

THE DUTY TO BE UNHOLY AND UNWISE
Convocation Address to the 2006 Graduating Class
of Meadville Lombard Theological School

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A funny thing happened to President Bush on his way to the Canandaigua Academy, my high school. He was there to tout the new Medicare drug benefit program to an audience of mostly seniors, including my 94-year-old mother. The “warm up act” to entertain the guests while waiting for the president was a group of students presenting songs from Meredith Wilson’s Music Man. And what did these future leaders sing as the president arrived? “We got trouble, we got trouble, right here in River City.” The irony was exquisite.

We’ve got trouble right here in River City – or Chicago – or wherever members of the Meadville Lombard class of 2006 may serve. As one wag said of our troubled times: “The next 20 years will be the hardest. They always have been.”

As I look at the issues which concern us, I think of the army scout who gave this optimistic assessment to his commanding officer after one foray into enemy territory: “There’s good news, Sir. We can attack on any front. We’re surrounded.” And so it seems.

That will not be news to you who graduate this day. We of the liberal religious tradition are living in a very conservative time politically. Politics – presumably “the art of the possible” – has become more ideological and dogmatic. Issues which many of us thought were settled are again in play, resurrected by a resurgent reactionary conservatism aptly described by a Supreme Court justice who facetiously said, “This court may be in error, but it is never in doubt.”

We face a religious juggernaut in the cultural and political dominance of the religious right. Under the video screen at a recent evangelical convention which President Bush addressed were the words: “What can 30 million evangelicals do? Anything they want.” The religious right has what Mark Twain called “the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces.” I doubt our upcoming General Assembly will be so confident. Orthodox religion has seldom wanted to say “on the other hand.”

By contrast, the very genius of liberal religion is to be able to speak those four fateful words – “on the other hand.” We believe in the duty to be unholy and unwise – not to think ourselves more holy than we ought, nor to think ourselves more wise than we are. We could almost say we pride ourselves in our theological humility. But have we gone too far in our commitment to be unholy and unwise; are we too humble in our religious claims?

A Garry Trudeau Doonesbury cartoon captures this issue as the class of 2006 sets sail in a tsunami of conservatism. Mark, the 60’s liberal, is in the radio studio watching TV. “Fox News: We report, you decide.” He responds, “That has to be the most cynical slogan in the history of journalism.” His fellow talk-show host, Harvey the conservative, chimes in: “Drives you crazy, doesn’t it? You know why? Because you liberals are hung up on fairness! You actually try to respect all points of view! But conservatives feel no need whatsoever to consider other views. We know we’re right, so why bother? Because we have no tradition of tolerance, we’re unencumbered by doubt! So we roll you guys every time.” Mark ponders as Harvey pauses, and finally says, “Actually you make a good point....” To which Harvey grins and says, “See! Only a loser would admit that!”ⁱⁱ

A caricature, to be sure - some of my best friends are conservatives – political and religious - but it does cause one to reflect. As we here array ourselves for encounters with the religious right, I think there is a kernel of truth here. Are religious liberals too tolerant, too open, too nice, too wishy washy? Do we expose our children to other faiths so generously, they do not understand their own and cannot articulate its values? Are we so open to other views, so cautious in our fear of being dogmatic, so enamored of the ambiguity and ambivalence in religious and political life that we are in fact steam-rollered by those who claim absolute certainty in religion – because the Bible tells them so – or in politics - because Karl Rove tells them so? In its root meaning liberalism means openness, humility, generosity of spirit, neighborliness, loving compassion toward the other, the stranger, even the enemy. Are these values dysfunctional in the hardball religion and politics of 21st century life?

Our Unitarian Universalist commitment to freedom of conscience means I cannot speak for you, nor you for me. Preachers preach from a free pulpit; parishioners listen from a free pew – and how we cherish both. Religious educators often bend over backwards not to indoctrinate students. But how can we do this and still have a next generation? How are we to compete with groups committed to a religious triumphalism without violating our belief in truth known – or to be known? How are we to become a force in shaping our nation’s future without violating the individual conscience or our covenant of theological pluralism?

