First Universalist Church of Essex – Sermons
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Depression & the Spiritual Journey
January 6, 2008

One of my favorite Woody Allen movies is an early one called "Sleeper." You might remember he submits to being frozen while still alive around 1970 with the hopes when he is revived many things will have improved. As he is lying on this table and being thawed out, he looks up at the doctor and asks what year is it? 2150 is the reply. 2150, he says, I've been in therapy for almost 200 years, I'm almost cured. Then there's the story of the fellow who showed up in the psychiatrist's office and when asked why he was there, he replied: "I don't know, my parents said I should come." The doctor wasn't getting anywhere with the point of the visit so he decided to just start a conversation and asked the visitor; "So what do you like?" "Pancakes," he replied. "Pancakes," said the psychiatrist, "I like pancakes too." "No kidding," said the visitor, "Why don't you come home with me I've got a trunk load of them in my attic."

These two silly stories demonstrate for me a couple of issues: one, we live in a therapeutic culture – when we have issues or problems, or feel depressed, if we have the means, we seek out a therapist – a great Freudian psychologist wrote a brilliant book in 1965 entitled: "The Triumph of the Therapeutic," a real cultural commentary. The other silly stories speak to the dilemma of when should we seek help and for what reason; how do we know if we are really clinically depressed or just having a bad week as part of life's normal rhythm of ups and downs or reactions to illness or job loss or relational difficulties or death?

Someone made a sermon suggestion about addressing depression and I started to look back at old sermons to see what I've said in the past. Couldn't find one! I realized that, although I've thought a lot about depression, experienced some of it, sought some limited counseling for myself and listened to lots of others over the years, and read many books, I've always been reluctant to preach on it – it's a minefield, too loaded, too complex. I'm much more comfortable talking about controversial issues such as the current war, immigration, the class divide, affordable housing, zoning but I've always chickened out on addressing depression and trying to put some spiritual context into it.

Do I have experience? I'd say yes. Most recently, after 21 years in Pittsburgh, when we moved back here I went through a tremendous period of mourning over lost relationships and place – a spiritual director helped me through that. The worst case I am aware of occurred in 1969 when I went of to Northern California to join the Peace Corps – for three weeks or so as I began language training in Maylay, I couldn't eat or sleep or focus on anything but the East Coast and my roots. I finally was encouraged, by the PC psychologist, to leave but return if I wanted. As a child home life was clouded by alcoholism and, I later realized, depression. My sister, a trained psychiatric nurse, first named my father's alcoholism and my mother's ongoing depression. The rest of us slowly accepted

the truth of this but my sister could never get my mom to go to therapy; it just wasn't part of her world view. She couldn't imagine telling a total stranger (other than a Catholic priest, and then with great hesitation) her problems with my father. To her it would be a betrayal. Depression was not in her lexicon; it was just life's bumps. You deal with it. For my sister it was clear, 'see a psychiatrist, gets some drugs, and things would improve; For my mother, tough it out.

Not long ago I read about a study that shed light on this divide, not only generational but cultural and societal: the study, conducted in the late 1980s, suggested that depression is a society-wide major issue, not just an individual problem, especially since WWII. It concluded that if you were born in the last 50 years, roughly 1940, you were 10 times more likely to be depressed than if you were born in the 50 years before that! Why? Loss of psychological and spiritual guidance, change in family relations and influence, loss of religious/spiritual anchors. Youth especially, the study concluded, have suffered the loss of sources to turn to for solace and direction. To help solidify this idea of such a drastic cultural development, safeguard against bias, the study looked at two so-called "primitive cultures" – the Amish and a group in New Guinea. It was found that in both of these societies individuals had well-established social structures, myths and rituals, to fall back on in times of personal loss. With little in the way of such structure in our society, individuals are often left to themselves, hence the growth of psychotherapy in modern times – the triumph of the therapeutic! Such a society as ours, the study concludes, is ripe for individuals turning to cults and various forms of fundamentalist faith for solace and support.

A spiritual writer named John O'Donohue, echoes this modern dilemma. Post-modern culture is lonely, he says, we are exposed and vulnerable: Why? We are housed in a body – we are unsheltered in that body, such a fragile home; We are individual, therefore somewhat distinct, different, separate – we experience pain and suffering; We live in time which we can't control – our destiny can change at any moment and we die; We are vulnerable because of our destiny – we can't avoid pain and loss at some point.

So just what is depression? Where does it come from? We don't really know. We know the symptoms: prolonged low moods, suicidal thoughts/actions, loss of interest in enjoyable activities, lack of motivation for long periods, loss of appetite are some ways we experience depression. But is it biological? Polly Young-Eisendrath says we don't have hard evidence of that, even though medications often help, which makes us think it is biological. And, let's face it, if it is mostly biological the explanation and remedy are clear. And there are times when we feel so bad that the relief offered by drugs is a Godsend, a salvation. Psychologist and spiritual writer, Gerald May, a very experienced practitioner, suggests that serious symptoms of depression need to be recognized, acknowledged and consultation should be sought – many depressions can and should be treated with appropriate medications. It would be a crime not to treat such depressions, says May, and no one should suggest that somehow such

treatment prevents the deeper work of the spiritual journey, the journey with God, if you will. But, this same psychiatrist is also a scholar of the mystical tradition in Western religion and argues just as strenuously that drugs should never substitute for serious spiritual work, even when that spiritual work is difficult and full of darkness. Years ago a member of my Pittsburgh church sought out a therapist for ongoing depression and received medication. Upon experiencing positive results, he declared, these drugs are great, I still have all of my issues but I don't really care! He was happy. I was fairly un approving as I thought he was merely using the drugs to avoid some deep relational and spiritual issues that needed honest exploration.

A recent study on depression that appeared in "The Archives of General Psychiatry" concludes that "About 1 in 4 people who appear to be depressed are in fact struggling with the normal mental fallout from a recent emotional blow, like a ruptured marriage, the loss of a job, or the collapse of an investment." The authors thought the definition of clinical depression needed to be "redrawn" to exclude such cases. Too many school districts and health clinics use simple depression checklists, without taking the time to consider contexts and circumstances; the triumph of the therapeutic. Is this real depression or normal sadness, the authors ask?

Depression is real and frightening for those who experience it. It should not be taken lightly. Competent counselors, therapists ought to be sought out and, when appropriate, drugs can be enormously helpful. But I'm personally nervous about the quick turn to medications when things aren't going well – especially in the younger generation. One of my most favorite nieces seeks medication to, as she says to me, take the edge off. But I have not been successful at trying to get her to seek serious counseling, or, maybe better, spiritual direction. That's the real work we need to be about. Even, as Gerald May says, it leads us through the "dark night of the soul." If we stay with it, it can produce deep insights about our life and meaning, and help us deal with the normal sadness that comes with life as we know it.

One clear positive result of living in the therapeutic culture is that, hopefully, experiencing depression doesn't have to be a stigma. We can acknowledge it, talk about it openly, seek support and share our stories, knowing that many others are likely experiencing something similar. There should be no reluctance or shame attached to this. I certainly believe in the value of competent therapeutic consultation and intervention, but I also deeply believe in the healing power of community and deep relationships. A Pittsburgh friend who I often jogged with while there often calls me when his kids are in the throws of teen age rebellion and distemper. When things aren't going well his spouse recommends the kids go to therapy. Jules and I joke that we've probably been able to limit our need for therapists in our own personal life because we have developed a deep friendship and we can talk through almost anything. Nothing like a deep friend who knows how to listen and offer consolation and compassion. It goes a long

way. As Psychologist Harry Stack Sullivan wrote over 50 years ago, we all need CHUMS in our developmental process and for mental health. I love that word – I heard it the other day for the first time in years. Chums. I use the word pals. Same thing. Maybe if we all had great chums, we'd lower our therapeutic bills. Or at least lesson the depressions when they do come as they will.

