

ENGAGED SPIRITUALITY: CONFESSIONS OF A MILITANT MYSTIC

Richard S. Gilbert – Albany, NY – July 18, 2021

Several years ago I received an intriguing greeting card from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Missoula, Montana. They used my annual sermon subscription series by having one among them read a sermon at Sunday services. Later, I met several members of this enthusiastic little congregation at a General Assembly of our denomination. I was especially interested in one message on that card: “Thank you for your soul-filled fanaticism. Blessings.”¹

Who me? “Soul-filled”? And “fanaticism”? I always thought of myself as rather cerebral, with only occasional bursts of passion, and even rarer showings of soul. But fanaticism! I never thought of myself that way!

My self-image is that of the active citizen, trying to follow the Hebrew prophets of old who spoke truth to power. I refused to get very passionate about McSpirituality: junk food for the soul, or “a filet of soul.”² My stance is that of one who cries out against economic injustice.

For years now, I have pondered the words of German theologian Jurgen Moltmann who wrote about a “theology of relinquishment” and an “ethic of class betrayal.” He urged middle class people to challenge their inherent social advantages and to advocate policies which may not be aligned with their economic self-interest. Add to that the words of UU theologian James Luther Adams. He said that UUs join their mostly middle-class churches, not to have their middle-class values challenged, but confirmed. For him “The church is a spiritual center with a civic circumference.”

The deeper I probed, however, the more I began to see what the Missoula group was saying. I began to connect my soul with my society. I began to translate “soul-filled fanaticism” into the term “militant mystic.” Hence, the true confessions of a militant mystic – militant for change, but action growing out of the mystical union of humanity.

Latin American poet Octavio Paz once asked: “Is life a mystery to be deciphered or a problem to be solved? A problem. Now there is something I can deal with; I can define, analyze and maybe even solve it. It might give way to disciplined reason and persistent effort. But a mystery is something in which I am involved. It defies technique. It speaks to a different dimension of my being.”³

And then I came upon a book - *Engaged Spirituality: Social Change and American Religion*.⁴ Engaged spirituality emanates from the Buddhist tradition which links the individual soul to social action. It is not as if spirituality and action are discrete embodiments of personality. They are in fact melded in human beings.

That insight caused me to think of particular human beings who represented a militant mysticism. In their struggle to escape the biases of their particular class, they came to embody a “theology of relinquishment” and an “ethic of class betrayal.” Such reformers have inspired me to critique the very system which has enabled my relatively comfortable life. However, at times I managed to disturb my congregation with my sometimes radical economics, which might be described as a democratic socialism.

There are times when I would reverse my usual “Don’t just stand there, do something!” to a more reflective “Don’t just do something, stand there!” In this activist Albany congregation, perhaps that is good advice. It has been for me. And so, I would “stand there” and share some of my thoughts with you. Standing there and doing something are mutually enriching.

However, today my concern is not so much with economic critique as with an engaged spirituality and how it has informed me. What does it take to critique the very societal values which have enabled one to be part of the establishment class? I suggest it takes an “engaged spirituality.”

Spirituality has been defined in this way: "To separate the essential from the non-essential is what I call 'spiritual'." However definitions pale beside real life examples of the spiritual. And so I introduce you to four embodiments of that activist faith. They have challenged the status quo of the very class in which they live, and in so doing have inspired me to go and do likewise.

This reminds of the story about the man from Maine who was asked if he believed in infant baptism. "Believe in it," he said, "I've seen it done!" And so have I.

This inner compulsion to change the world has no greater example than the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who died last October. It was he who originated the term "engaged spirituality," As a monk in Vietnam he chose a "third way" between the American-backed South Vietnam and the North Vietnamese. Nhat Hanh practiced Buddhist "right living" in a cooperative society, in Vietnam and in Plum Village France. In May of 1967 I had dinner with Nhat Hanh in Ithaca at the invitation of a member of the Ithaca Unitarian Church I then served. George Kahin chaired the Southeast Asia Department at Cornell, He had written an important book on that conflict, and was a fierce opponent of the Vietnam War.

Nhat Hanh was a diminutive figure who looked as if a strong New York wind would blow him away. Yet his very body exuded charisma. I knew I was in the presence of a unique human being. His voice was soft, yet compelling. His spiritually based views of war and peace were convincing. I was impressed by his spiritual presence as well as his staunch advocacy for human rights and peace. How could he be so centered, especially after what he had experienced in the midst of the conflict? These two impulses – the inner spiritual and the outer ethical - met in this man.

