

“Challenging Prophets”
Greenville UU Fellowship
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Prophets & Teachers

Some of the people whose prophetic words and deeds have influenced me:

First and foremost, **my parents**, who showed me at an early age that there were times I needed to speak out and fight for what is right, and who continue to show up and use their voices whenever possible.

The DREAMERS – Undocumented youth and young adults who were brought to the US as children – these DACA (or deferred action for childhood arrivals) students have had to become activists as the policies that impact their lives have been catapulted into the back and forth of political rhetoric and legislative maneuvering.

Bayard Rustin was a civil rights organizer who envisioned a series of Marches on Washington in the forties, taught Martin Luther King, Jr. about nonviolence, and was one of the main organizers for the Freedom Rides, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. His contributions are not well known, because as an openly gay man in the forties and fifties and sixties, he was forced to stay in the background.

Frances Perkins was the first female cabinet member in the United States, serving as Secretary of Labor under Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Perkins was instrumental in creating and implementing the Social Security Act and the New Deal—but she was also intensely interested in the safety and rights of workers after she witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in New York City in 1911.

Bree Newsome is an artist who drew national attention in 2015 when she climbed the flagpole in front of the South Carolina Capitol building and lowered the confederate battle flag. The flag was originally raised in 1961 as a statement of opposition to the Civil Rights Movement and lunch counter sit-ins occurring at the time. The massacre of nine black parishioners by a white supremacist at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston reignited controversy over South Carolina’s flag. Bree’s act of defiance against a symbol of hate has been memorialized in photographs and artwork and has become a symbol of courage, resistance and the empowerment of women.

Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson – Marsha P. Johnson was an outspoken African American trans rights/gay rights/AIDS activist, sex worker, and drag queen. Sylvia Rivera was of Venezuelan and Puerto Rican descent, and worked as a trans rights/gay rights activist and drag queen around the same time. Rivera and Johnson’s paths crossed at the famous Stonewall riots

in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City which catalyzed the modern gay rights movement. Marsha P. Johnson was among the first of the patrons to resist the police that night, and Sylvia Rivera among the first in the crowd of onlookers to take action by throwing a bottle at her police oppressors.

Rev. Dr. William J Barber, II led the HkonJ Moral Monday movement in North Carolina, and is now the leader of the Poor People's Campaign. His organization Repairers of the Breach says, "We challenge the position that the preeminent moral issues are prayer in public schools, abortion, and property rights. Instead, we declare that the moral public concerns of our faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, women, LGBTQ people, children, workers, immigrants, communities of color, and the sick. Our deepest moral traditions point to equal protection under the law, the desire for peace within and among nations, the dignity of all people, and the responsibility to care for our common home."

Theodore Parker was a Unitarian minister, a transcendentalist, and an activist most known for his abolitionist views. It is said that for a time he preached with a loaded pistol stashed in the pulpit because he was afraid he would be attacked for his work against slavery. He is the author of the often-paraphrased quote about the arc of the universe: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

During the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 80s and 90s, **Unitarian Universalist ministers and churches** held memorial services for gay men who had died of the disease. Some of their families had disowned them, and others simply refused to acknowledge their identity or their partners or friends as they planned the funerals – they were erased in eulogies and obituaries. UU congregations across the country provided spaces where the queer community could authentically mourn their dead.

In August of 2018, Swedish climate activist and teen **Greta Thunberg** began her school strike as one person with a sign in front of the Swedish parliament building. On Friday, an estimated four million people participated in over 2,500 events in over 163 countries on all seven continents calling on world leaders, corporations, and individuals to act now to reduce the now inevitable impacts of climate change on our world.

Sermon "Challenging Prophets"

I'm deeply grateful to Greta Thunberg and all the youth and adults who participated in the climate strike on Friday – including a lively group of folks from GUUF. According to the Washington Post, "Friday's strikes, which spanned more than 150 countries, were largely planned by teenagers and arose as a grass-roots movement. They came three days before world leaders gather at the United Nations for a much-anticipated climate summit...Young people left their classrooms to demand that governments act with more urgency to wean the

world off fossil fuels and cut carbon dioxide emissions. “The oceans are rising, and so are we!” They chanted.

I really couldn’t have asked for a better real-life example to embody the second source of Unitarian Universalism: Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

You might be interested to know that just a few years ago this source was edited. The original wording, adopted in 1980 when the sources were added to the bylaws, referred to “words and deeds of prophetic women and men.” At the time it was written, there was an increasing awareness of feminism, and women were intentionally put first because of that. The change to “prophetic people” is a great example of how we adapt our language as our understandings of inclusivity continue to evolve and change.

This source is the theological foundation of our Unitarian Universalist commitment to social action. The principles define some of the values that support that commitment, and remind us how we should behave as we engage in the work. But this source gives us the “why” for this commitment that is so central to our religious community.

So, let’s dig into the sentence a bit.

Words and deeds – speech and actions – of prophetic people. A prophet is generally understood to be a person who speaks divinely inspired revelations, interprets omens, or predicts the future. Mostly we think about biblical prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and John the Baptist, who are known for their exhortations to the people and their dire predictions. In Greek mythology, Cassandra was given the ability to predict the future but was powerless to stop it.

Jesus was a prophet whose message called out the excesses and evils of the roman empire – bringing to the forefront the injustices of his time and challenging people to love more and be more compassionate as they work to help those negatively impacted by the policies and actions of the Empire. A prophet can also be described as a person who advocates or speaks in a visionary way about a new belief, cause, or theory.

