

Remaining Enlightened in an Age of Endarkenment

By

Rev. Todd F. Eklof

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Several years ago, Peggy and I put a small amount of money on a home in Louisville we intended to buy, which would have been forfeited if we backed out of the agreement without cause. But on the day of the home inspection we arrived to discover the house had been broken into the night before, which didn't bode well and made us feel uneasy about it and the neighborhood it was in. We wanted out. Fortunately for us, there were several fireplaces in the house, all of which had been filled with concrete, rendering them unusable—a genuine disappointment for us. We asked that they be restored before moving forward with the purchase. The real estate agent said to do so would require tearing down the entire house and starting over again. To a mix of relief and disappointment, we got out of the deal along with our deposit.

Today we live in a nation that hasn't been the best sort of deal for lots of folks, some of whom have been discriminated against or otherwise disadvantaged because of identity issues like race, gender, religion, and sexuality, and some who have been hindered by growing economic disparity. When we see the continued deaths of unarmed black men and women at the hands of police officers, or see our courts, including the Supreme Court, being unfairly packed with conservative ideologues, some of whom just this week lashed out against the Court's 2015 recognition of gay marriage, favoring, instead, what they consider the religious freedom to practice discrimination, and when we discover that our own President, a supposed billionaire, pays less income tax than most of us do, who can blame us for wanting out of the deal?

The question is, how far should we go to do so? The group of men arrested earlier this week in an elaborate plot to kidnap Michigan's Governor then start a civil war to take over the government, wanted to tear the entire house down to start over again. It's one thing to replace broken windows, significant of the paradigms through which we see and act in the world, or to upgrade old plumbing or electrical wiring, or HVAC, and other antiquated systems that don't work anymore, but it's another to tear the entire structure down in order to replace its very foundation. Before going to such dramatic measures, we first need to determine if the foundation is still sound and if the real problem with the house is that it has shifted and no longer rests squarely upon its still solid foundation? Does the house need to be demolished or just reset? Does our society need to be entirely restructured and rebuilt from the ground up, or do we need to be reminded of the foundational values upon which it was supposed to be erected: Values we still claim are ours, even if we seldom live up to them anymore?

These values have historically been summed up in one word, *Enlightenment*, referring to the 17th and 18th centuries' Age of Reason when they began flourishing throughout Western society. *Enlightenment* isn't a word that's used much anymore and when it is, it often refers to something other than what it has historically signified. Someone might say "Thanks for enlightening me," on any sort of subject, or feel they have become an enlightened being by embracing New Age spirituality, for example, or some other exotic or alternative religion. The fact that we don't think much about the Enlightenment anymore, or quite understand what it means when we do, may itself be a sign our society, as a whole, is losing its connection to the defining principles it was founded upon. Things have shifted, and the entire structure of our society has become or remains unstable and uninhabitable for too many in our nation.

I have no reluctance, in theory, with moving on from the past, especially when our old ideas and ways no longer serve us or, worse, have become detrimental to our growth and progress. Moving on is what being *progressive* is supposed to be all about. But to be "all about" something means it must also be rooted in something, and, if uprooted from that something, it dies and ceases to exist. If our nation is no longer rooted in the values first discovered in Antiquity, then rediscovered during the Renaissance, then went on to flourish during the Enlightenment, including by inspiring the founders of this nation, then it will perish. Maybe that's what we're witnessing today, the death of our nation due to the same kind of internal cancer that has destroyed other great civilizations in the past. At best, we're facing a period of Endarkenment that can be lifted if we ignite a modern renaissance, another renewal of the perennial values that the greatest among us have lived by and aspired to live by throughout the past three millennia.

What exactly are these Enlightenment values I'm talking about? They need to be made explicit if we are to examine the soundness of this foundation. In his book, *Wisdom of the West*, Philosopher Bertrand Russell says, "Enlightenment was essentially a reevaluation of independent intellectual activity aimed quite literally at spreading light where hitherto darkness had prevailed."¹ At its core he characterized this historic shift by "its generally tolerant attitude to those that might be following different traditions."² This was especially true regarding differing religious viewpoints, but he goes on to say, "this new attitude in matter of belief had far-reaching political consequences" that opposed "unchecked authority in every sphere,"³ including in government.

