



***Harnessing Our
Deepest Explosions***

*Religious Education
and Convictional Theology*

Richard S. Gilbert

The 1995 Essex Hall Lecture

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Essex Hall Lecture April 20, 1995 - Chester, England

Introduction

The late Adlai Stevenson, twice-defeated American presidential candidate, once said before beginning a lecture: "My job is to speak and yours is to listen. If you finish before I do, please raise your hands." The offer stands. I am also reminded of writer Dorothy Parker's quip that if all the people in church pews were laid end to end, they would all sleep better.

This 1995 Essex Hall Lecture, "Harnessing Our Deepest Explosions: Religious Education and Convictional Theology", is based on the words of author D.H. Lawrence: "Whatever the queer little word 'god' means, it means something we can none of us quite get away from, or at; something connected with our deepest explosions."¹ My thesis is that religious education is a life-span process of building our own theology and harnessing those "deepest explosions".

If you have ever wondered "why bad things happen to good people", (Harold Kushner), whether earth's ultimate destiny is to be a "republic of insects and grass", (Jonathan Schell), if creation is a "cosmic fluke", or how Unitarians can behave virtuously without Heaven and Hell, then you are in danger of falling into theology. Somehow we have it in our heads that it is "un-Unitarian" to "do theology" since that is what the orthodox do, and we are, if truth be known, heretics.

Unitarians are very definitely happy heretics, but the heretic not only dissents, the heretic is one who chooses. We choose to "do theology" differently. But if we are living, breathing, hurting, laughing, crying, questing human beings, it is impossible not to be theologians. Theology traditionally has to do with the study of God or divine things, but there is another meaning as well — "the field of study, thought, and analysis which treats of ... religious truth".² It has to do with ultimate concern and commitment by whatever name we call them.

This is the text of the Essex Hall Lecture for 1995. It was delivered in Chester, on April 20, 1995. Essex Hall is the London headquarters of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches and stands on the site of the building where the first avowedly Unitarian congregation in an English speaking country met over two hundred years ago. The lecture was founded in 1892 and many distinguished persons in various fields have contributed to the series. The delivery of the lecture is one of the leading events during the General Assembly's Annual Meetings.

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While theology can be, and often is, stuffy, deadly dull and unutterably boring, it can be, and often is, exhilarating, exciting and endlessly fascinating. Why? Because it has to do with the stuff of human experience, the meaning of being and becoming. How do Unitarians "do theology"? I submit it is a different "doing" from conventional methods. We do theology, not to become divine, as someone suggested, but to become more human.

I suggest Unitarian theology can be understood at three levels (see the diagram below): (1) the operational level, the process by which we do theology in religious community; (2) the menu of the diverse theological perspectives from which we may choose; and (3) the specific credos which result when we "build our own theology", to quote a book written for the Unitarian Universalist Association of North America and subsequently translated into "British" by this General Assembly.

I would like to suggest four operational principles on which, I believe, we agree.

Operational Principle One: Credo Building

First, we affirm the centrality of credo ("I believe" or "I value"). Our religious communities endeavour to create a climate in which individuals are not only free to, but are encouraged to, even expected to, create their own core of meanings and values. I call this religion.

Credos, official formulations of orthodoxy, say "no" to new truth. They freeze theology at a given point in time and space, while flesh and blood people move into different times and spaces. "Truth cannot be reduced to a creed...". In our faith "credal matters are purposely kept open".³

Credos are built by professional theologians; credos are created by amateurs, every last one of us, out of the raw stuff of our own experience. While credos are cast in ecclesiastical concrete, credos are organic and grow as we grow.

In a cartoon, Frank and Ernest are atop a mountain, Frank with an open book. Ernest says: "If those are the ultimate answers to the riddle of the universe, why are they in a loose-leaf binder?"⁴ The Loose-leaf Bible is an

apt metaphor for theology building, combining the permanence of a core of convictions with the flexibility to modify them in the light of experience.

We do not create our credos *de novo*, however. We learn from the credos and credos of the past. But our credos must have the "smell of our own ground", (Theodore Parker), the taste of our own experience. Nor can we create credos alone, for we are more than atomised individuals: we are members of a community of religious growth and learning. This process of being co-creators of religion is nicely illustrated by the Chinese ideograph for belief, which is two persons talking.

The fact we do theology in community is accentuated by the African proverb, "I am because we are." In the context of religious education, we note another African saying that "It takes a whole village to raise a child", to which I would add that it takes a whole church to build a theology. While our theological product is personal, the process by which we build it is carried on in community.

