

Prophets of the Final Redemption

As I sit down to write this, I am forced to lift myself out of a nihilistic mindset that has draped its cloak around me over the last few months. A few months when I have witnessed a generational shift in my own family, when my phone dings daily with news alert after news alert of impending climate doom, when the world as I thought it no longer exists... Yet, my child comes to me, showing me the truly ingenious treehouse they've fashioned first in their minds and then on Minecraft, even as I read of science solutions for the climate crisis I had never before imagined. There is much possibility beyond the limitations of our minds. The future will undoubtedly be a world that looks and feels and smells differently from the visions I had growing up as a child of the '80s, but the climate scientists in our midst tell us impending doom is not yet certain and a new world *is* possible.

David invites us to consider, what story shall we tell? One story is that our role as ministers in this time is not to memorialize human life altogether, but to prophesy the potential that remains, casting vision and hope so that the people in our midst can bring their ingenuity to slow catastrophe and turn the tides of human planetary existence.

A Theological Framework for the Future

For us to survive and have relevancy into the future, Unitarian Universalism must root itself deeply in frameworks that speak not only to our lasting values, but that also provide wells

of nourishment for the deeply challenging, all-to-often nihilistic-seeming, days to come. Such meaning may be found in the frameworks of Liberation Theology and Liberatory Pedagogy.

Similar to the Buddhists' apocalyptic narrative wherein humans have agency in shaping global happenings, let us remember that Christianity's Liberation Theology is "built upon the 'strong theological conviction that the world had been deliberately created in an incomplete manner and that it was the destiny of humankind to join with the creator in completing the process and building a world that was both just and free' (Stenberg 272). Though Process Theologians would argue that the Creator has had limited power from the beginning of time and that the world comes into being moment-by-moment co-creatively in collaboration between the Creator and Creation, the concept that humans hold agency as a part of that Creation is not lost on us. If, in fact, we believe our agency, paired with the great Source of imagination and artistry, holds potential for problem-solving the Climate Crisis; and if Climate Scientists tell us the clock on climate change has not yet fully ticked past the point of no return, then our task as prophets is to remind one another of what may be our last great prospect for human potential and agency.

Our Unitarian Universalist theology reminds us that human beings cannot achieve such solutions alone or in silos. Liberation theology and liberatory pedagogy call us to collective liberation, not just of the planet, but of all of creation. We must '[come] together to understand and teach one another [and] also liberate one another' (Stenberg, 274). Unitarian Universalist theologian, Sharon Welch, writes, "Community and solidarity, then, are foundations of the prophetic tradition...Sin is 'the denial of solidarity' and the hope of resurrection 'is the hope for the power of solidarity to transform reality, a hope that human identity is found in relation to

others, in participation in the formation of a community that transcends us now and after death” (Stenberg, 274). Like in Aztec theology, we all have to do our small part; for it will be our collective action that “keeps the end away” (Schwartz, 5).

As Stenberg articulates, though this liberation must arise from the collective, “such a process...requires leadership, and within the prophetic tradition the prophet serves as a social guide to reconfigure and transform culture” (274). Kanpol and Yeo argue that “...the Left has failed to understand that it is also about hope, the moral and the spiritual” (Stenberg, 277). Let us not forget hope, dear colleagues. We are called not just in our congregations, but in our communities, to be the social guides to reconfigure and transform culture, who are both “at once ‘gut-wrenchingly critical of social surroundings’ and who ‘[pass] on a message of transformative hope’” (ibid).

Where Hope Lies

On the afternoon of this writing, I stood in the backyard of my home waiting on my two 15-week-old Australian Shepherd puppies to learn where to pee and gazed at the azure skies arcing above trees with rust and golden leaves. These blue skies, the language of which occupies poetry and song, may – by necessity – become a thing of the past.

Elizabeth Kolbert’s *Under a White Sky* notes the many ways humanity has wrought havoc on the natural world, creating unforeseen significant problems down the line while unabashedly controlling nature to meet immediate challenges and desires. Though she warns of the effects of human intervention on biodiversity and waterways, she names the possibilities human

innovation allows for mitigating the climate crisis. These include carbon capture in oceanic vegetation, in trees, or underground; and solar geoengineering, seeding the stratosphere with diamond or calcium carbonate particulate to prevent the sun's rays from reaching the earth and thereby slowing global warming.

We don't know what the long-term ramifications will be of such significant manipulations of the natural world – Kolbert's text is, after all, about how humankind's manipulation of the natural environment has often caused even worse unforeseen consequences, begetting need for even further manipulation. But David Keith, a professor of applied physics at Harvard and the "foremost proponent of geoengineering," provides us hope, saying he "believes that the world will eventually cut its carbon emissions if not all the way down to zero, then close to it" and that "carbon-removal technologies can eventually be scaled up to take care of the rest" (Kolbert, 176-77). Keith suggests offering a number of ways to reduce emissions and to capture carbon lessens pressure on individuals for doing any one solution, and may increase overall human action. When Kolbert questioned his push for humanity's manipulation of the natural world, he reminded her that not all of our technological fixes go awry – not all 'cures are worse than the cause,' providing agriculture as an example. "I'm not saying that modifications mostly do work. I'm saying it's a wide, undefined set" (179). Another scientist Kolbert speaks with points out that we wouldn't choose chemotherapy to treat just any illness, but when it's your last option to treat a cancer, you use it.

A UU Apocalyptic Vision

There will surely be some grief, even in our sources of hope and survival. Our azure skies may one day have more of a white hue, the sun's rays filtered by calcium carbonate. Trenches the size of multiple football fields may become a part of our topography. Underground rock may be pumped full of carbon from the atmosphere to store it there for the next thousand-plus years. Portions of the currently-inhabitable earth may become entirely uninhabitable as results of drought or flooding. Surely, there will be population migration and hardship, and those most harshly impacted will almost certainly be those who are already the most marginalized among us. Yet, not all hope is lost – humanity as a species *can survive* “a final redemption” (NT Wright). If humans are to survive, life on earth must transform, and it can. It will likely look, smell, and sound vastly different from the world we currently know. Yet, when since the Industrial Revolution has life on earth not transformed rapidly from one generation – nee decade – to the next? Scientists are telling us we need not yet succumb to visions of full-on human catastrophe akin to the apocalyptic visions of our sibling faith traditions. We have an opportunity to make different choices for our future, to use human creativity to shape before-unimaginable worlds not just as my child does in Minecraft, but on a global level in co-creation with the The Creative Force. As Unitarian Universalists and prophets, let us hold in collaborative partnership our reverence for both science and reason and for the co-creative spirit faithfully luring human ingenuity toward the that-which-is-yet-possible. The UU Apocalyptic vision may, literally, also be an apocalypse in that it is a world yet to be revealed, but it is a revelation of overcoming holistic global collapse. It is a revelation of hope, of

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humanity collectively working globally to do their part so that all may be liberated; all may survive.

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Works Cited

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