

WHAT DOES A UU THEOLOGIAN EAT FOR BREAKFAST?

— A sermon by Jaco B. ten Hove — Paint Branch UU Church — August 12, 2007 —

Maybe you've never really been moved to wonder what a UU theologian eats for breakfast, which would be a reasonable posture, I admit. Today's sermon title may seem like just an impertinent rhetorical question, but I hope to show otherwise.

First, though, a word about theologians. Theologians, in general, are those people who feel called to mull over and write about deep religious concepts and who find a way to financially support their habit. One runs into them again and again in seminary course reading lists and on heavy library shelves.

Stereotypically, theologians tend to sequester themselves apart from the harder edges of the world, apart from day-to-day realities, in order to ponder intangibles and conscientiously crank out ream after lofty ream of important paperwork. They examine and interpret and propose and talk mainly to each other about often obscure, multi-syllabic subjects of allegedly fundamental relevance, such as ontological eschatology.

By comparison, breakfast menus might seem like an awfully mundane subject, which indeed they are—and that's my point. Because back on that hard edge of day-to-day reality there grows among some of us a suspicious feeling about theology and theologians. Huge, philosophical notions bandied around in safe, intellectual circles are only so much morning fog unless they can provide digestible nutrition to get you and me started on another day.

I suggest that we are fundamentally sustained as much by the simple, intentional act of, say, eating breakfast as by any amount of complex pondering when such mind work remains merely a passive, theoretical exercise. The 350 year old words of Martin Luther provide a caveat for those who would be expert in matters religious: "A theologian is born..." he said, "not by thinking, reading or speculating..., [but] by living, nay dying" [Luther, *Table Talk* (1569), p. 352].

Another day dawns and where are we? Another day dawns and what are we chewing on? "What's for breakfast?" Are we aware of living and dying? An eminent if fictional theologian might put it this way: "What's going to happen exciting today?" (Winnie-the-Pooh, from *The Tao of Pooh*.)

When so much of the world is struggling just to get another meal on the table, when profound injustice implicates even much of the religious realm, the career field of theologian begins to appear shaded in irrelevance. So one might wonder if a Unitarian Universalist theologian would be any different.

Enter the Reverend Doctor James Luther Adams, who was a different sort of religious expert, an inspiring and challenging model of religion in action, a man in deep relationship to his time and his abiding beliefs, whose long lifeline spanned almost exactly the 20th century. Born in 1901 in eastern Washington State to a fundamentalist Christian family, he died in 1994 as a pre-eminent and beloved UU theologian, whose work continues to guide our sense of social ethics.

His theology is grounded in a vision for “a global community of mutual trust” [from *On Being Human Religiously*, Editor’s Introduction, p.xxiv]. “JLA,” as he is fondly known, did a fair share of very significant writing, to be sure, much of it found in a collection of his essays entitled, “On Being Human, Religiously.” But he was so busy engaging with life that he never got around to organizing his writings beyond essay form.

All his renowned and thorough scholarship serves to back up a surprisingly simple imperative—simple but still in need of emphasis. It is one that he lived out to its fullest in his own life:

Any theology (and belief system) is immediately, ultimately and especially tested by its embodiment in people and their institutions.

[from *On Being Human Religiously*]

He advocated a powerfully practical philosophy rooted in ethical activity, and lots of it. The point of religious contact most interesting to Jim Adams was where the theological “rubber meets the road” of reality. For him, theology must have direct application in social settings, in response to real problems and real people. Here’s a theologian who could hold his own up in the ivory tower, but whose primary concerns as a religious expert were well grounded in the activity of living. How refreshing!

Over the years, in communing with theologians and global figures of the highest rank, Adams garnered quite a reputation for this fiercely uncompromising requirement of theology grounded in application. More than once did abstractly-inclined speakers spot him in the audience and adjust their remarks to either include more concrete terms or apologize for a lack thereof. And yet his genuine personality was such that he also inspired great friendship and loyalty.

He and spouse Margaret were especially well known for hosting students in their home, where Jim would engage them good-naturedly but intensely, such that any number of my colleagues can relate very formative stories of their conversations with him. I was not lucky enough to ever encounter him face-to-face, but I did contact him once, out of the blue, to help me consider my own religious diet.

James Luther Adams had just turned 90 when I wrote to ask what he ate for breakfast, with hopes of getting his attention and a few pointers. It was a dubious opening tack, I admit, but I needn't have worried. He wrote back and satisfied my inquires quite warmly, as I should have suspected.

Besides further illuminating a couple of points from his writings that I had asked about, he also told me his morning meal preferences: instant oatmeal, which he proudly fixed himself, plus Swiss Miss chocolate and fruit. His least favorite part, he said, were the medications he had to take each morning.

I also discovered that, even at age 90, Jim Adams was still entertaining Harvard Divinity School students in his kitchen for good conversation and lunches of peanut butter on toast, with tea and cookies. Ah, a man after my own palate.

His journey in earlier years might well resonate with some UUs. Jim was born and raised in a small town with a Baptist minister father who gave up life insurance because it showed a lack of faith in God. But as a young adult in college, Jim Adams rebelled, by majoring in atheism. While at the University of Minnesota Adams was eagerly exposed to Unitarian ideas and preaching, which propelled him to Harvard Divinity School and ordination.