Operational Principle Two: Free and Disciplined Searching

Second, we affirm the free and disciplined search for truth and meaning. While we rightly celebrate freedom, cherish the free mind principle, defend our right to follow where mind and heart and conscience lead us, we often make freedom a fetish. Some would summarise the essence of our faith as freedom to believe anything we desire, a position dubbed "anythingarianism".

But freedom is a social value; freedom in community calls us to the disciplines of the spirit — rational thinking, genuine feeling, honest sharing and willingness to change our mind. The 19th century Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson, once wrote, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do."⁵ He lived that credo, too. Once in the middle of delivering a sermon he had given before, he suddenly stopped and announced "that the sentence he had just read he no longer believed".⁶

In the disciplines of freedom, we are open to many sources of truth about existence and its meaning for us. Reason does not exhaust our resources. It has been said, "Beware of logic. It is an organised way of going wrong with confidence." (Charles Kettering).

We rely also on intuition, science and the humanities; the inherent wisdom of our feelings; the insights of the great prophets and teachers of humanity; and our own personal experiences of being and becoming. We are, in this sense, not corpse-cold Unitarians, as Emerson once averred, but rather "impassioned clay" (Ralph Helverson).

Operational Principle Three: The Democratic Method

Third, we affirm the democratic method in human relations. That is no merely innocuous statement. It implies the inherent worth and dignity of every human personality. It celebrates the right and responsibility of individuals to participate in those decisions that affect them — religiously, socially, politically, economically.

It has facetiously been said the only things American Unitarians can agree on are congregational polity and Robert's Rules of Order, the conventional set of rules for managing meetings in the U.S.. Ecclesiastically, each of our congregations is autonomous. That is our church polity. We do resort to Robert's Rules of Order to guide our sometime fractious deliberations. I rather suspect something similar is true for British Unitarians.

But the crucial point is that ours is a religiously based, covenantal community. We have gathered together not to believe alike, but "to love alike", (Francis David), to live religiously together. Many of us would take strenuous exception to the rather orthodox sounding statements of our religious forebears. James Martineau's 19th century British Unitarianism may inform us, but may not be our theological cup of tea here at the brink of the 21st century.

We do theology in community, not falling victim to the quips that "we can't see the forest for the ME'S" or that "I was a legend in my own mind."

As historian Conrad Wright has pointed out, alongside early substantive theological statements, the first New England churches developed more durable covenants — not credal formulations, but mutual promises to live

together. Not what we *believe* together, but what we *do* together becomes central.⁷ Our theological method is democratic not autocratic.

Operational Principle Four: Deed Over Creed

Finally, we affirm a convictional theology which places deed over creed: "By their fruits shall ye know them" (Matthew 7:20). "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

In this connection, I was struck by the contrast between Mother Theresa and former Unitarian Universalist Association President Gene Pickett as reported in a Chicago press interview. When asked about life's final meaning she said: "To become holy, and to go to Heaven". When confronted with her answer and asked the same question, Pickett said: "The purpose of life is to become whole and to create heaven on earth."⁸

My favourite story illustrating what I call convictional theology — one that embodies principles, beliefs and actions — is told by the poet Hermann Heine. He was walking with a friend before the Cathedral of Amiens in France. "Tell me, Hermann," said his friend, "why can't people build piles like this any more?" Answered Heine, "My friend, in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than opinions to build a Gothic cathedral."⁹

A Theological Menu

However, as poet George Santayana once wrote: "We cannot be religious in general." It is not enough to affirm these operational values; they do not constitute specific beliefs about the nature of ultimate reality, humanity, morality, human meaning and destiny. They are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a Unitarian theology.

I suggest that while we embrace these four methods consensually, their use takes us to different places on the theological spectrum. I think of a favourite New Yorker cartoon of a woman and a man conversing. She to him: "Don't worry, Howard. The big questions are multiple choice." It isn't quite that simple for us, but we do enjoy the religious freedom to contemplate a diverse theological spectrum of belief.

