

Five Smooth Stones
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme – Alexis Balkowitsch

Sometimes I feel like I'm not a very good Unitarian Universalist. I mean, I believe in UU principles, and I try to live the values. But I haven't really taken the time to time to learn our history, or do any sort of meaningful deep dive into our foundations and traditions. Like I know this church used to be named after Michael Servetus...but I couldn't tell you much about him. Likewise, I know that...something, something, Transylvania...but again, not real sharp on the details. So when I found out I was doing this service about a seminal piece of writing from a distinguished Unitarian theologian, I felt like I might be a little out of my depth. I mean, before this week I honestly couldn't have told you what the Five Smooth Stones were.

Which is kind of strange, considering that for my entire life, history and religion are two things that have always interested me. It's ironic—or perhaps inevitable—that someone raised by very non-religious people would grow up so fascinated by religion. I did my high school senior research project on Zoroastrianism. I took every class I could in college on both world religions and early Christianity. Actually, my original plan for college was to double major in Hebrew and Archaeology and go pore over religious texts in the Middle East...but looking back I think I probably had an overly romanticized view, influenced by too many rewatches of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*.

But it's not just an intellectual fascination—I feel a deep spiritual pull from religious observance, being in places of worship, reading texts, sharing space with believers of all faiths. In college, I would spend my Easers at midnight vigil with my Catholic best friend, and was deeply touched by the feeling of communal awe. In those same years, I attended some Episcopalian services with another friend. I vividly remember being moved to tears the first time I met their priest, and something about his deeply calm and kind energy hit me like a wave. Later, after college, I had the opportunity to live in Japan for three months, and one of my most cherished memories of that experience is being invited to participate in an evening of chant, and walking and sitting meditation at a Buddhist temple in Ueno. My rudimentary Japanese skills were a barrier to deep conversation, but the feeling of connection in the space needed no translation. And that's just three examples from nearly forty-some-odd years of profound experiences.

So why haven't I given that same time and energy to Unitarian Universalism, even as I call myself a UU? I suppose it's because as a lover of history, everything we do here feels so modern. We're in a modern building, talking about modern issues. Our rituals can feel fluid, and sometimes give me a feeling of impermanence or unrootedness—even if that's not necessarily true.

And yet, this is the religious community that I have stuck with longer than any other. Nearly ten years, in fact! And I think that's mostly due to two things. First, it's because of all of you, and the Beloved Community we have created here. And second, it's everything that's held in those Five Smooth Stones, that more than history or ritual, give me a foundation for living through these troubling times.

Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism (JLA)© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Way back in 2002, I studied at the University of Chicago and graduated from Meadville Lombard Theological School, one of two Unitarian Universalist seminaries in this country. The tradition at the time was to present graduates with 5 smooth stones. Each stone represents an aspect of Unitarian Universalism, rather like the 5 pillars of Islam. These particular stones were conceived of by James Luther Adams, who had taught at Meadville Lombard, and Harvard and Andover Newton. His presence will still vivid around the Chicago campus, though he had died nearly a decade before. He's known as one of the most influential theologians among Unitarian Universalists in the last century. I've mentioned him a few times this year because his critique of our tradition was that we didn't have the backbone to stand up to fascism and he wanted to provide the theological bones to the spine. Given this era of renewed fascism, I think it is important to understand what James Luther Adams – we call him *JLA* – had to say.

I was surprised to learn that he was born in Ritzville, Washington. I think very few people are born in Ritzville, WA. If you've driven across the state on 1-90 as many times as I have, it is a familiar, if small, landmark, near Othello or Moses Lake if those places mean anything to you. The connection I share with JLA regarding a Washington birthplace and Chicago home is dear to me. Though born in Washington state, my dad had moved our family to Chicago when I was a toddler, and then returned for graduate school to Washington state when I turned 5. Likewise, when my son turned 5, I moved my family from Wenatchee, WA (Northwest of Ritzville) to Chicago so that I could attend graduate school at Meadville Lombard. The connections of place and study of UU theology make me feel a fondness for this man I never met. But back to his five smooth stones.

