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“Who is Today’s Bob Dylan?”

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As UUs, we draw upon “the words and deeds of prophetic people” as a source of strength, wisdom, and direction. This is one of the aspects of Unitarian Universalism I appreciate the most. With no disrespect to sacred texts, in my own experience on this earth the voices that have moved me most powerfully have not been ancient, they haven’t even been old, rather they have been voices of my own time. And most commonly, they have been voices accompanied by music.

At their best – think of Bob Dylan or Pete Seeger or Bob Marley – prophetic musical voices show us both “the world as it is” and “the world as it should be.” They awaken compassion, model courage and love and call us to action, just as sacred texts can do. And, as with a liturgical prayer or a verse from the bible, we sing or listen to these songs day after day and year on year, until they come to live somewhere deep in our bones and powerfully shape our spiritual lives.

But I am speaking for myself here, for my time, and my demographic. On Tuesday night, I emailed my children to ask “Who is your Bob Dylan?”

First to respond was my daughter Kate:

A prophetic voice comes to me in the form of Ed Sheeran. I sometimes shrink away from proclaiming my deep and heartfelt adoration for him because he is so overwhelming popular and I need to maintain my image as a cool, hip 20 year old. But the truth is that Ed Sheeran is one of the great loves of my life. I could write an essay about why I find his music so inspiring, but to be concise: the dude can write a love song. His lyrics are personal, intimate and specific, for example, “When your eyes turn from green to gray in the winter I’ll hold you in a cold place, and you should never cut your hair, cause I love the way you flick it off your shoulder.” The love he writes about feels so real, and so powerful. To some, his music may seem sappy, and maybe it is, but it inspires me to see and feel in others what I think of as *that Ed Sheeran level of love*. And it’s bigger than romantic love. One of his newer lyrics that I think is all too appropriate right now is, “Love could change the world in a moment, but what do I know?” Listening to Ed Sheeran motivates me to go out and make that change because – well - he just makes you want to love.

And from Jack, age 26:

I've recently been spending a lot of time listening to the music John Lennon and Yoko Ono made together, but if you are asking about new voices, I am a huge fan of The Avett Brothers. When we talk about speaking truth to power today, two structures we need to confront that Bob Dylan was not staring down in the 60s and 70s are social media and celebrity culture. I truly think these powerful forces not only distract us, but control us by pushing us to focus on our image of ourselves, which is not the same thing as really understanding who we are – and without knowing that we can neither see the world clearly or act meaningfully to change it. The Avett Brothers are fearless in making their true selves an open book, digging in courageously to express authentic human struggles and human challenges. Their music calls you to do the same, it unpeels you from the inside out. And every time you hear and respond to their music it challenges you to claim your own power by understanding what it means to be YOU. And – bonus – they are great musicians!

Nick, age 23:

After growing up in this church I still can't quote much from the Bible, but I can say this: the most important guiding principle in my development has been the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

As I moved out into the world and away from the comfort of my home and this community, I must admit that I stopped going to church, but I began to find resonance between the core principles of Unitarian Universalism that I had internalized in my youth and the thoughts and beliefs I found expressed in secular, popular music. In the first year after high school, while serving as a City Year Corps Member, I would enjoy a daily sermon during my morning bus ride across Los Angeles, courtesy of the incisive and revolutionary Kendrick Lamar. Here's the thing: honoring the inherent worth and dignity of all people isn't that hard to do within the comfort of familiar company. The true challenge lies in the daily labor of enacting that moral principle through lived experience... relentlessly. In order to do this, one must do what one can to understand a diverse set of experiences and perspectives and see the hidden biases that are embedded within our own particular experience and world view. Empathy is not possible without understanding and, for me, Kendrick Lamar opened windows into experiences I could never live on my own yet which were a daily reality for many of the students I worked with. By vividly depicting the world as it is, artists like Kendrick Lamar have forced me to critically reflect upon my own choices and

actions within this imperfect world and to really sit with the disparity between stated values (like the inherent worth and dignity of all people), the imperfect society in which I exist, and the value-driven life that I hope to lead.

