

Saving a Wretch Like Me

**an essay by Hollis Huston
for Ohio River Group
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And there he plays extravagant matches
In fitless finger-stalls,
On a cloth untrue,
With a twisted cue,
And elliptical billiard balls.
-- *The Mikado*²

Some natural tears they dropp'd, but wiped them soon;
The World was all before them . . .
-- *Paradise Lost*³

How do "sin" and "hope" figure in current Unitarian Universalist Theology?

I accepted this question, but have found it hard to write about. It seems premised on other questions already answered. Do "Sin" and "Hope" actually figure for us? And what is to be considered "current"? right now, this November? this season or this year? or the year and a quarter since Michael Brown's death? or the almost four years since Trayvon Martin's murder? or the first decade and a half of the new millennium, which began with a mass murder of Americans and two invasions of Asia in response? My first thoughts are that 1) we avoid owning a theology of Sin, but are compelled to substitute other words for it; that 2) we search for a new theology of Hope, having lost our grounding for it; and that 3) we sense that we cannot have one of these ideas without the other.

Our study group decided to address Sin and Hope together, and that means we think Sin and Hope are connected. We made this decision last year after two days of discussion on the American complex of racial sin. We exposed a lot of pain to each other, pain felt on our own account

¹With passages spoken not written at the time of presentation.

²*The Complete Plays of Gilbert and Sullivan* (New York: Modern Library, n. d.), p. 384.

³XII, 645-6, *The College Survey of English Literature*, Vol. I, eds. B. J. Whiting, Fred B. Millett, Alexander M Witherspoon, Odell Shephard, Arthur Palmer Hudson, Edward Wagenknecht, Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 683.

and pain on account of our people, who need leadership. They struggle, and we with them, to name or conceal, align with or escape from, their inheritance of oppression's benefits. We speak to them from a fog of disillusioned prophecy. We have seen the tropes of racial hatred resurrected as a political platform. We have seen the violence of our systems exposed to damning view in new media of communication. Therefore when we ask these days in anguish *What ought we to do?* we mean *What ought we to do in relation to people of color?* Our scales of life and death, right and wrong, justice and injustice, are calibrated on the color line. The word "currently" means "now" -- the Tragic but Hopeful moment when systemic violence has been exposed in a new way. Do Unitarian Universalists have a concept of Sin? And is there any Hope for us? And what is the connection between Sin and Hope?

If I describe these thoughts of ours I am already passing on to what they are really trying to think. When I say what we are trying to think I may just project my own wishes, saying only what I wish we would think. And where do I get off, assuming that what we say we think isn't what we really think? Who died and left me as therapist? But this is the only way I can think it.

"Upon those that step into the same rivers," said the philosopher, "different and different waters flow."⁴ *Current* doesn't mean *historical*. Current means *right now*, in a moment not yet described in history or codified in reading lists. The current has no scripture, is still in flux: no authority gets to survey it. I've looked through more than a year of *UU World* and *Quest*. And I have reflected on lessons learned in recent revisitations of the Civil Rights Campaigns a half century ago, because the achievements of that time give us hope, and model a kind of engagement with sinfulness.

The Mighty Stream

The judgment of God is on America now. . . . America's on the way to hell.
-- Martin Luther King (February 16, March 9, 1968)⁵

⁴Heraclitus, in G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: a Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 195.

⁵Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 181-2.

Unitarian Universalists are not now talking about sin. We're talking about injustice, inequality, oppression, exclusion. We're looking forward to healing (supposing disease), forgiveness (supposing grievance), gratitude (supposing entitlement), humility (supposing perfectionism), compassion (supposing cruelty), generosity (supposing greed), courage (supposing cowardice), Beloved Community (supposing tribalism). When we speak of sin it is generally to ban the word. People join our church "to be part of a religion that calls no one a sinner."⁶

If we call no one a sinner then we are committed to the idea that no one sins. Liberal religions have sometimes assumed that there is no such thing as sin, but only error, ignorance and deprivation of goodness. Those who find this line of thought adequate may say proudly that they have no theology of sin, because sin is a thing of no account, having no positive identity. It is not true however that we call no one a sinner, any more than it is true that Unitarian Universalists can "believe whatever they want."