I suggest seven discrete theological options which might characterise American Unitarian Universalists, hoping you will make the appropriate translation to Great Britain:

1) **Liberal Christianity**, which takes Biblical religion seriously and finds in the Jesus of history a decisive model for religious living;

2) **Naturalistic Theism**, best exemplified in process theology and a text from Alfred North Whitehead: "[God] is the binding element in the world.";¹⁰

3) **Scientific Naturalism**, which grounds theology in the scientific method of truth seeking, endeavouring to find an objective basis for religious values;

4) **Universal Religion**, an embracing faith that is radically open to the insights of all the great world religions;

5) **Liberation Theology** (feminist, black, Third World), which sees reality from the perspective of the oppressed, but compels the affluent to transform a position of privilege into a theology of relinquishment;

6) **Religious Humanism**, in which humanity, while not the measure of all things, is at least the measurer of all things; religion emerges from human experience. Here we have what has been called "the agnostic with footnotes". (Greta Crosby);

7) **Earth-based Spirituality**, recognising our sense of oneness with the earth and its rhythms, the "interdependent web of being of which we are all part."¹¹ For example, the major festivals of the great world faiths are often based on earlier pagan rituals of the changing earth.

These are discrete theological positions; it is, of course, possible to take insights from each into a personal theology.

Building Our Own Theology

Ultimately, we are all theologians. We all ponder the great life issues. As Unitarians we celebrate a community of method which unites us even as we enjoy a diversity of perspectives which enables us to learn and grow

religiously. We come, then, to the task of life-span religious education — building our own theology.

American cartoonist Charles Schultz renders this soliloquy on theology through the words of Lucy in Peanuts: "My topic today is the purpose of theology. We must always keep our purpose in mind. Our purpose as students is understandably selfish. There is nothing better than being in a class where no one knows the answer."

Since we religious liberals admit no one knows the answer, it is terribly tempting for us to ignore the dethroned queen of the sciences, as theology has historically been named. We are impatient as educators to teach, as preachers to preach, as activists to act, before we do our theological homework. As American Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said: "We have a special responsibility to develop a literacy and, shall we say, get people out of the stage of the emancipated Unitarian who believes that because (we) call (ourselves) Unitarians, there's nothing more to do."¹²

We fail to do our theological homework at our peril. Without a deep-rooted theology, this tumultuous world in which we live and move and have our fragile being will be full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. If we are to harness our deepest spiritual explosions for meaningful living in this world, we need to get our theology straight. Developing a theology is not an academic exercise, but has to do with the very stuff of our lives.

Religion is that core of ultimate meanings and values to which we commit our lives — convictions. Religious education is the life-span process of growing those meanings, values and convictions.

Theology is the reflection upon and criticism of them. One person with a conviction is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only beliefs or feelings.¹³ Conviction is more than belief, an intellectual construct; it is more than emotion, a psychological construct. It combines reason and feeling with will to act.

As Hosea Ballou put it: "There is one inevitable criterion of judgment touching religious faith in doctrinal matters: can you reduce it to practice? If not, have none of it."¹⁴

My theological model has its roots in anthropology; that is, it is rooted in human experience, the result of the tough and tender experiences of life.¹⁵ It was not invented out of whole cloth by academics who would obfuscate it for those who would presume to read. It emerged from people who tried to make some sense out of the world in which they lived.

We are the theologians. As theologians we are the measurers of all things theological. By our very nature we are the ultimate seat of authority in religion. Take the Abraham and Isaac story in the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham has been commanded to take Isaac into the wilderness and slay him as a sacrifice. At the last moment a voice intervened and commanded Abraham to stay his hand. How does Abraham know if the voice is that of Yahweh or of Moloch, god of death? To make that decision Abraham must decide the source of the command. Only he can make that decision.¹⁶

No, only we can make that decision. We are the meaning makers. We are co-creators of meanings, values, convictions. We live in a community of co-creators. The creation of a liberal theology, I submit, needs to address the basic religious questions — developmental tasks along the life span: human nature, the nature of ultimate reality, our role in history, our ethical behaviour, and the meanings we create for our lives.

Human Nature

If we are the measurers of all things theological, we clearly need to know something about ourselves — the issue is human nature, which as Mark Twain suggests "is a commodity which seems to be widely distributed among the human race". Traditionally, Unitarians have held a very optimistic view of human nature — what Roman Catholic creation theologian Matthew Fox calls "original blessedness" as opposed to the traditional orthodox Christian doctrine of original sin.

We have understood human beings are rational creatures, creatures of evolution. We have not paid nearly as much attention to our capacity for sin. Sin is a concept we don't much like to talk about. But I think of sin in the Old Testament sense — missing the mark — as an archer seeks to hit the bulls eye and only occasionally succeeds. We don't do very well explaining, for example, the Holocaust, or that "the best and the brightest" brought the world Vietnam, in terms of human nature. We don't have a fully developed tragic sense of life.

