

# Texts of Liberation

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I have always believed in the liberal way in religion, even when I did not know what it was, trapped as I was in the Kumbaya Catholicism of my 1960's childhood. There was a lot of hope in those days that Vatican II would accomplish what even the Reformation and counter-Reformation could not—genuine change—but that turned out to be an illusion. My devotion was dampened by the priest who reminded me that as a girl, I couldn't possibly serve Mass; even at 10, I was vibrating with rage, I vowed never to belong to a church again.

But years later, in college, I met a guy. At the threshold of dating, he asked me my religion; I told him I didn't have one. I asked him his; he replied, "I'm a Unitarian." "What's that?" I asked him; I'd never heard of it before, and didn't give it a lot of thought until spring break, when I went home with him and spent the week with his family. In his house, everybody went to church on Sunday. So I went—to the Community Church of New York, where I listened to Donald Harrington preach, walked around the assembly hall at coffee hour, toured the lively tables filled with social action projects. It never occurred to me to go on my own. I didn't see the point of going to church again, though I thought that if I ever did go to church again, I'd go to a church like that one. Fast forward a decade, when that guy and I get engaged, and he asked me for more than my hand in marriage. He asked if I would be willing to get married in a Unitarian church; it was important to his parents. It was an easy promise to make—all of the beauty of a church wedding, with no obligation to raise our children Catholic. Besides, it was important to him, and I loved him. I still do, 27 years later.

So it was that I married into this Unitarian Universalism, seeking at first only a way to make common cause with my new husband and his family. What I found, instead, was all of the rest of my life, as I took the first hesitant steps back to the path I'd glimpsed as a child, a path that would lead me to know and love God. It was at once the last thing I expected and the thing I most wanted. It was in a liberal religious sanctuary that I began to heal; it was among our people that I began to hope; it was through their affirmations that I came to understand God's call and embraced in myself what they and God saw in me—the capacity for our liberal ministry.

More than a quarter century has passed since I first signed the book at the Community Church of New York, and what was once for me a source of wonder has become, in these intervening years, more nuanced. I am not yet jaded, but I am close. I am not yet ready to join the United Church of Christ, though I've been threatening to do that for years. I am, however, long past being ready for genuine change, and until recently I was resigned to live my life as a Unitarian Universalist vaguely restless and discontent.

I probably would not have stayed resigned; I'm betting I would have progressed to pointed restlessness and discontent. But I have Larry, and Stephen and all the members of the Minns Committee to thank; this invitation has helped to focus my attention on the possibilities of our faith. Larry has framed our conversation with several provocative possibilities; I was especially taken by the vision he articulated courtesy of the Institute of the Future, particularly what he describes as a VUCA world: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity: an amplified world of extreme urgency, unpleasant surprises, and enigmatic choices.

I was reminded of a provocation of a different kind that I read last week, in the pages of *The Nation* magazine, from Melissa Harris-Perry in her column Sister Citizen. I have long been a fan of Melissa Harris-Perry (formerly Melissa Harris Lacewell)—MSNBC contributor, Princeton University professor of political science, African American woman, and Unitarian Universalist since childhood. But this particular column had me whooping with laughter as soon as I read the headline. The title of her column was, “Are We All Black Americans Now?” Her thesis, and it's a good one, is that the current predicament that most of us are in right now in the United States is one that is pitifully familiar to African American men, women, and children. She gives several examples, from the unemployment rate to the TSA inspection protocols at our nation's airports, to the recent events in Wisconsin, each one of them an example of what the institute calls a VUCA world, but that I recognize from my life as a black woman in America. Harris-Perry writes:

Few events more clearly demonstrated the blackening of America than the standoff in Wisconsin. Like the nineteenth-century leaders of Southern states who stripped black citizens of voting rights, public accommodation and civic associations, Wisconsin's Republican majority dismantled the hard-won basic rights of Wisconsin workers. Like those Confederate leaders, the Wisconsin GOP used intimidation, threats and even the police against demonstrators and rival officials. As the saga unfolded, many Wisconsin citizens felt stunned that their once-secure rights might be eliminated. For a moment, perhaps, they glimpsed the experience of black men and women who watched the shadow of Jim Crow blot out the promises of emancipation.

Volatility; Uncertainty; Complexity; Ambiguity.

Harris-Perry ends the essay with a challenge

Rather than try to escape the pain of experiencing some small familiarity with blackness, Americans could choose to learn from generations of African-Americans who resisted dehumanizing processes of domination and inequality...By embracing our collective blackness, perhaps we can find the fortitude and creativity necessary to face the continuing erosion of our national social safety net in the face of a persistent economic crisis.

I suspect of course that Harris-Perry meant this as a political challenge. But I want to take a different turn; I want to lift up her words as a theological challenge; I want us to act as though Melissa is right, as if we need to turn our faces toward the generations that preceded us so that we might learn to resist. Would we still choose Unitarian Universalism as a strategy of resistance? Would Unitarian Universalism still be able to save our lives? I have to wonder, as I have wondered for decades now, whether my mother would be welcome in any UU congregation. She is 85 now, and Pentecostal, and loves God and loves Jesus. She went to third grade, and is the best theologian I know. She would be welcome once people knew she was my mother. But what if she just came one Sunday to pray? What if her heart was heavy and she wanted a good word, and a moment of kindness in her day. Would she find it with us? No, she would not. She would be observed, dressed all in white because it is the Lord's Day, and asked politely whether she was lost.

