

Good Offices Account

Chapter for Fifth Principle Book Project

Written by Rev. Richard R. Davis

Before joining fourteen other UU ministers in resigning in protest from the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA) I served as a “Good Officer” in the association’s Pacific Northwest Chapter, having been elected by my colleagues to this position on four separate occasions during my twenty seven years as settled minister in Salem, OR. Very briefly, a Good Officer advocates for the prerogatives of UU ministers and offers pastoral support and ethical guidance to them as needed. In shorthand, this role is often described as being “a minister to ministers”.

Until June of 2019 my Good Offices role largely entailed helping colleagues manage their conflicts with the congregations they served or their ministerial colleagues. Then, in June my life changed when this role took me on a sharp and unexpected turn that led me into direct conflict with the UUMA and soon thereafter, the UUA.

As I was nearing the end of a four month sabbatical I became aware of a controversy that was erupting at the UUA General Assembly (GA) where the Rev. Todd Eklof, minister of the UU Church of Spokane, WA. had distributed his book *“The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister.”* The reaction was swift and severe: He was removed from the general assembly and interrogated by UUA officials; the UU Ministers Association People of Color and Indigenous Chapter accused him of disseminating “racism, ableism, and the affirmation of other forms of oppression, including classism and homo-and transphobia”, although no single passage from his book was then or ever has been cited to substantiate these serious allegations; and a harsh letter signed by 500 White UU ministers condemning the book was publicly posted, although many signees had not read the book. All of this had happened in a matter of days.

Rev. Eklof and I were both members of the same UUMA Chapter so I immediately reached out to him to offer Good Offices support. Advocating for my colleague’s freedom of conscience and expression, a hallmark of our liberal religious tradition, was my responsibility as a Good Officer. In truth, for some time Todd and I had been discussing our mutual concerns about illiberal and intolerant trends in our religious movement, and I knew he was raising important issues that warranted the attention of Unitarian Universalists, not promoting hate.

Earlier, in the winter of 2019, Todd asked for my feedback on an essay he had written describing how the skillful use of the ancient philosophical tool of logic could provide an effective, impartial way for Unitarian Universalists to examine and resolve controversies that had erupted in our movement (*this essay would become the 3rd Chapter of his book*). Todd, who comes from a working class background, never expected to attend college, but when fortuitous circumstances enabled him to get a higher education he fell in love with philosophy and became enamored of the uses of logic. His essay was both intellectually challenging and illuminating and convinced me that logic could be a useful tool in helping to resolve conflicts.

Indeed, Buddhist philosophy also uses logical reasoning to diagnose the ills that beset our minds, Islamic civilization cherished and preserved the tradition of Aristotelean logic when Western European civilization was mired in religious dogmatism; Ancient Indian, Chinese and Greek civilizations all developed sophisticated systems of logic. This deserves mention here inasmuch as the White ministers who condemned his book dismissed “zealous” use of logic and reason as “the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture”.

A UU clerical pronouncement abjuring the use of reason and logic is an astonishing and alarming development, especially in a liberal religious movement that has historically championed the full use of our intellects in our religious explorations. In truth, this dismissal of logic and reason was the imposition of an ideological perspective (Critical Race Theory - CRT) that seeks to discredit and dismantle the epistemological foundations of our liberal religious tradition – that is, the very ways we comprehend and interpret our world – ways that have in many important instances benefitted humankind.

When I saw that Rev. Eklof was being treated with such cruelty and contempt simply for sharing his honest views – views shared by many UU’s - I was shocked and dismayed. This bullying behavior reminded me of a playground pile on! Yet I also came to a realization – I loved Todd, my brother in our chosen profession and liberal faith, admired his courage and felt called to protect the freedom he was responsibly exercising. Until that moment I was not aware of that how much of a role love can play in helping us overcome our fears. Earlier I had realized that UUA leadership was imposing an illiberal, intolerant, divisive ideology upon us, yet I was afraid of speaking up – as many are now afraid – lest I be hastily, publicly condemned. Now love liberated me from those fears – love for Todd and our free faith tradition. He is a kind, generous and wise minister who offered his book to call attention to alarming trends in our movement, not to draw attention to himself. He, too, feared a negative reaction but realized he would lose his self respect if he did not summon up the moral courage to share what he had written, so he did. His intent was to initiate a sorely missing, honest dialogue among UU’s concerning conflicts and controversies that are adversely affecting Unitarian Universalism today.

