

“Five Smooth Stones”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Reading “Lament for a Wavering Viewpoint” by Phyllis McGinley

I want to be a Tory
And with the Tories stand,
Elect and bound for glory
With a proud, congenial band.
Or in the Leftist hallways
I gladly would abide,
But from my youth I always
Could see the Other Side.

How comfortable to rest with
The safe and armoured folk
Congenitally blessed with
Opinions stout as oak.
Assured that every question
One single answer hath,
They keep a good digestion
And whistle in their bath.

But all my views are plastic,
With neither form nor pride
They stretch like new elastic
Around the Other Side;
And I grow lean and haggard
With searching out the taint
Of hero in the Blackguard
Of Villain in the Saint.

Ah, snug lie those that slumber
Beneath Conviction’s roof
Their floors are sturdy lumber,
Their windows weatherproof.
But I sleep cold forever
And cold sleep all my kind,
Born nakedly to shiver
In the draft of an open mind.

Sermon: “Five Smooth Stones”

The scene was tense.
There were armies gathered all around.
Philistines on one side, Israelites on the other.

Goliath, who towered head and shoulders above the rest,
was itching for a fight—and had been, for forty long days.

He had been trash talking non-stop,
challenging just one Israelite soldier to step forward and take him on.

On that fateful day, David, a young shepherd
had arrived with food for his brothers,
who were serving in King Saul’s army.

David overheard the giant’s challenge,
and felt, with a wave of confidence, that he was up to the task.

He was the only person convinced of this, though.
He was young and scrawny, and had no weapons of his own.

Still, Saul was impressed by his boldness,
even if it was hard to tell if it were the stuff of bravery or bravado.

So the king suited him up with armour,
placing a helmet on his head and a mighty sword into his hands.

With a single step, though, David knew this wasn’t going to work.
So he cast off the heavy armour,
setting down the shield and helmet and sword.

And, then the Hebrew scriptures say that he “took his staff in his hand,
and chose five smooth stones from the brook
and put them in his shepherd’s bag.”¹

With his sling in his hand, he drew near to the Philistine.

Goliath couldn’t believe this scraggy boy,
with only peach-fuzz on his chin,
was the “soldier” sent forth by the Israelites.

¹ 1 Samuel 17:40.

There was more trash-talking at this point,
with David giving back to Goliath as good as he got.

Each talked about serving the other up on a platter,
about making the other food for the buzzards and the field mice.

When Goliath had enough of this,
he charged toward David, who then ran directly toward him.

David then pulled out a stone, placed it in his sling,
and with one shot to the forehead
brought Goliath to his knees and his death.

It's a story we've all likely known most of our lives—
the compelling tale of the ultimate underdog
taking on an outsized enemy and winning the day for his people.
An act of bravery that would over time
prepare the way for David to take the throne himself.

This, frankly, isn't an easy story for a pacifist-leaning lefty like me.

But it's a story to remember if today's sermon is to have context,
if it is to hold deeper meaning.

Because, today, I want to tell you about our five smooth stones,
“the five smooth stones” of liberal religion.

These stones are actually concepts developed by the minister, teacher,
and brilliant Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams
to describe the bedrock values that undergird our beliefs
and support our principles as religious liberals.

Now many of you might recall that I've talked about Adams before,
or JLA, as many of us call him.

I mentioned him a few weeks ago when I spoke about evil.

He's the minister that went to Germany
in the middle of the 1930s to study the rise of Nazism.

With a new spiffy camera in hand,

he made short films, documenting the changes taking place in German society, and the tragic failure of the German churches to mount a real and effective resistance.

What he witnessed shook him to his core.

And it's important to know this part of his story to better understand the very real giants JLA believed must be brought down.

Adams saw a vital role for religious liberals to play.

But, religious liberals—Unitarians for short—have never quite had the full-range of armour that most religions rely on.