It must be confessed, though with Sorrow, that transient things form a great part of what is commonly taught as Religion.

--Theodore Parker⁷

Various faiths have labelled various acts as sinful, and modernity has repealed many of those damnations. We don't now call it sinful to play cards, or to drink a glass of wine, or to read *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. We don't think it sinful to deny the Apostle's Creed, or to consult the prophet Yeshua rather than the God Jesus. We don't think it sinful to make reciprocally chosen, mutually joyous and responsible love. We don't think it sinful to marry a person of another race, or another religion, or the same gender, or to divorce and remarry, or to practice birth control. Parker the Transcendentalist, if he were with us today, would name these expired damnations as examples of "the transient" rather than "the permanent" in his Unitarian Christianity. Our counter-Index of personal conduct, acts considered sinful by someone else and declared beside the point among us, has made us a refuge for wounded Christians of many stripes. In an earlier time our many religious refugees, assaulted by illegitimate theologies of sin, were understandably reluctant to hear words of judgment that had so hurt them. In solidarity with them we recoiled from

⁶Abhi Janamanchi, "Faith in the Borderland," *Quest* (July/August, 2015), p. 2.

⁷"A Discourse on the Permanent and Transient in Christianity," Digital Commons at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1013&context=etas>.

the vocabularies in which they had been falsely judged, and then went further -- we declared those false judges sinful, along with the institutions in whose name they had spoken. In some of our churches, because some Christians and Jews had behaved badly, the scriptures of Christianity and Judaism were banned, along with their languages of reverence. We believed we knew who the real sinners were.

Peter Morales wonders why we have done so well welcoming gays and lesbians into our fellowship and ministry, but have succeeded less resoundingly in goals of racial diversification. "Why," he asks, "are issues of gender and sexuality so much easier for us than issues of race?"⁸ Neither of these oppressed communities has escaped the social and institutional injustices committed against them. But the answer to President Morales's question about the demography of our congregations and clergy lies in the differing religious situation of the two groups. Gays and lesbians were specifically damned by many churches, and we were a church that took the lead in undoing that damnation with a religious blessing. But our African and Latino friends, though they suffer general oppression by a whole society, by banks and civic associations and schools and courts and political systems and law enforcement and penal systems, were not specifically damned by their churches; they had created churches for themselves where their hopes could be nourished. When people of color come to us, they reject the blessing of those churches; we are always in competition for them. A church controls its own blessings, but no church including ours controls societal oppression. When we attract more people of color into our congregations and our ministry, this will not ensure that people of color are treated justly in America at large: that will be another and much greater mission.

As a people of High Criticism and worldly optimism, we have resisted some orthodox Christian theologies of sin. We assailed the ideas of Original Sin and Utter Depravity, as they come to us from Augustine through Luther, Calvin and the pilgrim churches of New England. Channing preached that these ideas "cast dishonor on the Creator," that it was morally repugnant to imagine God creating human beings in such a way that "under the innocent features of our childhood is hidden a nature averse to all good and propense to all evil, a nature which exposes us to God's displeasure and wrath." An ideology of unavoidable unworthiness, he said, is bound "to form a

⁸"A Mixture of Triumph and Pain," *UU World* (Fall 2015). p. 5.

gloomy, forbidding, and servile religion, and to lead men to substitute censoriousness, bitterness, and persecution" for true virtue.⁹

Pelagians at heart rather than Augustinians, we have insisted that human beings can be good.¹⁰ Though in Channing's time most Americans had been taught from their first primers that "In Adam's Fall/We sinned all,"¹¹ we along with many critical Christians would say that Adam is a legend and the idea of inherited sin is absurd. What would be the point, we say, of ethical and moral behavior if the will is essentially corrupt? Why develop a conscience if its agency is beside the point? If we cannot be good, why try?

