

Meaning Writ Large, Part 2: Power Theology

SONG ... READING ... SONG ... SERMON ... SONG ... CLOSING

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SONG

Gathered Here (Phil Porter)

Gathered here in the mystery of the hour, Gathered here in one strong body,
Gathered here in the struggle and the power, Spirit draw near.

READING INTRO

Perhaps the most beloved and formative Unitarian Universalist theologian and teacher of the 20th century was James Luther Adams, who hailed from eastern Washington state, although his life path led him to study and teach mostly in Chicago and Boston, where he continued to engage with students until he died at age 92 in 1994.

While he was still alive, I had a small correspondence with him, to support a sermon I thought would be pertinent, called “What Does a UU Theologian Eat for Breakfast?” And yes, I found out what he usually ate in the morning, which was not particularly relevant, but he was very gracious toward my impertinence.

JLA, as he’s fondly referred to, dived deep into the meanings and mysteries of community dynamics, especially how it is that people arrange themselves in voluntary associations, such as church. His writing is dense, but very helpful to generations of leaders.

Right after this reading, I’ll sing a song by Si Kahn, which I’ve arranged. But here’s James Luther Adams, from a 1968 address found in his book, *The Prophethood of All Believers*.

READING —From “Blessed Are the Powerful” by James Luther Adams (*pg. 271-273*)

In [acknowledgement] of the alienated, of the marginal men and women and children, power must be newly defined: as a creative, innovative relationship between those who have the freedom to participate in making social decisions and those who do not have that freedom.

Obviously, [one] cannot be content with philanthropy, for philanthropy may be a means of keeping others powerless; nor can one be content with simple majority rule. Conventional philanthropy and majority rule can be a means of still further alienating the marginal people, and thus increasing their self-hatred and resentment.

There is a good deal of evidence to show that the deeper the sense of alienation the greater the sense of hopelessness, and the more likely the resort to violence. In this context, the people with power engender the violence.

One theological tradition has called this process the wrath of God... [Hebrew Scripture] calls it *hardening of the heart*...

The authenticity of power is determined by the ends it serves and the means it uses. The truly powerful are those who serve larger purposes and can accomplish them. This kind of fulfillment requires “power with,” not “power over”; it requires love.

SONG

What You Do With What You've Got (Si Kahn)

You must know someone like him, he was tall and strong and lean,
Body like a greyhound, and a mind so sharp and keen.
But his heart just like a laurel, grew twisted on itself,
'Til almost everything he did brought pain to someone else.

Chorus:

It's not just what you're born with, it's what you choose to bear.
It's not how large your share is, but how much you can share.
It's not the fights you dream of, but those you really fought.
It's not just what you're given, but what you do with what you've got.

For what's the use of two strong legs, if you only run away?
What good is the finest voice, if you've nothing good to say?
What good are strength and muscles, if you only push and shove?
What's the use of two good ears, if you can't hear those you love?

Chorus

Between those who use their neighbors, and those who use a cane,
Between those in constant power and those in constant pain,
Between those who run to evil and those who cannot run,
Tell me, which are the cripples, and which ones touch the sun?

Chorus.

SERMON

What any of us does with what we've got can be measured, if you will, in personal power, which is one type of power I will explore this morning. Our own personal power is a reflection of the life force that is gathered within and focused by each of us in our own ways.

Si Kahn's poetry describes how that power can be applied to bring pain or touch the sun. He suggests what we all may have experienced, in ourselves or in others: that even if one's physical attributes are not obviously strong, that needn't detract from the personal power expressed through one's being. "It's not how large your share is, but how much you can share"—which points to a second kind of power, expressed *interpersonally*.

And James Luther Adams reminds us that "authentic power is determined by the ends it serves and the means it uses" to advance a love embodied by "power with," not "power over," which leads to a third kind of power I will consider, applied toward larger social and cultural change. Philanthropy, while essential, is not enough.

Understanding how power flows through and around our lives, internally and externally, is a key to fulfillment and to making contributions that matter. So today I continue my three-part sermon series

on Meaning Writ Large. And I use “theology” as an adaptable word for considering what may be of ultimate concern and foundational import.

Two weeks ago, I profiled the “Green Collar Theology” that I sense will undergird a rapid transformation of our energy use. And two weeks hence, on February 15, I will lift up what I call “Struggle Theology,” to see what holds us together on a path forward whenever things don’t go so smoothly or easily.

