

## “A Saving Faith”

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In 1927, a young Unitarian minister named James Luther Adams was studying in Germany.

He happened to be in the city of Nuremberg on the day of the Nazis’ annual mass meeting and parade. This was six years before the Nazis came to power, long before most Americans realized how dangerous they were. Adams asked some of his fellow spectators to explain what the swastikas on the banners meant.

Before long, he was in a pretty fierce argument with them. Then, all of a sudden, somebody grabbed him from behind and dragged him down an alley.

His heart was pounding.

The man who had grabbed him yelled at him in German, “You fool! Don’t you know?”

In Germany today when you are watching a parade, you either keep your mouth shut, or you get your head bashed in.” Then the man relaxed and smiled and explained, he was against the Nazis too.

He was just trying to keep a clueless American from getting beat up, which most likely would have happened if he hadn’t pulled him out of there.

That day ended all right for Adams, but he never forgot it.

He watched over the next few years as the Nazis stripped away freedom in Germany.

And he began to ask himself:

What have *I* done with my life

that would prevent the rise of fascism in my country?<sup>1</sup>  
What have *I* done to protect freedom here?

Over the next fifty-some years,  
that one question grew into the most influential body  
of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Unitarian theology that we have.  
James Luther Adams, or JLA, as everyone called him,  
served our tradition as a parish minister, a social activist,  
and a professor of ethics,  
to name only a few of the many hats he wore.  
And throughout his career,  
he kept challenging us with that same question:  
What are *we* doing to protect freedom in our time?

And another really important related question:  
Why is it so easy for people to go through life  
*not* getting involved, *not* doing much of anything  
to protect the values they say they believe in?  
JLA was convinced that, for a lot of people,  
there's a big discrepancy between what people *say* they believe in,  
what they have faith in,  
and what they actually *do* have faith in.  
He also said, every person has faith in something,  
no matter if they claim to be religious or not.  
He writes about this in his essay "A Faith for the Free,"  
which you are all welcome to come discuss this Wednesday evening,  
in the final session of the Classics of Unitarian Universalist class.  
Here's what he says:

The question concerning faith is not,  
Shall I be a person of faith?  
The proper question is, rather, Which faith is mine?  
or, better, Which faith should be mine?

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<sup>1</sup> James Luther Adams, "The Indispensable Discipline of Social Responsibility: Voluntary Associations," in *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses* (Boston: Skinner House, 1998), pp. 179–81.

for whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security,  
or amusement,  
whether a person lives for country, for science,  
for God, or for plunder,  
that person is demonstrating a faith,  
is showing that she or he puts confidence in something.<sup>2</sup>

Basically, he's saying, actions speak louder than words.  
He says, what you *say* you have faith in,  
even what you consciously *believe* you have faith in,  
may or may not be what you actually rely on,  
what is actually the thing you believe in and care about most.

Back in 1946,  
JLA wrote about working with white soldiers during World War II  
who saw themselves as infinitely morally superior to the Nazis,  
even though they themselves were just as racist inside,  
as became clear when he talked with them  
about their racial attitudes.

For many of them, their real faith was in white supremacy.<sup>3</sup>  
I don't have to tell you how hard we've had to fight  
to uproot *that* faith in this country.

All his life, JLA struggled to be very honest  
about what he himself truly had faith in.  
The evolution of his own religious beliefs  
led him through just about the entire spectrum  
of Protestant Christianity and beyond.  
He grew up in a fundamentalist Christian family  
in eastern Washington state.  
He got himself into college at the University of Minnesota,  
in my hometown of Minneapolis,  
and paid his way through school  
by working nights at the railroad yards.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James Luther Adams, "A Faith for the Free," in *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses* (Boston: Skinner House, 1998), p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> James Luther Adams, "A Faith for the Free," pp. 25–26.

As a college student, as college students often do,  
he rebelled against his childhood religion,  
and he started going to the Unitarian church  
where John Dietrich was preaching religious humanism.  
JLA loved what he was hearing—  
it liberated him to say,  
yes, I am religious, just not in the way my parents are!  
He headed off to seminary and the ministry.

But he hadn't quite found a resting-point for his faith either.  
Over the years, he found he couldn't let go of his belief  
that there was a meaning to this life,  
not just some private meaning  
that we invent to comfort ourselves in a meaningless universe,  
but a great meaning and purpose behind everything.  
He looked at his life and realized,  
I did not create myself;  
I was born into a time and place, circumstances beyond my control.  
I did not create the laws of science, or of history;  
nor can I change them.  
The rules of the universe, as it were, have already been set.  
And yet within this life,  
within this particular moment in history where I find myself,  
I am free to be creative.  
I am free to choose how I will respond and act.  
He said, I don't get to make the rules,  
but I see that when I align myself with them and live creatively,  
it is possible to achieve goodness and beauty and truth.  
And so he began to speak of his own faith in what he called  
“the inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all  
meaningful existence.”<sup>5</sup>

This reality [he says] is not...merely ourselves—

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<sup>4</sup> “Faculty of Divinity Memorial Minute: James Luther Adams,” online at  
<http://www.hno.harvard.edu/gazette/2000/11.02/11-adams.html>.

<sup>5</sup> James Luther Adams, “A Faith for the Free,” p. 32.

in it we live and move and have our being—  
nor is it a mere projection of human wishes;  
it is a working reality that every person is coerced to live with.  
In this sense the faith of the free is not free;  
the human being is not free to work without the sustaining,  
commanding reality.  
One is free only to obstruct it  
or to conform to the conditions it demands for growth....  
The free person's faith is therefore a faith  
in the giver of being and freedom.

