

## On Human Nature

Reading from *The Gulag Archipelago* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Thirty-five years ago, my family crossed the threshold of a Unitarian Universalist church and my life changed. My life was set on a new trajectory that day and I can't imagine who I would be if my parents hadn't visited that church on that day, been welcomed, and joined that community. I wouldn't have the people who became my surrogate extended family. I wouldn't have my best friend, who I met in church youth group. I wouldn't be a minister and I wouldn't live in Kalamazoo, as it was the opportunity to minister with you that brought me and my family to West Michigan. I likely wouldn't have the ethical principles that guide my actions or at least I wouldn't describe them the way we do here – respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all; respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. I am not a strong enough believer in providence to think that Unitarian Universalism or Kalamazoo would have found me some other way, that this was my destiny, had that day 35 years ago been different, had that congregation not welcomed my family warmly enough to keep us coming back, had my parents chosen the Lutheran church down the street to visit instead. Of course, you might have a different idea about providence. That theological diversity is our strength.

I begin with my story because I need you to know how much I value our tradition in general and the church I was raised in particular, how much goodness it has brought into my life, and the reality that I have no idea who I would be without Unitarian Universalism. And now, this week and next week, my sermons are going to explore a theological lover's quarrel I am having with our tradition – two ways that our tradition, at least as it was taught to me both in formal religious education settings and in the casual ways culture and belief are taught in any community, did not prepare me for this world. My quarrels are with our teachings on human nature and the nature of progress. I'll stick to human nature this week.

The first principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association, as laid out in its bylaws is 'respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person.' This is something that every congregation covenants to affirm and promote. As a child, this was taught to me as 'people are good.' I have great compassion for my teachers. Teaching the concept of 'inherent worth' to a young child is really hard – I celebrate those in this community taking on that task this year. Inherent is not a word for little kids, so it was swapped with the idea that 'people are good.' And in making that swap, my teachers and my church misled me. Inherent worth means that people are precious as they are, just because they are. That is not a claim about human nature or how we are disposed, but about how we are to act in the world, showing respect to everyone, knowing that no one has to do anything to be worthy of care, knowing that we are worthy just as we are. That is a powerful claim in this world where so many are considered less important because of their citizenship status, physical ability, race, gender identity, class, and other identities.

'People are good' is a different claim entirely, one about human nature and our innate tendencies. That we are innately drawn to act in good ways. I am mostly glad to have been taught that people – including me – are good. My childhood church did not teach me about original sin or any of other doctrines of human depravity. I was not taught that who I inherently am is something that I had to overcome to become worthy of love, to win God's favor, or to be valuable. I know so many in this community and elsewhere struggle against messages received in childhood that were essentially 'you're not good enough' coated in theological language. It is one of the greatest gifts of my life – and one of the greatest gifts we offer our children—to not have heard that at church.

And yet, to be told that 'people are good' is too much of an overcorrection. Being taught that 'people are good' didn't serve me well. It left me unprepared to navigate the world, whether that was the social hierarchies of the junior high cafeteria, romantic relationships with people who didn't respect me, and my own internal emotional life, which is peppered with more jealousy, greed, and meanness than I'd like there to be, just like everyone's. The church people who loved me well didn't prepare me for our actual world, but an ideal one – and I had very little space to explore that I am not always good, that my first impulse is not always kindness, so I started wondering if I was broken or not Unitarian Universalist enough or why others didn't struggle like me. The seasons that I have drifted away from our faith have all been in part because I didn't feel good enough to be with people who claim that they're good all the time without much effort.

If I could re-write the teachings I received; I would make it much more nuanced. 'People are good,' yes, but that statement needs to continue. People are good and people are bad. We have tremendous capacity for caring and for cruelty and we can choose how we act. It is our religious conviction that everyone, regardless of their behavior deserves respect, just because they are.' That's a lesson harder to teach, but it is a lesson that is true – and that prepares us to both live in this world as it is and change this world to be closer to our vision of beloved community.

We all intimately know the human capacity for kindness and cruelty. We've all been treated cruelly – and we've all be cruel. We know we have capacity for kindness and meanness – and being good is something that rarely comes without effort. We have to choose goodness again and again and again. We constantly fall short of our aspirations for ourselves. That feels like a much more accurate view of human nature to me than the simple 'people are good.'

If the teaching that 'people are good' was only being taught to our children, I wouldn't be preaching about this today. I would be having this conversation with Diane, our director of religious education, our religious education committee, and those who teach and advise our children. But the teaching that people are good is a challenge for us all. The words I learned in seminary to describe this problem is that 'Our theological anthropology is too high.'

This high theological anthropology, this overly rosy view of human nature permeates our Unitarian Universalist culture. It is throughout our hymnal, which is the closest thing we have to shared theological statements. Hymnals are the work of Unitarian Universalist committees who give us resources for worship, meaning its reflective and a little prescriptive of Unitarian Universalism broadly, including both our culture and our theology.

I don't pick the hymns that are overly optimistic about humanity because they aren't my favorite, but they are throughout the hymnal. There's one called 'O What a Piece of Work Are We' – a title that always makes me think it's sarcastic, but it is meant earnestly.