The stones themselves are from that David and Goliath story that Ashley retold this morning, a story from the Bible that is standard in Western culture.



In fact, remember this photo I took of the statue of David by Michelangelo when I was lucky enough to travel to Florence, Italy this last year? He's got his slingshot casually slung over his left shoulder and the strap of the sling in his right hand. This David is depicted the moment before slaying the Phillistine giant, Goliath. He is sizing him up and determining his next move. He has five stones with him, apparently, because Goliath had four brothers who might have also appeared, though didn't. Or at least that's what the Christian websites on the internet tell me. He slays Goliath with the first stone.

JLA references the five smooth stones and expects the reader to understand the context of the story of David and Goliath, which was probably true in the mid-part of the last century, but cannot be assumed of Unitarian Universalists today. So, I explain that to get us on the same page.

I want to explain as best I can JLA's five smooth stones. It's a little more complicated than the reading we shared, though that's a start. And a lot more nuanced than I remember when I re-read the essay this week. So, here we go. And remember, Adams' purpose is to create a theological grounding for Unitarian Universalists that is strong enough to stand up to fascism. Fascism is the Goliath here, and we are David in this story. He wants to help us slay Goliath with our slingshot.

The first stone says that “Religious liberalism depends on the principle that ‘revelation’ is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism.” “The liberal’s ultimate faith,” he writes, “is not in himself.”

The stone, that revelation is continuous, could be the stone that says “we believe in science” – that is new truths breaking forth constantly. But his caution that our faith should not lie ultimately in ourselves, reminds us that the scientific truth in one era becomes nonsense in another. He posits a reality beyond human understanding, and forces at work that we can participate in, but don’t control. “We put our faith,” he writes, “in a creative reality that is re-creative.”

God is present in this stone, but even in his era, he recognized that the term ‘God’ can get in the way of our understanding – so he says that “the word ‘God’ may in the present context be replaced by the phrase ‘that which ultimately concerns humanity’ or ‘that in which we should place our confidence.’”

One thing I appreciate about this first stone, a critique I often have of liberalism – religious liberalism included – is that we put too much faith in human understanding and knowledge and fail to recognize the vast territory that remains mysterious to human eyes and ears.

“The second major principle of religious liberalism is that all relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion.” He goes on to say that “Liberalism, in its social articulation, might be defined as a protest against ‘pecking orders.’”

I like that. And here is where our understanding of white supremacy culture or the culture of dominance comes in. We do not believe in pecking orders. We do not believe that one person – because of their race or beauty or gender or ability should be valued over another because of their sexual orientation or size or nationality or religion.

We are all living in a culture that tells us that the young, male beautiful, idealized body in the statue is far more valuable than the actual body standing in front of it, older, female, short and wide. But liberal religion protests such pecking orders. Adams says that this “protest often found its sanction in the basic theological assertion that all are children of one God.”



This is the basis “of the liberals’ belief that the method of free inquiry is the necessary condition for the preservation of human dignity. This method of free inquiry and persuasion is the only one consistent with both the dignity and the limitations of human nature, and it is the method that yields the maximum of discovery and criticism.”

He says you are not going to find infallible guidance in liberal religion, and that the orthodox might say this is why you need the guidance of God or church doctrine. What the orthodox overlook, he says is this: “the most pretentious pride of all is that of those who think themselves capable of recognizing infallibility, for they must themselves claim to be infallible in order to identify the infallible.” In contrast, the liberal seeks “the free loyalty and conviction of people exposed to them in open discourse.”

This stone may be the hardest of the bunch, in my humble opinion. Pecking orders and coercion exist so pervasively in our culture that I think we are sometimes unaware when we are engaging in those practices. But the loyalty and conviction of a people who have chosen us in open discourse is so much more valuable.

“Third, religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one’s effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community.” *Make the world a better place*, we say each week in the children’s affirmation.

