

Heeding the Prophets
Karen Gustafson
First Unitarian Society of Madison
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“Talk is cheap” is a line that echoes out of the dusty past – probably repeated by one or more of my parents during the black hole of my adolescence.

“I PROMISE I’ll clean my room later today if you just let me go to the movie this afternoon.”

“Talk is cheap”

Aware of New Year’s resolutions that fall by the wayside and best intentions that are eclipsed by expediency, many of us live out our personal lives with a vague sense that there is much that we might do to embody our own best selves.

It would not be surprising, then, if your response and mine, to the words of Bernice King,* daughter of Martin Luther King Junior might range from defensiveness to shame to self righteousness. It would be hard to deny the truth of her message.

“It is easy,” she says, “to honor a true prophet with words. We can talk about what he did and how he changed America and that is fine. But the real question is, what am I doing? ...We must face the fact that it is not enough to say, “We love Dr. King,” “We respect Dr. King,” “We honor Dr. King.” In my mind he would not be terribly impressed with our mere words and our lip service. He would say that you honor, love and respect me by picking up where I left off.”

Talk, she might say, is cheap.

But this disconnect between what we get as the wisdom of heroes and prophets and how that wisdom is embodied in the lives of those who hear seems to be embedded in human history. Always it has been “easier to pay homage to profits than to heed the direction of their vision.”

Why is this?

The answer might lie in how we understand the nature of prophesy and prophets.

We can trace the roots of prophecy in Judeo-Christian tradition to the Old Testament. In his book *The Message of the Prophets*, Gerhard von Rad delineates three characteristics of the ancient prophets.

First they draw heavily, albeit selectively, from their religious past. Second, they did so in light of their notion of the future; and third their words were directed to the specific concrete historical situation in which they found themselves. The prophets perceived themselves as agents of change. In their messages they spoke of the death of the status quo in the name of a new beginning.

These Biblical prophets get all of this without benefit of media coverage or advanced copy or constitutional protection of freedom of speech. They spoke out of the keen sense of observation, transient faith in divine revelation and a passionate commitment to truth and action as they saw it. They were variously received by kings and priests sometimes seen as true messengers of God. At other times they were driven away and stoned by those whose investment in truth, unrevealed, was great.

Jesus was the central prophet of the New Testament. Jesus was not so concerned with the immediate future as he was in the salvation of the human race. He saw the means for achieving that through a radical affirmation of love and compassion and peace and justice for all. Things are a mess, he said, and if you live this way things will get better. This is the time to change and this is how.

There have been, of course, many prophets since then. Martin Luther and John Calvin and Michael Servetus and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa, all examples of latter day prophets, grounded in their religious past, envisioning the future, addressing the political and social ills of their time.

Through their stories and their writings we have come to see a prophet as one of superior wisdom, one who speaks to and for others, a gifted voice ringing with transforming revelation, one whose dreams exceed our own.

And perhaps here is the rub.

Many of you have seen the mugs and t-shirts that sport a list of famous Unitarian Universalist. These are available in catalogs and in booths at Unitarian Universalist events. It is an example of how we often define OUR faith tradition by its prophets. We sometimes have trouble saying exactly

what a Unitarian Universalist is or believes, but we can and do claim good company or at least famous company. It is a kind of gild by association.

As I read the names on the mug I am struck by something on the order of a revelation about the very nature of our faith tradition.

Rather than a central prophet like Jesus or Muhammad or Buddha we claim legions of individuals who by no divine revelation but by the power of human determination, committed to justice, directed by talent or creativity, distinguish themselves through their lives and work in the world. Close scrutiny of these lives often shows not saintliness or even superior wisdom but regular folks who, like most other famous people, were in the right place at the right time, offered what was needed; created something of lasting value; presented an idea that fuels the imagination of a generation; was credited with invention that changed the course of history. But I wonder if surface recognition of what made them famous might not do both them and us a great disservice. Listen to some of their names and something for which they are famous: Abigail Adams, pioneer feminist, wife of John Adams second president of the United States, also a Unitarian; Joseph Priestly scientist who discovered oxygen; Susan B Anthony, 19th century suffragette; Ralph Waldo Emerson, Unitarian Minister, and philosopher of religion; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, poet; Jane Adams, pacifist and settlement house reformer; James Reeb, Unitarian Minister and activist, murdered in Selma Alabama during the march for Civil Rights in March of 1965.

This is a very small part of an almost inexhaustible list, a list of associations about which one might be proud. But does offering this list in any way serve our movement? Does it help those who do not know us to know us better? Oh, Ralph Waldo Emerson. I know about him. I get it. Unitarians are famous enough to be in anthologies of American literature. And Longfellow? Wow. If I become a Unitarian Universalist will I be able to write rhyming couplets? I was an undergraduate English major and I didn't know that Emerson or any other of those guys was a Unitarian until I went to seminary.

I am aware of how quickly I can get into into the fame game. I have in the past used these names to give credibility to this sometimes ambiguous but always profoundly significant religious tradition. How do the historic accomplishments of these famous people reflect an understanding and practice of values and the principles of our Unitarian Universalist tradition?