His masterful book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* has been my meditation Bible. When you wash a pot be mindful of what you are doing. As I take my morning walk, I am mindful not only of walking, but of being alive. I become a vital part of the nature in which I move. To the extent I have a spiritual discipline, mindfulness is it. Nhat Hanh goes on:

"Breathing in, I am aware of my heart. Breathing out, I smile to my heart and know that my heart still functions normally. I feel grateful for my heart. It's very important that we re-learn the art of resting and relaxing. Not only does it help prevent the onset of many illnesses that develop through chronic tension and worrying; it allows us to clear our minds, focus, and find creative solutions to problems. You carry Mother Earth within you. She is not outside of you. Mother Earth is not just your environment. In that insight of inter-being, it is possible to have real communication with the Earth, which is the highest form of prayer."

A second Ithaca encounter put me in the presence of another militant mystic who practiced engaged spirituality – Father Daniel Berrigan. From 1965 to 1970 I was not only the minister of the Ithaca Unitarian Church, but also UU chaplain at Cornell University. Much to my surprise, this Ivy League school had hired Dan as the Associate Director of Cornell United Religious Work. CURW was an official division of the University and occupied what was called "The God Box," Anabel Taylor Hall, set prominently on East Hill across the courtyard from the law school at Myron Taylor Hall. Formal campus religious life was a combination of sponsored University staff surrounded by an assortment of chaplains - Roman Catholic, Jewish and Protestant – including a Christian evangelical and a Unitarian Universalist – me.

For nearly four years I worked with Dan and was deeply moved by who he was and what he did. Like Nhat Hanh, Dan spoke with a soft voice, but underscored his convictions with dramatic actions. A Jesuit priest, Dan never locked the door of his apartment. If someone stole from it, they obviously needed it more than he did. I even co-officiated at a wedding with Dan in the commons at Anabel Taylor Hall – me in suit and robe, Dan in black turtleneck and chinos.

Dan was not only a prophet, but a poet, who wrote extraordinary words – some of which he shared at my invitation from the pulpit of First Unitarian Church in Ithaca.

One day I found myself walking from downtown Ithaca up the hill toward the campus with Dan, following an anti-draft rally. Two of my chaplain colleagues had turned in their draft cards in protest, and I was wrestling with my hesitancy to do so. As we chatted, Dan told me he was soon leaving town to do something he felt he had to do to protest the war. What followed was burning of draft files in Catonsville, Maryland. After this he was on the lamb and pursued by the FBI on their “most wanted” list, the first-ever Catholic priest to be listed. Agents even interrogated me on his whereabouts. I had no clue, but Dan kept popping up in churches unannounced to preach and then disappear.

One of those pop-ups was in the Barton Hall, Cornell’s ROTC building, at an antiwar weekend, I was a reader as we celebrated a peace Passover Seder before about 10,000 people – including, I am sure, a posse of FBI agents. It was rumored Dan would make an appearance, and he did not disappoint. During the point in the service where an empty chair for the prophet Elijah was referenced, Dan walked in to a tumultuous ovation. Surrounded by a non-violent Pretorian Guard, he delivered a spell-binding anti-war speech. He disappeared as quickly as he appeared. Eventually he was apprehended and incarcerated.

I had another encounter with him as he was awarded the Adin Ballou prize by the UU Peace Fellowship at a UUA General Assembly. Our final meeting occurred at Cornell when he returned for a reunion of those who had worked with him in his time at Cornell. We spent several hours with him, remembering all that we had shared. I will never forget his response to a question at one session: “Father Berrigan, aren’t you ever in despair?” He responded, “Despair is a luxury beyond my means.”

Dan Berrigan, the radical priest, was a gentle man with a powerful conscience. He exuded more charisma than anyone I had ever known. His prophetic lifestyle called my own rather conventional lifestyle into question. Dan built in me a creative tension between the celebrating life and serving life.

Nhat Hanh and Dan Berrigan are two of those who have deepened both my spiritual life and my activist life. A third exemplar of engaged spirituality may surprise you: Susan B. Anthony. I am writing a book about her: *No Consorting with Angels: The Spiritual Life of Susan B. Anthony*. Born a Quaker, she joined the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, which I served for 32 years. I’m trying to discover what made her tick over a long lifetime of work for women’s rights. She died in 1906, 14 years before passage of the 19th amendment giving women the vote. Her incredible commitment required spiritual adrenaline that did not dissipate with defeat but provided decades of resilience.

