

“Making a Prophet”

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21 January 2018

Reading:

“The Opening of Eyes” (David Whyte)

That day I saw beneath the dark clouds
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.
It is the heart after years
of secret conversing
speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

Song:

“Protester” (Lynn Harrison)

I was not a protester
Could not describe me with that word
I wasn't there that day or night
But I knew something wasn't right

*'Til I saw what you did, Sir
I was not a protester (x2)*

I was not an activist
Never one to raise my fist
In fact I seldom raised my voice
But today I have no choice

Chorus

I was not political
Maybe I am typical
You might call me unaware
I was only standing there

Chorus

I was not a detainee
But I know they're just like me
For they carried out no crime
In that place and at that time

Chorus

I was not a protester
Of that, you can be assured
But something in me's changed somehow
I wasn't then what I am now

Chorus

Sermon: "Making a Prophet"

"I'm just an ordinary person.
I'm not an organizer, I'm not an activist."

Those were the words of Sherry Good, the Toronto woman who launched a class-action lawsuit against the Toronto Police, after the G20 summit held here in 2010.

Along with about a thousand other innocent people, she was caught up in what remains the largest mass arrest in Toronto's history.

The song I just sang was inspired by that event...
but I've been told that it comments on many people's
experiences of first-time activism.

In the past year, many women and men have come to protest...
to march in the streets as they did yesterday.

And every day, more people come to social justice work,
because they see abuse of power up close.

Before living through an experience of victimization,
or witnessing injustice against others, we might not tend to raise our voice.

We might feel "unaware" of social justice issues.
"Typically unpolitical" perhaps. "Only standing there."

But that can change.

After I wrote that song, I discovered a book by Thomas Merton, the late Christian mystic and activist.

It was called "Confessions of a Guilty Bystander"...a title that comments on the position of the reluctant prophet.

When we engage in life fully...
allowing the opening of our eyes,
as described in David Whyte's poem...
we cannot help but see and indeed experience injustice.

And in that blaze of realization...the revelation that something is burning
that we did not expect nor want to be...

We might be called, if not dragged, into the role of prophet.

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In Biblical times—more than two thousand years ago—
prophets were said to be ordinary people called by God,
to speak a truth that challenged the social order.

Moses was a prophet, called to lead his people out of Egypt.
Jonah was a very famous "reluctant prophet",
called by God to preach to a particular community...
but at first running away from the responsibility.

Jesus was a prophet, called to critique his faith tradition
and to re-imagine it, according to a message of unconditional love.

Muhammad was a prophet,
called by God to carry forward the teachings of previous prophets
including Abraham, Moses and Jesus.

In the Baha'i faith, Baha'ullah was a prophet called by God to spiritually unify the world.

Some might even say that Gautama Buddha was a prophet of sorts (although he did not claim any such title)...

One could say he was called by a transformative non-theistic experience to live in a more compassionate way and teach others to do so.

There are many other historical prophets we could mention...

And of course there were—and are—many self-described prophets in both the religious and secular worlds who (blessedly!) do not have a lasting influence.

There are, also, many effective and inspiring prophets who speak to smaller groups, or for shorter periods of time... and who never become well-known.

In the Unitarian faith tradition, guided by our Fourth Principle: "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning"... we hold the sacred responsibility of deciding who, for us, is a prophet and who is not.

We also have the invitation, and indeed the responsibility, to nurture "the prophet within"...

So that we might be voices for social justice, in our own time and in our own way.

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As the philosopher Friedrich Schlegel once said, "The historian is a prophet looking backwards."

Whenever someone speaks truth to power or challenges the way things are, in hopes of creating a better world...they (or we) don't know how the story will turn out.

The act of calling forth a new way of being—it's an act of faith.

Where the ancient religious prophets were “called by God,” we might feel called, perhaps, by the “creative unfolding toward good.”

Pulled, perhaps, along that arc of the universe that is bending toward justice...

The one that our Unitarian ancestor Theodore Parker and later Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of so eloquently.

In his book "The Prophetic Imperative," Unitarian Universalist theologian Richard S. Gilbert writes about an ongoing force he calls “cosmic creativity”...

A creative process that prompts him to work at repairing the world “while I may.”

Gilbert says, “this power speaks to me from people of prophetic fire, a creative minority who believe they can change the world.

It speaks to me from the lives of ordinary men and women and children,

and from the depths of my own heart
when I pause long enough
and thoughtfully enough
to hear and heed.”¹

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¹ Richard S. Gilbert, *The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice* (Skinner House: Boston, 2000), 17.

In our times, when "God" can be re-imagined as the universal creative power, the voice within, the deep Self...or when life itself can take the place of any concept of God...

Ordinary people are called to be prophets all the time!

That said, the stories of the ancient prophets can shed light on our own stumbling toward prophecy...

As can the examples of well-known prophets in the modern day, who can serve as inspiration to us.

One thing is sure: to be a prophet can often be unprofitable, to say the least.

On January 15th, millions of people around the world honoured the life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

He was a prophet who was killed as a result of his activism... as of course were Oscar Romero of El Salvador... Dietrich Bonhoeffer executed by the Nazis... along with many others.

Malala Yousafzai's activism did not begin with the attempt on her life, but was intensified by it.