The nation abounds with gurus and groups presuming to possess the road map for religious living – a kind of theological triple A. This excerpt from a young Christian fundamentalist in the San Francisco bay area illustrates the point:

"Everything is questioning and searching. No answers, no security, no stable pattern. It is actually a way of going insane. A Christian is just the reverse. He doesn't have to decide what is right or wrong. He just has to decide to do right or wrong. He already knows. That is the worst thing to do to a man - make him decide everything for himself, because he can't. It is a satanic trap, an ego thing, wanting to be independent when you can't be. Our generation was funny. We grew up

expecting to be happy, but in a way we grew up without hope. There's a kind of desperation we have, because there is really no future and we know that now. But in the Lord there is a future, and we know it is coming.”ⁱⁱ

What can we say with such clarity and confidence? We may smile indulgently, frown worriedly, or utter a superior sigh, but this is the way increasing numbers of young people, including some raised in our church schools, feel. They are willing to renounce choice for security; they are willing to sacrifice the search for the answer. They seek the ethical surety of a cause to which they may give absolute allegiance.

W.B. Yeats succinctly sums up our predicament in two lines from his poem “The Second Coming”:

"The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."ⁱⁱⁱ

We of the liberal household of faith have been doing battle with that kind of religion for at least four centuries. We cherish doubt as a religious virtue, the handmaiden of faith. We applaud Paul Tillich's words: "The passion for truth in youth is silenced by answers which have the weight of undisputed authority, be it that of the mother or father or an old friend, or a gang or the representatives of the social pattern. Don't give in too quickly to those who want to alleviate your anxiety about truth. Don't be seduced into a truth which is not really your own . . . even if the seducer is your church."^{iv} Therefore, listen critically to every word from this pulpit. Punctuate them, not with "thus saith the lord," but with "thus pronounceth this preacher this day."

We celebrate the right to change our minds, freedom of conscience, autonomy in religion. And yet there is an uneasiness among us, perhaps a kind of spiritual jealousy at the zeal of those who claim to have found the truth. There is among us a kind of theological envy at the fervent commitment the true believers of this world can command.

Take the struggle over Intelligent Design and Evolution – ID is clearly a dressed-up attempt to insert biblical creationism into the public school curriculum to supplement or supplant the teaching of evolution. ID is a kind of non-scientific dogmatism – yet as a religious liberal I confess that I don't want the religion of scientism either – the idea that science has all the answers to all the important questions. That would narrow my view. I admit to more than a twinge of mysticism as I explore what evolution has wrought. Even as I visited the Darwin Exhibit in the Museum of Natural History in New York recently, I had to acknowledge how much we do not yet know about evolution. I still wrestle with the question: was the cosmos an accident? I think so, and yet. . . . What will my somewhat nuanced view avail me in struggles over public school science curricula?

Nothing saddens me more than the struggle over reproductive freedom in our nation – particularly South Dakota's virtual ban on abortion and the view of the Republican gubernatorial candidate in Ohio who opposes abortion even if the woman's life is in jeopardy. These politicians have a laser-like focus on ending abortion – perhaps even contraception. Yet I acknowledge a moral ambivalence toward abortion. I emphatically support reproductive freedom, yet I can't say

definitively when human life begins. I agonize with women who make this tough decision. But those across the street waving those “abortion is murder!” signs are absolutely sure they are right! My pro-life “friend” Mary keeps reminding me I will roast in hell. Will my honest struggle with the ethics of abortion render me a weak advocate as I debate those who have no such moral qualms?

Our plight in liberal religion is this: having rejected a faith based on creed or dogma and absolute certainty, we often tend to retreat into a relativism in which there are no strong faith commitments. Let me illustrate this equivocation:

It seems a Unitarian Universalist minister was negotiating between two strong theological factions in the church who were at odds. To the one group, after listening to their presentation, he said, "You're right, you're absolutely right." To the opposite group he said, "You're right, you're absolutely right." When the minister's partner noted this paltry response, the minister replied: "You're right, you're absolutely right."

We rightly condemn dogma as a dead truth embalmed for posterity. We affirm James Thurber's wisdom, “It is better to ask some of the questions than to know all of the answers.” Still, we are troubled. Critique is a necessary but not sufficient condition for religion. We can analyze religion to death. But it is impossible to live with all questions and no answers.