Finally, when the need is real, I'm glad there is a therapeutic profession; it's an advance when used appropriately. But it doesn't replace the important work of undertaking the spiritual journey ands the seeking of real meaning in life. They are not mutually exclusive. After interviewing a collection of psychiatrists and Buddhist practitioners about depression, a recent author concluded "Before Enlightenment, take prozac and talk to your shrink. After enlightenment, take prozac and talk to your shrink." I might add, make sure you nurture your relationship with chums and, on occasion, let your minister know how life is going. He might think of a good joke to share to help get you through the day and whatever the experience you might be going through.

MLK & the Role of the Church in the World
January 20, 2008

As many of you know I like repeating certain rituals throughout the year. We just went through the holiday season, Hanukkah, Solstice, Christmas – two of my favorite rituals during this time are to drink eggnog (has to be Hood's) with a wee touch of brandy and watch the video "A Christmas Carol" by Dickens –Scrooge; I also read the play in its entirety. I like repeating out loud certain classic lines. Well, for the celebration of the life of Dr. King, I like to re-read what is now an American classic, his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Much like reading Dickens and drinking eggnog, it's a spiritual practice. I think of this letter as a deeply spiritual document.

It's April 1963, he's serving a sentence for a civil rights demonstration and reflecting upon an open letter that 8 white, liberal Alabama clergy had written, encouraging King to stop the demonstrations and let the courts do their job on desegregation and integration. They feared civil disturbances would result from his tactics. King's open letter was a response to these clergymen with a focus on what King saw as the role of the church in society.

In the letter King expresses disappointment with the white church and its leadership, most especially the clergy. He thought they would be great supports in the struggle for black freedom, instead "all too many have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of the stained-glass windows." Ouch! Often, King writes, he has heard that ministers tell their folks to obey the desegregation decisions because it's the law when he longed to hear that the clergy might say "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother." In the midst of the deep racial and economic injustices of our society, said King, the churches are often on the sidelines, practicing some kind of "other worldly religion," largely "adjusted to the status quo," their ministers saying "these are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern." In the midst of the suffering of "tired, bruised and weary Negro women and men," he went on, I have asked myself about these churches: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?" "I have wept over the laxity of the church," that, he declared, as the son, grandson and great grandson of preachers, I love so much. Will the church wind up being an irrelevant social club" when all is said and done? He concludes by reminding his fellow clergy that the race issue is not a "political one but a moral one" and in the face of such injustice "It has always been the responsibility of the church to broaden horizons, challenge the status quo, and break the mores when necessary." The church must leave its sanctuaries and exercise its critical function of being the "guardian of the moral and spiritual life of the community."

I consider Dr. King one of the most extraordinary church people and prophets of our age – both a theologian and an organizer, an agitator yet one steeped in love and non-violence, his legacy is a model for ministers, lay folks and the religious community. You may have seen the recent flap among Democrats about king's legacy. Senator Clinton suggested that while King was a great orator, one who inspired many, and a great organizer, it took a politician, a president (LBJ) to get Civil Rights' legislation passed. Although I doubt she meant it that way, some interpreted her remarks as diminishing the role of Dr. King and giving too much credit to the former President. While I personally think the subsequent flap was overblown, I was much more struck by a wonderful letter to the editor that appeared a few days later in the Globe. It was written by a women who seemed steeped in civil rights' activism dating back to the late 1950s. In the letter she acknowledged the important role of both King ("perhaps our greatest leader") and Johnson (clearly "wily and effective") yet she profoundly made the much more penetrating insight that nothing really could have happened if it were not for the "decades-long movement" that led up to the passage of the legislation. The original comment by Clinton and the subsequent flap, in other words, were both missing the point. "It was, rather, the blood, sweat, tears and organizing by countless lesser-known people, mainly African-Americans" that actually provided the fertile ground for the eventual passage of the historic legislation – she went on to mention Robert Moses, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer and, finally, a "16 year-old African-American girl, Nancy Penick," who, by "1962 in North Carolina, had already been arrested 9 times and been beaten over the head in civil rights' demonstrations."

This letter brings me back to King's focus in the "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," i.e., the role of all of us, not just a few individuals, in the struggle for a better world. And, especially, the role of the religious congregation as a moral conscience in the community. Occasionally, in my life, I've had experiences, that remind me of this insight. Back in the mid 1980s, while in Pittsburgh, when immigration was also a hot topic and many undocumented immigrants were flowing into this country from Latin Amerca, we became part of a kind of underground railroad like in the days of slavery, providing sanctuary for these people who were fleeing from danger and violence in their countries of origin. It seems our government was not willing to recognize this danger and was simply arresting and deporting them back home. Two such immigrants, Maria and Gabriel, from El Salvador made their way to Wooster, Ohio, where I met them and brought to a church in Pittsburgh, where they lived for nearly one year, illegally. As a leader in this effort, I received a call from Immigration, asking me and others to come to the office. 4 of us went, 3 ministers and a lay leader. The INS agents were polite and respectful, suggesting that they understood our good intentions, but, nevertheless, what we were doing was wrong, illegal, and that we should simply turn the refugees over to them, assuring us they would get a fair hearing on their case. One of us spoke up and said we couldn't do that, we were afraid for their safety, we cited numerous cases of frightened immigrants being deported back to danger, and that for us it was a moral issue and as church

people we had to do the moral thing, the law and current INS policies, in this case, we judged to be immoral. At that moment, this respectful and measured agent exploded on us, vociferously proclaiming not to talk to him about morality, he was merely doing his job and upholding the law! I have rarely felt such a clear distinction than that in my 30 or so years of ministry and rarely have felt so clear on the moral role of the religious community in our society.

When I re-read Dr. King's letter this year, the memory of that that experience came rushing back to me. That day we were just 4 individuals yet part of a national movement of thousands working to alter U.S. foreign and immigration policy, which, ultimately, several years later we successfully did. It took a massive, national effort by thousands of houses of worship to bring this all about, not unlike the civil rights movement of the 1940s and 50s and 60s, and, I might add, the underground railroad movement of the 1850s and 60s, maybe the real beginning of the civil rights' movement in this country.

Which brings me right back home to our small, yet vibrant congregation – part of this wider movement of Universalists and Unitarians who have always stood for the human rights of all – people of color, people of limited economic means, people of differing sexual orientations and gender identities, people with disabilities and other physical and mental challenges. The very notion that part of our purpose, our reason for coming together, along with encouraging the personal spiritual journeys of each of us, and bringing hope and joy to all who come into this sanctuary, is to be a moral conscience and a moral actor in the wider community that is still suffering from injustices and inequalities. That is why part of what we have tried to initiate here involves outreach activities which help transform each of us as we work to lighten the burden of struggle and suffering of others – to this end, we cook meals for the Open Door Pantry and slowly develop relationships with those who come to be nourished; we work with Wellspring House whose focus on helping low-income women secure education and housing will be highlighted in the upcoming annual legislative breakfast on Feb. 1 –we'll hear stories of women who are working yet can't make ends meet; we vigil and lobby for peace and the end of wars which, we believe, only create greater suffering and violence for those effected; we work to ensure full human rights for gays & lesbians; and we organize with several other congregations on Cape Ann through ECCO to help bring opportunities for low income folks and youth to prosper in our community. You all would have been proud to hear at our last ECCO meeting several FUCE members speaking about setting up a meeting place for at risk youth/students in Gloucester and for plans to sponsor a summer job fair and meet with the Chamber of Commerce to hire youth for first-time jobs this year.

These are examples, I believe, of what Dr. King had in mind when he challenged the churches to take on what he called the moral issues of injustice and inequity that still fester in our society. It's not so much about a charismatic leader or an influential politician but rather about scores of people working together to heal

our broken world from its fissures and cracks. It's working concretely on what Dr. King referred to as the beloved community – a community where all have opportunities and experiences of fairness and equality and justice. As Dr. King saw it, it is how we express love in the world; we work for justice. Otherwise love is an empty symbol; an expression, an emotion with no content. Ultimately, I believe, our moral work in the community is a essential aspect of our spiritual life, just as important as our prayer and mediation, our more personal and individual efforts to seek holiness; Part of our search God and Ultimate Truth. It is all one. But we do it best as a community. Celebrating the legacy of this man, a young preacher shot down long before he attained full maturity and his lofty goals, is one way we remind ourselves of this great calling we have from the Creator. When I get weak-kneed about this mission, have doubts about the true role of the church in society, I think of our Salvadoran friends, Gabriel and Maria, and their children.

