

RESPONSE TO ROSEMARIE SMURZYNSKI'S PAPER ON SUFFERING & HOPE
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Rosemarie, I want to express my appreciation for both a fine sermon and a fine paper. I don't think JLA would turn in his grave in the least. He would applaud the results of your hard work, as I do. You did indeed cite your sources as you preached the Word, and preached it well. No need to apologize at all. You done good.

In your paper you mentioned the fact that we had read Brueggemann's earlier work, *The Prophetic Imagination*, at a previous Greenfield Group gathering. I must confess that I like his second book much better than the first. I remember that I did not care for the first book that much, mainly because I could not enter into the Biblical world-view of the prophets as easily as Brueggeman seems to do—not because I do not appreciate the self-critical role that the prophets played in Hebrew religion and culture, but because I could not accept the theological assumptions which undergirded that self-critical role. I have some of the same problems with *The Hopeful Imagination*.

I can remember having similar issues when studying the prophetic writings during my introductory Old Testament course at Andover Newton ever so many years ago. The theological assumption of the prophetic tradition in the Bible is that historical events are the action of God in history in response to the moral actions and forms of worship on the part of Israel and her Gentile neighbors. Their monotheism was heavily tinged with henotheism—the belief that their worship of Yahweh was the only correct one—and all the others were false. The assumption was that first Judah, and then Israel, fell to foreign powers because they fell short of Yahwistic moral laws and failed to give their God sole and sufficient worship. The underlying assumption behind the first assumption is that if the people of Israel had been more moral in their public and private behavior, and more pure in their worship of Yahweh, that God would have saved them from being conquered by the likes of Nebuchadnezzar. That is no more true than that God literally used Cyrus to restore the fortunes of Israel after their long ordeal of suffering and exile. In the world of *Realpolitik*, we know that is not the case.

We know, for example, that Solomon, one of the most politically successful of Israel's ancient kings, tolerated, and even promoted worship of pagan gods, while building a temple to Yahweh in Jerusalem. He was a political and religious pragmatist who played both ends against the middle and did it well. He may have given Yahweh top billing, but he did not give the LORD exclusive honor. He was never punished by God for his failure to be a purist worshipper of Yahweh. Quite to the contrary. He was idolized as an exemplar of political and spiritual wisdom.

The theological assumptions underlying the poetry of the prophets whom Brueggemann cites are faulty to begin with. He fails to note that the grief of Jeremiah eventually yields to the resignation of Job whose unmerited suffering far outweighs any human moral culpability. Jeremiah, as far as we know, goes into exile with his people, and dies without hope. In our times the Holocaust is the grief and suffering of a Jeremiah and a Job writ

large on a collective scale. Would any modern day prophet seriously suggest that the Holocaust was visited upon the Jewish people for some heinous sin of apostasy? Or that God used Hitler to inflict his punishment? Hardly, yet that is what Jeremiah clearly believed about the Babylonian conquest of Israel and the Exile that followed. We ask ourselves, is the divine, at the cosmic level of creation, in fact operative in human history in the way that the prophetic and hopeful imagination of the prophets would lead us to believe? I don't think so. Brueggemann is right when he says on page 80 that "God has no intrinsic organismic linkage to this or any social arrangement." God is not useful in any sense of being a guarantor of any moral, religious or cultural forms and structures. The latter are human constructs and they will come and go however worthy we may deem them to be.

This does not mean that the poetry of the prophets is not useful to us on a human level and adaptable to our interpretation of the times in which we live. Both Brueggemann and Rosemarie do an excellent job in that very endeavor. I like what Brueggemann says about words and language. "Our worlds come from our words. Our life is fed and shaped by our metaphors." Our language has the power "to shape reality and not just describe it." Our theological and metaphysical assumptions are quite different than those of the Hebrew prophets, or even of Brueggemann himself. As you yourself state, Rosemarie, your theology is not Brueggemann's theology, nor that of the prophets themselves, though you admit that your spirit "moves with these texts" and their powerful metaphors of exile and restoration, of relinquishment and receiving. You then go onto to say, "I don't see God as situational as the Israelites did; but I do see the mysterious enters our lives over and over again. There is universal wisdom in what is written here. The universe does bend to justice...a justice that works in our hands and is inspired by something far deeper than ourselves." We can call it the "Larger Self" in the language of William James, or perhaps our Higher Power, or a power greater than ourselves, in the language of A.A.