But this source uses the adjectival form, prophetic, which describes a particular kind of speech and action. This is not about making accurate predictions, but about how actions, when based on compassionate, loving, justice-centered values, can influence the world around us. We’re talking about prophetic witness. According to Cornell West, “Prophetic witness consists of human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. Prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil, including especially the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil.” (from *Democracy Matters*)

Which brings me to the challenge of defining “evil.” It is at the most basic level, the absence or opposite of good. Some call it profound wickedness or immorality, and some understand it as a

demonic being or supernatural force. It's deeply complex and hard to pin down. Today, however, we are talking about the *structures* of evil, which are somewhat easier to define. Structures of evil are those which oppress people, limit freedom, cause pain and suffering, destroy the natural world.

My colleague Erika Hewitt points out that the adjective "prophetic" modifies "people," and asks, "What would happen... if we moved the word "prophetic" to describe words and deeds, rather than people? After all, the world – with all of its harmful powers and structures – has been transformed and repaired by ordinary people who stepped forward when they could no longer keep silent; real people like us, who came out of the ordinary. Character is nothing without behavior; if we were to speak of "prophetic words and deeds of people," might we see ourselves more clearly as agents of love and transformation?"

The people we call prophets – whether prophets from history or those we see in the present day – we can guess that they didn't wake up one day and say, "I think I'd like to be a prophet." In fact, most prophets are reluctant. "Who me?" they say. "No, no, I'm not the one you seek." Or they were simply people living their lives. They were people who witnessed or experienced injustice, harm, or oppression and said, "that's not right," and *then* decided there was something they could do about it.

Being prophetic involves being uncomfortable, speaking truth to power, making other people uncomfortable. Sometimes a prophet stands in the tough spots and points to the person whose voice isn't being heard.

What is your passion? Where does your voice need to be heard, where does your strength need to be applied? Or, whose voice can you amplify, whose work can you support?

William Barber is a contemporary prophet if ever there was one. He has a passion for the issues, an incisive and comprehensive grasp of their depth and breadth, and *what* a prophetic voice he has! But he is *never* alone on the stage. He uses his platform to do two things: to speak his vision for a better world and to amplify the voices of the people directly impacted by the policies and norms against which he is organizing.

Unitarian minister, theologian, and professor James Luther Adams went to Germany in 1935-36 to study with some of the great theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century, including Karl Barth, and Albert Schweitzer. Witnessing the rise of Nazism during that year abroad profoundly impacted him, and that experience is woven through all of his later writings. He spoke often about the "... liberal church as 'the prophethood of all believers' —an institution whose people, rooted in the biblical and liberal traditions, learn to judge and correct their society." (<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/james-luther-adamss-examined-faith>)

Adams' words remind us that this source isn't about our thoughts or intentions. It's about our words and our deeds. "The meaning of life is found in the processes and responsibilities of groups and institutions. The entire people, in this covenant view, is responsible for the

character of the society. This is one of the great insights in history, namely that one is related to the collective in such a way as to be responsible for the consequences of one's actions and for the consequences of collective action. Institutional and not merely individual behavior is an indispensable aspect of human existence." (The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern. The Essential JLA p. 233)

Nonetheless, we wonder if what we're doing is making a difference, if

The following reflection from my colleague Laura Bogle illuminates the struggle in a helpful way. She wrote it on the anniversary of 9/11 in 2016.

The view from my mother's porch is a cemetery. My twin girls, 2, like to climb and run round the old gravestones. Peek a boo. Hide and seek. Life and death. History in the present.

On this day 15 years ago I talked to my father on the phone after the twin towers had fallen. I'm so Sorry, he said. I'm sorry we haven't made this world a better place. The catch in his voice, that made me cry, too; that voice gone almost 10 years now, but it is the rough crackling of my fathers crying voice that I remember, that I can summon up in my mind.

The girls run and play in the September sun, oblivious to the particularity of this day, of any day, and the generation they will inhabit. "Stay there" they say. Doing their version of counting to 10. Walking away, then running back to touch me. And I do, I do so much want to stay here. And I want my children to stay here. But no more than a mother in Afghanistan or Syria or St. Louis or St. Cloud.

I have puzzled over the mystery of my father apologizing to me on September 11. The heavy weight. How could he feel so personally responsible? And yet how could he not? How could we not? From generation to generation, we hand down this world.

I feel heart broken and scared in a different way now that I have children. Heartbroken at every act of violence and with every daily malice that waves out from our TV screens. Heartbroken that my older daughter, just weeks into Kindergarten, has already experienced a lock down drill. Heartbroken at the lives of children who live in communities perpetually locked-down by poverty, war, incarceration; with futures of being locked-up or locked-out.

Maybe what my Papa tried to say in his own way is: my heart is broken by the future I see unfolding out of this present. I want it to be different for you.

I am still in that unfolding future. We living are all still in that unfolding future. [Hopefully] my children, our children, will be in that unfolding future for a long time to come. And so I will continue to choose love over fear. I will seek joy with children and elders, and I will do my part to create places for love to inhabit our communities, for connection across difference.

And this November I will vote with my father's crying voice in my mind. Not only that though, also with his radical Southern defiance and his laugh and the sparkly eyes of children he never got to meet in mind.

We all are living in this same sort of unfolding future. We do the best we can on a given day to love our people, to be compassionate to the ones who aren't "ours." What we forget is that there isn't a single person who *isn't* "ours." The prophetic voices that inspire me share a common thread – they all saw something that wasn't right, and they decided to do what they could to try to change it. Perhaps the injustice they saw hasn't been fixed, and perhaps we will continue to fight for justice and equity for a long time to come. We may not have created the structures that oppress us all, but we are the ones who are here to dismantle them.

In the words of Adrienne Rich, "My heart is moved by all I cannot save. So much has been destroyed. I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world." And so let us choose to bless the world, to reconstitute it, with the transforming power of our love, with the fire of our commitments to justice, with hearts full of compassion. Our children are calling us to stay, they are calling us to the work.

May it be so.