

Engagement With the World

A Personal Perspective of Faith in Action

William F. Schulz

My religious consciousness was shaped by many things: warm childhood memories of church, the inspiring presence of a minister, and a fascination with why things happened. But always a part of that awareness was a sense of life's inequities. Religion and justice seemed borne on each other's wings. What makes them such soulmates to me?

Every single one of us knows what it is like to bleed. Every one of us has experienced pain. If that were not a fact of human existence, we might not notice the suffering of the world. Because it is, we do.

I was four or five years old when I first learned about other people's suffering. My parents had taken me on a tour of General Robert E. Lee's mansion outside Washington, DC. Within that grand ante-bellum house, I saw high ceilings and glittering crystal. When the tour was over and we emerged onto the grounds, my mother took my hand. "Now I want you to see another kind of house," she said, and led me to the slave huts, which were damp, run down, and frightening.

"Did people actually live in these?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Oh, yes."

Every single one of us knows what it is like to bleed. In one respect pain is a gift because it cultivates our imagination. Without it, we would be far less likely to rail at deprivation or shrink from cruelty. Of course not everyone derives sympathy from suffering. But the religious imagination contends that in the heart of every stranger lurks a reflection of our own.

The Unitarian Universalism that I champion fosters just such imagination.

Part of the reason for needing this imagination is because we cannot get away from the world. Unitarian Universalism is a faith utterly encumbered by existence. We do not think of metaphysical escapes from the world and reality.

Our religious tradition has always been that way. Christian, theist, mystic, humanist—it doesn't matter. Go all the way back to the Counter Reformation, to the earliest anti-Trinitarian debate, and you find a faith that calls for engagement with the world, not retreat.

This doesn't mean that Unitarian Universalists do not value the spiritual arts and disciplines. Worship, introspection, meditation, solitude, and dozens more have their honored place. It only means that whatever our religious practice, eventually our faith

needs to bring us face to face with radiance, misery, glory, and pain—face to face with the hard facts of daily life.

The Unitarian Universalism that I practice requires such engagement.

And it requires engagement exactly because the world is so astonishingly full of grace. I can't help but be thrilled by the blessings that surround me whenever I take the time to hear and see. How can any of us doubt the magnificence of a world that contains luscious pears and endless seas and jazz by Duke Ellington and paintings by Georgia O'Keefe?

But to savor that magnificence, we need to be free of mind-numbing pain. We need resources to buy the pear, we need time to visit the sea. We do not need to be under threat of our lives; we just need access to Ellington and knowledge of O'Keefe. "The rich and the poor," someone has said, "are not equally free to [choose whether to] sleep under the bridges of Paris." Or as basketball player Moses Malone so aptly put it, "If you don't got the ball, you sure can't shoot it."

The world presents itself as full of blessings, rich with opportunity. "Grace" is the word we use to describe these unsolicited favors. Grace does not come for the asking, but it can be thwarted. Religion's job is both to signal the gifts and to help everyone have a part in the unwrapping.

The Unitarian Universalism that I cherish seeks to save the world because it is so precious.

But what are the true odds of succeeding at sav-ing the world? For every victory of justice, we can cite a dozen instances of its defeat. Do our actions in the face of wrong and tragedy truly make a difference?

"I spent seventeen months in the prison queues of Leningrad," wrote Soviet poet Anna Akhmatova. "One day somebody recognized me. A woman with lips blue with cold who was standing behind me came out of the numbness and whispered in my ear: 'Can you describe this?' she asked. I said, 'I can.' Then something resembling a smile slipped over what once had been her face."

The woman had smiled because even the prison queues of Leningrad could not erase her conviction that the future was not settled, or her assumption that the right word at the right time, the right witness in the right place, might redeem even the most vicious perfidy.

My religion has taught me that the meaning of history is still in the making, that tomorrow is not set, that there is no such thing as fate. "The future lasts a long time," said the distinguished neo-Marxist French philosopher Louis Althusser, but each day of it can be shaped. "If one could be punished for anything at all or nothing," said sociology professor Nechama Tec, "then one might as well do something worthwhile."

It is of course in the last analysis a matter of faith. It cannot be proven that history is not predetermined. But I take only amusement from the reaction of a Presbyterian woman, a firm believer in predestination, who, upon falling down a flight of stairs, picked herself up and remarked, "Well, thank God that's over!"

The Unitarian Universalism that I honor takes it on faith that we can affect the tenor of the day.

I have been supremely fortunate in my life: loving parents, a good education, more than enough to eat. I have not been the victim of racism or sexism; so far I have two well-functioning arms and legs. But on some level I know what it is like to suffer and I want the world to be a less cruel place.

My commitment to social justice, like so much else, has something to do with death. We all know that the angel of death perches on the shoulder of everyone. The angel's hour will come, and when it comes naturally, through unpreventable disease or age, we may leave at peace. But when it comes prematurely, through poverty or terror or stupidity, that is *unacceptable*. I mean that quite literally: I may not be able to stop it, but I can never be at peace.

My commitment to social justice derives from this: that we might keep the angel of death waiting just long enough that the children of life have the time to finish their dance.

The Reverend Dr. William F. Schulz, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 1985 to 1993, is executive director of Amnesty International USA.

For Further Reading

We recommend the following books, some of which are available from the [UUA Bookstore](http://www.uua.org/bookstore), 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108-2800, 1-800-215-9076, email: bookstore@uua.org. Or check with your local library or bookstore.

How Can I Help? Stories and Reflections on Service by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. New York: Knopf, 1991.

In the Tiger's Mouth: An Empowerment Guide for Social Action by Katrina Shields. Philadelphia: New Society, 1993.

Shared Values For a Troubled World: Conversations With Men and Women of Conscience by Rushworth M. Kidder. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.

Some Do Care: Contemporary Lives of Moral Commitment by William Damon and Anne Colby. New York: Free Press, 1992.

The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society by Amitai Etzioni. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Talking Peace: A Vision for the Next Generation by Jimmy Carter. New York: Dutton,

1993.