She did not formulate her beliefs in a theological pattern. However, in my attempted soul gazing, there is an engaged spirituality that is unmistakable. Many observers in that day and this try to fit her into a traditional Christian theology, but her radical ally, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, wrote of her: “Every energy of her soul is centered upon the needs of this world. To her, work is worship.” The title of this spiritual biography suggests her indifference to orthodox Christian categories. In her letter to the spiritualist, Mrs. Annie Besant, she urged Besant to join the suffrage movement and in doing so articulated her love for work on this earth rather than “soaring to the stars and consorting with the angels.”⁵ Hers was an “engaged spirituality” that moves me yet.

A sage once was asked if there was more in his philosophy than meditation and quiet introspection. Was there a place for social action? “Oh, yes,” he replied. “That, too. Social action is another way of working on yourself.”⁶ We cheat ourselves if we neglect the spiritual growth that comes through social action.

My personal mission statement is to grow a soul, to love and to be loved, and to help repair a broken world. In that statement the spiritual and the social are not divided. They are part and parcel of what I try to be and do. The one infuses the other: from spiritual gratitude I set out to change the world. As I change the world, I experience the spiritual. The spiritual and the social are part of the same movement of the soul.

We Americans now suffer a difficult post-election, not quite post-pandemic period. What was the Trump bump of our activism in opposing one of the worst presidents in our history is in danger of becoming a Trump slump. Many are exhausted from those four deadly years and the “seismic crises” of the aftermath – increased income inequity, deepened racism, and homophobia, to say nothing of the global climate crisis. Just to listen to NPR or watch the PBS News Hour is enough to make one want to retreat from the fray.

However, we cannot, must not become mere “injustice collectors,” jumping on the grievance conveyor belt and shouting about the coming apocalypse. We cannot abide what seems to be the end of empathy in our nation. While every day seems to bring another blow to this great democratic experiment, this cannot be the last word. I think of the cartoon picturing a man in sackcloth walking down the street with a sign that reads: “The world is not coming to an end; we must suffer along and learn to cope.”

We must be about the business of “beating swords into ballots,”⁷ beating plowshares into economic justice, treating the earth as a garden to be tended rather than as a mine to be exploited. We need to build a spiritual infrastructure if we are to create a moral superstructure for our nation.

Philosopher Costica Bradatan, writing on why democracies fail, put it this way: “Genuine democracy is difficult to achieve, and once achieved, fragile. In the grand scheme of human events, it is the exception, not the rule Who in his right mind would choose the dull responsibilities of democracy over the instant gratification a demagogue will provide?”⁸

There is a dialogue which helps me persevere. You may have heard the discouraging words of one poor soul who said, “If you want to hear the gods laugh, tell them your plans.” Humbled though I am by those words, I respond with a challenge from the Arab mystic Rumi: “Start a huge, foolish project like Noah.” We were made for times like this.

I leave you with an image that has seared itself into my mind and soul. It is the story of Judy Welles, a friend and ministerial colleague who took advantage of Oregon’s medical aid in dying legislation last September 28 at age 77. When her suffering from cancer became simply too much to bear, she obtained a life-ending drug cocktail from her doctor. In the presence of her family she drank the potion and died peacefully in their embrace. What adds poignancy to the story is this. She had so wanted to vote in last November’s election, but knew she could not make it. During the morning of her last day of life, she wrote letters to Pennsylvanians urging them to vote. That afternoon she died. Her spirituality was engaged literally until her last breath.

Friends, these are tough times. Many of us have spent a lifetime seeking goals now under siege. It is easy to become impatient. Many among us are tired. But this is no time for despair. It is time for our own version of militant mysticism, engaged spirituality – or, if you prefer, time for soul-filled fanaticism. So say Thich Nhat Hahn, Dan Berrigan, Susan B. Anthony, and Judy Welles. What say you?

OPENING WORDS: ACTIVE HOPE - Joanna Macy

Active Hope is not wishful thinking.

Active Hope is not waiting to be rescued

By the Lone Ranger or by some savior.

Active Hope is waking up to the beauty of life

On whose behalf we can act.

We belong to this world.

The web of life is calling us forth at this time.

We’ve come a long way and are here to play our part.

With Active Hope, we realize that there are adventures in store,

Strengths to discover, and comrades to link arms with.

Active Hope is a readiness to engage.