As Jessica Rodela, the minister in Waterloo, puts it:

Adams compared [us] to David.
We've removed many of the trappings of religion,
left conventional wisdom behind,
and stand against the giant messages of the culture
about consumerism and waste,
violence and fear, oppression and war,
and here we stand
armed only with 5 smooth stones in our theological pocket.²

Still, Adams argued that what we have is more than enough to take on the giants of this world.

He believed that stones of love, and commitment, and hope could be used not as weapons, but as the building blocks for a more noble future.

The **first of JLA's five smooth stones** is the idea that revelation is not sealed. That truth isn't closed.

We don't believe there was some particular, sacred knowledge available to certain people for a limited time thousands of years ago. A time that ended when the books or scrolls or tablets were all handed down from on high. End of story.

² Jessica Purple Rodela, "The Uncommon Denomination," preached at Grand River Unitarian, Waterloo, Ontario, 3 February 2013.

We, instead, put our trust in the advance of knowledge
—and the understanding that the story of the universe is still being written.

“The quest for truth is our sacrament” and that quest
is a never-ending search for knowledge and wisdom.

This open quest for truth and meaning, this unending pursuit,
is one of our greatest strengths,
as it allows us the room to grow and change
and remain relevant to our times.

And, yet, it also keeps us humble—or at least should.

Certainty isn’t our strong-suit.
Because we’ve learned that truth can change.
That things look different over the course of time.
That there are other perspectives to consider.
That, indeed, revelation is ongoing and truth evolves.

The **second smooth stone** is the conviction
that relationships must be free of coercion,
and built instead upon a foundation of free and mutual consent.

This is the golden rule, or better, the platinum rule
that challenges us to treat others as they wish to be treated.

This is our religious democracy in action.
This is where the challenge of love figures in,
as we strive to tend the interdependent web of life with care and concern.

This is the stone that calls us to proclaim “love is our doctrine,”
and really mean it.

The **third smooth stone** is the belief that we bear a moral obligation
to direct our efforts toward the establishment of a just and loving society—
to work to build up the Beloved Community, that place
where justice reigns in our hearts, in our relationships, and in our world.

JLA once told a powerful story that gives heft to this stone:

[Back in the 50s, he said] in the First Unitarian Church of Chicago
we started a program some of us called “aggressive love”

to try to desegregate that Gothic cathedral [of a congregation].

We had two members of the Board objecting.

Unitarianism has no creed, they said,
and we were making [racial] desegregation a creed.

It was a gentle but firm disagreement
and a couple of us kept pressing.

“Well, what do you say is the purpose of this church” we asked,
and we kept it up until 1:30 in the morning.

We were all worn out, when finally [JLA says] this man made
one of the great statements, for my money, in the history of religion.

“OK, Jim. The purpose of this church . . . well, the purpose of this
church is to get hold of people like me and change them!”³

During the Protestant Reformation,
the idea of the priesthood of all believers emerged—
the idea that all people had a calling to preach the good news
if not with their voices, then with their lives.

JLA expanded that idea to include the prophethood of all believers.

He felt that in the liberal religious tradition,
which he traced to the prophetic traditions of Judaism and Christianity,
there is a responsibility for each of us
to take up the mantle of leadership and speak truth to power,
to denounce what is evil, and seek an end with all the might we can muster
to any and everything that would do harm to life.

As he put it:

A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief.
It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility;
it robs us of our birthright of freedom in an open universe;
it robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members;
it reduces us to beasts of burden in slavish subservience
to a state, a church or party—to a self-made God.⁴

³ As told by Reverend George K. Beach, in a 1999 Minns Lecture.

The **fourth stone** is very similar to the third.

It says that together we have the power the effect change in the world.

JLA repeatedly said that there was no “immaculate conception of virtue.”
He felt that good must “be consciously given form and power within history.”

He believed that people make things happen,
which echoes that old saying that if you want your prayers answered,
you better look to your own hands.

