

I love living in CNY - I love the four seasons I love snow I love the cold. There were points in my life when I could have chosen to live elsewhere and I did not. But truth be told the first 2 weeks of December are probably my least favorite. The days are pretty short the nights are pretty long - my desire to hibernate usually kicks in. I don't have my usual energy in December. And when my energy is down it is harder to find hope. And after a year of a political agenda in charge that is not conservative it is just anti-humanity it is even harder to find my hope. I am trying to do some things to help myself - limit my social media, double up on my spiritual practice. Read fewer headlines and instead read longer articles.

And I continue to turn to my liberal faith for hope and direction. Our liberal faith has sometimes been accused of being too thin. When the solution is that everyone should be nice it is a little hard to deal with the idea of evil. I suppose some people might want to turn to a faith that is more defined, where the moral distinctions are clear where the lines are not so nuanced. But that does not work for me.

There is something about this liberal faith that lures me on. When I came into the UU faith I was introduced to James Luther Adams. He is a Unitarian Universalist theologian. In his life his faith journey took him from fundamentalism, to humanism to Christianity. He lived through World War I, WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. You heard his writing earlier. He saw militarism at its worst and still he kept his faith and his hope. In fact he kind of doubled down on his faith.

In 1976 Beacon Press our UU press published "On being human religiously: Selected essays in religion and society" And in this book was Adams essay where he laid out his ideas of the five smooth stones of liberalism.

### Five smooth stones

1 Possibility or Revelation - Adams says that Revelation is not sealed - it has not ended. There is always the possibility of knowing more and learning more Revelation does not end.

2 Respect - Relationships between persons rest on mutual and free consent and not coercion. How timely this now seems

3 Justice - there is a moral obligation to the establishment of a just and loving community. Adams wrote:

“ A Faith that is not the [sibling] of justice is bound to bring us grief.”

“This love is not something that is ultimately created by us or that is even at our disposal. It seizes and transforms life, bringing us into a new kind of community that provides new channels for love and new structures for justice. “ This love does not prevent us from hurt or harm but it can transform even the worst harm into something good.

For Adams this love is not “nice” or “sweet”. It does not watch what it says for fear of upsetting the social order.

He says

“The community of justice and love is not an ethereal fellowship that is above the conflicts and turmoils of the world. It is one that takes shape in nature and history, one that requires the achievement of freedom with respect to material resources as well as with respect to spiritual resources. Indeed, the one kind of freedom is not fully authentic without the other. Freedom, justice, and love require a body as well as a spirit.”

4 Agency or Power - good things don't just happen we make them happen

5 Hope "[L]iberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.”

Douglas Taylor the minister at the Binghamton UU church summed them up this way

"As a liberal religious community we affirm that we are always learning; that there is always more truth unfolding in our understanding. We see that being together matters, relationships are more important than doctrine, we say. We further state that how we are together – how we are in relationship – also matters. We are committed to the notion that to be good we must do good. And finally, we always hope. These, here stated in simple language, are James Luther Adams' famous Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion.

Possibility - Respect - Justice - Agency - Hope

Why five smooth stones? Why Five, Why Stones, Why smooth?

James Luther Adams pulled this metaphor from the Old Testament story of David and Goliath. Many of us know that story. The Israelites and the Philistines were locked in battle. The Philistines sent out Goliath - a giant - who challenged the Israelites to send out their strongest fighter and the winning fighter would win for their whole country too. David, the youngest son of Jesse, slight and not yet fully-grown begged king Saul to let him go and Saul did! A modern translation of what happens next from the book of 1 Samuel:

**"38-39** Then Saul outfitted David as a soldier in armor. He put his bronze helmet on his head and belted his sword on him over the armor. David tried to walk but he could hardly budge.

David told Saul, "I can't even move with all this stuff on me. I'm not used to this." And he took it all off.

**40** Then David took his shepherd's staff, selected five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in the pocket of his shepherd's pack, and with his sling in his hand approached Goliath."

David ran quickly to Goliath surprising him and loaded his sling with one of the five stones whipping it around he took aim and let a stone fly and felled the giant with one shot.

Why Five

"Five is the number of strength and power ... This power is what fueled the first global migrations of the birds and fish created on the fifth day of creation. Just in case we missed this connection with creation and the number five, it says in 1 Sam. 17:48 that when Goliath went to meet David in battle, that David "ran quickly" to meet him. The word for ran (*rutz*) is the same root word used to

describe the movement of the creatures created on day five.