There are lots of inventors and writers and thinkers and feminists and social reformers of all kinds who were not Unitarian or Universalist. So what beyond the apparent public accomplishments of these particular people might we want to claim? How might we approach our understanding of these folks that would give them flesh and blood and foibles and families and joys and concerns? How might we make them part of our beloved community? What might their presence among us do to lighten their load support their causes strengthen their faith nurture their best? How might we be inspired to manifest our gifts in ways we are reluctant to?

The thing that characterizes the accomplishments of many of these folks is that they were, in their own ways, prophets - people with ideas and vision that was ahead of their time, who addressed the needs of their times in ways that are still manifest today. The American Red Cross which is a vital force in America today came about in significant part due to the efforts of Clara Barton. She did not wake up one day and say, "I know what I'll do by the time I'm 62, I'll be famous for starting a relief agency and getting it endorsed by the US government even if it takes me 30 years." Instead the formation of the Red Cross was the result of this person seeing a need, approaching it with determination, willing to push on in the face of opposition, willing to subject herself to rejection and ridicule, who probably cried herself to sleep, struggled with her relationships, worried about her finances, and didn't get enough sleep.

Or Ralph Waldo Emerson, a great thinker whose ideas about Unitarian Christianity were so radical that he was banned from some lecture circuits. Many of those ideas form the center of naturalistic transcendental theology as we take it for granted today. So into his head was he that he found it impossible to continue to be a Unitarian minister because, though he loved the preaching, he really didn't like the interpersonal aspects of his ministry. What seems significant to me about him is that he also experienced great personal suffering with the loss of the wife and child, with illness and financial difficulty. It was his own particular belief system and his community of friends but sustained him in these times. What was it about his faith that sustained him? What were the values that made each day possible?

The point is, I knew you would want me to make a point here, is that I have come to wonder if surface recognition of famous Unitarian Universalists is one of the ways we succumb to a temptation which feeds the great a human tendency to want see our prophets and heroes as "other", extraordinary

individuals who distinguish themselves in ways that we cannot imagine for ourselves. These special people have names we can drop and causes we claim but do not fully engage because history has made them into super heroes, capable of feats of love and compassion and justice seeking that are, well, beyond us mere mortals. So focused have our religious and cultural institutions been upon pointing out the martyrdom and the extraordinary qualities they possessed that it is easy to separate ourselves from the causes and messages they carried. And in so doing, separate ourselves from our own passionate dreaming and striving for powerful manifestations of what could be.

In some perverse way, the fame of others seems to strip so many of us of our own prophetic power. We include these prophets in circumscribed ways but never allow them to be fully human, seldom letting them truly inspire us to the recognition that all possess the potential for the greatness that comes from simply living productive lives, informed by our values and by our principles. It's not about setting out to be famous. It's about nurturing one another into greatness in small ways, letting those small acts distinguish us. As the Buddhist psychologist Sheldon Kopp notes, "When we do impeccable work, we need not be concerned with the outcome."

Let us return to the characteristics of the prophets. First we are told that they draw heavily upon their religious past. We have religious past. We each have a personal religious history that for better or for worse informs our way of living. It behooves us to remember that past, to claim the wisdom that our first sense of the mystery and miracle of life brought to us. Furthermore we each have the Judeo Western heritage to draw upon. We have a grounding of principles and practice. We are informed by the guiding force of love and peace and justice that it is our cultural tradition at its best. We also have a past as Unitarian Universalists. We have a great statement of Principles that came to us from the assembled wisdom of our congregations. We have a vast history of individuals who moved out of their comfort zones to confront oppression.

Another characteristic of the prophets was the perception that they were agents of change. It was I believe, this perception that gave them the courage of their convictions. We too can be agents of change. We can do it best when we come to the present with a deep respect for complexity, profound humility and the passion for speaking the truth as we know it.

We do ourselves and the world we live in a great disservice when we rely upon the dreams of proclaimed prophets instead of living out our dreams for a better world. I do not mean to trivialize the works of the great. But I know that

their passion and courage to act and to change came and comes from the voices within as well as the voices outside them. Each of us must find a source of courage and passion within ourselves that will continue to empower the forces of good. Let us use this community as a place to deepen our understanding of the religious past and to know each our own truth, that we may be visible in our knowing and create together a world whose future is secure.

If Martin Luther King had lived, he would have turned 81 years old on Friday. Since his death he has been subject to the human scandal machine. But his message that we are each responsible for being agents of social change through our love and through our activism is a message that rises above the level of human frailty. We have killed the messenger and the message lives.

The old cartoon character Pogo once said, "We have met the enemy and it is us."

And, I say we are in the presence of prophets. That's us, too.

It is important to remind ourselves that prophesy, Unitarian Universalist style does not come from an external source but from attention to our own experience and the combined wisdom of our people. It is not about heeding the prophets so much as about leveraging our resources here and now; about making the choices we can and must to make a difference. There is no gap between what we say and what we know must be done.

We are moved to action not so much by the dreams of others but by the stirrings of our own hearts.