Because it has been used badly, we fell out of the habit of speaking the word "sin." Use of the word seems to us sinful, a mark of the other beastly churches from whose claws we have for many decades rescued people. It is not true however that we do not condemn the conduct of others. We say that brutally racist cops and amateurs who ape them are "murderers;" we say that campaigns such as "preventing voter fraud" and the "war on drugs" are examples of "pernicious mutant racism."¹² We speak with approbrium of White Supremacy. We join protests such as the North Carolina NAACP's "Moral March," acting against a putative Immorality that appears to be already on the march.¹³ Our prophetic vocabulary has a strong moral flavor. Voter Suppression is not just an error, or a bad choice, or an absurdity, or an ethical error by individuals, or a suboptimal approach to democracy, we think; it is deeply offensive, a turning away from decency and from common standards of American virtue. It pollutes the stream of truth and meaning. It desecrates the temple of Human Dignity, befouling the altar of the Voting Rights Act. It is racism. Like the murder of Hamlet's father that poisons the ground of his decision-making, "it smells to heaven."¹⁴ To use a word that most Americans would accept as meaning all that I have just said in the last five sentences, it turns away from *God*.¹⁵

⁹ "Unitarian Christianity," May 5, 1819, <http://ucmtl.typepad.com/files/unitarian-christianity-1.pdf>

¹⁰ John Portman appears to get his understanding of the Augustine/Pelagius debate entirely wrong, calling Pelagius: "a thinker who believed that nothing we humans might do could possibly 'earn' us salvation," *A History of Sin: Its Evolution to Today and Beyond* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), p. xv.

¹¹ *The New England Primer*, 1777 ed., <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/nep/1777/>

¹² Morales, loc. cit.

¹³ Donald Skinner, "1,500 UUs Join Huge N.C. March," *UU World* (Summer 2014), pp. 36-7.

¹⁴ *Hamlet*, III. iii. l. 36, ed. T. J. B. Spencer (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 143.

¹⁵ "Sin: . . . a transgression against God," *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, q. v. "Sin," p. 530. Dorothee Sölle calls it a "universal Christian statement" that "sin is a separation from God," *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 54.

We mean all this but fumble for the adequate words. Awkward is it to take a prophetic stance without language of judgment. Nathan went to David's court, raised his bony finger and pointed to the place from which corruption spewed. "Ha'ish attah," he said to his king, "The man is you."¹⁶ Dr. King channelled the prophet Amos, calling out the day when "Justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."¹⁷ A prophet calls on Justice because Injustice rules; and calling on Righteousness, he implies that something else stands in its place -- something Un-Righteous. And King's audience knew who he was pointing at; in his imagery they saw those Un-Righteous swept away in floods of history, like Pharaoh's army.

Categorical Boundaries

Act so as to treat man, in your own person as in that of anyone else, always as an end, never merely as a means.

-- Immanuel Kant, "Metaphysical Foundations of Morals"¹⁸

Four hundred years of theft -- of the land of one group of peoples and the labor of another, treating people of color as means to happiness for the colorless -- is in Enlightened judgment a massive ethical violation, a contradiction of freedom and of humanity itself. With the help however of such aggrandizements a disjointed conglomeration of European refugees became a mighty nation, founded on declarations of universal human rights. We could project these declarations around the world, inconsistently acting in accordance with them at home, because our ideas were powerful, unleashing and at the same time governing the creativity of those to whom their blessing was extended. Without the assets accumulated in our vast theft of capital and labor, on the other hand, our powerful ideas might have failed. The cause of human rights has failed in many places since this group last met, and our country nearly failed on a battlefield in Pennsylvania, a hallowed ground that Lincoln said had tested "whether any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure." If our nation had failed, we would not be here having this discussion. How

¹⁶ *II Samuel 12:7, Tanakh: the Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 486.

¹⁷ Paraphrase of *Amos 5:24* -- "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," (NRSV).

¹⁸ *The Philosophy of Kant*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich (New York: Modern Library, 1977), p. 178.

ironic that our power to maintain and to project the doctrine of human rights is brought to us in significant part by our original violations of human rights. Even at our most virtuous, we are compromised. The author of words that were echoed in many a new constitution and in the charter of the United Nations, the author who said that all human beings are created equal, with an unalienable right to pursue happiness rather than to be used as a means to the happiness of others, was himself an exploiter of human flesh.