As I’ll later describe in more detail, Todd was quickly censored and dis-fellowshipped by the UUMA and UUA leadership with the intent of destroying his reputation and career. Such punitive actions also serve as an effective control mechanism – if you can make people afraid, you can control them. It’s a frightening time for many today who feel as though the slightest, innocent slip can result in loss of livelihood and reputation. Fearing this, people feel wary, stifled, unsettled and uncertain of what they can and cannot say. Then, too, inside the UU ministry the rules have changed. In Summer of 2020 the UUMA adopted institutional changes that creates an opaque authoritarian leadership structure that has the power to censure ministers for unknown reasons – it’s truly Kafkaesque. UU ministers now know that if they do voice dissenting views the response will be swift and the consequences severe - your livelihood and your reputation are at stake. You better toe the party line – if you can figure out what that is.

The fear of being ostracized is a primal fear - ancient humans were so immediately dependent upon one another for survival that banishing someone amounted to their death sentence. Today, shaming and ostracizing someone amounts to a social death sentence. We all want to be liked, loved and respected and the threat of that being taken away from us stirs up deep fears. Our liberal religious tradition should serve to reassure us that we will not expel anyone from our circle of loving care and concern simply for being authentic in the expression of their views, yet today such reassurance is found lacking among top level UU leaders - the harsh, unforgiving tone of the letter from the 500 White ministers is damning evidence of that. It lacked any sense of grace, compassion, forbearance or forgiveness – it was not a pastoral invitation into dialogue and discernment, it was a demeaning diatribe.

Think for a moment of the harm these actions by UU religious leaders have inflicted upon Rev. Eklof – harm that will affect him throughout his life. Since he has been condemned by them as someone who traffics in racist, classist, ableist, homophobic, transphobic views, there are many UU's who know nothing at all about Todd as an individual who will nevertheless be inclined to uncritically accept and spread those harsh pronouncements because that is what we tend to do. Generally speaking, if someone is labelled a “criminal” or a “thug” or a “racist” by some authoritative entity, we assume such labelling must be accurate, thus we no longer see the person, only the dehumanizing label that has been pinned upon them. In my prison ministry I got to see the beautiful human side of people so labelled and realized how misleading it is to regard individuals according to the very worst thing they are alleged ever to have done. Yet we do label – it's easy and convenient. So now, in the minds of many UU's who don't know Rev. Eklof, he has been mis-labelled and maligned as a stooge of the alt right, although he has consistently challenged racism, homophobia and social injustice throughout his ministry. It is profoundly disturbing when UU religious leaders resort to character assassination by labelling individuals as a means of enforcing ideological conformity.

This public shaming and humiliation was so hurriedly and unjustly executed upon Rev. Eklof that you cannot help but wonder: how did the UUA and UUMA lose sight of his humanity, his inherent worth and dignity? It was because they saw him through the lens of a soul deadening political ideology that categorizes, caricaturizes and thereby dehumanizes people. They did not recognize Todd as an individual but as a category of person – a White man – a category which had earlier oppressed marginalized people and was therefore now deserving of retributive marginalization and silencing. When such labelling ideologies prevail – whomever they silence and oppress - dehumanization occurs and injustice is simply perpetuated.

