

## **Good News for Troubled Times**

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### **Reading**

by Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Rebecca Parker, from *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-First Century*

How can people move beyond isolation, a banal individualism, and a lack of purpose? One way is by coming together with others in religious communities that fire our intellects, touch our hearts, connect us in loving support with others, turn us to face the world's painful realities with honesty and critical analysis, and direct us into deeds of service and social activism...

Good religious communities convert people to the way of life our society needs to move to: from believing that violence is redemptive to practicing justice and compassion; from going it alone to giving and receiving care from others; from isolating oneself in individualism to sharing work on behalf of the common good.

Much in our dominant culture can lull people into numbness, complacency, or compliance. Staying awake, becoming active rather than passive in the world, requires something more of us – something we cannot do alone. Religious communities can enable people to claim and deepen the values that the dominant culture is ignoring or denying. They can convert us from lifestyles that disregard the earth and are heedless of the environmental damage and danger we are courting, to lifestyles of reverence and gratitude that enable us to be less materialistic and more attentive to the goodness of life's intangibles. They can free us from consuming unsatisfying intellectual junk food and give us deep nourishment through the bread and wine of spiritual traditions, sacred texts, intellectual quests, meditation, and prayer.

### **Sermon**

In the “Power of Myth” televised interviews by journalist Bill Moyers with the scholar of mythology Joseph Campbell, Campbell at one point lifts up what he calls the “terrible mystery” of life “in its very essence and character... “this whole business of living by killing and eating.” He goes on:

But it is a childish attitude to say no to life with all its pain, to say that this is something that should not have been.

Then Moyers responds by reminding us of a line from Zorba:

“Trouble? Life is trouble.”

Then Campbell again:

Only death is no trouble. People ask me, “Do you have optimism about the world?” And I say, “Yes, it’s great just the way it is. And you are not going to fix it up. Nobody has ever made it any better. It is never going to be any better. This is it, so take it or leave it. You are not going to correct or improve it.”

Moyers wants to object, asking:

Doesn’t that lead to a rather passive attitude in the face of evil?

Well, I will return to these provocative thoughts a little later.

But first:

We live in an unprecedented era – in many ways of course, but in particular in this way:

On the one hand, for the past several hundred years, and for the past century or so at an ever increasing pace, the world in terms of speed of travel and communication has *manifested* ever more clearly what it has always been – namely, one world. Think of it: from the first telegraph message from Washington to Baltimore in 1844, to Alexander Graham Bell’s first phone call a little more than thirty years later, and in the blink of an eye (when measured against the extent of human history... not to mention geologic or cosmic history) we’ve moved to the world in which we now live of air travel in a day or two to just about anywhere on the planet, and of course instant, cheap, digital, anytime anywhere communication (well, except in those pesky dead spots).

In short, human beings are connected more closely together than ever before; and in innumerable ways this is a beautiful, positive thing.

But... other hand in this unprecedented era: This has all happened so quickly that it has led to cultural and religious conflict on a scale we have never seen before. Troubles.

When it comes to religion, adherents of religions that on the face of it seem quite different, even mutually incompatible, are challenged even so to learn to co-exist in this manifestly one world.

We are, putting it mildly, having mixed success.

For (two hands again) on the one hand we do see events like the upcoming World Parliament of Religions in Salt Lake City, which will bring together thousands of people representing over fifty religious traditions (did you even know there were that many

religious traditions?) asking the question: “What is possible if people of faith work together?”

Yet on the other hand we see all too many examples such as the following: This past week a Hindu mob in an Indian village, believing rumors that a Muslim family who had lived in the same village for decades had killed a cow, burst into the home of that family, beat the father and son, leaving the son critically injured... and the father to die on the street.

One of the Hindu men involved in the beating was quoted as saying that “we are more attached to the cow than to our own children.”

Another example: yesterday and today there have been anti-Islam demonstrations in front of mosques in a number of cities and towns across our own nation.

Religiously inspired trouble indeed in these troubled times.

When it comes to the mob in India, we can rightly say that it is simply terribly wrong to kill a man in response to a rumor that he killed a cow.

But without in any way excusing such a murder, it also behooves us to come to a deeper understanding of why cows are considered sacred for Hindus. It behooves us as well to come to a more thorough understanding of the historical and political dimensions of the ongoing tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India, rooted in the Muslim conquest of India centuries ago, in British colonialism, in partition in 1947, and so on.

Very little in this manifestly one world of ours is simple. Certainly our troubles are anything but simple.

Even so, there are those – including many of the so-called “new atheists” – who, in light of all too much religiously inspired conflict and violence, affirm a simple solution: just throw out all religion!

Smart people should know better. For though an individual can personally leave religion behind, which many have done, there is no “throwing out” religion in general.

What then?

To begin with, more and more of us must come to understand that religious language (almost all religious language) is metaphor, which means not literally true, though often deeply true in other ways, representing experiential truths that simply cannot be expressed in ordinary prose.