In 1885 this liberal confidence in human nature was given classic expression by the American Unitarian James Freeman Clark who affirmed faith "in the progress of mankind onward and upward forever".¹⁷ The 1936 Universalist Avowal of Faith unequivocally stated belief "in the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God".¹⁸ In the 1967 Goals Survey, 9 in 10 American Unitarian Universalists agreed our "potential for love can overcome our potential for evil".¹⁹ In the 1985 "Purposes and Principles" adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association the by-laws state, "We affirm and promote...justice, equity and compassion in human relations", and "The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." Unitarians are irrepressibly optimistic, almost to a fault. But, if people are so good by nature, why does humanity so often seem to be in such a mess?

Against this typically optimistic view is the more traditional Christian view of original sin. It holds we are wilful, even arrogant creatures. Reinhold Niebuhr said "...the view that men are 'sinful' is one of the best attested and empirically verified facts of human existence."²⁰ He once suggested each person secretly thinks he/she is the "end-product of evolution — what God was really trying to accomplish all this time."²¹

The inevitable humility we experience in the face of the evidence was colourfully put by Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen): "What are we when you come to think of us, but minutely set, ingenious machines for turning, with infinite artfulness, the red wine of Shiraz into urine?" Or, as Ashley Montague subtly put it: "At last we have discovered the missing link between our anthropoid ancestors and truly civilized (beings) - us."²²

I conclude human nature is best described by theologian Paul Tillich's phrase, "finite freedom". Or to use James Luther Adams' formulation, "We are both fated and free." We have the potential to transcend ourselves; we can also be utterly selfish. Our potential for creativity is matched by our propensity for destruction.

Victor Frankl dramatised this view with his vivid description of his concentration camp experience: "Man could be defined as the being who invented the gas chambers for human extermination. But man can also be defined as the being who entered those gas chambers with the stirring tune of the 'Marseillaise', or the Lord's Prayer on his lips."²³

Ultimate Reality

People exist in a cosmic setting. Human nature has its ultimate ground. We live in a spiritual environment. We are integral parts of this cosmic creativity — co-creators with it.

You must know the old quip that "the creed of the English is that there is no God and it is wise to pray to him from time to time." The question of the nature of God or Ultimate Reality is an open one for us. We know we are part of a cosmic reality greater than ourselves, but we are hard put to name it. For some it is God, for others Nature, or Cosmos or Being Itself. Some believe that to name it is to diminish it.

I am less concerned with answering that question of the ages and more concerned that religious liberals of all ages have experiences that may be called divine. As one observer said, "...today I am more comfortable talking about the experience of the sacred than about the existence of a divine being." ²⁴

It may be that the most valuable function Unitarian religious education can perform is asking the right questions about Ultimate Reality: Is it benign? Does it have a will of its own? Does it intervene in human affairs? Does it make any difference in our lives? We may not succeed in answering all of our questions. The provisional answers we have found may only serve to raise a whole set of new questions. In some ways we may feel as confused as ever, but perhaps we will be confused on a higher level and about more important things. ²⁵

It may be, for instance, that God is not a noun, but a verb. That is, the word may not refer to any being up there or out there or even in there, but to a divine process of which we are part. It may be that we experience the divine in relational power — that it is created out of the gathering of people in worship or in pursuit of a noble cause.

I think of the simple story of a conversation between the priest and the peasant while viewing the latter's fine garden. "You and the Lord," said the priest, "have worked well here." The peasant then said to the priest, "You should have seen the place when the Lord had it alone." ²⁶

History as the For Instances of Theology

My own notion of God is what I call "horizontal transcendence". I personally look to no God either within or beyond history as a point of reference. My point of reference is the possibility of a "Beloved Community of Earth", a vision which transcends my meagre efforts, a goal which extends beyond my lifetime, a concept so noble I do not confuse any reality with that ideal, a goal which commands my allegiance.

You may recall Jonathan Schell's book *The Fate of The Earth*, a passionate warning about the possibility of nuclear annihilation written in the most dangerous 1980's of Ronald Reagan and the "Evil Empire". It was a work so powerful because it was so theological. It was fundamentally an eschatological book, dealing with the ultimate end of things.

It placed our peace efforts in an ultimate context — a frame of reference that is truly transcendent. It is strange that it took a secular writer like Jonathan Schell to point out the theological implications of what we are doing to ourselves. We can barely cope with our personal deaths; now we must contemplate the death of the species at our own hand, by our choice end the human project, either in nuclear holocaust, or environmental calamity. We have taken unto ourselves the power once reserved to God.

With the end of the Cold War the threat of nuclear annihilation has receded and been replaced with the danger of ecological catastrophe, global overpopulation, ethnic conflict and poverty both at home and abroad. But finding our place in the context of history is no less a theological challenge.