So there you go. Three contemporary prophetic voices that teach about the power of love, awaken empathy, reveal truth, and offer insights into others and into the self. A daily sermon, delivered via ear buds, on the world as it is and the world as it should be. Spotify play lists available upon request.

“With No Extraordinary Power’: The Second Source”

The Rev. Heather Janules

The first time I went to Budapest, I was fascinated to hear about its existence. It was housed in a prominent church on the Pest side of the city but my traveling companions and I didn’t have time to see it before we left for Romania.

The second time I went to Budapest, I could not see it as it had been removed from public viewing for restoration. But, this summer, when Cynthia, Mary and I toured Budapest as part of our trip to Transylvania, I finally saw it – the mummified hand of Saint Istvan.

Saint Istvan or King Stephen was the first king of Hungary, ruling from the years 1000-1038. After his death, his body was disinterred and – because his right hand was alleged to possess miraculous properties – it was separated from his body. The hand was housed in myriad locations by different entities over the years, even once purchased by a queen from an order of Dominican friars as a gift to her Hungarian subjects. Now it is stored in St. Stephen’s Basilica, removed each August 20<sup>th</sup> as part of a ceremony called the Holy Right Hand procession.<sup>1</sup>

I did not actually see the right hand; the bejeweled case housing the hand is so ostentatious the hand is hard to make out amid the gold and colored stones. But there is a print-out of an x-ray, posted on a nearby bulletin board, likely hanging there since the days when Communists were in power. The x-ray reveals what appears to be a very human hand behind the glass, surrounded by treasure.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://hungarianspectrum.wordpress.com/2013/08/20/the-holy-right-hand-of-st-stephen-king-of-hungary/>

My desire to view Saint Istvan's hand did not come from a belief that it has the power to alter laws of science and manifest miracles. The attraction was experiencing the novelty of being one of many people investing time and money to view – or attempting to view - a deified body part.

My best self considers the veneration of King Stephen's hand with a curiosity about religious difference. My more immature self is amused, imagining what it would be like if thousands of Boston tourists paid money to visit the Arlington Street Church so they could view William Ellery Channing's right ear lobe under glass. My immature amusement is grounded in my theological beliefs: Mummified hands do not manifest miracles, no matter from whom they are removed. They just are just preserved body parts of deceased human beings.

But human beings, when they are alive, do make miracles. As singular and collective lights in a world often devoid of hope, people change the reality we share. Not through magic but, in Adrienne Rich's words, "with no extraordinary power." With nothing but human courage and "the flame of the human spirit touched into being by the mystery of life." "Age after age," through words and deeds, people "confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love." Despite the obstacles, the sacrifices, the dangers and sometimes the very real risk of physical death, "nevertheless the prophetic among us persist" in pursuit of an alternative vision of the world we live in.

The reality of these human tendencies – to both create and participate in "powers and structures of evil" *and* to confront these systems with "justice, compassion and love" – is integral to religion. Community organizers remind us that there is "the world as it is" and those who live a life of the spirit follow a call to create "the world as it should be." And a specific tradition of the spirit, Unitarian Universalism, invites us to behold the actions and spoken truths of those who work towards that greater vision as nothing short of sacraments.

For some faiths draw inspiration and authority from scripture, some from tradition. Unitarian Universalism also draws inspiration and authority from holy writings and history but, collectively, from Six Sources. This year, in an occasional sermon series, we will reflect on these Sources together. In this month centered on "courage," we begin by considering the Second Source, what it means to find

spiritual guidance through “prophetic words and deeds of people who confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.”

Yesterday, I was one of four people who toured downtown Boston, visiting sites related to Universalist and Unitarian history. For those who are new to Unitarian Universalism, you should know that as Salt Lake City is to Mormonism, Boston is to Unitarian Universalism. One cannot travel far without passing a church, a statue or other monument that has ties to what was once two separate faiths, now joined together in this liberal religious tradition.