Further, understanding religious language as metaphor can then lead us to see the common ground that, for all of their differences, really does underlie all religious traditions, as we come to realize that metaphors that seem so different actually point to or are meant to evoke, among other things, but centrally, an extraordinarily similar inward experience of unity, of Buddha nature, of God, of our True Selves

Yet further: At their depth, all the religious traditions (though many have often forgotten this... at our peril) invite us to a journey inward to discover or uncover for ourselves precisely an *experience* of this unity, experience who we truly are

And of more than passing note when it comes to the inward journey of discovering who we truly are, is that troubles, personal or otherwise, can (not invariably, but can...) lead us on an express train to this discovery.

Every Sunday morning when someone shares in this Meeting House a personal sorrow, a trouble, I experience (and I expect you do too) a heart-opening; and this is at least a taste of the *experience* of being connected, being part of one fabric of community and of life – unity of life.

This is also precisely what happens when I read the heart-breaking, heart-opening stories of Syrian refugees or the story of the Doctors Without Borders hospital bombed (by us) in Kunduz, or the story of the most recent victims of a mass shooting, whether Charleston or Roseburg, Oregon.

All this said, then, beyond our personal experiences of unity and connection, more and more adherents and leaders of the religions must encourage this inward journey to deeper understanding of the unity of humanity, of life, as well as of the religions. And though Unitarian Universalists cannot be and are not the only ones doing this work – there are far too few of us – fortunately we are not alone. Next week's World Parliament of Religions surely reminds us of this, that we are not alone in seeking inter-religious understanding or in asking "What is possible if people of faith work together?" In this spirit, an often quoted verse from the Koran is to the effect that God made many different peoples so that we could know each other.

In what ways, though, few that we are, can Unitarian Universalists *uniquely* contribute to this shared spiritual work?

Well, what could be more important in our time than to affirm the preciousness – we name it the inherent worth and dignity – of each person within the interdependent web of all life – our first and seventh principles.

And what could be more important in these troubled times than a religious tradition and set of values that is open-minded, affirming the importance of the ongoing search for truth and meaning; and also open-hearted, affirming the need for mutual spiritual support in loving, democratic community?

What could be more important than a religious tradition and movement working together with others to seek to heal broken hearts, broken lives, and a broken world?

Rebecca Parker put this all a little differently in the reading we heard earlier, but it is pretty much the same message. She affirmed that "staying awake" in this troubled world requires community – and religious community at that, since religious community offers ways to "claim and deepen the values that the dominant culture is ignoring or denying," and can help us do this by giving us "deep nourishment through the bread and wine of spiritual traditions, sacred texts, intellectual quests, meditation, and prayer."

As I've been saying, it's of course not only us who can help in this essential spiritual work. But at our best, it is certainly us among others.

So... returning to Joseph Campbell's assertion that we "are not going to correct or improve" the world and then Moyers' concern – which might understandably be ours as well – that believing this can easily lead to a passive attitude in regard to the evils, to the troubles of the world, and that (as Moyers suggests later in the interview) we wouldn't be motivated to make laws or fight battles, work for justice and peace.

Well Campbell responds: "This is not the necessary conclusion to draw. You *could* say, 'I will participate in this life...'"

Then Moyers, seeing the point: "I will do the best I can."

You see, no one is perfectly pure; in fact whatever else we do, we all also participate, however unintentionally or unconsciously, to some degree in the evils we protest. No one has clean hands.

But everyone can pitch in with those hands, can participate consciously in the directions of kindness, justice, peace, love... doing the best we each can. Indeed, once you get a glimmer of the reality that we are not ultimately separate beings, but are individual manifestations of – call it what you will – one life, one world, one divine spirit, one larger Self – you just may discover you actually have little choice but to "participate in this life."

Concluding a little closer to home: More than once over the years I've been asked – sometimes as an abstract question, but more often from the depths of personal sorrow – what comfort can Unitarian Universalism possibly offer in the midst of life's suffering, sometimes terrible personal suffering and loss, when we have no shared belief in a personal God of comfort and love or in an eventual heaven at the end of it all?

In conversation, my response – usually our shared response – almost always circles around to this: that whatever else each of us believes or doesn't believe when it comes to the big theological or spiritual questions, we know that we do have the love and care and concern we are able to offer one another as friends, within families, and in community.

This, actually, is the good news at the heart of all I've been saying, very good news indeed. For if we do manage to stick by each other this *is* enough to see us through whatever troubles come our way.

Live long enough and you know for a fact that this is true in our personal lives.

We may also come to realize that it is true as well in the larger life we share. For though, as Joseph Campbell correctly reminded us, we can't change the essential nature of the world, of life, we *can* choose to participate, to "do our best."

And we can learn to do this from as deep a grounding as we can find, nourished by the spiritual bread and wine of the great wisdom traditions of humanity, as well as from whatever might be our spiritual practices in this world of troubles, yes... but which is also a world of beauty and of love... which is also a world of ongoing creativity (in spite of some appearances), creativity leading *perhaps* – with our *participation* – to a world which will still have troubles, but which may also be more united, more at peace, more clearly manifesting through kindness and love the one world that we are.

So may it be.