

HE SAID, SHE SAID:

WORDS AND DEEDS OF PROPHETIC WOMEN AND MEN

SOURCE #2

Rev. Kit Ketcham, Oct. 21, 2007

It's a funny thing about words. As I've spent time thinking about and researching the Sources of Unitarian Universalism, I've gotten into the habit of looking more closely at the words that express the Source. What do they mean? What did they mean to those who expressed the Source in this way?

We're all aware that words mean different things to different people, depending on their culture, their world view, their education, their personal nature.

Some of us only use words in a literal sense. Others use them metaphorically. Most of us use words in both ways. We recognize that words are powerful and that it's important not to misuse them or to use them lightly.

So let's all get on more or less the same page when it comes to some of the words that we'll be using in our thinking about the Sources, particularly this source, because it is about words and how they relate to deeds.

First, though, let's read together our Second Source, including the introductory statement. "The Living Tradition we share draws from many Sources: Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." (reread)

The words used here are powerful, far-reaching in their implications.

The word Source usually is considered to mean “point of origin”, “wellspring---of a stream, for example”, “supplier of information”. When I talk about the Sources of Unitarian Universalism, I am talking about our origins, our deepest roots, our wellsprings, the place we get knowledge.

And a prophet? I think of a prophet as a person with uncommon knowledge and understanding who speaks words that have lasting significance or predict an event or recognize a danger in advance.

So what does it mean to be prophetic, as in Prophetic Women and Men? When you selected a quote to bring today, how did you decide? Did you think of a specific person first or did you think of the wisdom first and then find the person’s name?

No matter how you did it, the words or persons you chose have deep significance to you. Those persons, those words, those deeds, have shaped your life in some way. And by shaping your life, they have shaped your contributions to this community, they have made our congregation, our Unitarian Universalism what it is today.

One of my earliest connections to a prophetic human being, except for those Bible figures or others named in my history books, was when I discovered the essayist Charles Erskine Scott Wood, through his small book of playlets entitled “Heavenly Discourse”, which we will use as a readers’ theatre piece at our Conversation on the second Source, next Saturday night. (I have scripts to hand out today, if you plan to take part.)

When I discovered him, I had just graduated from Linfield College, where I had gotten a religious education that outstripped my Sunday School learnings in my dad’s little Baptist church.

And that summer, I went to Green Lake, Wisconsin, to serve on the Young Adult staff at the American Baptist Assembly grounds there.

It was my first time away from the Pacific Northwest alone. I rode out on the train, met a shuttle car in Fond du Lac, and joined other staff members there on the shores of Green Lake as a snack bar attendant.

Not so good for my figure, as the chocolate dip cones were irresistible, but great for my horizons, as I met other college students and Baptist ministers from all over the United States and abroad.

These were not small town pastors like my dear father. They were not limited by a Bible College education but well schooled in an understanding of modern culture and how it related to religious faith. As I listened to preachers like Howard Moody and Harvey Cox, liberal Christian thinkers whose minds wrestled with the issues of poverty and civil rights, my mindset, my worldview shifted radically.

One day, browsing in the bookstore, I happened upon a small book. Opening it, I found God talking to Mark Twain and Billy Sunday and Jesus and Satan, expressing impatience with the foibles of humankind, puzzling over why Christians were behaving as they were, thanking heretics like Darwin and Rabelais for their clear thinking and their understanding of the questions of Creation, and, above all, yearning for humankind to “get it”, to understand that their petty, pious squabbles (this was right after WWI) were silly and damaging to themselves and to the earth and its peoples.

I was entranced. First of all, the conversations were hilarious and, as always, humor drew me in further and further. This was gentle humor, not unkind, and the depiction of Heaven as a place where both heretics and saints communed with each other and with the Divine opened a door in my mind, a door which has never closed.

When I asked Mavis to send out the email asking folks to dig up quotes of the earliest prophetic men and women you could find, I wasn't sure what we'd come up with. But I knew it would paint a portrait of the thinkers and doers whom we consider pillars of our faith tradition.