JLA wasn't very worried about what you called this *thing*,  
this source of being and freedom.  
He said, theists might call it God,  
and indeed he did,  
but humanists can understand just as well  
this sense that there is a meaning behind the universe;  
it matters what we do with our life,  
and, in fact, our life only really makes sense when we align ourselves  
with human good, human freedom, human dignity.<sup>6</sup>

This was JLA's core faith—  
this faith that the universe is not meaningless,  
that the goal of life is freedom and creativity,  
and that our choices matter.  
And this faith led him to challenge our movement over and over  
to choose justice—to use our freedom to work for justice,  
and not only on our own but together in community,  
to build institutions that can defend freedom,  
institutions that clearly stood for something.

This is where JLA is still speaking to us so strongly today.  
He got really impatient with Unitarian Universalists who said  
that in their churches,

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<sup>6</sup> James Luther Adams, "A Faith for the Free," p. 34.

people should be free to believe whatever they wanted.

Absolutely not, he said!

Let me read to you again part of the reading we heard this morning:

Religious liberals who say that religious liberalism encourages people merely to think as they please... have become “faith-fully” neutral, and this neutrality is only a halfway station (if not already a camouflage) for an unexamined faith, for an unreliable, destructive faith....<sup>7</sup>

He often told a story to show exactly what he meant.

Back in the 1950s,

the city of Chicago had been racially divided for a long time.

JLA was living in Chicago at that time,

teaching religious ethics at Meadville Theological School.

He was also a member of an urban Unitarian congregation that was trying to desegregate.

One night, one of the board members spoke up against the desegregation plan.

He said, Unitarianism has no creed,

and the church was trying to make desegregation into a creed.

This guy accused the minister of preaching politics, not religion, and complained that the church should be “more realistic.”

“OK,” said Adams, “what do you say is the purpose of this church?”

Does the church exist to make people comfortable in their prejudices?

“Well, no,” the board member had to admit.

“Then what is the purpose of the church?” asked Adams.

The board member replied, “How should I know?

I’m not a theologian.”

But Adams just kept pressing.

They kept at it late into the night.

Finally, the board member said slowly,

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<sup>7</sup> James Luther Adams, “A Faith for the Free,” p. 39.

“OK. The purpose of this church...  
well, the purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me  
and change them!”<sup>8</sup>

There you go.

It *does* matter what we believe.

It *does* matter what we as a church believe, together.

It matters for the same reason we teach our children

to be kind to one another,

to forgive,

to be fair,

and, in the words of our story,

to feed the good wolf inside of them.

It matters what we believe

because our beliefs lead us to actions,

and our actions really do have power

to shape what this world is going to be like

for ourselves and everyone else.

Don't get me wrong.

I love that our tradition encourages people to be creative,

to ask questions,

not to settle for old ways of thinking if they don't make sense to us.

I love that we have always stood up for freedom of conscience,

freedom of thought.

I love that there is room here for us

to explore what we think the universe is like.

I love that we know we don't have to agree on every point

to be a community of faith together.

But a church where you could believe absolutely anything you want,  
a church which is open to literally anything—

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<sup>8</sup> James Luther Adams, quoted in George Kimmich Beach, “The Parables of James Luther Adams,” *Minns Lectures 1999* (Boston: UUA, 1999), p. 63 [as quoted in Commission on Appraisal, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership* (Boston: UUA, 2001), p. 12]; John A. Buehrens and Forrest Church, *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), pp. 65–66.

in that church I personally have no interest,  
because that church would have no interest  
in what kind of world its members are helping to create.  
A church that doesn't care what you believe  
is a church that doesn't care what the world is becoming—  
or, worse, a church that actually protects discrimination  
and oppression in the guise of neutrality,  
just as that church member tried to argue freedom of conscience  
meant the church should protect people's right to be racist.<sup>9</sup>  
This is not the kind of church I want to be a part of.

But a church where people can show one another  
how what they believe  
is leading them to live a life of goodness,  
of justice,  
a life of meaning and beauty—  
that is a church that stands for something,  
a church that believes in its power to make a difference,  
a church that matters in this world.

Over the last few months, I've shared with you my conviction  
that ours is a church where belief does matter.  
There are beliefs we hold in common that have been passed on to us  
by our ancestors who found freedom and power in those beliefs.

And so we've looked back  
at the early Unitarians, whose faith in the power of the human mind  
led them to call on every person  
to think about faith and morality for themselves,  
not to follow whatever the Bible said without question.  
And the Transcendentalists, who believed  
our own inner wisdom would guide us more surely than any book,  
and trusted that wisdom when it called them  
to speak and act in the service of justice.

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<sup>9</sup> James Luther Adams, "A Faith for the Free," p. 41.

We've looked back at the early Universalists,  
who put their faith in a loving God who saves everybody.  
Today we still share their faith that humanity is one.  
We still refuse to divide people up into the good and the bad,  
the saved and the damned.

And we've walked with the Social Gospellers  
and the early Humanists,  
who told us the most important thing about religion  
is not what you believe, but what you *do*  
to bring more justice and compassion into the world.

Faith in the power of human beings to live lives of worth and beauty.  
Faith in the wisdom within us.  
Faith in the power that created us.  
Faith that, in the end, what we do with our lives  
matters much more than what we say we believe.  
This is a living faith—this is *our* faith.

My fervent hope for our church  
is that every generation will take up the challenge  
to live this faith as fully as we can,  
claiming our place as human beings  
with the power to change the world,  
giving ourselves freely to the difficult and joyful and lasting work  
of building the beloved community on earth.

May it be so.  
Amen.