I confess that I would have liked to hear more from you on how your theology differs from that of Brueggemann and the Biblical prophets. You gave a hint of it in the above statement which I do appreciate. I think you hit the nail on the head when you noted the shift in cosmic perspective which the view of the earth from the moon set in motion back in the heyday of the space program in the 60s and 70s. Marshall McLuan's concept of the "global village" took on a spatial image, which we have yet to integrate into our consciousness of ourselves in the universe. We now have a God's eye view of the world that the prophets had only an inkling of, except that we must now shift our focus from that of a one planet deity to the God of the galaxies. That is quite a reach in terms of a comprehensible theological metaphor. I recall that one of the candidating sermons I preached in Norwell in 1969 was, "Do We Need A Space Theology?" I said, yes we do indeed, but it has not yet happened to any significant degree. In fact, we have retreated to a certain extent from space exploration. It is not as vigorous as it once was. NASA has to fight for every dollar to keep its program alive. We are still earth bound to a large extent in our view of ourselves and the divine. "Your God is too small", said, J.B. Phillips, in the title of one of his books some 35 years ago, and that may still be the case in spite of the wide spread popularity of Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* some years later.

I would like to return for a moment to the theme of relinquishment and reception. I appreciated your reference to your own congregation, which along with you as minister, is wrestling with the changes wrought by growth in numbers. Some want to hold onto things as they have been (the Royal Consciousness of the congregation) while others want to go with the transformation that growth inevitably brings. You as the minister are caught in the middle between the two poles. I could not help but think of my own situation in Norwell. The last few years have seen the growth level off and even decline a bit, though there are still new faces coming through the door. The other day one of my older parishioners asked if we would be having a student minister next year. I told her it was highly unlikely. She then wondered if our Associate Community Minister, Judy Campbell, would be around to provide some continuity. I had to tell her that Judy would in fact be cutting back on her involvement as she pursues other possibilities when she retires from teaching at Lesley in June. She commented that the membership would be experiencing some major losses and gaps in leadership next year. They will have only one minister at the helm, an unknown interim, instead of the three leaders they now have.

This was her, as well as my own, anticipatory grief that will come with the completion of my ministry. Out of that grief and loss they will know suffering and exile, homecoming and rejuvenation, as will this minister who will be moving to the Cape. I cannot help but wonder whether in my present role I am in some sense part of the Royal Consciousness that knows it must relinquish its power to make way for the new. I've already started having dreams about this change. In one dream I am riding in the back seat of a car with my wife. It is my car, but first one parishioner, a man, and then another, a woman, take over the driving, from the passenger side of the car in the front. They pull the steering wheel over to their side of the car. I am having doubts about whether they will be able to steer the car in the right direction. It's hard to let go even when you want to, or think you do.

I was particularly struck by Brueggemann's reference to the end of the Enlightenment as the big thing we have to relinquish as citizens of modern western culture. That certainly won't be easy for UU's whose theology is grounded in the Enlightenment. Reason, science, the privileges of white middle-class entitlements, are being threatened by the rise of 3rd World cultures, liberation movements, along with the heightened interest in spirituality. The tension between the old rational humanists and the spiritual enthusiasts is already keenly felt in our movement. What will we have to relinquish in order to receive a new life of the spirit? Can we in fact have our cake and eat it too? I remember taking a week-long course in Silva Mind Control back in the early 70's. It was a throw back in some respects to my Christian Science background, which provides a convenient illusion of controlling your world through the power of your thoughts. Thoughts indeed are powerful, but they are not all powerful, and even Christian Scientists and Mind Control graduates must come to terms with the limits of their human mortality and the fact that we cannot ultimately control our every thought any more than we can control the vast array of actions and events in the outer world. Buddhists have taught their followers for more than two millennia about the transitory nature of existence. The only thing we can be sure of is that "the times they are a-changin'."

I took the liberty of doing some extra curricula reading in the writings of the French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, in his book, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*. He says some things about the nature of hope that are worth sharing. Hope, says Marcel, is a transcendent act of the soul that affirms the possibility of vital regeneration in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Hope, however, “is always associated with a communion [of souls], no matter how interior it may be.” To say, “I hope” is really to say, “I hope in thee for us.” Hope has an essential prophetic character. It is “a knowing which outstrips [even] the unknown—but which excludes all presumption.” Hope does not “see what is going to happen; but...affirms as if it saw.” It could be called, he says, “a memory of the future”, a phrase that resonates with Brueggemann’s line about “future giving memory.”

Hope is not to be confused with a shallow and simple optimism—the “vague feeling that things tend to turn out for the best.” Rather, hope can exist only when the temptation to despair is also present. “Hope is the act by which this temptation is overcome.” Hope means “accepting the trial as an integral part of the self...to be absorbed and transmuted.”

Invincible or eternal “hope arises from the ruins of all human and limited hopes.” It “is a mystery [that] coincides with the spiritual principle itself.”

The mysterious does indeed “enter our lives over and over again.” It is our vocation as ministers to serve that mystery, vast beyond all comprehension, (the holiness of God) yet more intimate than our essential and most authentic selves (the pathos of God). In serving that mystery we learn again and again what it means to relinquish and receive and to help others to do so. Through that mystery we are linked to everyone and every thing that exists.