One such thinker and doer was Origen of Alexandria. He introduced the controversial and dangerous heresy of universalism, the idea that since God is love, everyone, even Satan, will be saved in the end, by endless opportunities for repentance and reconciliation, through learning and growth, even after death.

Origen was born in about the year 185 of the common era and died in about 254, after having been condemned and tortured as a heretic by the early church. He was a theologian, philosopher, and devoted Christian who castrated himself so that he could tutor women without suspicion. Now there's a heroic deed for you---a guy who believed that women should be educated in theology and philosophy and gave up his masculinity to do it.

The theologian Arius in the third century also lived and taught in Alexandria, Egypt. Here was another freethinker. The most controversial of his teachings dealt with the relationship between God and Jesus. Arius did not believe that Jesus was God. His Unitarian position---that God is One, not three in one--- conflicted with the trinitarian positions dominating the Roman Church and most other Christian traditions which followed.

Over the centuries since that time, we Unitarian Universalists have come to recognize many men and women whose words and deeds form much of the foundation of our faith.

Primary among those early prophets are those who felt so strongly that religious belief could not be coerced, that there were other ways to view God, and that people should be free to find their own interpretations of the Divine. This was risky and many died defying orthodoxy.

Among those was Michael Servetus, who, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, wrote the book “On the Errors of the Trinity” and whose writings inspired Katherine Vogel of Krakow, Poland, who had the courage to hold firm, even though she was burned at the stake in 1539, a fate which also claimed Servetus, at the hands of John Calvin.

And then there was King John Sigismund of Transylvania, the only Unitarian king in history, who issued the first public decree of religious toleration in his kingdom during his reign in 1570.

How do these early lives, these early words and deeds relate to our lives as Unitarian Universalists today? How have they inspired women and men throughout the centuries to take their courage and their lives into their own hands, defying the conventional wisdom, belying the orthodoxy of belief, risking persecution and death, believing that integrity and freedom of belief were worth dying for.

Over the centuries since Origen, Arius, Sigismund, Servetus, and Vogel, the Unitarian and Universalist passion for integrity has moved beyond the field of religious freedom, important as that still is. As UUism moved from Europe to North America, the cause of religious freedom was mostly won and our forebears, our prophetic women and men, took on the challenges of a young democratic nation.

In this country, our congregations were established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an alternative to hard-bitten Calvinism, the faith of our Puritan forebears. Unitarians did not believe in original sin; Universalists did not believe in hell. We became oases of a gentler theology, one which advocated that human beings were essentially good, though capable of wrongdoing.

Men and women like Henry Whitney Bellows and Mary Ashton Rice Livermore raised millions of dollars in the 1860's to provide medical care to ease the suffering of the wounded and dying on both sides during the Civil War. Their efforts formed the precursor to the American Red Cross.

In later years, Mary Livermore led the Massachusetts Suffrage Association and founded *The Agitator*, a paper devoted to suffrage and women's rights.

Theodore Parker was the most popular preacher in Boston, in his day. He wrote his sermons with a pistol by his side, not to protect himself from dissidents but, should the need arise, to defend escaped slaves traveling on the underground railroad toward Canada.

Parker once wrote: "Be ours a religion which, like sunshine, goes everywhere; its temple, all space; its shrine, the good heart; its creed, all truth; its ritual, works of love; its profession of faith, divine living."

The words and deeds of such activists as Parker, Bellows and Livermore point us, as UUs, to a path of courage and moral strength. It is not enough to preach words of good intentions and right opinions; without the deeds to back them up, words are empty shells.

More recently, in 1965, the Rev. James Reeb and two of his UU colleagues went to Selma, Alabama, to support the growing civil rights movement there. Leaving a restaurant one night, they were set upon by four white men wielding baseball bats. His colleagues, Orloff Miller and Clark Olsen, were beaten but survived.