Democracy and Congregational Polity
Jan. 27, 2008

It was around 1987 or so, in Pittsburgh, and Melanie and I were happily attending a racially/ethnically integrated Catholic church on Pittsburgh's Northside. It was small for a Catholic church, maybe 60-70 families but a great group with a good priest, who was also a good friend. One Sunday pat got into the pulpit and proclaimed, regrettably, that the Bishop had decided to close St. Joseph's. No warning, no dialogue, no congregational input, just the hierarchy being the hierarchy. We were angry at the lack of process and very disappointed that this priest-friend, a very good fellow, had given no warning. Even the best were loyal to the company. On the way home that day, Melanie and I said: "That's it, we're done." We may always be catholic in our hearts and spirituality, but we can't be part of this institution any longer. Recovering Catholics? Maybe it's just in remission!

I was thinking about this moment last week while we were spending time with my siblings and partners on the Cape. My sister's partner, Donna, was sharing her experience with a break away Catholic movement that, interestingly, meets and has Catholic Mass at a UU church in Greater Boston. It's a fairly small group, served by a Catholic priest who married, and Donna was sharing a recent experience of a meeting with the group's designated leadership. Like Melanie and myself, this group of folks all said one day, that's it, we can't be part of this Catholic institution any more but in their case they weren't ready to let go of their faith practice, so they joined one of the several Catholic breakaway groups that maintains all the theology and ritual, but is committed to a non-hierarchical, democratic process of decision-making and worship. Seems exciting except mostly what Donna shared was how difficult was the process and how challenging she was finding some of the people and ideas floating around. Power struggles and personality conflicts were very real. She was frustrated and unclear what the future holds.

For some of us, I'm sure, especially if we are new to UU, we still don't get this idea of religion/Church and democracy, even if we recite our 7 principles: "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." When Melanie and I first stumbled into a UU church in 1989, we were stunned by the openness of the process, the encouragement to take responsibility for your own spiritual journey and search "Build Your Own Theology," we heard! How refreshing. How challenging. Maybe some of us still have images, as I do, of Monsignor Dolan getting up in the pulpit and reading the riot act to parishioners – growing up we never had any doubt whose church it was. Whenever a member asks me about using the church, I usually respond, why are you asking me, it's your church? Some of us are still getting use to the idea. After all, being told what is truth and what to think does have its upsides!

So where did this revolution happen that we now call Unitarian Universalism? To understand how a church and denomination such as ours really works, it helps to know how we got here. Earlier you read the words of a wonderful Unitarian Universalist theologian who died about 10 years ago, JL Adams. In his career he wrote a lot about our UU roots.

We are part of what historians call the Radical reformation or the so-called left-wing of the reformation. We mostly know about the revolt from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century through the writings of Martin Luther and John Calvin; a little later we heard about the beginnings of Anglicanism with the issues surrounding King Henry the VIII, later still the Methodists and John Wesley. As a result, the so-called mainline Protestant revolt resulted in Lutherans, Presbyterians, eventually Episcopalians and Methodists, etc. But some of the reformers felt that these protesters maintained too much of the old, hierarchical structures. These mistrusted clericalism and wanted much more control in the hands of the laity. They rejected a model of decision-making in the hands of a clerical class; they imagined a church with democratic structures where everyone had a say. They were Baptists, Quakers, Mennonites, and eventually Unitarians and Universalists. JL Adams calls this movement Radical Laicism – Lay folks not clergy call the shots. According to Adams, and you read the words earlier, they believed in the priesthood and prophethood of all believers, i.e., all are priests, all are responsible for things sacred, all are responsible for the care of souls, not just priests and ministers, and all are prophets, responsible for justice in the world. Furthermore, they practice what became to be known as congregational polity, i.e., every congregation makes its own decisions. No outside authority tells a congregation what to do or who to call as priest or minister. We may be members of the wider UUA, but we make our own decisions here in Essex. But one of the things I like best about being part of a denomination, a religious movement such as ours is that the Radical or left-wing reformers got their ideas not from democratic movements in society, but rather from the early Christian church movement, that group around Jesus that worshipped in the Jewish synagogue but developed its own tradition based on the teachings of Jesus and his followers. These Jewish/Christians still went to the synagogue but they also met in private homes and had open discussions about how to live and believe and worship. The Radical reformers felt they were reclaiming that model of church. That's why I told that story of the battles between Peter and Paul
In those early years – they were in charge and were trying to figure it all out. As we know, democracy can be messy!

So here we are today, and later downstairs we will be practicing exactly what the radical reformers had in mind, talking about what we believe as a congregation and how we should apply that in our day. We'll even take a vote on two key issues of concern: to join a community organizing network called ECCO, and to become part of the welcoming church movement of the UUA, as we affirm our openness to glbt folks.

As a former priest in the Catholic tradition, and now a minister in two UU churches in Pittsburgh and Essex, it has been fascinating to figure out what it means to be called to a leadership role in a thoroughly democratic context. It's a privilege but also a challenge to figure out how to both lead and encourage equal leadership from all of you and, ultimately, submit to your decisions through the Board of a Trustees. When I was first called to the church in Pittsburgh, I decided to sit with all of the then 14 or 15 members to ask their views. While most were incredibly supportive and receptive, one member said to me: Art, I thought calling you was a terrible use of money and I voted against it. Sorry, but I think we made a big mistake. The relationship of 12 years turned out to be very positive; Phil eventually faded from the congregation, although he did admit maybe it wasn't such a bad idea after all.

My experience here has been wonderful, as the spirit of openness and cooperation has been a model. But it isn't always the case in our churches – especially between minister and congregation. A few years back as I was looking at minutes from church meetings here 30 years ago, I noticed that at some point after the meeting was well underway, the minister came in, gave his report, then left as the meeting continued. One day I asked Millie Johnston about that. Why wasn't the minister there throughout? I could tell Millie didn't exactly want to say, so I pressed her. Do you suppose, Millie, that the members of the board didn't completely trust the minister? Matter of factly, Millie gently responded, I suppose that's exactly right! I guess the then board was practicing very radical laicism. Fortunately, I've never experienced this, though I have colleagues who have. I have felt called to leadership and trusted in that role and I must honestly say, though I consult all the time with the church's lay leadership, I also make decisions pretty much on my own that I judge leaders are called to do – decisions that in other congregational contexts, might have cost the minister his calling/his job. You all know the philosophy, right, easier to ask forgiveness than permission? A few years ago I was approached about performing a marriage for two women in this sanctuary, something never before done, of course, since such a possibility had only recently been legalized in Massachusetts. Many ministers likely would have gone to the lay leadership seeking permission to do such, which, conceivably, could have led to a wider discussion in the congregation. I went to the Board to simply announce it, letting them know this was happening. As a leader, I judged this not to be a discussion but something wholly consistent with our mission and theology. I think that's what leaders do. No one blinked but they certainly could have said, that's our decision not yours. They certainly would have a right to do that. Part of the dynamic is one of trust and unlike 30 years ago, that's not an issue here. If it were, the relationship wouldn't work. However that's not to say I and the leadership of the Board always agree. When we talk about money, it sometimes gets interesting! But that's ok – the way it should be. In fact Board meetings are generally a joy, even when we do disagree – just ask Lynne Marchetti, who often after a board meeting proclaims how much she loves our meetings! The democratic process, when it works, when there is good leadership and trust, is wonderful. May it ever be so!

After service today, we'll do it as a congregation: share information, vote on issues of concern, and open it up to a wide discussion.