Even amid his rejection of traditional theology, Adams was seeking something that was ultimately reliable, something to depend upon in taking life's daily steps after each breakfast meal. He believed that in the human search for meaning it was an illusion to think that religion could be dispensed with altogether. "The basic concerns of religion are inescapable," he declared, even for atheists. This hunger led him into the Unitarian ministry.

After graduating from Harvard he served as parish minister for couple of nearby Unitarian churches for the better part of a decade, and then, in 1936, he began his long tenure as an influential teacher of religious depth, mostly at Meadville-Lombard Theological School in Chicago (where my spouse /co-minister Barbara ran into him once) and back at Harvard.

But for a critical year between his parish service and the onset of his teaching career, JLA went to Germany, in 1935-36, where he encountered both the profound young student of

religion, Paul Tillich, and the powerful young Third Reich, each of which affected his life's work in great measure. Adams became the premier English interpreter of theologian Tillich, a religious giant whose powerful abstractions *required* interpretation. (Tillich's personal testimonial and gratitude is in a blurb on the back cover of "On Being Human Religiously.")

Meanwhile, Jim's own writings grew to reflect a keen critique of any social or political absolutism, reflecting his frightening encounter with Nazi totalitarianism. He had watched Hitler ruthlessly gain power, and returned to America convinced that the thrust of religious freedom must be ever vigilant and strong to stand against evil. A major theme of all his teaching was that "a weak liberal religion bestows a spurious blessing on the status quo" [*Van Eric Fox and Alice Blair Wesley*, from the UU Historical Society's *Dictionary of UU Biography* at <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/jameslutheradams.html>].

For almost 60 years, Adams influenced a vast array of students of religion and ministry, primarily from his teaching posts in Chicago and Boston. He believed fervently in the importance of voluntary associations and the authentically free spirit in the free church. But these magnificent values, he taught, should always and ever serve the common good, especially as a champion for the voiceless oppressed.

He was fiercely committed to social ideals in action, but also had a sparkling sense of humor and winsome charm. One story [via Bill Schulz] tells how, after spouse Margaret urged him into a political demonstration, Jim later commented that Margaret was always so much more radical than him that she insisted on hanging her bathroom towels to the left of his.

Which brings us back to the quest for meaning located in the activity of living an ethical existence. If you're anything like me, you value ethical integrity; you want to practice what you preach; you desire a life of action coherent with belief. This is certainly a large but problematic goal as we live with the challenging dilemmas and demands of day-to-day reality. Furthermore, you're also no doubt interested in an ethical integrity of the whole, perhaps as described by one familiar American phrase: "liberty and justice for all."

In the work of James Luther Adams I find a ready path toward ethical integrity, which begins with what he calls "centerstance in the midst of circumstance." What a beautiful turn of a phrase: centerstance in the midst of circumstance. Does this image conjure up any visualization for you? What would it feel or look like to have centerstance in the midst of circumstance?

Perhaps we would first understand ourselves in a centered stance, with the world of circumstance swirling around us. To be centered is to be balanced, steady, alert yet relaxed.

Ahh, sounds good. In our own diverse ways, we seek this quality of centeredness in our lives: we correct imbalances, we steady the pace of our lives; we aim for an alert yet relaxed condition.

But as important as being a centered person is, we know that correct attitudes and posture alone, in an *isolated* individual, are not sufficient for true ethical integrity. As a worker in the Sanctuary movement [Jim Corbett] once said: “Individuals can resist injustice, but only a community can *do* justice.”

We are, of course, in the midst of circumstance, circumstance which demands an extension of one’s internal centeredness into social activity, social institutions, onto the hard edges of community. On the path toward ethical integrity, there must be an encounter beyond our selves, centered or not; there must be meaningful interaction with the forces that swirl around us; there must be sustenance. We are wise not to mistake the menu for the meal.

Okay, assuming we each personally achieve a measure of “centerstance in the midst of circumstance,” how does this help us get to the next step and satisfy our hunger for justice? for ethical integrity of the whole? for a global community of mutual trust? One contribution Adams made toward this larger vision is his illumination of Power.

Since he was so committed to responsible religious action in the world, Adams had a lot to say about power, an understanding of which, he declared, is essential to any description of religion. In the 1950s Adams was affirming that empowerment *of* people is more productive than having power *over* them. And I have never heard anyone else suggest the term “co-archy” in place of “hierarchy,” as he did many years ago. He may have been ahead of his time. (But hey, he liked instant oatmeal.)

Freedom and justice, he said, hinge on the power of organization *and* the organization of power. Another great phrase: *both* “the power of organization *and* the organization of power.” But absolute power corrupts absolutely when it is separated from the law of Love in relationship, which is mutuality. Political power separated from Love and mutuality creates hardness of heart and fosters injustice. And Love is most present in relationships, which tend to manifest in groups.

One of JLA’s most telling quotes is this one: “Humans are made for relationship, and without it we are of all creatures most miserable.” We quest for solid relationships, often moving between them, in and out of different groups, all the time in mutual relationship, seeking Love, holding close to Love, sharing Love.