*And there is no health in us.*¹⁹ We are frustrated "about our current reality as a predominantly Euro-American movement."²⁰ Our middle-class and pigmentally challenged past does not conveniently die; as Faulkner might say, it isn't even past.²¹ For we walk in the blinders of, work with brass mittens of, White Privilege. Our compassion is warped because we don't have the experience of growing up in neighborhoods without honest employment, safe recreation or decent food; we aren't harassed and brutalized by gangs and police. Our children weren't piped from school to prison for minor escapades. We haven't been locked up for lifetimes due to non-violent offenses.²²

In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body -- it is *heritage*.
-- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*²³

What we thought was normal life is exposed to us as an unfair advantage, a thumb set on the scale in our favor, giving us gravity we do not wholly deserve. "Check your privilege!" we are told, but we cannot leave it with the coat-check. Our privilege is our breath, our blood, our thought, our nerve fibers sampling the world with partiality. Even a white martyr is stuck on one side of The Veil: Reeb and Liuzzo were privileged white folks who chose to align with the oppressed and could leave if they chose.

¹⁹"General Confession, Daily Morning Prayer," from *1928 Common Book of Prayer*, <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1928/MP.htm>.

²⁰Janamanchi, loc. cit.

²¹*Requiem for a Nun*, I. iii.

²²"Most people in state prison for drug offenses have *no* history of violence or significant selling activity" (Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed. [New York: The New Press, 2011], p. 60).

²³(New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015) p. 103.

Most people of the middle class in American today, buffeted and cheated by public disinvestment and the greed of game-masters, don't leap from mountain-top to mountain-top. We hope we won't fall into poverty before we die, but the thought of leaving a nest egg to the children as a head start in life seems an antique fantasy of former times. But now I know that my life is privileged, because Trayvon Martin was removed from the earth for walking in his neighborhood and wearing a hoodie in the rain, while I would never be challenged for doing either of these things. Walking in the neighborhood and wearing a hoodie are not mentioned in the Bill of Rights because they do not rise to a level of abstraction high enough: they are concrete instances of my unalienable right to life, which I had taken for granted. I see that this ground of life is given me and denied to others — it is privilege. We must walk in our neighborhoods, but some are killed for doing so. And the knowledge arouses in me something baser than a prophet's righteous anger. The feeling is nausea. This murder makes me want to puke.

We are like the Mikado's condemned billiard-sharp. Justice is an "extravagant match," but we play it on a "cloth untrue" where the motions we initiate proceed along biased trajectories we did not have in mind. We ourselves are "twisted cues," warped by the strains of our social location, excellent in our purposes but working them with unconscious obliquities. The "elliptical billiard balls" are the people, parties and movements we would set in motion, their unexpected contours and unknown centers of mass defeating our intentions. Gilbert's maliciously designed dungeon cell for a social offender images a Fallen Creature in a Fallen World.

"White Privilege" is a name for the dungeon into which we were born. In this term we record the corruption present in our condemnation of corruption. In an act of intellectual power we condemn our power to condemn the things we know are condemnable. Our teeth are set on edge because our ancestors ate sour grapes.²⁴ It may be useful to step back from this self-diagnosis, rooted in the history of a specific nation, and ask if it fits a larger pattern of history.

Perhaps we would wish to find these great declaration of human rights originating in some other, perfect country. Nominations? The world now contains multiple democracies, but none of them are innocent. Scratch the surface, toss aside the glossy documents, excavate the soils of history

²⁴Jeremiah 31:29.

and we will find always some forgotten or denied slaughter. For most of history, writes Steven Pinker, "genocide and war crimes were absent from the historical record only because no one at the time thought they were a big deal."²⁵ And that goes for the victims of our own violence as well: how romantic and condescending to assume that either Africans or the Americans who preceded us were any more or less bloodthirsty than the Israelites who boasted that, escaping slavery, they brought genocide and ethnic cleansing to the Promised Land. The English tormented the Irish for almost five centuries, but no one asks what those suffering Celts had once done to the peoples of New Grange and Carrowmore.

Our White Privilege is a local instance of something more general and existential, a sign of the alienation that is human life. For we are imbedded in and also transcendent of our gross materiality. Without the anxiety of duplicitous essence we would have all been eaten by predators. Our saving capacity is language: we survived because we could speak to each other, even when the bear was not present, about what to do if the bear came over the mountain. We could share memories and make plans; we could express truths in the abstract to each other, and we also could lie. By our separation from nature we assumed power over it; but our separation creates a fissure in which Wrong can arise. This "contradiction," in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, is that a human being is "both a part of nature and a spiritual personality claiming to dominate nature."²⁶ In the will to power that dominates nature we forget our messy entanglement in what is to be dominated.