You know it's amazing what is going on in our sister church of Roman Catholicism – beside the break off groups that have formed, like the one our friend Donna talked about, there are still several churches in the diocese that the Bishop closed yet parishioners won't leave and vigil and hold worship every day of the week. A year or so ago the Cardinal's secretary (another bishop) was asked about these vigils and the defiance of so many Catholics to the Cardinal's decisions. The bishop said, remarkably, that these folks didn't really understand Catholicism, that they were really Congregationalists – that is, as we spoke of earlier, they were practicing congregational polity, radical laicism, if you will, as they took over these sanctuaries. What the Bishop meant was they weren't Catholics as Catholicism developed into a hierarchically-controlled expression of Christianity. What, I think, the bishop was missing was that these modern-day Catholics were acting like the early church of the first centuries of the Jesus movement, taking responsibility for their life of faith and saying to the hierarchy, you can't make this decision without us. We are the church, too. Let's sit down and work this out. Sound like Radical reformers to me. Fortunately, we are part of a movement that waged that battle a few centuries ago. Nevertheless, we've got many issues to work are way through as we try to remain faithful to our adopted heritage. We'll get to exercise that process in just a few minutes. But not before we break bread, another ancient custom of the early church.

Race, Ethnicity, Oneness, AA Heritage Month
February 3, 2008

If you have been following the Presidential primary races – if you watch the news you only have two choices, the Presidential races or Super Bowl hype – you are aware that on the democratic side in these past few weeks the issue of race has emerged with full force. Of course given that a key candidate, Barak Obama, a person of color, the product of a black father and white mother, has been in the race from the beginning, there's a sense in which race became automatically thrust into the campaign right at the get go. But it became pretty ugly recently because of some remarks of both Clintons – however misunderstood they might have been. Nevertheless, for me the remarkable thing about the way race has been talked about in the campaign has to do with the notion that Senator Obama, in his words and way of being/interacting, and his philosophy, represents, at least for some, as a symbol of one who is attempting to transcend race, i.e., here is a person who looks "black" but not only isn't (he's bi-racial, bi-ethnic and I personally don't understand why when a person like Obama comes along who is clearly bi-racial, bi-ethnic, he is still referred to as the potential first black president), but is attempting to say that race doesn't matter, it's irrelevant as a category or designation. Given the tragic history of racism in this country, and the way race has been used to separate and oppress people, this is trulty and extraordinary moment, no matter what your political leaning. And, Senator Obama is not the only prominent public figure who seems to transcend race – I'm thinking of Tiger Woods, Oprah Winfrey, just to cite two examples. You all can think of many others. Can we transcend race?

One way we will, potentially, transcend race, is through genetic testing. I've mentioned before that a professor at Harvard, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, jr., recently did a study on a number of prominent African-American persons by using DNA tests to trace their ancestry. Almost every person in the study, it turns out, has at least 25% European ancestry that s/he was not previously aware of, including Dr.Gates himself, who discovered he is 50% of European descent. Being that he is head of the African-American Studies Program at Harvard, he suggested, jokingly, he may have to resign.

Furthermore, if we accept the writings of many, many academicians, both from the fields of biology and sociology, we will have to acknowledge that the whole concept of race, that human beings come from different races of people, is a totally social construct – it has no basis in reality. Even a good U.S. historian will tell you that among others, Jews and Irish were considered non-white barely more than a century ago. You remember me sharing with you that great song from the Irish film: "The Commitment" – "they say the Irish are the blacks of Europe, so say it loud, we're black and we're proud."

Still, though, given the role race has played in our history, can we imagine actually transcending race, as Obama and many other persons of color are

suggesting? Haven't most of us been thoroughly conditioned to think in racial terms? Furthermore, not all people in the African American community think it's time to transcend race. It has been said by a number of commentators that some in the black community don't think Obama's black enough, meaning that there's still a long we to go for people of color to overcome racism and discrimination and they fear that attempting to transcend race will be in effect saying everyone is on a level playing field; racism no longer exists; everyone has an equal chance. Many would argue we aren't close to that, just remember what happened in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina. Most of the faces that were left behind were dark faces. Not much of a level playing field in those scenes. So, one might legitimately ask is it the right time to talk about transcending race?

You know, I read a fascinating book a while back by a scholar at Boston University, entitled "From Emerson (Ralph Waldo) to King (Martin Luther), about democracy, race and politics. In the book, Anita Haya Patterson, a female person of color, focuses on writings about race in Ralph Waldo Emerson, WEB DuBois, and MLK. Interestingly, she argues, Emerson had a big influence of both of these famous black scholars. Her main insight is that in each of their cases, they exhibited a kind of "double-consciousness" about race. In Emerson's case, he wrote marvelous things about universal human rights and freedoms, inherent human dignity, and society's obligation to protect such rights and freedoms for everyone, yet, he also held that Anglo-Saxons were clearly a superior race, persons of African descent (and I'm sure Irish) inferior. This great champion of human freedom and dignity, this revered figure in Unitarian History, was a confirmed racist. He had this "double-consciousness." But, in a fascinating way, says Patterson, both DuBois and King, greatly influenced by Emerson's brilliance and articulation of the rights and dignity of humans, also exhibited a "double-consciousness" in that they used race as a way to organize persons of color to fight for freedom and equality denied them at every turn. Both DuBois and King understood that the category of race was a social construct, it wasn't real, and that there was just one human race, nevertheless, since rights were denied persons of color, they used race to fight for these inherent rights. Obviously, neither felt it was time to transcend race. Many in the current civil rights' movement would still argue that like DuBois and King, we must still exhibit this "double consciousness" and use the concept of race until the time when there is true equality. Some see someone like Obama as a sell out. He's not black enough! What a fascinating time in our history to be at this point – this point of transition to a new awareness, a new consciousness – like we are getting there but there's still work to do. Maybe it's time to consider no longer celebrating African American Heritage month yet do we really believe racism is dead? Maybe it's not yet time to declare the problem is over. Maybe we still have to tell stories about the underground railroad, about General Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people, stories about Frederick Douglas, and WEB DuBois, and Rosa Parks and Whitney Young.

In this vein, an amazing thing happened recently in the world of sports regarding race. A young woman commentator on the golf channel suggested that Tiger Woods was so far above the rest of the field, there's no longer any serious competition. Someone should lynch him in a back alley, she joked. Shortly after this comment, an editor of a golf magazine displayed a noose on the magazine's cover, thinking it also a great joke – given the brutal history of black lynchings, such attempts at humor seem unimaginable to some of us. Evidently, Tiger was enormously forgiving and, at least publicly, took no offense. But when I hear something like that I think maybe there is a reason we celebrate black heritage month and keep telling the stories, both the triumphs and the failures.
But besides knowing the history and re-telling the stories of so many great figures who fought and died so that others might be free, I also believe and have been enormously enriched by working side by side with persons of color in the struggle for a more equitable society. And, I will say, my experience is that such close contact and working relationships with persons of different cultural and ethnic heritages, has been among my most rich of human encounters; Sacred encounters really. I have told you, I'm sure, of my years of work with low-income tenants in Pittsburgh, almost 100% African-American women, who were nearly evicted from their apartments. I would frequently go to their meetings, often being the only white face in a group of 20. Often the meetings would start long after the agreed upon time. One night one of the women asked me: "Art, do you know what CPT means?" Sheepishly, I acknowledged that I did, but as a white person I didn't feel free to say it. But, since you asked, yes, it means "colored people's time." We knew you knew it Art. You shouldn't feel embarrassed. You're one of us; you've earned your ghetto card. I will tell you, I've never felt any moment in my life that was more sacred than that one with those women who spent most of their lives being wary of people who looked like me. Ronell, one of the group leaders, felt comfortable enough to say to me one night that her husband referred to me as that little white guy with the Afro. I can honestly say that there were times in that group when I felt race had indeed been transcended. I loved and trusted them and it seemed they reciprocated. And that experience, as well as a number of other such experiences with different inter-racial groups, both in Pittsburgh, and now here, especially with ECCO, has led me to the conviction that it would be great if we could begin to change our ideas and language when it comes to people from different cultural backgrounds. Begin to act as if race had indeed been transcended. Increasingly I try not to use the terms black or white. I don't think of myself as white nor my friend Ronell as black; or Ruben or Loretta in Gloucester. I don't believe there are races of people so I try not to use the word race, which increasingly has no meaning for me. I prefer the expression ethnicity, hence, Afro-Americans, Polish Americans, Jewish Americans. Even the word we are all just Americans or USers could work, although I prefer to refer to the culture that shaped me. I understand that some Americans don't have any great sense of a culture other than American. That still beats black and white, or red or yellow or brown or whatever other racial designation we have become accustomed to. Yet, I also understand, like DuBois and King, and many human rights activists of today, there may still be a need for a so-called "double-

consciousness," acknowledging that we are all one and as humans we deserve all the same rights, at the same time acknowledging oppression still exists for many people, including those whose skin color or ethnic heritage is not European.