When people have come to me in the depths of their despair, when marriages are falling apart, when children are too much with them and for them, when people find themselves intolerably lonely, when life has no meaning, when activists despair as to the worthwhile ness of their struggle, they are not interested in critiques of orthodox theology - they seek an affirmative faith to sustain them. Before the chilling cosmic silence, before the corruptions of culture, before the torn threads of personal life, there is the need for something in which we can have faith.

They, we, are not so much interested in intellectual propositions in which to believe, as in discerning those meanings, values and convictions in which to have faith. Belief is an intellectual function. Faith is a function of the will. As L. P. Jacks provocatively puts it: "Faith is not belief in spite of the evidence but adventure in scorn of the consequences."^{vi}

Faith, then, is not mere assent to theological ideas; it is commitment to religious values. The question of faith really is not “Can I believe in God” but “To what can I commit my life?” I would define theological doubt, then, in intellectual terms - we doubt the biblical story of creation as historical. Religious doubt is more profound – religious doubt is cynicism about the meaning of the life adventure itself - whether it is worth doing.

Unitarian Universalists need to exhibit what poet John Ciardi called “the courage of our confusions.” I believe it is possible to create in our lives that delicate balance between faith and doubt that satisfies both our need for discernment and our need for commitment. Doubt is a religious value that enables us to sharpen our spiritual perceptions and strengthen our commitment. It is possible to live meaningfully with a great many theological doubts. There is a sense in which we are all agnostics. Let us at least be committed agnostics – agnostics with a cause.

Science helps us here with the concept of heuristics, a belief acted upon even without perfect knowledge it is right. We don't know if the sun will rise tomorrow or if we will be alive tomorrow, but it is a good hypothesis to proceed upon. The mature religious person knows we are compelled to build our lives on probabilities. Heuristics permits us to be fully committed to the best we know today, but at the same time knowing that tomorrow may find us wrong. Ours is a self-correcting faith.

We don't know why there is something rather than nothing. We don't really know how our cosmos was created much less why or even if that is a proper thought category; we don't really know if there is meaning in life. We don't really know if commitment to a cause transcending the self is worthwhile; we don't really know if a Beloved Community of earth is possible.

Yet, we are, or ought to be, willing to take the risk, to make the wager, that this cosmic creativity that spawned us is essentially good; that whatever their source, we stand in awe before celestial powers; that we can create meaning out of the meaninglessness of our lives; that this meaning is enhanced when we spend our lives for that which outlasts them.

Doubts plague us; we have a duty to be unholy and unwise – to interrogate life as to its worthwhileness, to question ourselves and our religious commitments, to test our faith in the workshop of doubt. We define and refine our religious commitments in the laboratory of living, we do this with an optimistic bias that in the final analysis, we will find life worth the living. Our task as religious leaders is to live that faith in such a way that it will be contagious.

Two years ago my friend Father Daniel Berrigan came to the Cornell University campus for a weekend celebrating peace and justice-making. I worked with Dan three decades ago when he was on the staff of Cornell United Religious Work and I was minister at the Ithaca Unitarian Church. Dan was asked, "Don't you despair at the moral state of the world?" Dan's answer was typically soft, brief and profound: "Despair is a luxury beyond my means." Dan suggested that the means inheres in the ends, there is meaning in the very struggle for peace and justice.

Do religious liberals have that kind of faith in the future? Do we have that kind of sustaining spiritual power? Do we have the courage to risk ourselves in uncertainty? Do we have the faith to plant a tree today knowing we will die tomorrow? Do we have the will to withstand anything that can happen to us in the universe? Do we really believe in the authority of truth known - or to be known? Do we have a centerstance of faith within the circumstance of doubt? Do we have the energy to transcend our often too casual commitment to our faith? My hope for you is that in seeking to be unholy and unwise you will find a religion that matters and a wisdom that counts.

ⁱ *Doonesbury*, 7/13/03.

ⁱⁱ Source unknown.

ⁱⁱⁱ W. H. Auden, "The Second Coming."

^{iv} Paul Tillich. *The New Being*, pp. 65-67.

^v James Thurber, source unknown.

^{vi} L. P. Jacks, source unknown.