James Reeb was murdered, and the words of one of his first sermons as the minister of a UU congregation came back to remind us all of what commitment to integrity means.

He asked: “Is there nothing worth risking one’s life for? Are there no dreams or goals so important that we risk our own destruction to gain them?” James Reeb answered those questions with his life on a Selma sidewalk.

During that same civil rights battle in Selma, laywoman Viola Liuzzo of First Unitarian Church in Detroit gave a ride home to several black protesters. A car full of Ku Klux Klan members followed her for twenty miles, attempting to run her off the road. Eventually, they fired several shots into the car and Viola Liuzzo was killed by bullets to the head. Her last words were those of the song “We Shall Overcome”.

So the Sources of our faith include the words and deeds of many a brave and far-seeing individual. And the question becomes, today, how do we carry on their legacy of prophetic action? What are the battlefields today that require our prophetic words and deeds?

One of those battlefields is the ongoing issue of civil rights, not only for racial minorities but for sexual minorities. This very weekend, across the water at the Lynnwood Convention Center, a group of anti-gay religious people, called “Watchmen on the Wall” has been meeting.

This group has been guilty of extreme violence, even attempted murder, toward sexual minorities. At the same time as their hateful rhetoric is spoken, a peaceful demonstration has surrounded the Convention Center, with many, many supporters and allies of the sexual minority community present, in hopes of sending a message of peace and harmony to an organization that has struck out physically, emotionally, and politically at innocent victims.

And there is a rally going on right now, at the Edmonds UU Church, to counteract the hate and violence of the Watchmen group, and that sanctuary, I trust, is filled with prophetic women and men, setting an example for all of us, of courage, good cheer, and determination to secure full civil rights and tolerance for people who have too long been denied those rights and that acceptance.

A second battlefield is, of course, that of environmental justice. Recently, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and Al Gore Jr. for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures that are needed to counteract such change.

That the Peace Prize should be given to a scientific project, rather than to an obvious humanitarian effort, was a surprise to many, but the significance of this award is stupendous, in that it recognizes that if we do not heal the earth, we have no hope of healing the divisions in our larger world.

This past week, I attended a gathering of leaders at the Whidbey Institute entitled “A Resurgence of Hope”. Two wellknown leaders in the field of Environmental Justice, Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, spent the day with a large group, helping us to see the incredible strides that have been made in human understanding of our relationship with the earth and encouraging us to take steps in our own lives and in our institutions to speak out, to stand up, to act locally and globally to reverse the damage to our planet and to see our responsibility to each other and to the earth.

And, I might suggest, a third battlefield is right here on Whidbey Island. As our population increases and property becomes more and more expensive, low income residents are displaced and discouraged from full participation in the community.

Plans for growth often exclude plans for affordable housing, assisted living and community services, in favor of single family homes on huge lots with immense price tags. Will we come to a point where Whidbey Island is an enclave only of wealthy retirees? Will those who work here on the island have to commute from the mainland because they can’t afford to live here?

Where will our teachers, our clerks, our bank employees, our landscape experts, our barbers and hair stylists, our friends and our neighbors and members of this congregation---where will they live, if the price goes too high?

Are we speaking out at town meetings, speaking up for those who may be excluded because of choices made by local governments?

Are we speaking up at county meetings, advocating for protection of the earth and providing community services to youth and low income folk?

Are we speaking up at rallies where civil rights are the topic?

As Unitarian Universalists, we have a rich history of women and men who were willing to stand up, speak out, and act upon their convictions. We are the next generation of those prophetic women and men. What will we do on the battlefields of our time here on the earth? Will future generations look at us and say, “those men and women set a standard of courage in action and we will follow their example.” What will our legacy be for our children and our grandchildren?

Let’s pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #287, Faith of the Larger Liberty.

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we have a long and noble heritage as Unitarian Universalists, that our prophets have been men and women of vision and compassion. May we follow in their footsteps, advocating for justice, freedom, and compassion in our communities and in our everyday lives. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.