What if Unitarian Universalism became theologically literate in more ways than those of our forefathers and foremothers? What if we came to specialize in texts of liberation? We would start with Hebrew and Christian scripture, of course, because they are our oldest heritage. But should we choose to become literate in all the texts of liberation available to us, how many doors might open? What if we chose to inform ourselves more deeply about the liberatory and celebratory message of the traditional black church? What if we made it our business to view the story of our free faith through a womanist frame, using the parameters of that theology to point our people toward more victorious living?

When I speak of the black church here, I am being faithful to my liberal religious heritage by casting the widest possible net: I rely here on the pioneering womanist theologian Deloris Williams and her *book Sisters in the Wilderness*. She writes: I believe the black church is the heart of hope in the black community's experience of oppression, survival struggle and its historic efforts toward complete liberation.

It cannot be tampered with or changed by humans to meet human expectations and goals. The black church cannot be made respectable because it is already sacralized by the pain and resurrection of thousands upon thousands of victims. It cannot be made elite because it is already classless. In America it came first to the community of slaves. It cannot be made more male than female because it is already both, equally, it cannot be made heterosexist because it is a homo hetero amalgam. It cannot be made political because it is perfect justice.

The black church is not indigenous to most of us in this room. It is not ours to assimilate as though we were Borg, roaming through the theological universe. But we of liberal faith could choose to be teachable; we could choose to learn more from the black church paradigm than spirituals; we might discover a deeply rooted spirituality that could sustain us as well. And we could do the same with the many expressions of faith that have been proven in the lives of real people right now. What if we became the people of Pentecost, with tongues of liberatory fire descending upon all the people, each one of them hearing the voice of Spirit in the language they understand: this one in womanist process theology, this one in Mahayana Buddhist practice; this one in religious humanism?

And we could do more. Many of us could embrace our intellectual life, the underpinnings of our faith tradition, and renew it for this new age. We could return to the religious marketplace of ideas, reengage our sister and brother faiths not just in the streets and the courthouses and the sanctuaries, but also in the classrooms and in the libraries. It has become fashionable to decry the deep well of intellect from which we have always drawn, and we have joked for decades about being terminally overeducated. But that is hardly a fault in a world overrun with ignorant religiosity. It has never been okay to be dumb and in these times, an ignorant faith is dangerous. Somebody ought to know something about who and what we are as a religious people; somebody—a lot of somebodies—should be asking the same questions we are, then writing and teaching others about the answers they get. And it is never okay to leave your religious legacy to be interpreted only by others, however brilliant or sympathetic they might be. The *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* in its most recent issue notes a renewed interest in liberal religion and reviews several books on the subject. Yet not a single name was familiar to me. I do not assume I know every UU scholar that has ever walked the earth, but I know that we do not have a critical mass of scholars—historians, theologians, ethicists—who are steeped in Unitarian Universalism and trained to add to our collective knowledge. One of the most telling signs that we have stopped taking our religion seriously is our failure to insure its scholarly continuity.

There are some signs that the gap is being closed—at the other end of the country, at Starr King School for the Ministry, there is this weekend an emerging scholars' conference. I rejoice to know that there are enough scholars to hold a conference, but it grieves me to know that they are not here to enrich this conversation.

Above all, we could recall our reason for being a free religious community—to reorient ourselves toward the Holy, to be a beacon of hope and courage at a time of despair and fear, not only to stand but to move against perhaps our most pernicious enemy: fundamentalism. The rise of fundamentalisms of every kind should both alarm and galvanize us, for fundamentalism is antithetical to freedom. And it should encourage us, for so long as fundamentalists in every walk of life attempt to close the doors and the minds of this world, we will have work to do.

We could become not reactive, but responsive, on alert for those moments that might prove fruitful in our ongoing work to stand against fundamentalisms of every kind. When Sister Elizabeth Johnson books are censored because the Roman Catholic Church finds them unsupportive of doctrine, members of our faith should make themselves known as a supportive presence and affirm the freedom of inquiry upon which all of us depend. When Carleton Pearson and Rob Bell and other former evangelicals discover the kindness and the everlasting love of God, we should be there, with an open hand and an invitation, in the same way we stand with people who embrace marriage equality, or immigration rights, because our future in part depends on the free exchange of these ideas among us, without fear.

Above all, we could recall our reason for being a free religious community: to reorient ourselves toward the Holy, to be a beacon of hope and courage at a time of despair and fear, not just to stand but to move against fundamentalisms —fundamentalisms of the mind, fundamentalisms of religion, fundamentalisms of politics. We are perhaps, if not the best, one of the best religious traditions with which to combat this threat. Among all the religions of the world, we are the people who have struggled the most for freedom of faith.

We heard about our martyrs yesterday; there are martyrs today—some among us, some elsewhere. Who will stand with them and for them? Fundamentalism is antithetical to our freedoms, and a threat that we underestimate. We should be encouraged though, because as long as fundamentalists live, as long as they exist in any walk of life to close the doors and the minds of this world, we will have work to do. And so I invite you to consider all the things and the provocations of this current world, and consider the ways

in which who we are can feed those who struggle as we do, and who in mutual exchange might help us become who we are meant to be. Thank you.