The lyric is:

O what a piece of work are we, how marvelously wrought;  
The quick contrivance of the hand, the wonder of our thought.

Why need to look for miracle outside of nature's law?  
Humanity we wonder at with every breath we draw!

But give us room to move and grow, but give our spirit play,

And we can make a world of light out of the common clay.<sup>1</sup>

It's a beautiful sentiment – and it is not accurate, not entirely. We look to our relationships, to our workplaces, and our politics and we do not see a world of light being built out of the common clay. Or, at least, that is not all we see.

This would be fine if we had a hymns that balanced these out, naming our capacity for cruelty alongside our capacity for goodness, but the hymnal offers very little. We have the hymn we just sang together that names 'we are not yet fully wise, that we are in the making still' and 'still with faults we daily cope.' That honesty makes this one of my favorite hymns.

We also have 'Amazing Grace' in our hymnal, which we don't sing often here, because it doesn't reflect what is most commonly believed among us. In our hymnal's version of 'Amazing Grace,' there is an asterisk in the first line, 'Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.' The asterisk is after the word 'wretch.' It invites people to use the word 'soul' as an alternative. This is telling. Now, the theology of 'Amazing Grace' doesn't reflect my understanding of the holy, but I know that sometimes I am a wretch. I mess up. I hurt people. This is part of me and always will be, despite my best efforts. I suspect this is true for all of us. And when I sing 'Amazing Grace' in communities where it does reflect the common theology, it is really powerful to name my occasional wretchedness alongside others. Singing 'soul' instead is more pleasant, I suppose, but something is lost.

Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout, who serves as the music director at the UU congregation in Ann Arbor and has been with us in recent years to lead worship and help us in develop a mission for our worship has said that predominantly white UU congregations, 'allow ourselves to overdose on the worship of goodness... We lopsided our spirits to the point where they feel poisoned by the presence of tragedy... we gorge ourselves on this notion of fundamental human goodness without taking a bite of fundamental human inequity.'<sup>2</sup> I hope we can develop a more balanced, more honest way of being, way of understanding.

We come by our high theological anthropology honestly. It was a reaction to those preaching human depravity in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – and those deeply harmful teachings needed to be opposed, just as anyone preaching today who claims that we are not worthy needs to be opposed. Unitarian Universalism has a strong utopian streak throughout its history, of idealists proclaiming that humanity is only good and then realizing it isn't so. There's a new book of Unitarian Universalist theology that explores this topic beautifully. In *After the Good News*, which is available in our church library, UU minister Nancy McDonald Ladd, explores the failed utopian experiments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in her hometown of New Harmony, Indiana, as a metaphor for Unitarian Universalism's overly optimistic ways. It's a powerful, engaging piece of writing that I commend to all of you. It has given me much food for thought and it undergirds much of this sermon. She includes a historical survey of how we developed such a high theological anthropology and names how it doesn't serve us, especially now. She writes about the modern and post-modern theologians trying to point us toward a new understanding of ourselves and one another that is both faithful and true.

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, Malvina. 'O What a Piece of Work Are We.' © 1958 Schroder Music, published in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #313

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Ladd, Nancy McDonald. *After the Good News*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2019. Page 52

One of the theologians she names is James Luther Adams, the most important Unitarian Universalist theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the wake of the Second World War and his own experiences in Nazi Germany, he questioned the high theological anthropology that we inherited. In a forceful essay called 'The Changing Reputation of Human Nature,' he writes about how human agency and human will matter more than what is or isn't innate:

'This contradiction in human nature derives from the fact that human will is a decisive element in human structure. And it is a will that is ambiguous in character. We can use our freedom by expressing a will to mutuality, but we can also abuse it by exercising a will to power. Freedom and liberation is therefore both the basis of meaning and the occasion for the destruction of meaning. Here we see again the tragic nature of the human condition. The tragedy does not derive merely from the fact that humanity carries an inheritance from the jungle within. It derives also (and primarily) from the fact that we have a freedom that we did not have in the jungle, a freedom to exercise the infinitely higher powers of human nature in terms of creative love, and a freedom to waste them in mere lassitudes and triviality, or to pervert them for the sake of a will to power.

Adams continues, 'It is this coexistence in humanity of the possibility using our freedom [in service of love] and the possibility of perverting it to our own destructive ends that constitutes the deepest contradiction of our nature... Martin Luther suggested humanity is the [scene] of opposing cosmic forces, the forces of love and of power. The contradiction penetrates our innermost spiritual life. It goes to the very center of our being; it reaches out through the individual and permeates all our social relations.'<sup>3</sup>

Or, in more poetic language, what we chose is what we are, as we sang earlier. And our lives are filled with moments to choose between love and power, between meaning and the destruction of meaning. Moments when we have the power to shape our nature and create the patterns that define our lives and our world.

So, let us remember that goodness is not easy; it is not inevitable. It is, nonetheless, the work before us. Let us choose goodness over and over and over again.

And may we remember through it all, that we and everyone possesses worth and dignity just because we are.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Adams, James Luther. *The Essential James Luther Adams*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998. Page 69-70