To support this very human desire for relationship, Adams offered a strong theology of Groups. He is an avid proponent of voluntary associations, of many types. Voluntary associations breed relationships of Love in community. *And such communities tend to create power that is just.* His point is straightforward: mutuality is nutritious.

But we don't just have relationship with each other. We also exist in tandem with other creatures, other forms of life, even cosmic forces. For him the meaning of life emerges from all of these relationships, and the concern to discover that meaning is a religious activity. Our chosen associations in groups can be the most powerfully meaningful, and certainly tell a lot about who we are.

Think of the associations you choose and the groups you belong to voluntarily, willingly, even eagerly. Think of this church and its congregational life. Many people, when asked what is important to them about their active membership in a particular group, cite the relationships they have made under that collective umbrella. Chances are, you find some significant meaning in your participation in groups. Maybe you've never conceived of your voluntary associations as religious activity, but that's what they are, according to this foremost UU theologian.

Adams early on recognized and lifted up the power inherent in a relational theology. "Meaning," he said, "is a shared and enjoyed relatedness." And this is what church is about: fostering "a shared and enjoyed relatedness." Hopefully, our church helps us to establish relationships that not only encourage a centered stance, but a productive encounter with the circumstances of our lives. This, in turn, enables us to transform our abstract ethical standards into vital commitments and action toward the Good.

So goes the theology of James Luther Adams, urging us into relationships of meaning and vital commitments to just and loving power in community. He declares that our large institutions are reflective of our individual commitments. The voluntary associations we choose to make speak loudly about our ethical integrity and the meaning we find in our lives. "Centerstance in the midst of circumstance" involves both power and mutuality—in ethical relationship.

JLA has lots more to say, too, which I couldn't work into this one sermon. So I've produced a short hand-out [following] that portrays one of his better-known presentations, which I also recommend to you. It's a short list of his "Guiding Principles for a Free Faith," which have become known as "the Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism."

If you look on the Internet resource called Wikipedia under the heading “Liberal Religion,” you’ll find a short entry, consisting mostly of these five statements by James Luther Adams. They are very helpful and provide enough grist for another sermon someday.

But let me leave you with an image that might offer some metaphysical help to balance our diets with both nutritious breakfasts and healthy philosophical considerations. It’s a 16th century woodcut that Adams enjoyed describing—a portrait of the impending reunion of the wayward Prodigal Son with his father. They are frozen in art, approaching each other with arms out, but not yet touching. However, their shadows fall on the ground in such a way as to merge into an eternal embrace.

The symbolic impact of this image is strong: things are *not* as separated as they seem. Less obvious parts of us all are *already* merging and uniting, eternally. The relationships of our lives happen on many levels and offer corresponding levels of meaning, awaiting our discovery, every day.

Our involvements of the heart, our vital commitments, our voluntary associations—all move us toward a powerful reunion with each other and with whatever we find to be ultimately reliable. This activity becomes creation anew: exciting, vital work in the world, work that becomes us.

We have a choice, you and I and America, and we have a responsibility, and we have a church. Together we can strive to find our centerstance in the midst of circumstance and by that route contribute our life energy toward a global community of mutual trust.

James Luther Adams issued a message that calls us to act with integrity, power and mutuality. So may it be. Bon appetit.

[Find “***THE FIVE SMOOTH STONES OF LIBERALISM*** by James Luther Adams on the next page.]

THE FIVE SMOOTH STONES OF LIBERALISM

by James Luther Adams

James Luther Adams

“Guiding Principles for a Free Faith”

Ch. 1: pp. 12-20 in

On Being Human Religiously

Beacon Press, 1976

1. Religious liberalism depends first on the principle that ‘revelation’ is continuous. Meaning has not been finally captured. Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism.
2. All relations between persons ought ideally to rest on mutual, free consent and not on coercion... Free choice is a principle without which religion, or society, or politics, cannot be liberal.
3. Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community. It is this which makes the role of the prophet central and indispensable in liberalism.
4. We deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation... The decisive forms of goodness in society are institutional forms.
5. Finally, liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.

From **Rev. Dr. Daniel Ó Connell**

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(Sermon: "Five Smooth Stones" — 8/25/02)

One of Adams' editors took the title *Five Smooth Stones* from the bible. In First Samuel, chap. 17, we can read about the young Hebrew shepherd David going out to meet up with Goliath of Gath, a huge giant of a man: a professional soldier.

On his way, David had been given armor, but he turned it down as too bulky and uncomfortable. Instead, he stopped in the valley and picked up five smooth stones to use with his sling and his staff, which were his preferred weapons. With one shot, he slew the giant.

Centuries ago, with one smooth stone—the promotion of the belief that revelation is continuous and available to all of us—religious liberals began the long walk out of the valley toward the beloved community. With one shot, we turned away from the giant, and on to our own path. We woke up.

1. *Wake up to revelation*
2. *Invite consent in religious matters*
3. *Claim civic ownership*
4. *Don't hide your religion*
5. *Remember your treasure—it's all you've really got*