“A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us grief,” writes Adams. “The ‘holy’ thing in life is the participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice.” It may seem that finding a few coins in your couch to give to charity is inadequate to the Goliath of world hunger, and it is. But the point of this stone and that story, is that we have a moral obligation to do what we can do. If donating some money is what you can do, then JLA would have us do it.

This one is the simplest, I think, for me to understand.

So, I move on to **the fourth stone**. He says, “Now, anything that exists effectively in history must have form. And the creation of a form requires power. It requires not only the power of thought but also the power of organization and the organization of power. Thus we are led to the fourth element of liberalism: we deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation.” *We make the world a better place*.

Virtue and goodness are a human construct. Pecking orders, for example, exist in nature – the term comes from the study of birds and the way they form social organization within 18-24 hours of meeting, establishing pecking rights. But just because they exist in nature doesn’t mean they are good or necessary for humans. We have the freedom and creativity to construct different social organizations.

“The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms.” Says JLA. “The faith of a church or of a nation is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape the various institutions.” We are a faith that tries to shape history. He writes that “any other faith is thoroughly undependable....it is a faith that enables history to crush humanity. Its ministry prepares people to adjust to the crushing by focusing on, and salving, the personal experiences of hurt.” “The creation of justice in community,” however, “requires the organization of power.”

Without using the term “interdependence” he talks about how there is an interdependent relationship – that the health of the body politic depends upon the health and faith of its individual members and vice versa.

I don’t know if JLA is referencing the liberal reticence about authority and power, but I do think that the idea that the creation of justice in community requires the organization of power does challenge our occasional indifference to and distaste of power. That this indifference and distaste is based on the not-so-occasional mis-use and abuse of power doesn’t negate the real need for power and organization of power to incarnate virtue, to make good in the world.

“Finally, liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.”

His very next sentence is important for us to hear in this moment of history "This view does not necessarily involve immediate optimism."

This is where faith comes in. Of course, I'm reminded of the 19th century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker's statement used so eloquently by Martin Luther King Jr. and woven into that White House rug in the Oval Office when Barack Obama was president, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

"Liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism." James Luther Adams and Martin Luther King Jr. would have read the writings of Theodore Parker. The divine resources – the divine and human resources that are available for the achievement of meaningful change – this understanding of divinity is a process theology – a God or reality which interacts with us and changes in turn, a partner in our ability to effect change. It is a relational understanding of the universe. We are not in control. Nor are we powerless.

"There is something in the genuine liberal perspective that, while recognizing this tragic nature of the human condition, continues to live with a dynamic hope, with optative mood as one of its voices."

I had to look up "optative mood" – there's nothing like reading theology to make one feel inadequate in one's own native language – but optative mood, is a grammatical device that indicates a wish or hope regarding a given action. In other words, the genuine liberal recognizes the tragic nature of our human condition – our tendency toward pecking orders and domination, war and abuse – but we live with a dynamic hope, an undying faith that we can do better.

These are the principles of religious liberalism, according to James Luther Adams. Our five smooth stones. He believes that these stones are weighty enough to slay the Goliath of fascism.

Freedom is big in this essay as it was during his times, when Nazi Germany sought to limit and eliminate the freedoms of those lowest in their pecking order.

Then, for a time in this country, it seemed that freedom got used as an excuse for hyper-individualism. The freedom to not wear a mask, even if that meant putting your neighbors at risk of disease. Abuse and bullying tolerated because of freedom of speech. You get the idea.

But now that ICE officials swoop into cities without identification, wearing masks, kidnapping and imprisoning whomever they so choose, without evidence or recourse, we are reminded once again of the preciousness of freedom. The attempted takeover of DC's city police department in a sweeping use of federal authority, reminds us again of the value of our freedom.

And so our closing song is a protest one, pre-dating the Nazi era, but revived during it as a form of resistance. It is told that in 1942 Sophie School, a member of a non-violent resistance group, played the song on her flute outside the walls of Ulm prison, where her father had been detained for calling Hitler a "Scourge of God." *Thinking or our thoughts are free* – Die Gedanken Sind Frei.