UU's have learned through painful historical experience that those who enforce dogmas and ideologies practice religious tyranny and we want no part of that. Our hard won freedom of conscience and expression is an essential religious right, now under threat. We are - thankfully - too diverse in our perspectives to have a common creed. Instead, we have a covenant – a promise to dwell together in love as a theologically diverse religious body. Imposing one's beliefs upon another is a violation of that individual's inner sanctum wherein they alone should have the right to listen to the voice of their own conscience and decide what is true, what is good and loving, what is beautiful and what is sacred. Having uncontested

recourse to our inner sanctums is necessary for true moral and spiritual discernment – this freedom lies at the heart of our liberal faith. In championing this inviolable freedom we affirm our individuality which enables each of us to make our unique contributions to the vast mosaic of life. (Individuality should not to be confused or conflated with individualism which asserts the supremacy of the isolated self.)

When ideological views are imposed upon groups it precludes the possibility of the free exchange of ideas and opinions necessary for a healthy society. Rev. Eklof's dissenting views were not granted an honest hearing and were peremptorily condemned because they ran counter to the prevailing ideological orthodoxy among UU leaders. His show trial was over before it began – he was guilty of standing in the way of ideologues possessed by arrogant certitude. As James Baldwin warned: "nobody is more dangerous than one who imagines themselves pure in heart, for their purity, by definition is unassailable". Those possessed by ideological certitude feel empowered to overrule slower, deliberative due processes since they imagine themselves to be unassailably pure and infallibly correct. Thus, Todd was deemed an enemy of the UU state and had to be banished before his heresies spread. Now he has been airbrushed out of the collective image of UU ministers – disappeared, even as his book was thrown into trash bins by UU clergy at the General Assembly in Spokane – their variation of a book burning.

When ideologies exercise cult like control over people's minds they become, in the words of theologians, "idolatrous". Such ideologies function as an absolute guide for their true believers, purportedly explaining the flow of human history, the complex workings of society, defining the believer's moral vision and issuing them their marching orders. Embracing such an ideology – ideological fundamentalism - is akin to the forms of idolatry known as racism, nationalism and tribalism, wherein the triumph of your race, your nation, your tribe, your ideology is envisioned as the ultimate good.

It's instructive to note that idolatry is a cardinal sin in the three Abrahamic faith traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and it is the only sin explicitly noted in our UUA Principles and purposes which cautions us against "idolatry of the mind and spirit". Might these sources be directing our attention to a genuine and perennial threat to human societies? Idolatry is a concept worthy of the deepest reflection, regardless of one's religious or non-religious views. The liberal theologian Paul Tillich aptly defined idolatry as "giving ultimate concern to that which is not ultimate" to which he added this stark assessment: "Ultimate concern can destroy us as it can heal us. But we can never be without it." Emerson recognized this as well when he noted that "a person will worship something – have no doubt about that....it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we worship we are becoming". When we worship – idolize - the wrong thing by assigning ultimate value to that which does not deserve that status we can cause great harm to ourselves and others.

Tillich's and Emerson's point is that we all have ultimate values that profoundly shape our lives for good or ill – it's unavoidable. When we worship gods of wealth, power, nation, tribe, political ideology at the expense of love for the whole, the consequences are never good.

This is why our UU Purposes and Principles warns against “idolatry of the mind and spirit”. When many people choose to embrace political or religious ideologies that create division, discord and destruction the threat posed by idolatry increases exponentially.

True ideological believers eventually feel compelled to make human sacrifices (literally or figuratively) upon their false god’s altar. UU ideologues demanded that Todd be silenced and ostracized as quickly as possible – due processes were not deemed necessary since from their ideological perspective - which harbors no doubt nor brooks dissent - any opposition is inherently wrong. Political and religious ideologies thus eclipse our view of the inherent worth and dignity of everyone. Whenever we lose sight of one another’s humanity, we have surely lost our spiritual bearings. I say that to myself as much as anyone. We are called to practice boundless compassion, agape love, even for those with whom we are in conflict. Our Unitarian Universalist values compel us to stretch our hearts and minds toward such universal inclusion and concern. If your political or religious ideology gives you license to hate and despise others this is a clear sign that this ideology has enslaved your mind and distorted your vision.