<https://graceintorah.net/2015/06/19/five-smooth-stones/>

Why smooth

"The constant washing of the water of [life] wears down all of our rough and crooked edges. Like the river stones, this is a slow process, a journey if you will, down the bumpy and twisted path of life." <https://graceintorah.net/2015/06/19/five-smooth-stones/>

The stones would not fly so well or hit so hard if they were not smooth. But the process of smoothing a stone is long. We talk about life smoothing our rough edges, and we know that that process can be emotionally painful and draining. We can sometimes think that we are losing our edge. But we are not we are being made ready for just the right moment

Why Stone?

Clearly for David he needed a weapon something that would land hard and kill his enemy. Five smooth eggs just would not have worked out as well. In this day and age we could think about these five smooth stones as being weapons of liberalism but I would rather not weaponize our work just yet. I would rather call them tools. Blessed sacred tools that help us get the job done.

Adams was a thoughtful writer he picked this metaphor carefully. 5 smooth stones. He lived through World War II. Before the war he studied in Germany with Bonhoeffer and others who came to be part of the resistance. His was no

theology created while he sat in an armchair and wondered about the evil in the world. He knew the world had taken too long to fight the Nazis. He saw the horror of what happened.

He did not write about the 5 smooth stones in his optimistic youth when the future was shiny and full of promise. He wrote it in his 72nd year. He had seen a lot. He has seen evil almost conquer the world, and he had seen goodness not quite win. He must have known he was in the last phase of his life. But he did not write about how we had fallen short. No he wrote about what will carry us forward

Possibility - Respect - Justice - Agency - Hope

These are days that try us - I talked earlier with our children about the idea of Hanukah and Hope. WE often think of Hope and Lament as opposite. James Luther Adams knew this was not true. Hope is being open to the universe and all that it has to offer. Open to all of it. The beauty and the joy - and the horror and the pain. We who live in a bubble of white privilege, or any of the privileges that create a bubble around us may have the belief that hope is optimism - hope is greeting each day with a smile. But for those folks who are part of a marginalized group - I suspect that they have always known that hope and pain and fear and joy all live together. Life is always a jumble a mess confusion.

I love the Blues. Blues music will almost always make me smile. Which is kind of funny if you think about it. Why is a song about how hard life is how it grinds you down how is it that that makes one smile? Because you are still singing. The hope is getting up and making that music even in the face of

unbearable pain. Hope and Lament are not opposites. We can lament because we can hope, just as we can smile because we can hope.

How do we move from lament to hope? Self-help books will give you a path a set of steps designed for you to conquer lament and succeed with hope. I offer you another possibility.

We do not move from lament to hope. It is a false binary. We hold lament close, deep, we feel it, we sing it we dance it we share it we let it move us change us lead and in that there is hope. We can only do this with others in community and this is the hope that Adams speaks of. Alone each of us is swallowed up by the lament together in collaboration in community our individual laments weave into a communal hope

In 1948 the church James Luther Adams belonged to First Unitarian of Chicago was trying to decide if it should desegregate. There were people who said yes and people who said no. It came to pass that the Board of Trustees was trying to decide what to do. Adams sat on the Board he was passionate that the church should desegregate. And there was a man who just a passionately said they should not. This Board meeting went on into the early hours of the morning. At some point Adams turned to this man and said "What do you say is the purpose of this church?"

Suddenly, everyone was listening. Everyone wanted to hear the answer to this crucial question. Probably, the person who objected was listening especially hard to his own heart, as well as to the words he had heard from other board members through the long discussion.

The board member who opposed opening the church to people of color finally replied. "Okay, Jim. The purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them."

We lament because what is happening in the world is awful. But that is not the end of hope. We have gathered here this morning. There is hope in that. Maybe you will find a bit of respite here - there is hope in that. We have sages and wise ones among us and there is hope in that. We have youth who will move this world forward and there is hope in that. We get hold of people and help them change and there is hope in that.

What is the purpose of this church? To get hold of people like us and change them. It has always been this way and for that I am thankful.

Possibility - Respect - Justice - Power - Hope that is something that will keep me going during these dreary winter months as I move from lament to hope and back again.

In a world without end may this be so.