

INTRODUCTION: NOT ONLY A FAIR WEATHER FAITH

Religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.

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Religion and Life's Crises

The story is told that before the birth of Gautama, who was to become the Buddha, his parents were told that he would be either a great emperor or an extraordinary religious leader. Determined that his son become a great emperor, the father tried to prevent the boy from becoming interested in religion by shielding his son from awareness of old age, disease, and death. The father built three palaces for Gautama, surrounded him with young, healthy attendants and thousands of dancing girls, and made sure that whenever he went riding, his path was cleared of any who were ill or elderly or dying.

Even so, one day as he was out riding, the prince saw a bald, toothless and feeble old man and asked what was wrong with him. He was told that the man was simply old and that when people become old they lose their hair and teeth and become feeble. The next day the prince saw a person suffering from an incurable disease, and he learned for the first time that pain and suffering belong to the human condition. The third day he saw a funeral procession, and the young man learned the dreadful fact of death.

Deeply distressed by these revelations he asked: "How can life be happy and joyful if we suffer pain and illness and eventually become old and die?" Resolving to dedicate his life to a search for freedom from the miseries of old age, disease, and death, he embarked on a religious quest.

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski wrote:

Religion is not born out of speculation or reflection, still less out of illusion or misapprehension, but rather out of the real tragedies of human life, out of the conflict between human plans and realities.¹

To qualify as a vital and viable religion a religious movement must deal with the tragedies of human life in a significant way. However, some have felt our Unitarian Universalist faith fails to do that. For example, several years ago the Religion section of *Time* magazine carried a story about a rabbi who, dissatisfied with Judaism, was seeking a religious affiliation more compatible with his modern scientific views. Asked if Unitarianism might not be the religion he was looking for, the rabbi replied that it was not, because Unitarianism did not deal adequately with the reality of death.

Recently a member of my own congregation who had lost her father wrote me to say that despite having benefited immensely from the life-affirming experience of participation in our congregation for several years, she was returning to the Roman Catholic Church of her childhood because Unitarian Universalists did not offer the answers she sought as she tried to cope with her father's death and the prospect of her own.

These evaluations may represent more than two isolated instances. Those of us who proclaim and practice liberal religion may sometimes have portrayed ours as a fair weather religion, a religion for the sunny days, not a religion for

all seasons. My purpose is to make clear a liberal religious perspective on several of the important issues all of us face at one time or another. If Unitarian Universalists cannot speak adequately to these crises, then I would agree with our detractors that our faith fails us. However, this is not the case. A liberal faith does provide satisfying answers to the crises of life, specifically to the struggle for meaning and purpose, the problem of pain and suffering, and the crisis of loss and death.

To be human is to endure pain and loss and the separation of death — both separation from loved ones who die and finally our own separation by death from all that we love and enjoy. No religion eliminates pain, loss, separation or death from human life, and no religion prevents those realities from causing us suffering and grief. Unitarian Universalists, like other religious people, find in their faith a perspective that gives meaning to personal crises and comfort and strength in times of crisis. Religious faith does not of course eliminate the crises of life; it does reduce the anguish they bring and provides resources to cope with their impact.

To be human is also to question the reasons for and the meaning of suffering, loss and death. The answers of the liberally religious to these "why" questions are not the same as those given by the more traditionally religious, but they are both honest and satisfying.

It is sometimes said, perhaps in the interest of promoting a superficial tolerance or unity, that it does not matter what we believe. I disagree. What we believe shapes our attitudes toward life and our responses to specific events. What we believe about life and its meaning, about suffering, loss and death influences deeply how we live and what we do when

we face these experiences. This book offers a liberal philosophical and theological perspective on these experiences.

Our faith has to offer us more, though, than an intellectual understanding in the midst of crisis. Equally important is the personal or pastoral dimension, the ministry of the religious community to those suffering loss. To be human is not only to think; it is also to feel, and an adequate religious response to life's crises will include a ministry to the emotional aspect of life. Our discussion includes a treatment of both the psychological dynamics of particular crises and the effective ministry of the caring religious community.

Humanist and Theist

Liberal religion addresses the crises of life from a perspective amenable to *both* an open but non-theistic humanism and a naturalistic theism. Non-theistic humanists doubt the existence of a supernatural Creator and hold that we are responsible for ourselves and for the world, that we are not to expect a supernatural power to intervene on our behalf or empower or comfort us in times of need. To this type of humanist the resources we have to sustain us are within the self and within the human community, and these are considerable and sufficient. Most humanists do not believe in personal immortality, and so a humanist response to the problem of death will differ from that of the traditional theist.

In the first half of the twentieth century, humanists tended to be dogmatic in their rejection of theism and insistence that humanity must learn to be self-sufficient. More recently, a new humanism has emerged which is compatible with some forms of liberal theism. I call it "open humanism," for although it seldom uses "God-language," it is open to the mystery of life and to transcendence in life.