It’s helpful to remember that the Dalai Lama prays for the well being of those in the Chinese government every morning – the very government that seeks to destroy Tibetan culture. The words of Jesus also come to mind: “love your enemies, bless those who persecute you”. If that’s not a spiritual stretch I don’t know what is, but it’s a stretch we are all called to attempt again and again. Then, too, for our common spiritual well being it’s important to foreswear demonizing others and necessary to humbly acknowledge that we all need to forgive and we all need to be forgiven. Our theologies need to offer us clear pathways back to healing and wholeness. Too often, ideologies lead only to divisiveness and destruction. Above all, we need to be able to find our way back to love, again and again.

Sadly, the CRT ideologues in the UUA and the UUMA lost sight of love in their treatment of Rev. Eklof . When he was censored by the UUMA board there was no forewarning, no semblance of due process, nor was there any acknowledgement that 500 UU clergy had violated, en masse, our UUMA Guidelines which expressly stated “I will not publically speak scornfully (find exact words). Such hypocrisy and abuse of power destroys trust and has been most disheartening to witness.

Consider the broader implications of the official censoring and dis-fellowshipping of Rev. Eklof: not only have my fellow UU clergy and our religious association attempted to excommunicate Todd, they implicitly condemn the many Unitarian Universalists who share his views or believe he has the right to share them - this includes a substantial body of lay members and quite a few ministers. Indeed, most online reviews of the Gadfly Papers by Unitarian Universalists are glowing and appreciative. Then, too, the congregation I serve in Salem, OR independently studied Rev. Eklof’s book and concluded that the harsh accusations levelled against it were unsubstantiated. It surprised me that these members took this matter so seriously, but I have found it immensely heartening that they voted in a congregational meeting to protest the unjust treatment of Rev. Eklof to the UUA and the UUMA. Undoubtedly, there are thousands of Unitarian Universalists who agree in broad principle with

the concerns raised by Rev. Eklof in his book. Which begs some questions: Do the clergy who harshly condemned him also condemn UU's who share his concerns? Who gave UU clergy such censorious powers in our free faith tradition in the first place? Questions abound.

Consider what is now happening in our purportedly democratic, non-creedal religious association. There is a growing constriction upon the spiritual and intellectual freedom of the ministry and the laity. Religious authority - in the form of the UUA and UUMA - is acting like a boa constrictor that squeezes its captured prey ever tighter. In the many recurring instances where such constrictions upon freedom occur, history teaches us that the longer you wait to cry out in protest, the less lung capacity and courage there is to do so.

Recognizing this constricting threat has led me to recognize my deep appreciation for our heretical, free faith tradition. I draw particular inspiration from forbears in our dual tradition that have been truth's courageous emissaries and love's compassionate embodiments in our hurting, unjust world. This love motivates me to speak out to protect our religious body as best I can. Ours is, at its best, a living, evolving religious tradition that invites us to be our authentic selves, to grow spiritually with others, to create loving community that we might walk the paths of compassion and gratitude, meaning and purpose. My rich experience with congregations has shown me that our free faith tradition is worth protecting against a hijacking by illiberal, ideological forces that brook no dissent.

Indeed, some historical awareness of previous excommunications of dissenters from Unitarian and Universalist bodies (later regretted) might help put things in perspective as you consider what has happened to Rev. Eklof. Such inquisitorial actions rarely end up looking good for the persecutors in the historical record, nor should it. Institutions falter and fail, as ours is now by failing to serve and empower member congregations. Rather, UUA Leadership has chosen a top down model of overpowering and imposing an ideology upon congregations as their preferred modus operandi.

It is important for UU's to have some sense of the narrative arc of our history – we living generations today are part of an unfolding story that is greater than any one of us. We stand upon the shoulders of brave, dedicated ancestors. Individuals who forget their past have amnesia and become disoriented and directionless; a religious movement whose adherents have little knowledge and understanding of their past is unmoored and vulnerable to drifting in unhealthy directions in spiritually perilous times such as we now find ourselves. Look to those sublime moments when our forebears manifested spiritual genius in their writings and in their deeds of service toward the creation of a more just and compassionate world. The words from the hymn “Rank by Rank” remind us that “what they (*our forbears*) dreamed, be ours to do, hope their hopes and seal them true”. We are indeed communities of “memory and hope”. We repay our debt to great souls in our past by remembering them and continuing the work they began, not “dismantling” it, as current UU ideological orthodoxy demands.

