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Choose Something Like a Star

James Luther Adams — a Christian humanist and one of the leading Unitarian Universalist theologians of the 20th century — has been on my mind a lot lately. He spent time in Germany in 1927, before the Nazis came into power, and then for a longer period in the mid-1930s.

He tells the story of being in Nuremberg in 1927 and watching a Sunday parade on the occasion of the annual mass rally of the Nazis. The parade lasted for four hours, with thousands of people marching and singing, a large crowd attending, and “innumerable brass bands” playing. Adams got into a conversation with some people on the sidelines who turned out to be Nazi sympathizers, and out of curiosity asked about the meaning of the swastika, which was on many of the banners. Pretty soon, the conversation got more and more heated, with more and more people joining in.

He describes what happened next:

Suddenly someone seized me from behind and pulled me by the elbows out of the group with which I was arguing. In the firm grip of someone whom I could barely see I was forced through the crowd and propelled down a side-street and up into a dead-end alley. I assure you my palpitation rose quite perceptibly. I was beginning to feel Nazism existentially.

At the end of the alley my uninvited host swung me around quickly, and he shouted at me in German, “You fool. Don’t you know? In Germany today when you are watching a parade, you either keep your mouth shut or you get your head bashed in.” I thought he was going to bash it in right there.

But then his face changed into a friendly smile, and he said, “If you had continued that argument for five minutes longer, those fellows would have beaten you up.”¹

The man was an unemployed worker and an anti-Nazi. He invited Adams to his home for a meal, which the American gladly accepted. Over Sunday dinner, Adams learned about the economic distress out of which Nazism was born. He also learned about

threats to organizations that refused to bow to the Nazis. “The totalitarian process had begun,” he wrote. “Freedom of association was being abolished.”

Adams returned to Germany in the mid-1930s for “a year of study of theology, of prayer and liturgy, of fascism and its persecution of the churches.”² He also “spent some months in the so-called ‘underground’ movement of the Confessing Church in Germany.” A theologian he knew also “saw to it that I should get acquainted with German Christians, Nazis among the clergy whom he deemed to be insane.”

The experience of Nazism induced in Adams what he called “a kind of conversion.” In 1936, Adams was talking with a German psychiatrist and philosopher named Karl Jaspers and asked him

what he deemed to be the contemporary significance of liberal Christianity. [Jaspers] replied with unwonted vehemence, “Religious liberalism has no significance. It has *Zwang*—no costing commitment.”³

This prompted Adams to look closely at his own behavior.

I pressed upon myself the question, “If Fascism should arise in the States, what in your past performance would constitute a pattern or framework of resistance?” I could give only a feeble answer to the question. My principal political activities had been the reading of the newspaper and voting. I had preached sermons on the depression or in defense of strikers. Occasionally, I uttered protest against censorship in Boston, but I had no adequate conception of citizenship participation.⁴

As noted in the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography,

Adams returned to the United States more convinced than ever [before] that the tendency of religious liberals to be theologically content with vague slogans and platitudes about open-mindedness could only render liberal churches irrelevant and impotent in [the] face of the world’s evils.⁵

What are the theological precepts that can guide us as we look at our country’s current slide towards fascism?

Please understand: I take the power of language very seriously. I engage with it not just as part of my profession as a minister — my love and respect for words are a core part of my being. So in a context like this, when I talk about fascism, or make analogies

with Nazi Germany, or even use a word like “evil,” I don’t do it lightly. I use this language even knowing that some of you may have voted for the man now sworn in as President. But unless we name the dangers we’re up against — and we’re already seeing evidence of those dangers — we’ll have a harder time organizing against them.

So what are the spiritual underpinnings that can guide us in these times? Where does that which is of ultimate concern meet that which is of immediate concern?

Today’s reading⁶ urges us to choose something like a star on which to stay our minds — something that asks us to reach a certain height so that the volatility of the mob won’t carry us away.

All of us have key values that guide us, and each one of those has layers and layers of implications. Where those implications lead depends very much on the lenses you bring to them, from your culture and social location to your family background and personal history.

For example, some of the chief things that guide me are love, compassion, justice, and covenant. I can’t always live up to everything they ask of me, but I keep coming back to them. I want to come back them, even when it’s hard.

While we should avoid falling into the fickleness of the mob or the tepidness of the liberal church in Nazi Germany, we must also beware of falling into rigidity. Adams noted, “A weak liberal religion bestows a spurious blessing on the status quo,” but also warned, “People can die from hardening of the categories.”

Rigidity bypasses any kind of deep thinking. The rules are there, you follow them, end of story. There’s nothing else to explore. Rigidity stops our thoughts before we have the chance to get a fuller, more nuanced picture. We get stuck in our own point of view and start to believe it’s the only one that’s true, or that matters. Anyone who challenges us get dismissed — or worse.

A fundamental question for many religions centers on how we should relate to the “other” — those who have different points of view, who are unfamiliar to us, whose rituals seems strange, whose presence conjures fear. Often, the answer comes down to hospitality. We find it in the Hebrew scriptures when Abraham runs out of his tent to invite in the three angels. The Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) was renowned for his generous welcome. Unitarian Universalists gather to build Beloved Community across differences. Buddhism considers the entire notion of separateness an illusion. This very congregation offered sanctuary to a family fleeing civil war in El Salvador.