Humanists and liberal theists may make quite similar responses to the crises dealt with in this book.

Mystery lies all around us: the mystery of life itself, the mystery of the universe, the mystery of love and the mystery of human intelligence. Even with the great discoveries of modern science, there is still much about life and the world that we do not understand, cannot explain, and may never understand or explain. With Einstein the humanist affirms that awareness of that which is impenetrable to us is the source of true religiousness. And with Dag Hammarskjöld, the open humanist agrees that

God does not die on the day when we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason.²

The major components of naturalistic theism may be outlined as follows.

Naturalistic theism shares with non-theistic humanism the view that we human beings are free and therefore responsible for our own actions. Its God is neither a Calvinistic God who foreordains and predestines everything nor the God of the pietist who regards whatever occurs as the will of Deity.

The naturalistic theist maintains that we humans are responsible for the world as well as for our own individual lives. God does not violate human freedom to save us from our own mistakes or malice. The naturalistic theist agrees with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young German pastor and theologian executed by the Nazis for his involvement in the plot on Hitler's life. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer wrote that for many God was a *deus ex machina* to be called on in times of crisis to rescue them, as in Greek drama when the author of a play introduced a god to resolve

an otherwise insoluble situation. Bonhoeffer insisted that God is not like that, but that God expects us to solve our own problems. Rather than being a cause for despair, response to this God is an incentive to discovery and growth.

For the naturalistic theist, God's role is somewhat like that of a magnetic field. It draws us toward the good, the true and the beautiful, or it inspires and empowers us to do the good. God's power is the attracting, persuading power of love, not the power of force or compulsion.

Feminist theologians have contributed significantly to a contemporary liberal conception of God by repudiating the male imagery traditionally associated with deity in the West. Male imagery implies a God whose power is the power of strength or force rather than the attractive power of love and beauty that would be associated with female imagery of the divine. Male imagery also suggests a dominant and authoritarian God who expects subservience and obedience whereas female imagery implies a deity who works with and cares for human beings and continually nurtures our growth and creativity.³

Moreover, the God of naturalistic theism is not a supernatural being separate from the world who acts upon the world from without, but a God who is immanent in life and the world. The liberal theist postulates a monism in which God is in some sense identified with the universe and the universe with God. This is not the traditional dualistic view in which God and the world are separate entities.

Since the only language applicable to God is symbolic and metaphorical, we acknowledge the limits of our ability to conceptualize and discuss this or any type of theism. However, symbols and metaphors can be helpful in pointing to the relationship of God and the world. For example, God

may be understood as the Ground of Being (Paul Tillich); that is, as that Life in which all things are rooted and from which all things draw nourishment and sustenance. This type of imagery is also found in feminist theology which suggests the Earth Mother image.

Or, the relationship of God and the world may be thought of as analogous to the relationship between air and living things. God is like the air we breathe; it is everywhere, invisible, and that upon which we depend for life. (It is interesting to note that in both Greek and Hebrew the word for breath is the same as the word for spirit.)

While such metaphors are only very partial representations of the holy in life (they involve no moral dimension, for example), they offer images of God quite different from the traditional image of an all-powerful Father. The immanence of God or the identification of God with the world represents a paradigm shift now occurring in the way many people conceive of God. Evidence of such a shift can be cited from a number of sources, but I will mention only two.

Albert Einstein wrote:

The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend definitions of God, and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from *the experience of all things as a meaningful unity*.⁴

In an extraordinary passage of *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker, Celie and Shug talk about God. Celie has spoken of her rejection of a God she regards as white, male, distant, and unhelpful. Shug, however, has a very different conception:

Here's the thing . . . The thing I believe. God is inside you, and inside everybody else. You come into

the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. . .

It? [Celie asks]

Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.⁵

Then follows a passage in which Shug refers to her mystical "feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. . . ."⁶

An important implication of this worldview for a theology that deals with life's crises is the inter-connectedness of all life and particularly of all humankind. Moreover, the God of naturalistic theism may be understood not as complete and unchanging, as in traditional theology, but, like all creation, as in process. God can be thought of as participating actively in the vast ongoing evolutionary process of the universe, pulling it toward maturation, or perhaps better, inspiring and empowering all living things toward the good.

God is that concept we use to point to the mystery and glory in and behind the universe and life, what Rudolf Otto called the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The liberally religious, theist and non-theist, like all religious people, is filled with awe and wonder at the inexpressibly vast and beautiful universe in which we live. Such wonder leads to worship, and the liberal theist calls the object of worship God.

Postscript

Since individual freedom of belief is a cardinal principle for Unitarian Universalists, no one can articulate *the* Unitarian Universalist answers to the crises of life. My intention

here is to articulate a liberal religious perspective I hope will have value for others as well.