Active Hope is a readiness to discover the strengths
In ourselves and in others;
A readiness to discover the reasons for hope
And the occasions for love.
A readiness to discover the size and strength of our hearts,
Our quickness of mind, our steadiness of purpose
Our own authority, our love for life,
The liveliness of our curiosity,
The unsuspected deep well of patience and diligence,
The keenness of our senses, our capacity to lead.
None of these can be discovered in an armchair or without risk.

READING: WE WERE MADE FOR THESE TIMES
Letter to a Young Activist - Clarissa Pinkola Estes
American poet, post-trauma specialist, Jungian psychoanalyst
author of *Women Who Run with the Wolves*

My friends, do not lose heart. We were made for these times. I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in our world now. Ours is a time of almost daily astonishment and often righteous rage over the latest degradations of what matters most to civilized, visionary people.

You are right in your assessments. . . . Yet, I urge you, ask you, gentle you, to please not spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times. Especially do not lose hope. Most particularly because, the fact is that we were made for these times. Yes. For years, we have been learning, practicing, been in training for and just wailing to meet on this exact plain of engagement.

I grew up on the Great Lakes and recognize a seaworthy vessel when I see one. Regarding awakened souls, there have never been more able vessels in the waters than there are right now across the world. And they are fully provisioned and able to signal one another as never before in the history of humankind.

There will always be times when you feel discouraged. I too have felt despair many times in my life, but! do not keep a chair for it. I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate.

The reason is this: In my uttermost bones I know something, as do you. It is that there can be no despair when you remember why you came to Earth, who you serve, and who sent you here. The good words we say and the good deeds we do are not ours. They are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for.

SPOKEN MEDITATION: TO SAVOR THE WORLD OR SAVE IT

"It's hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenges. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between the desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." - E.B. White July 11, 1969.

I rise in the morning torn between the desire
To save the world or to savor it, to serve life or to enjoy it;
To savor the sweet taste of my own joy
Or to share the bitter cup of my neighbor.
To celebrate life with exuberant step
Or to struggle for the life of the heavy laden.
What am I to do when the guilt at my bounty

Clouds the sky of my vision?
When the glow which lights my every day
Illumines the hurting world around me?
To savor the world or save it?
God of justice, if such there be,
Take from me the burden of my question.
Let me praise my plenitude without limit;
Let me cast from my eyes all troubled folk!
No, you will not let me be. You will not stop my ears
To the cries of the hurt and the hungry;
You will not close my eyes to the sight of the afflicted.
What is that you say?
To save, one must serve? To savor, one must save?
The one will not stand without the other?
Forgive me, in my preoccupation with myself,
In my concern for my own life
I had forgotten.
Forgive me, God of justice,
Forgive me, and make me whole.

PRAYER OF AFFIRMATION: PANDEMIC FEVER: AN ANTIDOTE

There is something difficult about this particular time
in this particular climate
in this particular point of history.
I feel it in myself; I sense it in those about me.
I am just a little more impatient than usual.
I am more often on edge.
My spiritual resources feel depleted.....
I have pandemic fever.
Partly it is the weather.
Partly it is an election aftermath.
Partly it is Nature that speaks back to us.
Partly it is a pandemic that seems to have no end.
We grow tired with the work we have to do and see no end to it.
There are the tensions of an endless political "mean season."
Politicians pander, citizens protest, people are angry.
There is malaise in the land.
What to do?
Enjoy the spectacle of winter becoming spring.
Read a good book. Plant some seeds. Dig a garden.
Come to church – even if virtually.
Remember, you can't save the world in a day.
Be a little more patient with one another.
Pandemic fever, too, will pass away.
Amen. (Announce hymn "When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place")

BENEDICTION: TO BE OF USE by Marge Piercy *Singing the Living Tradition # 567*

I want to be with people who submerge in the task.
Who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along.
Who stand in the line and haul in their places,

Who are not parlor generals and field deserters, but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out: The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, in smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn,
are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real. Amen.

¹ Personal note.

² Joseph Campbell.

³ Octavio Paz. Source unknown.

⁴ Gregory C. Stanczak. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

⁵ Letter to Mrs. Annie Besant quoted in Ida Husted Harper, *Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony*, Vol. III. North Stratford, NH, Reprint Edition, 1998, p. 1333.

⁶ Roy Phillips, "Transforming Liberal Congregations: From Educating Others to Developing Spiritually in Shared Ministry," *Unitarian Universalist Voice*, Fall 1996, p. 4.

⁷ William Schweiker, UCDS prof of theological ethics. *Sightings* column July 2021.