In addition, Russell says, "Enlightenment ... was bound up with the spread of scientific knowledge ... Just as in the sphere of religion, Protestantism had thrown up the idea that everyone should use his own judgement, so in the scientific field men must now look at nature for themselves, rather than put blind trust in the pronouncements of those who stood for old-established doctrines."⁴ In brief, Russell defines these Enlightenment values as toleration, freedom, reason, and science. If so, then the question before us is, are these values what's wrong with our society today? Must we tear down the entire house to get at

and destroy this faulty foundation in order to start completely over again? Or should we reset the unsettled and shifting house more firmly upon it? Are toleration, freedom, reason, and science still our values or are they our problem?

When our particular church was founded in 1887 our bylaws stated, “The authority of its belief is reason, the method of finding its beliefs is scientific. Its aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion,” and its, “First principle is freedom of opinion and is subject to no censure for heresy.”⁵ Is this still what we are about, or have we already torn the entire house down and been rebuilt into something else? I hope not. I still think of myself as a Renaissance minister and ours as an Enlightenment church, given that Unitarianism itself was constructed on this foundation.

Last year a team from the Unitarian Universalist Association was pushed upon our community to “assess,” we were told, the health of our congregation. They concluded ours was a broken congregation in need of “healing, repair, and rebuilding.” I disagreed then and still disagree with this, so called, assessment. For the most part, ours is a congregation that still rests firmly upon its original foundation, standing firm as a shining example of our rich history and Enlightenment values. We need only to recover from last year’s attempt by some to tear our house down. Rather than repair and rebuilding, we need but to be reminded of who we are, what we stand for, and what we still stand firmly upon. And we can be grateful for the tumult we have recently endured because it now requires us, each one of us, to reexamine what we are about, what our church is about, and our reasons for being here. Are we still a liberal religious community built upon the firm foundation of tolerance, freedom, reason, and science, or have we shifted entirely into something else, something unrecognizable, just as the Unitarian Universalist Association has become by punishing and censoring those heretics and dissenters who challenge it?

In his recent article, *Kneeling at the Church of Social Justice*, Columbia University professor and contributor to *The Atlantic*, John McWhorter complains that social justice philosophy has morphed into a kind of religious cult. Part of what I’m calling the Endarkenment, he refers to as TWR, Third Wave Antiracism, which he says has different methods and attitudes from antiracism waves that previously worked against slavery and segregation. TWR, he says, focuses instead on “psychological rather than institutional”⁶ concerns. In his 2018 *Atlantic* article, *Virtue Signalers Won’t Change the World*, he says, “this focus on the psychological has morphed, of late, from a pragmatic mission to change minds into a witch hunt driven by the personal benefits of virtue signaling, obsessed with unconscious and subconscious bias.”⁷ In his more recent article on the cultish nature of what he calls this “phenomenon of hypersensitivity” and how widespread it has become, McWhorter states explicitly, “Unitarianism has been all but taken over in many places by modern antiracist theology, forcing the resignation of various ministers and other figures.”⁸

These resignations and my excommunication have happened because, as McWhorter says, “The new faith also manifests itself in objections to what its adherents process as dissent.”⁹ The Unitarian Universalist Association no longer permits criticism of its new dogma even though dissent epitomizes the spirit, if not the very definition, of the Enlightenment principles Unitarianism is founded upon and that, until now, have sustained our once free and liberal religion. In his 1784 essay, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, Immanuel Kant wrote, “Nothing is required for this enlightenment ... except freedom; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of all, namely, the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters.”¹⁰ In other words, the Enlightenment means, in simple terms, the freedom to think and speak for oneself. And such freedom requires the right of dissent:

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. *Sapere Aude!* [dare to know] “Have courage to use your own understanding!”—that is the motto of enlightenment.¹¹

Until recently, this is what our religion has always been about, and is the principle that has drawn many of us to it, and the principle that causes us to remain a part of it. It had seemed easy to remain a part of it until last year after I was banned from the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly for distributing my book of dissenting opinions, then was publicly condemned, falsely accused, censured, fired as an adjunct professor, and eventually excommunicated, all while a small number within or own congregation were working in secret with the UUA leadership to remove me from my post. Such un-Unitarian and unenlightened behavior shocked us all as we tried to figure out what the hell was happening. Some left because the coup failed, some left disillusioned such could happen at UU church to begin with, some left sad or angry, and some are still wondering if there’s any reason to return or to stay. I know this because I too am often sad and angry and continue to ask myself if it’s worth being part of such a religion anymore.