Because I worked so closely with African Americans in Pittsburgh, I often dreamed we could slowly build a multicultural worship community. We often had meetings in the church; I asked many African Americans to preach. Many came to worship on special days. But when I asked Ronell one day, could you imagine joining our church, she simply said: no, Art, I need my Jesus too much. But not just Jesus, when I go to church I need to be shoutin and hollering, dancing, swayin and singing. I understood that perfectly. Faith and culture are very hard to separate. As bonded as we were our cultures still differed. I don't ever expect to love collard greens or black-eyed peas either. And as much as I appreciate the tradition, Jazz will never do it for like Irish or folk music does. But I still love the fact that it seemed we had transcended race in our friendship and work together in the community. That on many levels we did experience the oneness that we proclaim here every Sunday. And I have hopes that, though we have a ways to go on questions of race, that although divisions and oppressions still exist, that we have made progress and that future generations will find it hard to believe that we once thought of ourselves as black and white and separated ourselves by such an odd concept as race.

So as we sing our way out this morning, think of my friend Ronell, and think about transcending your usual way of expression, and see if you can move, and sway, maybe even shout and holler, more than you ever imagined possible. Maybe for just a moment you can feel one with all the peoples of the world; all 6 ½ billion. You may surprise yourself how much you enjoy it!

Love & Suffering are Inter-twined
February 10, 2008

It's always interesting to me that Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the Lenten season in the Christian calendar, are so close together. One celebration is about candy and flowers and romance, the other about prayer, fasting and serious reflection, not so much about our failures, but about our creatureliness and human limitations. Trying to put these experiences in some kind of dialogue, human love and human limitations, made me think of a scene in Dostoevsky's "Brothers Karamazov." A woman goes to a monastery and asks the monk to help her with a lack of faith, not so much in God but in immortality. No one can prove it, so I think to myself suppose I've been believing this all my life and when I die there's nothing; it's awful. How can I be sure? The monk responds: "By the experience of active love … in so far as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the immortality of the soul." "Active love," the woman wondered, what could that mean? After all she loved humanity and wanted to serve, especially those in need, as long as those served were grateful to her. Since people in need, especially those in great suffering, might not always be grateful, what would you do then, asked the monk? Well I couldn't offer love to someone so ungrateful, she replied. To that, the monk responded, "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams…it is labor and fortitude." Yet, reminds the great Dorothy Day, co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, and a great admirer of Dostoevsky, "When one loves, there is at that time a correlation between the spiritual and the material. Even the flesh is energized, the human spirit is made strong. All sacrifice, all suffering is easy for the sake of love." Easy, maybe, for one such as Dorothy Day or Dostoevsky, but what of the rest of us mortals? Is that what love really requires to be authentic and full? I've always found that scene somewhat haunting and difficult. How many of us could actually practice that kind of love? Yet, I find myself over the years returning to it over and over. Maybe's it's the Irish melancholy? How do you sell that one on Valentine's Day?

I think some of the great wisdom traditions and teachers can help us here. I started reading a book by the Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hanh, recently, entitled "Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers." In it, Hanh talks about some false notions we have of happiness and love: "Look deeply and you will touch the fact that happiness and well-being cannot be separated from suffering and ill-being. This is the interbeing nature of happiness and suffering. There is an illusion to be removed…" In the same fashion, he goes on, "…love cannot exist without suffering. In fact, suffering is the ground on which love is born. If you have not suffered, if you don't see the suffering of people or other living beings, you would not have love in you nor would you understand what it is to love…Love is born of suffering," that is, "You know what suffering is. You don't want to suffer, you don't want to make other people suffer, and therefore your love is born. You want to be happy and you want to bring happiness to others.

That is love…because we are struggling to free ourselves from the grip of suffering…we learn how to love and how to take care of ourselves and of others…because I suffer, I need love…and…love is practice."
Now, if you're still with me, that's a lot to chew over. As I reflected on these insights, I tried to make it personal. As many of you know the brother closest to me in age died some years ago. Since his death, Melanie and I have gotten quite close to his adult children. The youngest of the group, who is always trying to figure out her dad and her relationship with him asked recently, how is it that my father had great anger and little love for gramps, his own father, but you had such a deep love and connection to gramps, you were only two years apart. I tried to reflect upon that and respond. True enough, I said, our experiences were similar – we were expected to be at the grocery store all of the time, it was hard work and gramps was often tense and stressed out and when he came home he treated that with alcohol; often he was unreachable. For reasons, I said, that can only be explained by the very distinct persons my brother and I were, my brother reacted with anger and acting out, and I reacted by going within myself and creating some of my own reality. I guess it protected me in a way my brother was more vulnerable. I can't say where the different responses came from. My brother went on to become a very successful businessman, a true extrovert; I went into a monastery, at least for a time. But I think I created a monastery early on in life. I suffered every bit as much as my brother in those turbulent times but, for reasons I don't totally understand, my own suffering helped me seek and give love, and it also helped me understand and empathize with the suffering my father endured, having lost his own mother at age 11 and sent off to a boarding home. In retrospect, I said to my niece, I wish I had been able to love my brother more as I witnessed his own suffering. But, as an older person, I am struck by the wisdom of the Buddhist insight about the relationship of suffering and love, that suffering
Can actually be the ground on which love is born. But I've also been around long enough to know that, tragically, as one theologian says, that actual suffering does lots of damage, and for some it is not easy to see the relationship of suffering and love. And probably for many of us, whatever our religious background, we never developed a spiritual practice that could help us see and experience the relationship between the two. It is very hard to see anything positive about human suffering – it takes greatly developed Buddhist or Christian wisdom to understand that. One of the greatest gifts I've ever received, as strange as it may sound, is that of being with my dad a few weeks before his death as he was in a hospital bed at home in the living room. He was too weak to clean himself, so I remember washing and shaving him and I've never felt so loved or able to give love in my life.

Our adult education class is currently reading a book by historian of religion, Karen Armstrong. It's an autobiography of a woman who has suffered much. Interestingly, I came across a brief article she wrote not long ago in which she suggests that a deep spiritual life needs to reflect, on occasion, on the dark side of life. She begins the article by reflecting on the work of an English woman

named Jacqueline Wilson, who writes novels for children – she is more well know there than JK Rowling, according to Armstrong. Nevertheless, says Armstrong, her children's writings are often very bleak, lots of conflict, disharmony, anguish and betrayals in families. Things generally turn out well but what's the appeal of this often bleak vision she wonders. Armstrong suggests that many children's classics have very dark aspects to them, for example, Alice in Wonderland, and theorizes that such classics endure because children instinctively know what is best for them, and that their worst fears become more manageable when they are made explicit. This makes me think, again, of Arlo Guthrie. In the lead up to his poem about mooses, Arlo talks about his desire to write poems for little kids. He's tired, he says, of the new breed of self-esteem building songs, poems and books that, he says, kids have to put up with these days. I liked the old stuff that scared the hell out of you, give you a reason to stay under the covers at night. Feeling too good about yourself, he concludes, you tend to wander.

