like caulking used to stop the leaks, or like a bicycle pump to keep adding air to the inflatable boat, even as the number of leaks increase.

Theology or tending to self care of one's soul and spirit, to me means tending to who and what one loves. In this period of time, in this period of history, when it is easiest to be in despair, to hate, it is an act of good stewardship to declare one's wholehearted, reckless love for

The earth

For the stranger

For justice,

For facts

For community

For yourself and one another.

If you want to tend to your personal theology, tend to who and what you love. Tend to what you need to say and do in order to protect who and what you love. If you do, you will be like a beam of sunlight coming over the mountain. You will be the moon illuminating the forest. You will be using your theology to, and I again quote your mission statement: “support, strengthen and renew yourself and each other, as you strive to live your life according to your highest principles, values and beliefs.”

I am foolish enough to believe that “we were made to love, and love doesn’t like to be bottled up.” Amy Sutherland.

In the face of disruption every day, disruption of the values and goals I find important in my government and in society, good stewardship of the earth and of my world, I need to remember who and what I love. I know the 9 point plan and the 20 point plan for resistance. I have the phone numbers and the email addresses and the mailing addresses of the people I need to contact. I know the groups who are counting on my donations to see them through this time of disruption. My Facebook account is full of alarming headlines every day, reminding me to be anxious, angered, outraged. Every day, when I hear the headlines on public radio, I nearly forget who and what I love dearly. Love has always been a subversive activity when used in politics

and society. Look what Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. did with love and non-violence. We have interesting times ahead, and our theologies will be getting quite a work-out. I did not see this coming, I thought I could retire and chop firewood, cook dinner, write my memoir and go for hikes. My theology has more weight to lift.

We returned to New Hampshire over ten years ago because as much as we liked our life in Illinois, we loved New Hampshire, its mountains and rivers, its towns and people, and its Unitarian Universalist congregations. We love being with you this morning.