But today is about Power Theology, and I’m picking out a trio of angles on this many-faceted topic, looking for the supportive layers underneath its presence in our lives. I’ll consider interpersonal power in a few minutes and end up looking at power in larger groups. But I begin with personal power because that is really where everything human begins.

The entire story of our kind is full of individuals manifesting their own power, often toward good or evil, from Moses—who, it is said, found his calling and led his people out of bondage—to Hitler—who heard a different kind of call and led his people to slaughter millions of innocents. Both characters evidently had immense personal power.

We who inhabit the less historically notable moments of time are nonetheless also rich with personal power, to one degree or another. And how we apply it matters. It’s not just what we’re born with, it’s what we choose to bear.

But I realize that power is a complicated concept. So I want first to distinguish between power and authority, the latter being derived from some specific appointment or office—sometimes real and deserved, sometimes imagined or manufactured. Someone might rise to authority *because* of their personal power, but the personal power usually comes first.

Many of us Unitarian Universalists, it is said, have *issues* with authority, which may well be true. I have a mild affinity for that posture myself. But I am less interested here with authority, *per se*.

And I also distinguish power from a heightened sense of entitlement. Just because we think we *deserve* power does not automatically convey it to us, and those who would act as though they were entitled to more than their share are often duly derided. Entitlement would be an active abuse of personal power, and again, I am less interested in that here. I see authority and entitlement as add-ons that often cloud the truth of one’s own inherent and hopefully life-affirming power.

Authentic and positive personal power emerges from some centered place within us that knows where we rightly fit in, and how we are to move forward on our journey, and how we can offer our own unique contributions out of that centeredness.

We all can do this, potentially, and we rightly strive to increase this capacity for a personally powerful centeredness because it carries with it the fulfilling feeling of being in the zone, of clicking into the right gear, the right mode, doing the right thing to bring a sense of harmony and proportion.

For me, returning to the holy land of the Puget Sound was like that, on many levels. I just feel more centered when I'm grounded, literally, in this region. When we allow our deep intuition to connect us to a larger vision of life, we can see more clearly where we fit in and the part we are to play, which then further increases our centered, personal power.

Theists often perceive this intuitive process as knowing and following "God's will," and as a non-theist, I can usually translate that sentiment well enough (although there are limits).

I do believe the universe speaks to me and invites me deeper into its flow, if I attune myself to listen for and trust its ultimate harmony. But the ears to hear this music are within, which also means I must not crowd out those receptors with too much inner noise, and I must pay attention to catch the melodies of this sphere. I strive to be in ever-greater balance within the chorus of life, so I constantly retune my living voice, as I listen to all the other signs of life around me. I am in context with, not separate from a universal divinity.

Thus do I seek to marshal my personal power toward the Good, which now helps me move into my second angle of the morning, to consider power as it flows *interpersonally*, *among* people in, say, congregational relationship.

Another Unitarian Universalist thinker in this realm, with a lifetime in parish experience, is my colleague Robert Latham, now a semi-retired consultant writing about his insights, which can be provocatively helpful for congregations.

Latham is a firm believer in the school of thought that declares "Power Shared is Power Multiplied" [*Moving On from Church Folly Lane...* pg. 168]. This is a key to interpersonal dynamics, especially in contrast to those who would act as if there were a scarcity of power. When power shared is power multiplied, there is an unlimited, abundant amount of power to be created, without requiring any corresponding loss of power anywhere else.

In scarcity thinking, there is a finite amount of power to be divvied up and in order for any one of us to have more power it would have to be taken from someone else—an all too familiar scenario and attitude, which I suggest is outmoded, even if it's still a very active posture in our culture (and the world community).

In our time it really matters if we move out of a sense of scarcity or abundance around things like power, and love. If I hear the universe right, I believe we are called to increasingly embody an expansive posture that understands *life* shared as *life* multiplied.

It's not a new idea, it just has never gained traction the way it needs to now. Jesus modeled this abundance in providing loaves and fishes to the multitudes. He claimed there would be enough to go around, even though his skeptical disciples saw only a scarcity of food. They doubted, he believed, and the story that is remembered is one of abundance, even if the lesson of the story gets regularly shortchanged.

Wise teachers—and the universe—keep telling us that abundance is the path to follow, yet we

frequently insist on seeing only scarcity, which is often based in fear. Certainly we have to be realistic about diminishing physical and financial resources, but even there, we can approach such issues from a place of creatively abundant sharing, to find new value in new priorities, and appreciate the abundance of what is already here, nearby, rich without great expense or waste.