Being part of a church is great when it’s easy going, when there’s no strife and everyone is on the same page. But we’re now in an age of encroaching Endarkenment, in which the principle of dissent is no longer valued, not even by the very religion birthed to uphold it. The founders of our congregation, who constructed it upon the foundations of tolerance, freedom, reason, and science, promising there would be no “censure for heresy,” would be dismayed if they could have seen 133 years ahead to find these values are no longer flourishing in our world. But they would also be relieved to see the minister of their church continuing to stand for what they stood for, and they would be extremely proud of the great majority of you who have also remained standing for the principles they entrusted you with. You noble souls! How bright and beautiful you shine! I am so humbled to be your good company, and proud to occupy this esteemed and historic pulpit, a grace I am undeserving of.

The reasons I consider ours a new age of encroaching Endarkenment should also be clear by now, because we live in a time when thinking for ourselves is discouraged, in not punished, on many fronts, including both the Left and the Right. We have a Republican President who has frequently threatened to withhold funding to states with Democratic governors, for that explicit reason. We have CNN and MSNBC on the Left and Fox News and Rush Limbaugh on the Right, as examples of far reaching propagandists who spend 24 hours, seven days a week attacking those that their sides disagrees with. American universities are firing professors for saying things their students find offensive. Social media has provided the masses a tool for digital mobs to lash out against those they disagree with, destroying their reputations and livelihoods, while fashioning feedback bubbles for themselves that keep them safe from hearing anything they don't believe.

This is why, in a society that discourages us from thinking for ourselves, we must, as Kant says, remember the motto of Enlightenment, "Have courage to use your own understanding!" This is so for everyone in our society, but it is especially true for Unitarian Universalists because this is our foundation, it is what we have claimed and still claim we are all about, *a free and responsible search for truth and meaning*. It's always been hard living in a society that gravitates toward groupthink, but, until now, we were encouraged knowing we weren't alone, that we have been part of something larger pushing back against these forces of darkness. But now its long shadow and foul stench has entered what we thought was our sanctuary. It's not going to be easy for us anymore. Some may want to slip away, but there's nowhere safe from the shadow of Endarkenment. The only solution we have is to shine a light upon it, and that means having the courage to think for ourselves and, as Kant says, to do so publicly.

This is what I have strived to do despite the tremendous pushback against me, despite the assault on my character and threat to my livelihood, and it is what you have done by remaining part of this congregation and supporting the time honored freedom of our pulpit. I am humbled and grateful and encouraged by you. I am also encouraged to witness an increasing number of today's luminaries speaking out against the Endarkenment, people like John McWhorter, who is among over 150 who signed a recent letter published in *Harper's Magazine* expressing their concern that, "The free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted."¹² So even if the Unitarian Universalist Association is now on the wrong side of history, we are not alone. Many Unitarian ministers and members share our concern in addition to a growing number of those in our society at large, and they are all finding the courage to express themselves and to push back.

History has never looked fondly upon periods of groupthink, suppression, and fascism, and when it looks back upon this period, it will see our congregation standing on the right side, just as it has for over 130 years. As of late, we've heard a lot of noise in our house, popping and banging, as it settles during the chill of night, but it remains firm upon its good

foundation: tolerance, freedom, reason, science. Keep the faith. Keep shining your light. Keep thinking for yourself.

¹ Ibid.

² Russell, Bertrand, *The Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 230.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 232.

⁵ McDowell, Esther, *Unitarians in the State of Washington*, Frank McCaffrey Publishers, 1966. p. 97.

⁶ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/why-third-wave-anti-racism-dead-end/578764/>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ McWhorter, *Kneeling at the Church of Social Justice*, Reason.com, June 20, 2020.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* Konigsberg, Prussia, September 30, 1784.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Harper's Magazine*, "An Open Letter on Justice and Debate," July 7, 2020.