How can I be such a partial thing as I am, and yet envision the whole? It's been said that the ancient world and religions saw history as a cycle of recurring events, while the modern world including religions of The Book sees history as a straight line proceeding from alpha to omega; but neither of these models expresses the anxiety of consciousness. Douglas Hofstadter proposed the "Strange Loop" as a model of how History and Consciousness emerge from simple human awareness. "Despite one's sense of departing ever further from one's origin, one winds up, to one's shock, exactly where one had started out. In short, a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop."²⁷ It is an experience of *Being Here*, but also of *Seeing Myself Being*

²⁵ *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011), p. 694.

²⁶ *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I: Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 178.

²⁷ Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop* (Basic Books, 2007), pp. 101-2.

Here (which requires one to be elsewhere). This is *ekstasis*, or Standing Outside Oneself. So our moments are not unique, but refer back to other moments; and yet they are not the same as the moments to which they refer. Our movement is neither straight line nor circle, but might be imagined as a spiral. The helix is a circular progress: we come to the place that recalls the last time we traced this part of the coil's arc. I come again to Thanksgiving and to Christmas, just as I did last year but also differently, because I remember last year. "Some things that happen for the first time/Seem to be happening again."²⁸ We come back without knowing, but when we see that scene we think we can change. "Things you do come back to you/As though they knew the way."

Our ancestor Jefferson declared universal human rights while violating them; he knew good and evil but did not know he was naked. "Man . . . seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power which overreaches the limits of human creatureliness." We prepare to do something virtuous and change the world. "He assumes that he can . . . transcend finite limitations until his mind becomes identical with universal mind."²⁹ But the necessary forgetting of our unsuitability, of our participation in the thing we would change, is the moment where Niebuhr locates the Occasion of Sin. The Forgetting is necessary and yet deeply flawed.

I once lived in a New England parsonage of pre-revolutionary vintage, a two-story house wrapped around a chimney that opened onto a hearth in every room. That massive chimney had been sinking for two hundred years, and there was no justice in the house. You couldn't play marbles because anywhere you placed the marble, it would roll into the groove between two floorboards and then toward the chimney. It was a house deformed by the weight of history. There was no level surface, and no right angle. The doors were always jamming because the doorframes were changing their shape.

The Enlightenment dared us to be wise, to level the hills and exalt the valleys with critical thought. "*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own intelligence!;"³⁰ but the instruments of our survey may be warped. We didn't build the house, but are tilted by it; nor are we immacu-

²⁸ Lorenz Hart, "Where or When."

²⁹ Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-9.

³⁰ Kant, "What Is Enlightenment?", *op. cit.*, p. 132.

lately conceived, but marked and weighed at birth by history. "We are born into conditions in which we do not cause sin but already live in sin."³¹

And now let me ask, since we as a religious people have so signally rejected Original Sin, what was that silly idea really about? To what question is it such a dreadful answer? It was an answer to Hamlet's question, the fundamental religious question, which is: why are we not in paradise? and why (o cursed spite!) was ever I born to set it right? why is life so hard, and then we die? Why do we come into the world with childbirth's pain, and have to work for a living "by the sweat of your face," and then "to dust you shall return."³² Why do terrible things happen to good people, and why do our good purposes go wrong, and why isn't life more fair?

No, this isn't Paradise. It never was and never could have been. To use a theological word that does not appear in the scriptural creation stories, we live in a *fallen* world, a world without right angles or level surfaces. To live a High Critical and Enlightened faith, to know that all human beings have a right to pursue happiness, to search freely and responsibly for truth and meaning; to follow the bony prophetic finger as it indicates the concrete violence of segregations, old and new; but then to know that we ourselves, for all our vision, are impure; that we carry the toxin in us, having grown up in privilege; that even our outrage was composed from the sidelines, our potential sacrifices drawn as if from trust funds -- this is the alienated condition of a religion fostered in circles of elite education, coincident with social distinction. We ourselves are *fallen* in the fallen world. Do we deserve to be happy? Do we deserve to be good?