Finally, I am told the Chinese ideogram for *crisis* has two parts. One part means *danger*; the other means *opportunity*.⁷ When we experience a crisis, we are in danger of having the foundations on which we have built our lives shaken and perhaps destroyed, but we are also confronted with an opportunity for growth. I hope this book will help the reader deal with the dangerous aspect of crises and also suggest ways in which the experience of crisis may be an opportunity for spiritual growth and maturation.

RESOURCES OF LIBERAL RELIGION IN TIMES OF CRISIS

What are the principal resources the religious liberal has at his or her disposal for dealing with the crises of life? This chapter will suggest some of these, and subsequent chapters will apply these resources to specific concerns.

For several years Antoine de Saint Exupéry flew a mail plane in the early days of flying when airplanes did not have today's sophisticated equipment. Saint Exupéry tells of one experience flying the route from Southern France across the Mediterranean Sea to North Africa. Night fell with the pilot and his radio operator, Neri, above the Sahara, and the radio messages sent from the ports in the desert concerning their position were clearly inaccurate. They suddenly found themselves far off course and low on fuel.

We had no means of angular orientation, were already deafened, and were bit by bit growing blind. The moon like a pallid ember began to go out in the banks of fog. Overhead the sky was filling with clouds, and we flew thenceforth between cloud and fog in a world voided of all substance and all light. The ports that signaled us had given up trying to tell us where we were. "No bearings, no bearings," was all their message, for our voice reached them from everywhere and nowhere. With sinking hearts Neri and I leaned out, he on his side and I on mine, to see if anything, anything at all, was distinguishable in this void. Already our tired eyes were seeing things — errant signs, delusive flashes, phantoms.

The fliers' emotions suddenly went from despair to hope and joy as a point of light appeared on their port bow.

Assuming it was the light of an airport, Saint Exupéry began to bank the plane in the direction of the light only to see it twinkle and go out. They saw other lights, but with each their hopes rose only to be dashed as the light proved to be that of another star.

... And with that we knew ourselves to be lost in interplanetary space among a thousand inaccessible planets, we who sought only the one veritable planet, our own, that planet on which alone we should find our familiar countryside, the houses of our friends, our treasures.

What a fitting and poignant metaphor of our situation in the midst of a crisis! We experience a feeling of being lost, groping in the dark, looking for a light to show us the way, and finding none, or perhaps like Saint Exupéry, finding first one then another, none of which saves. But the story continues.

Flying blind and often in dense fog, not knowing where he was but knowing he could not make his destination, Saint Exupéry now began to set his course so he would not have to come down at sea. Then suddenly the airport at Cisneros, their destination, made contact with them. They now knew the direction they needed to follow although they did not think they had enough fuel to get to Cisneros.

But the airports one by one had been waking each other up. Into our dialogue broke the voices of Agadir, Casablanca, Dakar. The radio stations at each of these towns had warned the airports and the ports had flashed the news to our comrades. Bit by bit they were gathering round us as round a sick-bed. . . .

And suddenly into this conclave burst Toulouse, the headquarters of the Line three thousand miles away, worried along with the rest. Toulouse broke in without a word of greeting, simply to say sharply, "Your

reserve tanks bigger than standard. You have two hours fuel left. Proceed to Cisneros." ⁷

Four points from this story suggest the resources available to the liberally religious in times of crisis.

First, our own resources are often greater than we realize. "Your reserve tanks bigger than standard." I believe this is true of all us. We have reserves we seldom draw on and often don't know are there. But they are. We have only to reach down more deeply to draw on resources within ourselves.

I have seen this happen time and again. I think of a woman whose husband was dying a long, slow death from cancer. His gradual loss of physical, then mental capabilities bore down physically and emotionally on her. Where she found the strength to care for him and then after his death to participate with me in planning a meaningful memorial service, I can only guess. But I would say she drew on reserves deep within herself.

I think of a dying man who faced his last months and weeks with courage and grace and cheerfulness, determined to live as well as possible until the end. I am sure he was drawing on deep inner resources.

Some of us would say these people were strengthened by God or that the power and grace of God at work in them enabled them to carry on under trying circumstances. Others would insist that they were simply drawing on human resources. The theist identifies the depth in our being with God or the Creative Life Force; the non-theist does not. Whatever we name it, the religious liberal can recognize and acknowledge a deep reservoir within each person from which strength comes in times of crisis.

Unitarian Universalists hold central a belief in the dignity of each person including oneself. With this goes a faith in one's ability to tap one's own deep inner resources, or, if you wish, to draw strength from the Power of Love and Creativity. This is very different from "toughing it out", from a kind of Stoic resignation and stiff upper lip attitude. What I am talking about has more of the character of grace. It involves the faith that life is good and worthwhile, though it is often unfair and includes pain and loss and ultimately death. It involves gratitude for what is, without bitterness or resentment for what is not and cannot be.