To expand upon this point, allow me tell you about a truly great soul - my favorite UU historical figure, one of my great ancestral soul friends. I cannot pass up this opportunity to briefly share the story of his life and ministry and it seems most fitting to do so here.

For years I have engaged in what has felt like a Sisyphean task of acquainting fellow Unitarian Universalists – lay and clergy alike – with an inspiring figure, worthy of emulation who is scandalously overlooked. Over time I have gotten to know him better through his journals and other historical records. The memory of this 19th Century minister lives in my heart and has enlarged my vision of my ministry. Here I am shamelessly attempting to pique your curiosity so you will remember who I am about to reveal so that you might be inspired to do your own research into his life and ministry. Studying the lives of truly exemplary forebears is a good spiritual exercise – you can't help but be touched and transformed when you encounter a truly great soul. Here I am referring to the 19th Century Unitarian minister the Rev. Samuel Joseph May, the only figure in our UU history to have been inducted into the National Abolition Hall of Fame – a rare honor only bestowed upon twenty five Americans thus far.

May plays a central role in my spiritual life – this courageous, Gandhi like, warm hearted Unitarian minister, whose abolitionist activities spanned more than three decades in the 19th Century, provides a humbling standard against which to measure oneself. A historian at the Abolition Hall of Fame aptly refers to May as a “moral giant ahead of his time”. I urge you to seek out information about the remarkable story of his life and ministry, perhaps beginning with the free online source “Memoir of Samuel Joseph May”. Or you can visit the National Abolition Hall of Fame website for more information. Acquainting yourself with such a figure can really put a spring in your spiritual step and stretch your sense of life's creative, compassionate possibilities. In my role as a UU minister, I have discovered that it's important to have an ancestral soul friend to expand my vision of what it means to fulfill the ministerial role in our tradition – I absolutely need that.

May was a major figure in 19th century reform movements in America and played a vital role in bringing the evil of chattel slavery to the forefront of America's moral consciousness. (Not to mention his pivotal roles in educational reform and Women's rights movements.) Sam May was, by virtually all contemporary accounts, a truly beautiful soul who burned with a passionate love for humankind and displayed a powerful commitment to overturning the tables in society's temple courtyards that grievously shortchanged the people, especially those who were enslaved, poor, vulnerable. He could never rest as long as the evil institution of slavery existed. He was a pacifist, but he was not afraid of conflict. He didn't back down. In the 1830's and 40's being an abolitionist was a dangerous occupation – they were often greeted by hostile, violent crowds and uncooperative authorities. Then, too, May distinguished himself among the abolitionists by his steadfast rejection of racism in any form (*many abolitionists held racist views, as did most White Americans of that era and far beyond*). He was relentless in pursuit of abolitionist goals, yet he was unfailingly kind and respectful, even with those who persecuted him, thus he often won over people who had been set against him.

Samuel Joseph May worked alongside William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and others, and they became an indomitable force for good in the world as more Americans awoke to the evils of slavery and demanded that it be abolished. Indeed, it was May who in 1835 convinced the Rev. William Ellery Channing, his elder and mentor (often called “the Father of Unitarianism”), to recognize the evil of slavery and join the abolitionist ranks.