We began the tour at the Arlington Street Church, the place where I first discovered Unitarian Universalism. This congregation was once served by the renowned minister William Ellery Channing. Indeed, when we visited what is affectionately called “ASC,” there was no preserved earlobe on display, only his statue across the street, eternally looking at the church’s front door with great solemnity. The last few times I saw Channing’s statue, it was first adorned with a feather boa for Boston Pride and then a bright pink “kitty” hat for the Women’s March, a far cry from a deified body part encased in gold.

Despite our contemporary playfulness with William Ellery Channing’s statue, we remember Channing, among many things, for his significant role in the identification of “the words and deeds of prophetic people” as a source of spiritual inspiration. The Boston area is so important to Unitarian Universalist history as it was the location of a theological rift within the Christianity brought to what is now the United States by the Puritans. This rift led to not just an alternative interpretation of Jesus’ Gospel but an entirely new American faith tradition.

Congregations began to split over understanding the nature of Jesus of Nazareth, with some upholding the biblical miracles as truth and Jesus as a salvific messiah and others believing that the bible should be read with a critical mind and understanding Jesus as a prophetic human being. The more orthodox sometimes referred to those who rejected the miracles and affirmed the humanity of Jesus with a slur, calling them “Unitarians.”

In 1819, Channing – one of the proponents of the liberal interpretation of Jesus and his Gospel – preached a sermon on the occasion of the ordination of Jared Sparks in Baltimore. Titled “Unitarian Christianity,” Channing used this moment to strategically articulate a theological platform for the emerging Unitarian movement within New England Christianity.

Illustrating the personhood of Jesus and challenging the idea of the trinity, Channing observes:

It is a great excellence of the doctrine of God's unity, that it offers to us ONE OBJECT of supreme homage, adoration, and love... True piety, when directed to an undivided Deity, has a chasteness, a singleness, most favorable to religious awe and love...

He later affirms that

the doctrine of the Trinity injures devotion, not only by joining to the Father other objects of worship, but by taking from the Father the supreme affection, which is his due, and transferring it to the Son. This is a most important view. That Jesus Christ, if exalted into the infinite Divinity, should be more interesting than the Father, is precisely what might be expected ...from the principles of human nature. Men want an object of worship like themselves, and the great secret of idolatry lies in this propensity. A God, clothed in our form, and feeling our wants and sorrows, speaks to our weak nature more strongly, than a Father in heaven, a pure spirit, invisible and unapproachable, save by the reflecting and purified mind.”<sup>2</sup>

When I am asked about the role of Jesus within Unitarianism, I choose a more succinct explanation and summarize Channing’s words in this way: “We do not *worship* Jesus but seek to practice the faith of Jesus – serving the poor, comforting the sick and challenging the power of Empire – reflecting the will of a loving God.”

Channing’s sermon was about ninety minutes long and, as this was in the days before microphones, very few people actually heard it. But it was published and distributed widely, receiving tremendous praise by progressive Christians and

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.transcendentalists.com/unitarian\\_christianity.htm](http://www.transcendentalists.com/unitarian_christianity.htm)

named as heresy by the orthodox. This galvanized those who identified with the liberal perspective to create a distinct theological tradition, Unitarianism.

In approximately the same year, Thomas Jefferson pursued a more devotional path, creating a volume titled “The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth.” In a letter to John Adams, Jefferson names his motivation for creating this alternative bible. He writes that

In extracting the pure principles which [Jesus] taught, we should have to strip off the artificial vestments in which they have been muffled by priests, who have travestied them into various forms, as instruments of riches and power to themselves...We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus...There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson goes on to describe his process, literally cutting a New Testament in pieces and pasting it together to create a new Gospel, devoid of all miracle stories, speaking of “no extraordinary power.”