We feel in white privilege the weight of history, and our formation within it. No matter how lofty our principles, we are all born somewhere, in what the liberation theologians call a "social location." If that location is on high ground with a wide view, then we play with an unfair advantage. Those born in the vale below may suspect our motives, or our judgment. *Congratulations to the meek, for they are heirs to the Kingdom.* If you know so much about justice, the meek may say, why has your idea of justice left you in such a favorable position? We were born, as Mark

³¹ Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 54.

³² *Genesis* 3:16-19 (NRSV)

Belletini said in one of our discussions last year, "imbedded in racialized structures,"³³ structures that we might as well describe as structures of sin.

The Paradox of Privilege

We do in fact believe in sin. We judge the armies of injustice with words that substitute for an avoided vocabulary of sin. We judge ourselves with a word that represents what others would call our sinfulness. And what does this judgment mean? To the extent that I am a person of "Privilege," I am powerful, possessing powers that I did not earn, powers given me through accidents of history. I cannot renounce my privilege, because my very renunciation becomes my exercise of it. One could, like Francis of Assisi or the Buddha, give away one's wealth and join the homeless poor, but one's identity is then established as a person *who could have lived otherwise*. The mark of the meek on the other hand is that they did not come to their place by choice, but were "born with a boot on their neck." The saint's solidarity with the *misérables* therefore does not amount to identity. The real question is: how will I use the power that I own but did not earn?

I have sat in class with a liberation theologian who wrote that in order to be saved I must "destroy" my "white identity," and who encouraged in his classroom expressions of hostility toward Enlightenment.³⁴ I have spent some years coming to understand that Liberation without Enlightenment is just another crank of the Vengeance Wheel. If I am a creature of Enlightenment, then Enlightenment is my compromised gift that I bring to the manger, a gift that I will not, cannot put down. I understand that, if God is to be met in this world, it will be in the struggle for freedom of those who have been denied it; and in that sense it is true that God has chosen the poor. But God does not choose the poor because they are sinless. God chooses the poor because, as a universal principle, we are all created equal and *no one should be denied human dignity*. When the poor become rich and the weak become mighty they are no longer God's favorites because, in the language of the Lukan Beatitudes, they already have their compensation.³⁵ But while they

³³Mark feels that he is echoing language of John A. Powell.

³⁴"Those who wish to join us in this divine work must be willing to lose their white identity — indeed, destroy it" (James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary ed. [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970], p. 63).

³⁵"Damn you rich! you already have your consolation!" Luke 6:24, *The Complete Gospels*, ed. Robert J. Miller (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1994), p. 130.

are still weak they are heirs to the Kingdom. In the longest run God is not a champion of particular groups; God is rather what always reverses the victories.³⁶

Right now it is important for people like me to say that Black Lives Matter; but it would be impious of me to say that my life can be Black Life, and therefore I can only set foot on that land from a Bridge of Empathy. I know the value of my life, and I draw the larger circle that contains this location and that one. "Fear not the new generalization," said Emerson, "Generalization is always a new influx of the divinity."³⁷ Then, as best I can, because All Lives Matter, I know that Black Lives Matter. This is what I have to give. Take it or leave it, Lord, you've searched me and know what I'm made of — there's no better option, is there?

How are we wretches, whose lives have always been lionized, to be saved from our Privilege? In a Fallen World, where many of us inherit advantages, how shall we put down the burden of division and self-alienation, the "liberal guilt" which seems to disqualify us from from grace? Though we worry about our membership figures, we write about points of light, places where our values appear to take root in communities. We take hope from a fellowship of forty people who have never had professional clergy, as they acquire a building, enlarge their mission and take on a developmental minister.³⁸ We are encouraged that one of our congregations takes a building and makes itself visible in a reactionary suburban community.³⁹ We are proud that an urban church participates in actions of solidarity with its fellow citizens against police brutality.⁴⁰ We applaud the courage of a congregation in a white St. Louis county community, holding vigils in solidarity with the residents of nearby Ferguson.⁴¹

The challenge is to step into real discomfort, into what we do not know.

-- Christopher L. Walton⁴²

³⁶"If he were God he would reverse all the victories, which is what God always does," Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), p. 51.

³⁷"Circles," *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays & Lectures* (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 405-7.