In the summer of 2018, when I was being arrested, along with a few other clergy, in front of ICE (Immigrations, Customs Enforcement) headquarters in Portland, OR where we were protesting the unjust incarceration of asylum seekers, I was acutely aware of how I was heeding the spiritual example set by May, who often challenged governments’ enforcement of inhumane laws. My tears of grief at witnessing our government’s cruelty were mixed with tears of gratitude for the sublime example of May’s ministry. It’s good to have ancestral friends who lift you up and remind you of the larger meanings and higher purposes of life. Samuel J. May reminds me to be aware of the riches of our tradition, to listen for the sweet spiritual overtones of our free faith tradition as they resonate across the generations. We are a people on a pilgrimage always seeking to discover how the practices of religious freedom in community can bless more people, always resisting idolatrous tyrannies of the heart and mind, always yearning to freely bless one another and our world.

Finally, I hold up the example of Samuel J. May because he showed how to work for justice without losing his spiritual grounding and sense of compassion for everyone. Simply put, his ministry was not dedicated to the service of a divisive political or religious ideology but to an all inclusive Agape Love for humankind.

Whatever you do worship by virtue of the life you lead and the commitments you make, however you frame this theologically or non-theologically, if it is not some variation of a love song, you’re singing the wrong tune. Love – call this what you will - is the only thing worthy of our ultimate devotion. Alas, what we have been hearing from on high in the UUA has been anything but a love song.

Today, UU ideological overlords inform us that our spiritual forbears fail today’s purity tests and that our general heritage is irredeemably, systemically tainted. There is a revolutionary fervor amongst UU leaders that promotes “dismantling” (aka destroying) our system and starting afresh in a land of “collective liberation” wherein some category animals will be more equal than others. You don’t have to look very deep to perceive the magical thinking and the monumental arrogance and ignorance necessary to sustain such a naïve utopian vision. The dualistic, good vs. evil perspectives of Critical Race Theory does not allow for any nuance or appreciation for the riches of the past – it focuses exclusively upon its evils and therefore sees the only solution as being extreme purification - dismantling.

The destructive spirit of iconoclasm that once led “true believers” (ideologues, fundamentalists and fanatics of all stripes) to smash stained glass windows, irreplaceable statuary and architecture, to burn books and heretics, or send dissenters into exile is now

finding expression in a wholesale condemnation of our culture and society. Invariably, when ideologues try to impose their vision upon society it causes harm. In our small religious movement it already has caused harm by stifling the free exchange of ideas and opinions that spark creativity and and it is destroying peoples' reputations and careers.

Our free faith tradition is now endangered by ideologues in leadership positions. Rather than supporting the organic growth and continuing evolution of our forbears' dreams, UUA leadership seeks to "dismantle" them, to sever our spiritual roots and start completely anew, as though such a thing were actually desirable and possible.

This is supremely ironic: In founding our two traditions our Universalist and Unitarian forbears sought to create a religious refuge from the oppressive attitudes and practices engendered by ideological, dogmatic thinking: self righteous certitude, intolerance, punitive authoritarianism, hard heartedness, militant zeal, divisive dogma, and dim views of human nature which undermine people's sense of self worth, thereby making them vulnerable to manipulation through the selective stimulation of their feelings of guilt and shame. Yet, now, the liberal religious refuge our forbears created has been occupied at leadership levels of the UUA by spiritually ungrounded, theologically illiberal leaders who practice and perpetuate the same spiritually oppressive attitudes and practices our forbears once rightly abhorred.

It is my responsibility as a UU minister entrusted with a free pulpit by the congregation I am honored to serve to speak the truth as best I am able in regards to matters important to us all. Certainly, the spiritual health and vitality of our religious tradition is of primary concern to all UU's, and thus I will continue to speak out to preserve this as I am able.

My public support of Rev. Eklof led to some uncomfortable encounters with UUMA leadership. I was advised to back off – told that my role as a Good Officer was to bring Todd to heel, never mind that the UUMA was, in my view, the transgressing party. As though to prove this point the UUMA board unilaterally censured him without following the due processes prescribed in the UUMA Guidelines for Professional Conduct – that is, they acted in direct violation of their own guidelines! At the same time they countenanced the harsh and intemperate letter signed by 500 White colleagues with their silence. Then, to add salt to his wounds, the UUA removed him from ministerial fellowship for "refusal to engage," as was recorded in the UU World magazine. The fact is that the Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC) leaped at the opportunity to investigate him. Since the lead investigator had publicly gone on record condemning Rev. Eklof's book I questioned the fairness of these proceeding but was completely ignored, and he was promptly removed from UU ministerial fellowship. Next, the UUMA removed him from membership since you must be in fellowship to be a member.