I'm not saying it's easy, necessarily, and our muscle tone in this exercise can be rather weak, but not only is it possible, it actually offers its own rewards. It's not how large our share is, but how much we can share.

One of Robert Latham's insights that stirs me is this: "The bottom line to power is that, as meaning-makers, we humans can create both the problem and the solution" [ibid, pg. 170]. I'm very drawn to the abundance of both-and statements like this, which, I like to say, inspire a "bothandian" posture.

We have the power to create *and* solve problems. It's bothandian! Sometimes we get caught up in the problems and forget that we also hold the power to creatively solve them. As I said two weeks ago about the impending transformation of our energy culture, we need some big ideas to emerge, and fast. But this means we have to loosen up our thinking, since, as Einstein reminded us, we cannot solve problems from the same mindset that created them. The same mind, perhaps, but not the same mindset. But we *can* solve them!

As meaning-makers, we are constantly empowered to seek creative solutions, which often come in unexpected moments, from unexpected sources. One of my foundational beliefs can be summed up in a simple, humbling phrase: "You never know!" You never know from what quadrant a bright idea will emerge. You also never know if some little thing you say or do might unintentionally trigger a much larger notion in someone nearby.

So potentially everything you do matters, because everything is interconnected anyway; we usually just can't see a big enough picture to know exactly how it matters. But you never know. There is an abundance of possibilities.

I would amend Latham's statement slightly to say that "*Together* we humans can create both the problem and the solution." And you never know how the universe is conspiring to give birth to an abundant solution, so you play your role to the fullest, apply your personal power toward the Good and then trust that something will happen.

I've learned a few things from Buddhism over the years, but perhaps the most demanding and profound teaching for me has been to let go of results, which does not mean passivity at all. It means doing what you're called to do with all the vigor and heart and intention you can muster, but at the same time, to release expectations about what *should* happen.

Because you never know, anyway, so spend more energy on suggestions than on conclusions, I say. Take your best shot, but be listening for other people doing the same. *Together*, we can come up with something greater than the sum of the parts.

This is one of the beauties of congregational life, to my mind. Unlike many work or other settings,

there is very little vertical power here; we are all peers in some significant ways. So any of us at any moment might provide the key to opening another important door, perhaps for the good of the whole, perhaps for the good of the person sitting or standing next to us. You never know. But I believe it happens, This is my faith.

Someone will mention, perhaps even timidly, an idea or impression or experience of theirs. Someone else within earshot will get sparked by this into their own train of thought and add a new angle, whether in that moment or later. That will then morph into another conversation that adds another dimension, in turn triggering a further development by someone else down the line who is, wha'd'ya know, in position to effect an important change.

The original proposer was essential to this change, but may never know what eventuated. And it's not a linear process, of course, proceeding neatly from A to B to C, etc. No, these sparks fly all the time in all directions at once, wherever two or more are gathered. Ask almost any career educator; they know how this works big time. How many of you are educators of one sort or another? You never know, right, which piece of which teaching on which day is going to inspire which student into which lifetime of meaningful pursuit?

It happens in all kinds of fields and settings, as long as we keep offering and listening. Sometimes we might hear later from someone how one particular thing we said or did way back when made a difference, and at first we are surprised by this knowledge, but soon we realize it is the way of life—interconnected life, which thrives on the sparks we provide each other all the time, as long as we keep coming together, sharing and listening, offering and experimenting.

I think the abundant interpersonal power generated by this kind of community, modeled by us here locally, together, is what can make a difference in wider cultures. And let me go now to that third level to show how.

I'm again encouraged by an insight articulated by Robert Latham, who describes an important power principle this way: "Social symptoms are only changed by changing the social heart that produces them" [ibid, pg. 177].

In other words, if we wish to apply ourselves—our personal and interpersonal power—toward social change, we must pay attention to the symptoms of distress, yes, and treat the real needs there, of course. But real systemic change will only happen when what he calls the "social heart" is affected. For it is truly from our hearts that we act; our hearts dictate our behavior.

And groups of people naturally align their hearts in collective social behaviors. This may be a subconscious process, and people may even wish that it were otherwise, but the social heart nonetheless carries the day, for better or for worse—*until it is transformed*.