Positive thinking and always looking on the bright side is not all it's cracked up to be! Pain and suffering are part of life to be acknowledged. And at its best, says Armstrong, religion should help us see things as they are. She reminds us that the Buddha's father tried to shield him from sorrow by imprisoning him in a pleasure-palace, far removed from the real world. Only when Gotama left the palace and confronted sickness, decay and mortality, did his enlightenment begin.

The supreme emotion, says the Dalai Lama, is the capacity we have to empathize with one another, "the inability to bear the sight of another's suffering." If we can begin to enter another's pain, we can learn to love. It's in our nature, he believes, but is often blocked. Empathy, he says, leads to compassion – love, affection, kindness, gentleness, generosity of spirit, and warm-heartedness - to the practice of love, as St. Paul says, the greatest of the virtues. But not only love for other humans but for all of creation, as Meryl is reminding the children downstairs, compassion extended to animals as well. For a Buddhist, says Thich Nhat Hanh, as you look around you don't see anyone or anything that is not you father or mother: a squirrel is your father, a deer your mother. Now there's a highly developed spiritual awareness! I have to admit I'm still working on the human.

On this Valentine's day, celebrated in the midst of Lenten reflection and assessment of our lives, let us be mindful that deep love is a serious practice that has as its ground and partner, if you will, everyday suffering. Awareness of our own pain and that of others becomes, say the great masters, the impetus to give love and, hopefully receive it. It can be harsh and dreadful, as the monk in Dostoevsky's classic reminds, but it can be blissful as well when we are able to truly bond with another human being. When I reflect on the gift of the love I shared with y own father, I cannot neglect to see how much suffering was involved. It's a deep mystery why it is that way, yet it is at the core of the teachings of the great wisdom traditions. May we learn the lesson well.

Listen, Act & Sing: Peacemaking/Taoism
(in part, 3/5/06)
March 2, 2008

If you were not here last week, you missed this wonderful "show and tell" from our children. They studies and heard about UUs and chose to do these paper cutouts and present something of each of these people. One of the people highlighted was Pete Seeger, the great folk singer who is now just about 90 and still chugging along, even if he has lost his voice. Never mind, with Roger and Fran's help, we sang a couple of Seeger's best last week – "If I had a Hammer" and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" What a treat. Would you believe that after doing that on Sunday, wasn't there a PBS special on Pete Seeger on Wednesday, highlighting his remarkable life.

Ours is a peculiar religious movement in that we often claim people who are only tangentially related to us. For example, UUs often claim Thomas Jefferson or Ben Franklin or Henry David Thoreau, even though they were never really part of a Unitarian or Universalist church – they might have said something nice about UU, such as Jefferson who predicted most would eventually be Unitarians, though he didn't practice himself. Or Thoreau who had a kind of Unitarian upbringing and lots of Unitarian friends, but never really participated. Years ago Pete Seeger was interviewed in the UU magazine the World because of his UU connection. Much more recently he was interviewed by Beliefnet and said the following in response to the question "If you were to choose an organized religion, what would it be?": My mother was briefly a member of the Unitarian Church. I actually joined the Community Church (UU) on 35th street, in NY, because I had a chorus and we needed a place to rehearse. (Roger and Fran, you want to fess up!?) My wife Toshi thinks it was very dishonest of me to join a church simply because I needed to rehearse the chorus. But I've been on good terms with them ever since. And sung for them occasionally. And if I ever sing at all now, I would do it down there now. So what do you believe, the questioner went on? "I now feel that there must be microscopic electromagnetic waves that come out from our brain"! Remember when I talked about the Hindus last week and the "life waves" we constantly send out? "I feel most spiritual," he says, "when I'm out in the woods. I feel part of nature. Or looking up at the stars. I used to say I was an atheist. Now I say, it's all according to your definition of God. According to my definition of God, I'm not an atheist. Because I think God is everything. Whenever I open my eyes, I'm looking at God. Whenever I'm listening to something, I'm listening to God. I've had preachers of the gospel …saying 'Pete, I feel you're a very spiritual person,' and maybe I am. I feel strongly that I'm trying to raise people's spirits to get together…my main purpose in life at this age…I've decided that if there's a human race here in one hundred years, it will be because we learn how to participate with each other, even though we may disagree about many things."

“I’ve often thought, standing onstage with 1000 peoplein front of me, that somebody over on my right had a great-great grandfather who was trying to kill the great-great grandfather of somebody off to my left. And here we are all singing together. And wouldn’t it surprise all those great-grandfathers if they could see their great-grandchildren singing together? They’d probably say, “Why did we fight so hard?”

Watching the PBS profile of Pete Seegers was so inspiring. After serving in the Army during WW II, Pete joined the Young Communist League, because he thought their ideals were great. Eventually, by 1949, he had some disagreements and decided to leave but, as many know, in the 1950s, first with the Almanacs, then with the Weavers, he was called before the House on Un American Activities about this involvement. Pete simply refused to answer the questions. He said this is America, a great, free country and you get to believe what you want, as long as you don’t threaten or hurt anyone. When the reporters tried to bait him into admitting his involvement, he repeated that it wasn’t any of their affair what he believed or practiced. It’s a free country. But because of these associations, Pete was “blacklisted” for many years until the Smothers Brothers had the courage to put him on their show in the 1960s. All the years in between he just kept singing, wherever he was asked, as he said, “trying to raise people’s spirits.” In a great ironic twist, in the late 1990s he was honored at the Kennedy Center as a great American!

What most struck me about Pete’s manner throughout those difficult times, was his calm and his ability to remain focused on his music and bringing people together across differences and divides. In many ways Pete is a very political fellow, yet, in many ways he isn’t. He simply believes people should have food and land and housing and education and that wars are futile – he wrote a song about wars and their futility he called “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy.” Sounds political but it’s just great human logic. We just need to get in touch with it. Songs can help us. So Pete sings about it and believes by singing, he can bring people together.

As the children learn about world religions I thought about the spiritual path of Taoism, which it seems Pete practiced so well, knowingly or not. I thought what it takes to be so in touch with the human and to write and sing about it. It takes time, thought and listening. About just where songs come from, Pete said that Arlo Guthrie once proclaimed that “there’s a stream of songs flowing past you all the time, and you just have to know when to stick out your hand and get one.” Then he adds, (in typical Arlo fashion), “I’m lucky I don’t live downstream from Bob Dylan.” Taoism is a spiritual practice that seems to me would aid any great song writer or any of the rest of us as we negotiate this journey we are on.

(Peacemaking and Taoism, 3/5/06)

As we remember this month the 5th anniversary of the beginning of the war in Iraq, and we sponsor this afternoon's program featuring some reflections on this whole experience and what it means, I was struck by an insight from James Carroll, a columnist from the Globe who was once a Catholic priest, whose father was a general, and who writes presciently on issues of war and peace. Recently Carroll wrote concerning the notion of "national security" and the presidential race: (national security) "The phrase is potent because it promises something that is impossible, since the human condition is by definition insecure. When candidates vie with one another over who is most qualified to be 'commander in chief," and when they unanimously promise to strengthen military readiness, they together reinforce the dominant American "myth" (fallacy) – that an extravagant social investment of treasure and talent in armed power of the group offers members of the group escape from the existential dread that comes with life on a dangerous planet …" such a wager offers only the "feeling of security," not "actual security."

The Taoist Way understands this of our fragile life together. It offers only truth, not security. It suggests we do what we can, through creative solitude, to merely reduce friction and conflict in our lives, and the world around us. Pete Seeger's Way is that of song "trying to raise people's spirits" and bring unity through singing together. When he sang the following song for a Martin Luther King, jr. rally, Dr. King never stopped
thank

World Religions, Truth and Practice: Karen Armstrong
March 9, 2008

I'm thinking this morning, joyfully, that our children are being exposed to world religions, in this case Hinduism. How very different than the religious education I received. It made me think of back in 1989, Melanie I had recently returned from 6 mos. in Peru as I was researching for my doctoral thesis, and we were living with my mother for 6 months in JP. As we often did, we were strolling along the streets where I spent much of my childhood, youth and young adulthood saddened by the fact that we had finally decided that the religious home we had called ours no longer matched what we believed. Where would we go next, if anywhere, we wondered? All of a sudden, as we walked by a church I had passed thousands of times over the years, we noticed a message board that caught our eyes. It was a UU church with an inviting message. Wonder what that's all about, we said. We'll have to drop in one Sunday. After attending for a few weeks, someone invited us to an adult class entitled "Building Your Own Theology." BOT! I didn't know you could do that! In the class were UUs, Christians, Jews, Humanists, Pagans, Buddhists, etc. …what an adventure. We've never really looked back.