I am happy to note here that the power of the UUMA and UUA are not absolute. In our congregational polity, only congregations have the power to call and ordain ministers, and the UU Church of Spokane continues to have him serving them. The UUMA and the UUA cannot excommunicate him.

Not surprisingly, just as I was completing my fourth and final term as a Good Officer, I was removed from this position by UUMA Pacific Northwest Chapter leaders at the recommendation of the UUMA Board. Given all of that had transpired since June of 2019, I felt I had no choice but to join some other dissenting colleagues in resigning from the UUMA, an organization I do not trust and for which I have lost respect.

A religious movement whose primary source of spiritual fuel is anger and resentment will not last - fewer and fewer will, over time, want to be part of something that does not uplift and unify. Every religious movement should be required to pass religious scholar Karen Armstrong's "Litmus Test". Some religions manifest in life affirming, liberating ways. Others are divisive, destructive and oppressive. Sometimes, in the thick of life, it can be hard to tell the difference. You need to pay attention. Armstrong wisely notes that the litmus test for all religion should be the "Compassion Test". Concerning this she says: "The one and only test of a valid religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience, or devotional practice was that it must lead directly to practical compassion. If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express this sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, or self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God's name, it was bad theology. Compassion was the litmus test for the prophets of Israel, for the rabbis of the Talmud, for Jesus, for Paul, and for Muhammad, not to mention Confucius, Lao-Tzu, The Buddha, or the sages of the Upanishads".

Here's the question we must ask. What do you imagine would be the results of such a litmus test administered to Unitarian Universalists today? My hunch is that most UU congregations (I've been around quite a few over the years) would score impressively high on the compassion scale. Yet higher up, at the leadership level of the UUA, I think the score would be much lower. In fact, I could not give the leadership of our movement a passing grade on compassion – in challenging moments they have failed to show it, nor do they encourage us to genuinely practice it. All the great religious traditions have, from time to time, gotten hijacked by zealots, ideologues, fundamentalists and used as vehicles for divisive actions. You can read about this in the news almost any day, as religious fundamentalists and extremists of all stripes lead followers far away from the practices of compassion. It is naïve to believe that Unitarian Universalism is immune from such hijackings.

In all humility – everyone of us is called to ask "does the way I am practicing my religion pass the litmus test of compassion?" It's essential for all of us to ask this question for if you are consumed by hate for your enemies you will become an enemy to yourself.

The lesson of history is clear: attempts to impose heaven on earth through the ideological exercise of power don't lead to heaven – they lead to hells (on earth). That is where the UUA and the UUMA are leading us. They may think they know where they are going, but their ideological blinders distort their vision such that whereas they see the mirage of a perfect society ahead, clearer vision shows it be a desert of tribal discord and division. They claim, and may honestly believe, that they occupy the moral high ground, but so have so many before who

were so arrogant and self righteous that they could not see the beam in their own eyes, even as they made it their business to remove the specks in others.

When I assert that UUA and UUMA leadership is leading us to hell I am not speaking in anger or judgmentally, but with a sad awareness of what lies ahead of us on the path they are urging us to walk – it is a path without love and compassion, without understanding and forgiveness. it is a path of enforced conformity that entails the denial of freedom of conscience and expression - it is a path that will lead to more cancelling, dis-fellowshipping, discord, mistrust, anger, fear and oppression. This is nothing new – it's just a modern iteration of the ancient, oppressive practices of priestcraft in progressive guise.

When I was with Todd I witnessed how the UUMA and the UUA put him through hell – censoring him and removing him from UUA Ministerial Fellowship. It was unjust, authoritarian, and cruel. This will be recorded as a dark moment in our movement's history.

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