³⁸Katie Kandarian-Morris at Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Durango (Michael Hart, "Come and Join Us," *UU World* [Fall 2015], pp. 6-8)

³⁹Lake Country Unitarian Universalist Church (Nicole Sweeney Etter, "Flexibility Is a Key in Wisconsin Congregation," *UU World* [Spring 2015], pp. 11-13).

⁴⁰First Unitarian Church of Baltimore (Kenny Wiley, "This is Home for Me," *UU World* [Fall 2015], pp. 12-14).

⁴¹Eliot Unitarian Chapel in Kirkwood, Missouri (Barbara Gadon, "We Stepped Outside," *UU World* [Spring 2015], pp. 12,33.)

⁴²Christopher L. Walton, "Black Lives Matter," *UU World* (Fall 2015), p. 3.

In our fiftieth year commemoration of the Selma Voting Rights Marches a few months ago, we brought again to mind one of our most hopeful moments as religious Americans. Five hundred of us, along with eighty thousand other Americans, walked the Edmund Pettus Bridge again. In recollection and re-enactment we took stock of what we were called to do, and what we were not called to do. Neither then nor now was it necessary to destroy our white identities. We were not asked to give up our distinctive High Critical and Enlightened religious tradition, or to surrender our almost anarchic celebration of the individual spiritual journey. It didn't matter whether gospel was the favorite music of those who marched in the line of battle. No one required that we become Biblical fundamentalists, and swear out a belief that the Exodus is history rather than liberative legend. On Bloody Sunday and its aftermath many of our forbears heard the voices of the oppressed and journeyed to a battlefield of the human struggle for dignity. They followed the leadership of those born into oppression. They sang their songs and prayed their prayers and marched at their pace. They put their safety and their lives on the line for others who could not retreat to safety when they wished.

The barriers of race and class, head and heart, were breached.
 -- Mark Morrison-Reed, *The Selma Awakening*⁴³

Those saints stood in the line of battle with peaceful soldiers of Freedom -- Christian soldiers. It didn't matter whether Clark Olsen, or Orloff Miller, or James Reeb, or Viola Liuzzo were or were not Christian, or theist, or Buddhist or humanist or pagan; what mattered was that they showed they would take the same blows of the truncheon, stand in the path of the same bullets, as those who for a dozen years had already been marching. Their difference was essential to their power; because they were present and different, their presence sent a new kind of signal to the world. They had not become oppressed, but they had done what people of our kind can do.

Dr. King said before he died that America was going to hell, but for the moment that was Selma we stood out from that hell, engaging with assaulted people of color against principalities of sin. Our heroes and martyrs owned the partialities, the alienations, the privileges of their social location, and applied their power toward justice. "Selma was about being in authentic relationship to

⁴³ *The Selma Awakening: How the Civil Rights Movement Tested and Changed Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2014), p. 217.

one's values, promises, and hopes, and honoring them by committing one's life even unto death."⁴⁴ We may hope for resolution of our privilege — may I call it salvation from our sin? -- by owning it — confessing it? — and by breaking cycles of injustice — loving God and making justice? — after which we might experience forgiveness. When we give our whole selves, not just our virtues but our sins as well, to righteousness, no one is required to forgive us; but we might feel, as we rouse ourselves from shame to actions, a softening in the stressful gaze of God. Or it might be rather like therapy: by naming our embeddedness we get a chance to break free.

Our movement emerged from American Protestantism, and carries within it many Protestant assumptions. We can be included in Dorothee Sölle's warning against the "anthropological pessimism of Protestantism, . . . a feeling in which sin, guilt, helplessness and despair come together." Milton, accused of Arian tendencies, ends his theological epic with a strange overtone of optimism. After expulsion from Paradise the first parents quickly wipe away their "natural tears," for the future is theirs and "The World" (which is to say, human life) is "all before them." The Garden is now inaccessible, protected by the angel's flaming sword — but then, as the Deconstructionist would say, it had always already been inaccessible. Human life begins after Paradise, on a cloth untrue. We will always bear our privilege with us, but our sins are meant to be forgiven as we move into the New Land. "Only if we stand with one foot already in the new land of forgiveness and grace do we talk rightly of sin."⁴⁵ *Sin* therefore is a more *hopeful* word than *Privilege*.

⁴⁴ Morrison-Reed, loc. cit.

⁴⁵ Sölle, p. 58.