I think, for instance of drunk driving, which, when I was coming of age, was an accepted sadness that I as a new driver should take note of, but shouldn't really expect to change. "Oh, well, what can we do? Some people are just going to drive drunk. We'll just have to mandate seat belts."

Another example would be the lovely expression, “Boys will be boys,” often casually tossed out to excuse violent male misbehavior. Both these conditions reflected the contemporary social heart, which allowed such values to exist and dominate.

And both conditions have since been decidedly altered by active campaigns to change that social heart. The social permission for such destructive behavior has been intentionally removed, so that it—and acceptance of it—are now against the norm, at least. People will always help and support the still far too many individuals and families affected by drunk driving and male violence, but through concerted efforts, like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, they also have intentionally combined their power to change the social heart, which improves the odds that there will be less tragedy from such behavior.

Power is frequently defined as the ability to exercise influence. Latham sees power as “increments of attention” [ibid, pg. 168]. In the arena of large scale social change, the ability to exercise influence is what makes a difference, and that happens in many creative ways. One can judge effectiveness or readiness to change by noticing the “increments of attention” that any issue might receive.

Look, for instance, at the Alternative Gifts Program of this congregation, now well established in this region. The increasing “increments of attention” it now gets portray a power to exercise influence, in this case toward changing the social heart away from materialism, in favor of supporting groups doing the important work of social improvement.

Like many of you, Barbara and I have been participating in this program, wherever we’ve been, for some years now, and I’ve heard from my wider family that their own attitudes (and hearts) have been at least mildly transformed by our steady Alternative Gift-giving.

What congregations often call “social action,” Robert Latham says, is the vital first step of addressing pain caused by destructive conditions and behaviors, and raising awareness of the need for changing those conditions. But taking the second step, to help effect that change, requires transformation of the social heart that has enabled the conditions [ibid, pg. 178]. This is a wholly different business than treating symptoms, important as that is, too.

And one last insight from Latham suggests a congregational path in this direction. Appreciating our various diversities is a glowing attribute of UU settings, he notes, but it tends to dissipate any collective power that could be generated toward exercising influence. Our appreciation for diversity is a strength *and* it can also minimize or even neutralize our ability to influence issues of the day.

Rather, he says, “The greatest power to create social change derives from a common commitment to a common focus” [ibid, pg. 167]. “The wise congregation does not... become enamored of one over the other (—diversity OR commonality—but) uses each to strengthen the other toward a wholeness that further enhances its capacity to create personal and social transformation” [ibid, pg. 168].

Yes, it’s bothandian! We can *both* honor diversity *and* build a strong common focus. Again, it’s not necessarily easy, but worth the effort, together.

We often commit to groups, like Cedars, because we know our individual desires—to contribute more to the solutions of our time than to the problems—can be magnified in community. Together, we can encourage powerfully positive change on a large scale by touching the social heart with innovative influence, created at any moment by any combination of our personal and interpersonal powers that might lead to a big new idea, or to the right push. You never know.

Forty years ago James Luther Adams noted the difference between “power over” and “power with” and it continues to be a relevant, guiding distinction. I sense that the social heart which condones “power over” *is* being transformed, inexorably, toward the kind of “power with” that will guide us forward in greater peace and prosperity. And I sense that our UU theology can be an important guiding resource in this movement forward.

Adrienne Rich, in her larger poem, “Natural Resources” [in *The Fact of a Doorframe*, 2002], includes a very influential passage:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.*

We may indeed feel like we, alone, have no extraordinary power, but the call to reconstitute the world has never been louder, as has the call to combine what powers we *do* have, to be about the business of changing the social heart, changing our own hearts. It’s not how *large* our share is, but how *much* we can share. It’s not just what we’re given, but what we do with what we’ve got.

Many stones can form an arch, and drops of water turn a mill, but singly none. Together, step by step, heart by heart, the longest march can be won.

Such a reminder is expressed in Hymn #157, using words from the Preamble to the Constitution of the United Mine Workers of America. Let us sing together:

SONG Step by step the longest march can be won, can be won.
Many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none.
And together what we will can be accomplished still.
Many drops can turn a mill, singly none, singly none.

CLOSING WORDS

Gathered here this morning, in the mystery and the power,
Our one strong body has again drawn near to the spirit of Cedars.
“And in unity, what we will can be accomplished still.”
Let your next steps be ones of abundance, centered in the affection
that swirls outward from this moment, this space, this people.
Go in peace, BE peace, return in love multiplied.
Blessings on your path.

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