Many environmental prophets today such as Naomi Klein, Bill McKibben and David Suzuki have attracted more than their share of ridicule and rejection from the powerful mainstream.

When people challenge the social or religious order of the times, they often put themselves in unpopular and dangerous positions.

Conversely, when we are comfortable—or even profiting!—from our place in the world as it is....

well, how can we also be in a prophetic role?

Prophecy and profit may be a contradiction in terms.

In order to be able to offer genuine prophetic witness,
we have to be willing to undergo radical change within ourselves...
so that we can step forward fearlessly...

Knowing that whatever we might give up—like the jewel in Mike's story
this morning—is less important than the well-being of the whole.

I can tell you that I'm only beginning that transformation myself...

...and I fall short of my ideals more often than I like to admit.

But admitting that—as Thomas Merton did as the self-described
"guilty bystander"—may be the first step toward genuine change.

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When I was in my late twenties,
I experimented with prophetic action on a small scale,
when I was moved to act on what I saw as an injustice taking place in my
neighbourhood.

In a relatively safe act of political writing, I wrote a Facts and Arguments
story for the Globe and Mail.

Although I changed the names in the story,
people on my street recognized themselves...and they were very very angry.

It was, for me, a small taste of the unpopularity that prophets can
experience.

Although I'd like to say that I easily withstood the criticism and continued to speak out with confidence and courage, that was not actually the case.

I withdrew from any kind of political writing for quite some time.

I had to grow into my ability to speak up.

Today, as a result of spiritual practice, self-reflection, and dialogue in community, I hope I've matured into a more grounded sense of my own ethics.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I'm encouraged to stand up for my principles while recognizing that other people may have different views...

And to understand that conflict can lead to growth and change, and is therefore not something that needs to be feared.

I'm finding my feet in all of this...and, also, finding the prophetic voice that best suits me.

I'm reminded of the Jewish wisdom story about Rabbi Zsusya.

He said, "When I meet God in heaven, he will not ask me, Why were you not Moses?"

He will ask me, "Why were you not Zsuszya?"

What, then, is the kind of prophet you are called to be... according to your understanding of a Greater Good?

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It seems to me that “making a prophet”...
or fulfilling our prophetic potential...
depends as much on an inner process of opening and awakening
as it does on external activities.

It may be that like the reluctant prophet Jonah,
we need to go deep into the metaphorical “belly of the whale”
in order to release some of our ego-concerns,
and our perceived needs for approval and comfort...
so that we might risk more, for a higher cause.

When we’ve spent time in the “darkness”...
been confronted by injustice or dare I say “evil”...

When we’ve gotten up close to the suffering of others
and the suffering of the earth...

We might be transformed by the experience.

We might find that “something in me's changed somehow...
I wasn't then what I am now.”

And as much as the growth toward prophetic potential is an
individual journey, it all depends on relationship.

It’s about standing with others in their sorrow and pain...
About acknowledging our own doubts, fears and longings...

And then joining **together** in the urgent work of prophetic witness.

In his well-known essay, “The Prophethood of All Believers,”

The Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams wrote:
“The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic
function is assigned merely to the few. [...]

[It is] the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional) with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it.²

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A recent article in UU World magazine asked whether all Unitarians have to be activists, in light of the current discussions of race relations at the Unitarian Universalist Association.³

It's an article well worth reading. There's a wide spectrum of views there from many key leaders in the UU movement today.

In addition to their discussion of "do you have to be an activist to be a UU?"

(...which I fear could be misinterpreted as “who’s in and who’s out”...)

I find myself wanting to ask other questions, such as:

How can we become the sort of people who are truly prophetic...whether through protest, poetry, or political action?

How can we become stronger in our convictions that the world **can** change for the better...and express that conviction in ways that guide and lead?

How can we become an embodiment of whatever Creative Good called forth the prophecy in the first place?

A clue might be found in the first hymn we sang today,

² The Essential James Luther Adams – Selected Essays and Addresses, George Kimmich Beach, ed. (Skinner House: Boston, 1998), 112.

³ UU World online: <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/activism-unitarian-universalist>

“Though I May Speak With Bravest Fire.”

It’s based on the text of 1st Corinthians 13,
one of Paul’s letters from the Christian New Testament.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love,
I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

And if I have prophetic powers,
and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,
and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains,
but have not love, I am nothing.”

When we ask ourselves, “To what work of justice are we genuinely and
urgently called...both as individuals and as a congregation?”

We might start with the very simple question: "How shall we love?"

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Questions like these require us to look deeply within,
according to our own understandings of what is good and right
and true...and that is always an emerging understanding
and I would say an imperfect one.

There are no easy answers in this...
but through that process of difficult discernment,
we might find ourselves, at last “on solid ground”—

Rooted in what is real and necessary.
Rooted in the Deep Self...in Soul...in Life...
in Beloved Community...or in God.

We might find ourselves changed
in the ways that allow us to change the world...

Burning with the creative fire
that created us in the first place.

I believe that is what Life wishes for us.

May it be so.

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Closing Words

May you say “yes” to the prophet’s call within you.

May the blaze of creative fire awaken and inspire you.

May your eyes open to the possibility of healing, hope and justice.

And may you be embraced by the Love
that transcends all differences
and overcomes all obstacles,
today and always.