Now, true hospitality doesn't mean inviting people in and expecting them to be exactly like you. Like other key values, hospitality has layers of implications. It means making sure the other person has access to what they need, whether voting rights, healthcare, or an understanding of why we light a chalice each Sunday. It means learning from the newcomer and being willing to be changed by their presence. It means that even when we must act decisively, we can't write off those who oppose us, lest we lose some essential truth about their realities and sabotage our own efforts to reduce suffering.

Our task, then, is paradoxical. We need to stay grounded without getting weighed down, and we need space to dream without coming untethered.

Fortunately, humans already know another way to do this, which I'd like you to try with me right now.

As you're willing and able, please stand, if you can. You can also do this from your seat, if that's easier.

- Get a nice solid stance under you, feel where your feet touch the ground or where your body meets the chair.
- Imagine that your thumb and forefinger are holding the string of a kite, and — while being mindful of the people around you — let it bring your arm up, as though the wind has caught the kite and is drawing it up into the sky.
- Now imagine that a gentle breeze is swaying you just a bit as you fly the kite. If it helps, you can close your eyes.
- [pause]

Thanks. Have a seat again.

Now, I want to be sure not to force the metaphor further than it needs to go, because our heads could start spinning with questions like, "What happens if we let go of the string? Is there a lesson in there about resistance? What if the wind gets so strong that it rips the kite? What does it all MEAN?!"

No. What's important here has nothing to do with clinging to the kite — it's about holding on to that sensation. It's about getting a memory of suppleness into our bodies that we can draw on in other contexts.

Because we're going to need that combination of strength and flexibility — it's something trees exhibit so beautifully. We're going to need it as we unlearn old habits and reorient ourselves towards different ways of organizing. Our communities of

accountability will need to remain supple, too, if we're going to have any hope of staying connected when divisiveness casts its long shadow.

What are the practices that help you feel solid? What are the practices that give you perspective? What is the something-like-a-star that you've chosen to stay your mind on so that you may be staid?

Whatever worthy work you give your attention, and whatever mode you choose to apply your particular gifts, the one thing you can't do is opt out entirely. None of us gets a pass this time — the planet needs us too desperately. We can take pauses to grieve or collect ourselves or attend to personal matters, but as the saying goes, learn to rest, not to quit.

These words of Adams's from 1944 are still eerily apt:

We need to act to create a world community. This will involve struggle, for peace is possible only in the teeth of strife. Peace is possible only through organized power. Civilization is always a combination of love and power. Love without power is obviously impotent. Power without love and justice is tyranny.

Today, when a great democratic revolution is under way, a great counter-revolution is also again on the move. We must not deceive ourselves. We are caught in a struggle, and we can exercise positive choice only if we accept the responsibility of making our will count. ...human beings must cooperate—or perish!

I don't count and you don't count very much as individuals alone, but together we can count if we are now willing jointly to do the humdrum work, the spade work of democracy, the work that can alone bring liberty and justice for all. To do this we must be seized by a love that will not let us go; we must be seized by the primordial love that was expressed when the morning stars sang together at the dawn of creation, the love that alone can recreate the world.⁷

In a recent article on the website *Collect Your People*, Angus Maguire wrote:

The choice we have to make in the coming weeks, months and years are not Democrat vs. Republican, civility vs. bigotry, or even good vs. evil. *It will be a choice between our safety and our humanity.* We won't get to have both.⁸

James Luther Adams also recognized that business as usual won't get us through when the stakes are high:

[T]o be involved with other people so that it costs and so that one exposes the evils of society . . . requires something like conversion, something more than an attitude. It requires a sense that there's something wrong and I must be different from the way I have been.⁹

We have stark, difficult choices ahead of us, but those choices also give us sacred opportunities to define — and redefine — who we are. We won't get it right every time, so let that go right now. But when we're driven by love, driven by the forces in which we find our ultimate meaning, driven by the knowledge that the struggle itself is worthwhile even when we can't be sure of the outcome, then we can be in the struggle for the long haul. We can stick around longer to bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice. And we will know a fuller measure of who we really are.

Let your something-like-a-star light the way.

Ashé, amen, and blessed be.

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in conversation with Glen Thomas Rideout, Doug Wadkins, Cassandra Hartley, and theresa rohlck

¹ James Luther Adams, “The Indispensable Discipline of Social Responsibility”

² James Luther Adams, “The Evolution of My Social Concern,” <http://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/theology-philosophy/the-evolution-of-my-social-concern/>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ <http://uudb.org/articles/jameslutheradams.html>

⁶ Robert Frost, “Choose Something Like a Star,” <http://www.blueridgejournal.com/poems/rf-star.htm>

⁷ James Luther Adams, “Our Enemy: Angelism”

⁸ Angus Maguire, “That Feeling in Our Guts,” <https://collectyourpeople.com/that-feeling-in-our-guts-32d45fcbceaf#.v89023fdt>

⁹ James Luther Adams, “A Time to Speak: Conversations at Collegium”