We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.
The work of the world is ours to do.

This is where our affirmation that service is our prayer comes into play—
in our abiding trust that good can come from human effort.

Sometimes, we might just be startled by the impact we can actually have.

A few years ago, Cameron Sinclair,
the founder of Architecture for Humanity,
a nonprofit that uses the resources of design to solve social problems,
held a small design contest.

He asked people to come up with the best design possible
for a mobile AIDS clinic for a town in a country in Africa.

He posted the deadline, and he waited.
He didn’t think anyone would submit anything,
but on the day of the contest’s deadline,
a delivery man from Federal Express rang the doorbell
to his tiny studio apartment in New York City.

He was carrying a huge bag stuffed with envelopes.

“Wow,” [Sinclair] said. “Are all those mine?”

“No,” the delivery person said.
He [then] pointed to three giant Fed Ex trucks lined up on the street
behind him, [all with] their hazard lights blinking.

⁴ *The Essential JLA: Selected Writings and Essays* by James Luther Adams, Edited by George Kimmich Beach, p. 35.

“All those are yours.”⁵

Asking for help, working with others, collaborating out of compassion, can, sometimes to our great surprise, change the world.

As, Margaret Mead said, “It’s the only thing that ever has.”

The **fifth stone** will likely be the hardest one for many of you to hold.

It is the stone of hope.

JLA believed that the resources we need—be they human or divine—to achieve meaningful change justify an attitude of optimism.

Now, this isn’t immediate optimism, but a deep-seated trust of what he called an ultimate optimism.

There is hope, he said, in the ultimate abundance of the Universe.

He felt the human capacity to strive and overcome tragedy and strife was cause for a positive outlook at what we can, in time, achieve.

This stone, then, is one of faith—that the moral arc of the universe is, indeed, long but that it also bends toward justice.

When we look to the current state of our world, our country, our city, it can be hard to live in such hope, such faith, such trust.

The outlook is daunting, if not grim, in many, many ways. In the face of it all, optimism can seem naïve and horribly misplaced.

But there is more to optimism than this single understanding.

We must never forget that there have been truly astonishing events in our lifetime—moments of extraordinary change when walls have come down, when regimes have collapsed, when people have resisted tyranny and broken through to a better world.

⁵ Adapted from telling by Sarah Sentilles.

As Howard Zinn so powerfully puts it:

An optimist isn't necessarily a blithe,
slightly sappy whistler in the dark of our time.

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic.

It is based on the fact that human history is a history
not only of cruelty but also of compassion,
sacrifice, courage, [and] kindness.

What we choose to emphasize in this complex history
will determine our lives. If we see only the worst,
it destroys our capacity to do something.

If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—
where people have behaved magnificently,
this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility
of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.

And if we do act, in however small a way,
we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future.

The future is an infinite succession of present [moments],
and to live now as we think human beings should live,
in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself [he says]
a marvelous victory.⁶

What I believe JLA—and Howard Zinn—are both saying
is that hope is central to life.

Not false hope or some deluded optimism,
but an unquenchable thirst for a better world that we are committed
to bring into being, in whatever small ways we can.

As the words of Holly Near remind us:
“to be hopeless, would seem so strange.”
“Because it dishonours those who've gone before us.”

⁶ “The Optimism of Uncertainty,” Howard Zinn, from *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, edited by Paul Loeb, p. 64.

Those who have worked for a better world,
those who have changed the course of history
with nothing more than the force of their own will.

We are part of a story millions of years in the making.

To abandon hope, when it is most needed,
would be to fall prey to the seductive cynicism
that says there's nothing more we can do.

That is not the aspiration of a faithful people.
It is not an attitude that serves life.

We live in a world of giants.

There is a need for us to have all the tools we can
to live out a life of integrity in our time.

Let us, then, take up our five smooth stones
to tell the epic, unfolding story
of how a people filled with hope
are working together to change this world for good.

So may it be. Amen.