Now, turn the clock about 19 years and for the past month or so, 12 of us have been sharing thoughts from a book by an amazing religious scholar named Karen Armstrong. The book's title is "The Spiral Staircase" and it's a kind of personal and spiritual autobiography. In honor of women's history month, I thought it worth sharing a few insights from this remarkable spiritual seeker.

Much of Karen's story is full of anguish and disappointment. She entered a Catholic convent in England at age 17 in 1962. Seven years later she left, after much pain and confusion, having convinced herself that she had failed in her primary vocation to seek and experience God and live a life of fidelity to her religious vows. She had lots of physical and emotional difficulty in those years and left feeling like a square peg in a round hole. Her religious superiors were not especially helpful or sympathetic toward Karen's difficulties, physical and spiritual. Remarkably, though, Karen didn't really blame them, rather she thought of herself as a failure. For many years after this "failed" convent experience, she continued to struggle with physical and emotional difficulties, and disappointing career experiences; her doctoral dissertation in Literature at Oxford was rejected, while her attempts at a teaching career left her less than satisfied. Meanwhile her search for God hit a dead end and she finally acknowledged she no longer believed. The first time she decided no longer to celebrate Easter was a moment of great liberation, she declared. At the time, she was living with people who were professed atheists and this seemed exactly the right medicine for her to, once and for all, let go of the futile search for the Supreme Being of her spiritual journey. After a horrendous episode of losing consciousness at a train station, she was finally correctly diagnosed with epilepsy, offering her a tremendous relief

that she could finally name and properly treat her long term maladies of body and spirit.

It still took Karen many years, though, to finally find her true self and vocation in life. Along the way there were some wonderful moments of honesty and humor, such as the time she was dining with two gay friends who began asking her about her relational/love life. She quickly intuited that they were expecting her to come out of the closet and admit she was a lesbian. She chuckled, as did the class, when responding to them that she had many male relationships over the years, each one a dead end. She had finally accepted the fact that she was a "failed heterosexual" and expected to live her life a single woman, an "outsider in a society in which coupledom is the norm."

Ever so slowly, Karen began to create her own, unique personal and spiritual adventure. It began when, after many years in therapy, she decided to give up on psychiatry. Maybe it could help others she reasoned, but not herself. She had the insight that she "submitted to other people's programs and agendas for far too long – maybe that was the problem – it was time to take her life into her own hands. The beginning, she said, of "turning the corner." Interestingly, despite her rejection of her own religious past, and her declaration of disbelief, it was a deep spiritual insight from a Jewish friend that opened Karen up to a whole new world of understanding religion. She had always thought, and been told, that religion and the spiritual journey was about believing the right thing, getting your beliefs straight. But her Jewish friend said that true religion is not so much about what you believe, your doctrine, but rather what you practice, how you live. For Jews he said, we don't spend a lot of time on theology and doctrine, that's for the poets. What matters most is living right. One can believe a lot of things. That's ok. Good ethics is what counts. For Karen, who judged herself a religious failure because she stopped believing what she learned growing, this was a revelation that it was orthopraxis not orthodoxy that mattered. And, incredibly, this insight allowed Karen to begin to take up, once again, her interest in things religious, the beginning of her life of solitary scholarship ("God and I had unfinished business," she mused "even though I didn't believe that he existed,"). Mostly, she imagined, she wanted to study religion to criticize and to expose all the problems and warts of religious beliefs throughout history. However, much to her surprise, serious academic study of religion actually became, as our Hindu brethren might say, her own spiritual path to liberation and wholeness.

It was while writing a serious study of the medieval crusades that so horrified Karen that she began to see the importance of opening herself always to other points of view, and the beginning of her life as a serious scholar of world religions. Her study of the crusades convinced her that, despite the modern perspective in the West that Islam is an inherently violent religion, that her own Christian heritage was much more brutal than Islam in its treatment of other people and religions. She began to read and study and write seriously about Islam and Buddhism and did it in a way that she tried to enter into the mindset

and the consciousness of the figures she studied, such as the Buddha and Muhammad, as she had done earlier with St. Paul, and found herself with each of these figures empathizing greatly with their life and beliefs. She learned this from a great scholar of religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who when teaching students about different religions, insisted they not only study the religion for the term, but live like they were part of that religion – so while studying Islam, students would pray 5 times a day, give money to charities, fast during Ramadan, etc.
In this whole remarkable odyssey, Karen says it was her decision to write a book she later called the "History of God," that had the most impact on her renewed adventure to understand the spiritual life. Curiously, as she researched and wrote, she began to focus on her own inner life. She expected to write a history of how various religions created their own images of God, which she would proceed to tear apart as purely human wish fulfillment and fantasy. Instead, she slowly began to discover, the exercise became a way for her to completely re-imagine and reconstruct notions of the sacred. It's as if she was beginning to come full circle in her life, reverting back to her initial search for God, yet coming to completely different understandings of what it is to experience the holy. Rather than imagine God as a Being and object as she had struggled to do or fail to do in the convent, she began through her study to imagine God as paradox and mystery, leaving one with only a sense of awe and wonder as the great mystics would say. Maybe, she began to wonder, that the absence she also felt could actually be understood as a sacred presence, a presence impossible to describe or understand. Early on she had been taught to find the holy through reason and argument, as if God was some object out there, but now she believed the sacred could be experienced only through intuition, through mythology and mysticism, and the study of many, many religious traditions, which opened up new worlds of thought and ideas. A medieval Muslim mystic Ibn al-Arabi summed it up well for her: "Do not attach yourself to any particular creed exclusively, so that you may disbelieve all the rest; otherwise you will lose much good, nay, you will fail to recognize the real truth of the matter. God … is not confined to any one creed, for, he says, "Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah." (Or Yahweh or Brahmin or Nirvana!)

What Karen has most learned from her empathetic study of so many traditions is that there is no certainty of belief, be it the Hindu or Buddhist or Pagan or Christian or Islamic. Ultimately, she experienced, this letting go of certainty of beliefs is liberating - , as humans, the search for certainty is futile and, ultimately divisive, so often leading to violence and conflict. The best theology, she writes, is Universalist. If you are determined to prove your own tradition alone is correct, self and ego take over, and you stray from the search for truth. Ultimately, she believes, what most matters can be found in all the great wisdom traditions, that is, the practice of compassion. Believe what you will, but live your life feeling deeply the pain of others and act to relieve that suffering. This is what has been the great lesson she has taken from her studies of the great traditions. If a religious idea or belief does not lead to practical compassion, she argues, it is

invalid. “If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express this sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, or self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God’s name, it was bad theology.” A simple “litmus test.” She really sounds like a Universalist when she jokes that for those who think part of religion is the ability to disapprove of others, to make judgment, imagine their outrage when they get to heaven and find everyone else there as well!

As the book came to a conclusion it was great to find that this dignified, yet tortured soul has found her unique spiritual path in her rather monastic and silent life of reading, writing and study. She is no longer living out someone else’s spiritual adventure; she has found her own as we each must do. That’s her ultimate gift to the reader, I believe. “The great myths show,” she says, “that when you follow somebody else’s path, you go astray.” We must venture into the darkness of the unknown – without a map or clear route…explore your own labyrinth not somebody else’s … endure your own ideal … if you merely follow in another’s footsteps, setting out to please others or meet other’s expectations, you’ll not have an adventure, and worse, you won’t fulfill the unique call that each of us has.