We usually think of faith as assent to a set of teachings for which there is little empirical evidence. But that is belief, not faith. Faith refers to a basic trust that life is good and worth living and that the context in which we live is gracious and trustworthy. To a person with this basic trust, life is a gift, a gift to be enjoyed and cherished and developed and used for the benefit of humankind. This basic trust cannot be demonstrated by reason; nor is it a doctrine. It is an attitude, a basic confidence in or loyalty to life, and a deep resource in facing the crises of life.

A second resource available to Unitarian Universalists is the caring community. In times of personal crisis we need the help of others, and we can depend on others. Saint Exupéry was saved by the efforts of other people who finally succeeded in making radio contact with him. Others were reaching out, trying to help.

Few of us can get through our most serious personal crises without help from others. No matter how deeply we draw on our own reserves or inner resources, we need the support, encouragement, advice, comfort, and reassurance of others. Sometimes we simply need another perspective, a

new way of looking at things. And, perhaps most, we need the caring presence of others. Often there is little anyone can say or do to reduce the pain or sorrow we are feeling, but just to know that another person cares enough to visit with us or just to be there with us silently sharing our pain and grief — sometimes that is enough. It does not change the situation that brought suffering to us — nothing can do that — but it can bring comfort and solace. Albert Schweitzer said it well: "At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person."

Liberal religion is not only a way to look at things religiously, a theology; it also creates a caring religious community. Many times people who have suffered loss or experienced crisis in some form have told me how much their friends in the church meant to them during their most difficult time. In times of personal crisis there is no substitute for a caring community, for people ministering to one another. When Martin Luther proclaimed the priesthood of all believers he was surely referring not only to the idea that each person has direct access to God without a mediator but also to the fact that each of us can and should minister to others. The ministry of professionals is important (as a professional myself, I believe this with all my being!), but it is not a substitute for the ministry of the laity. Both are needed.

Third, all of us sometimes operate with erroneous ideas that interfere with the satisfactory resolution of our difficulty. In Saint Exupéry's case, he was operating with at least two false ideas. He thought he had less fuel than he did, and he thought he was farther off course than he really was. So too we may think that our lives are without signifi-

cance or that we cannot find joy after the death of a spouse or after divorce.

What we believe matters; what we think about an event or a situation influences how we feel and what we do in response to it. Our expectations play an important role in our attitudes. As long as Saint Exupéry believed he could not make it to Cisneros, he followed one course. When he learned that he had extra fuel and could make it, he changed course. If I believe that my life can be meaningful and of value only if I rise to the top in my profession or make a lot of money, I will live one way. If I believe that my life becomes meaningful because of daily acts of kindness and helpfulness, I will live another way. What we believe about suffering plays an important role in how we respond to suffering. What we believe about death influences our response when another dies and as we anticipate our own death.

So what we believe about these human experiences makes a difference in how we respond when we confront these matters. That is why much of this book deals with matters of belief, with theology.

I conclude this chapter with a final insight drawn from Saint Exupéry's experience which applies to us when we confront a critical situation in our lives. Even though Saint Exupéry was not sure where he was or how to get to his destination, he steered his course in the way that seemed best; he flew on in the hope that he would find the right course.

Sometimes that is the best we can do, too. In a difficult situation, unsure where we are or where we are going or how we can get there, we need not give up nor lose hope. Rather we can continue to steer our course in the best way we know

in the hope and faith that it will soon become clear, that we will get through the crisis somehow. Sometimes all we can do is to "hang in there," with very little faith and very little hope, but with just enough that we don't give up on ourselves or that we don't despair.

At such times it is terribly important to be able to draw upon the faith of liberal religion that human life is sacred and worth living and that there are resources deep within which will sustain us and see us through. It is also crucial to have the support of a caring community. A liberal faith offers much by way of both insight and support when we face difficult times.

PART II

THE CRISIS OF MEANING AND PURPOSE

SESSION ONE :A FAITH FOR ALL SEASONS

Shared Ministry / Scheduled for October 27, 2002

Preparation: Please read Part I of the book (pp. 3-18)

Questions we will address in our discussion:

1. The book says that liberal religion has sometimes been said to fail to offer adequate response to people who have experienced a crisis involving suffering or loss. Have you known people who have felt this way or have you felt this way yourself?
2. The perspective of the book includes both open humanism and naturalistic theism. What is the difference between these points of view? (humanist beliefs?/theist beliefs?) What do you personally believe about God and the role of God in personal crises? Is the God of naturalistic theism too impersonal a God to be a source of solace?
3. We will divide into pairs and discuss a personal crisis and the resources that were offered by our personal faith perspective and/or from the church community. After partner sharing, we will reconvene to compare experiences. Concluding questions we'll ask is :To what extent is our church a "caring community?" Are there ways we can be more effective?