In the Jefferson Bible, there is no Easter morning; the account of Jesus’ crucifixion ends with his physical death. Thus, the story of Jesus becomes like the stories of so many throughout history who responded to a brutal world with love, who refused to be complicit with the workings of oppression and who risk losing their physical lives through violence. In this way, we don’t compare prophets like Joan of Arc, Martin Luther King, Ghandi and Malala Yousefzai to Jesus but can see a bright thread through all these human lives that change the world for the better. None of them, including Jesus, have extraordinary power to heal people’s suffering, besides their own courage and willingness to sacrifice safety and comfort for what they understand to be undeniable truth.

Whereas history recalls Thomas Jefferson as a profound defender of human liberty and, at the same time, an unrepentant owner of human beings, perhaps he is not the best example of one who draws from “words and deeds of prophetic people” to navigate moral decisions. But Jefferson, like Channing, reminds us of human fallibility and possibility, our possibility ever deficient in comparison to the

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson\\_Bible](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Bible)

divine but ever animated by “the flame of the human spirit touched into being by the mystery of life.”

It is long after 1819. Today, in 2017, our on-line feeds are full of discussion about the American flag, the national anthem and what it means to “pledge allegiance” to these symbols. The “deed” of a football player, Colin Kaepernick, refusing to rise for the anthem in protest of our nation’s treatment of people-of-color is generating great controversy about respect for the country and those who serve in its military and our collective failure – like Jefferson himself – to reconcile our values of equality with the impact of slavery.

In this moment, it is not a right hand but the knee Kaepernick kneels upon during the anthem that confronts the reality we live in. Besides being – by some accounts – a mediocre football player with a national spotlight, he has “no extraordinary power.” By “taking a knee” before the flag, Kaepernick does not dismantle institutionalized racism but the conversation sparked by his deed invites us as a nation to pay attention to the gulf between “the world as it is” and “the world as it should be.” And, with this attention, there is potential for the seeds of “justice, compassion and the transforming power of love” to grow.

And today – literally today – there will be a ceremony rededicating the grave of William Ellery Channing at Mount Auburn Cemetery. With a headstone degraded by the elements and years of neglect, those who remember Channing and his ministry raised the resources to bring the marker of his mortal body back to a dignified state.

While I was not one of the thoughtful contributors to this effort, I imagine that those who gave to renew Channing’s headstone did so not because the remains beneath inspired veneration but because Channing’s life and ministry continue through his legacy. Channing’s supporters remember his “words and deeds” that illustrate a Christian gospel devoid of “extraordinary power” but available to all of us who draw from simple human courage to change the world.

There is no Holy Right Hand procession for Channing but there are those who remember his very human hand that, during the abolition movement, penned the words, “He who cannot see a brother, a child of God, a man possessing all the rights of humanity, under a skin darker than his own, wants the vision of a



Christian...To look unmoved on the degradation and wrongs of a fellow-creature, because burned by a fiercer sun, proves us strangers to justice and love, in those universal forms which characterize Christianity.”

And there are those who remember fellow Unitarian iconoclast Theodore Parker who used his very human right hand to place a loaded gun on his desk as he wrote his sermons, lest he need to protect the members of his congregation who were fugitive slaves.<sup>4</sup>

And, as yesterday’s history tour reminds us, we remember Dorothea Dix for her prophetic words before people in power in defense of the mentally ill and incarcerated.

And, as Carol reminds us in her reflection, we remember and celebrate the poets and prophets of today whose words help a new generation understand the world more clearly, inviting us to speak and act more courageously.

“The words and deeds of prophetic people” transcend Unitarian Universalism and all others who live the life of the spirit. The source of our simple powers of human courage even transcends belief in God as the Humanist movement, the Fifth Source, reminds us. However “the flame of the human spirit” comes to us, it burns throughout the ages. It has the energy to animate us into brave speech and courageous action. It gives us the energy to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love.”

May we feel this power, may we tend this flame, within our own souls and within this world as it is. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.danielharper.org/story42.htm>