Karen Armstrong was many years getting to this place, thorough many trials and tribulations. She has lived with uncertainty and been liberated by it. And through her deep study of the great wisdom traditions, she found empathy and compassion for the great figures she learned about and continues to pass on those joyful insights to all those who cross her unique spiritual path. She is a gift to the universe.

Somehow, each of us has landed here on our own spiritual adventure, whatever it is that got us here. As Melanie and I realized that day back in 1989, the real task is to build your own theology, thus fulfilling your own unique journey to truth. We can only hope that this community of faith will help provide you with the nurture and encouragement to do just that. So may it be.

Anger: What to do with it?
March 16, Palm Sunday

Being in this business of ministry, you sometimes have to field difficult questions. I think often, when people can't figure out some of the BIG questions about life and meaning, they look for a minister/priest/Rabbi, etc. A good Jewish friend, who is pretty much a secular and cultural Jew, is great at posing such dilemmas. One of his sons is 10 and my friend decided he's got to school Sasha a bit in Judaism so they start reading the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and he's horrified at all the violence and conflict and battles and what to make of it. He's especially struck at how often God is angry at someone. So, Uncle Art, he says, how do you explain this kind of emotional and vindictive God?

He's right, of course, about the anger and judgment of God. Just listen to one example: Usually the prophet is God's mouthpiece to the people, in this case Amos 5: 18-20! (Really dark, angry words from God about people's behavior) Whew. Talk about angry. Theologians usually explain or refer to this as God's Righteous Anger & Judgment, i.e., through the prophet God is condemning the people's conduct – usually the conduct of leaders who have set up a class system to benefit themselves and exploit the poor. So God's anger and judgment is seen as moral and just – it's about justice and people have to pay for bad behavior; accept their punishment. And then, of course, the God of the Old Testament also shows mercy and love, often giving evil doers a second and third chance. Still, though, the angry/judging God is pretty fearsome and, I might add, pretty emotional at times. Not someone you'd especially want to ever meet, I'd venture.

So then along comes Jesus, a fellow pretty much in this line of Jewish prophets, but a figure full of love and kindness and compassion, offering forgiveness and mercy, a pretty sympathetic and understanding type. Good with kids; good with the sick and elderly. Yet every once in a while he shows a different side like the day, not long before he's arrested and executed by the Romans, when he enters into the holy city, Jerusalem, goes to the High Temple, and acts like a madman, overturning tables and telling all the money changers to get out. Talk about anger. It's pretty uncharacteristic; where did that come from? Well, it's very clear from the life of Jesus that a central message he preached was that everyone is equal in God's eyes, everyone is invited to the table, and that it was an abomination that wealthy and elite leaders, priests and public officials made life tough for the poor and less well off. If there's one thing that got him agitated it was that – social inequality and exploitation. That's what he thought the Temple symbolized and he decided to clear it out with an outburst of anger. And he got their attention and it got him killed.

Here's a funny thing: there's a UU curriculum for children that tells the story of Jesus going into the Temple and overturning tables and in a rage throwing

people out and the curriculum raises the question: how could Jesus had dealt with this situation differently? Not lost his temper, I guess?!

So what do we make of Divine anger, righteous anger according to the theologians? What do we make of human anger? Is it ever justified? Does it help? Are there other ways to deal with conflict and injustice?

In a wonderful book on suffering and compassion, a Jungian psychologist named Polly Young-Eisendrath, suggests that some years back there was a movement in psychotherapy to encourage folks to get out anger – one psychologist called this the "ventilationist" bias, i.e., getting out negative feelings is honest, healthy and justified – let it rip! The problem is, Young says, it wasn't so good for ongoing relations or even one's own piece of mind. The fix was momentary, I guess. In Young's mind, it is first of all important to distinguish anger from aggression. Anger is useful, she contends, because she sees it mainly as a "moral emotion," i.e., it is an "indignant" feeling in response to a perceived injustice, but it should always involve reflection, thoughtfulness, and never just be an attack on someone else. When we get angry, we have a choice whether or not to express it – we reflect on the bigger picture and ask: does expressing anger help right the wrong? We have the option, she says, to address our anger with words right away or express it in the future in some creative act such as a demonstration or painting or cleaning the closet or writing a letter. Anger can, she suggests, change the world if directed appropriately – that is – when it can be heard, understood or expressed symbolically. Just think of the Civil Rights Movement, the non-violent marches on Washington, the campaign of Nelson Mandela in South Africa or Rosa Parks on the bus in Montgomery – you think they weren't angry? Anger can save energy and trouble if it stops something from going too far or in the wrong direction like when someone is making fun of a person and you say stop it, don't so that, I don't like that – that's anger expressed in a constructive manner to turn around hurtful behavior.

Aggression, says Young, is very different – it is often instinctual, aimed at protecting oneself, either by attacking another or withdrawing – fight or flight! Active aggression means attacking physically or emotionally, intimidating, name-calling, blaming, trivializing another. Passive aggression is withdrawing, going silent, stonewalling, procrastinating, putting another down with humor or putting oneself down.

I learned passive aggression early on in life as part of the family dynamic. Screaming or shouting or fighting wasn't approved, so we learned to withdraw affection, go silent, ignore, refuse to communicate. In honor of St. Paddy's Day, I couldn't go without an Irish story, here's a great example of the perfection of Irish passive aggression ("Father O'Malley).(short, funny story with passive aggressive punchline)

Aggression settles nothing and usually leads to more aggression. Aggression begets aggression. Just look at how long the Irish nationals responded to repression by the English and Anglo-Irish by aggression and how it only escalated; how the Palestinians have responded to oppression with aggression and it has only escalated. Irish Nationals and Palestinians have legitimate grievances but they can't be heard because of their aggressive response. Ever since 9/11, that's the way I feel about our leadership in the U.S. They met aggression with aggression, physically with weaponry, and symbolically with words, and it has only escalated the conflict with no end in sight. We're good, they're evil, and the rhetoric and bloodshed goes on. The war on terror brings more terror. Nothing gets settled.

"Anger," not aggression, she concludes, "is effective as a communication for setting limits and responding to injustice. It is a statement about the self and the domain of one's tolerance, but it is not an attack on another." In the end we must understand what she calls the "principle of absolute dependence, that we're all more dependent than otherwise" and aggression, to attack or diminish another, is effectively attacking and diminishing myself.

On this question of how to deal with our aggression and violence, says Thich Nhat Hanh, "the answer…is deceptively simple: 'Our daily lives have the most to do with the situation of the world. If we can change our daily lives, we can change our governments and we can change the world. Our presidents and our governments are us. They reflect our lifestyle and our way of thinking. The way we hold a cup of tea, pick up a newspaper, and even use toilet paper have to do with peace…there is no real boundary between what we call our inner anger and what we call the external violence of our society: the bombs are us."

Both these authors suggest the need for calm and reflection, what the Buddhists call "mindfulness," a deep spiritual practice to help us look at conflict and difficulty, determine if there is an injustice, and respond to it creatively without attack or aggression. Most especially, we need mindfulness and reflection to "learn to see and accept the reality of who we are" warts and all. And that, mysteriously, we are all in this together, all related. How liberating it is to accept myself, overcome that instinct of self-hate, wherever it comes from; be compassionate with myself, and extend that to others.

So maybe those theologians aren't far off with their notion of righteous anger and if we allow that of God and Jesus, then righteous anger has a place if we use it to creatively respond to injury and harm and injustice. But always keeping in mind the aim to right the wrong and heal the wound. And in our day, I believe, those who have done this most creatively have done it with non-violence – whether Mohandas Gandhi or Rosa Parks or Martin King or Dorothy Day or Nelson Mandela. My wish and prayer this Holy Week is that as demonstrations take place calling for an end to war, that the anger is expressed in ways that do not attack or injure but that show us the way to heal deep wounds within ourselves

and in our country as whole. The newest UU bumper sticker says, beautifully, “Nurture Your Spirit, Help Heal Our World.” Let it begin right now. Amen.