This macro-cosmic realisation can translate into a micro-cosmic psychic, moral and spiritual numbing. The facts seem so overwhelming, the prospects so bleak, the possibility of improving them so remote, people are tempted to hide their heads in the stultifying sands of a consumer culture to eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Some even suggest that shopping becomes another form of suicide. ²⁷

On the other hand, we can be moved by such a sober picture to a realisation of the historic nature of our task. We are no longer only solitary, anonymous bits of cosmic dust, but creatures who can help save the species. Such reflections greatly concentrate the mind.

We who work to change the world and move toward the Beloved Community of Earth are too often preoccupied with our finite endeavours which are dirty with the everyday, dingy with the prosaic, somehow separated from our cosmic connection. We desperately need to learn to "caress the details", (Vladimir Nabokov), to live with the partial fulfilment of the Beloved Community of Earth, recognising we are finite creatures who aspire infinitely. Our task is unfinished, just as the Cosmic Creativity continually unfolds. We need to learn to think globally, even cosmically, and act locally.

We are part of a reality greater than ourselves — co-creators of the Beloved Community of Earth. We participate in a process larger than ourselves, we affirm our responsibility to add the stubborn ounces of our weight to the human project we call history.

The Talmud says: "Would that they had forgotten My name and done that I commanded them." ²⁸ In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. And we are authors of the Word. We are co-authors of the world with the Nameless One. There is a cosmic connection and we are part of the warp and woof of it. We may be cosmically alone, but we are humanly together, in service to that which is greater than ourselves.

Ethics as Meeting Unenforceable Obligations

From this sweeping historical vision we are obliged to consider our relationships, not with history as an abstraction, but the flesh and blood people with whom we live and work day to day. The issue is ethics which refers to that old-fashioned word 'character', which evangelist Dwight Moody defined as "what you are in the dark".²⁹

I speak of ethics in terms of "the importance of being good for nothing", — our motivations for behaviour depend neither on fear or hell or promise of heaven, but on our inner convictions. Ethics are "unenforceable obligations" (Rushworth Kidder). If "laws are the wise restraints that make us free", (James Conant), then ethics are those inner imperatives that prompt us to care when we need not, to act when it may be controversial, to serve when we would rather indulge ourselves. The true test of character is to act when so doing will not do us any personal good.

The term for the most characteristic ethics across the Atlantic is that ours is the "IDI" generation — the "I deserve it generation". There is a dangerous self-centredness abroad that, for example, enables the rich to get richer while the poor get poorer. In my country the so-called "fortunate fifth" — the wealthiest 20% of the population has seemingly lost any concern it might have had for the poorest 20%.

One of our moral critics, educator Robert Coles of Harvard, writes: "Something is wrong with a society whose members are endlessly preoccupied with feeling better, rather than obsessed with making the world better." ³⁰ In his cross-cultural studies of children he finds the self-portraits of rich American children fill up the whole page, while in those of Hopi Indian children of the American southwest they are merely a dot in a rich landscape.

Hosea Ballou, that 19th century Universalist preacher of universal salvation, was riding the circuit in the new Hampshire hills with a Baptist minister one afternoon. They argued theology as they travelled. At one point, the Baptist looked over and said, "Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven." Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you." ³¹

We Are the Meaning Makers

A final and critical dimension of my theological stance has to do with human meaning. Over the past three decades we have witnessed distinctive value-tinged periods: the "Me Decade" of the 70's, which was in turn a response to the "activist decade" of the 60's. And we have just come through the "greed decade" of the 80's, which has spilled over into the 1990's "I deserve it" decade.

I submit that a vital source of personal religious meaning emerges out of commitment to causes that transcend the self. While psychologist Abraham Maslow has developed the concept of self-actualisation, we need to study him more closely. He speaks of "deficiency needs" — requirements for security, status and love, without which we could not survive. These blend into "being needs" as we ascend — the need to grow, to transcend the self, to serve causes beyond the self, to discover life meaning.

Maslow wrote: "Self-actualising people are, without one single exception, involved in a cause outside their own skin, in something outside themselves. They are devoted, working at something, something which is very precious to them — some calling or vocation in the old sense, the priestly sense." ³² As we pursue the spiritual, we need to remember a vital source of religious meaning is through our participation in the passions of our time. It is a theme sounded by contemporary prophets like Dag Hammarskjöld, who asserted, "In our age, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action." ³³ Paul Tillich said, "An ultimate concern must express itself socially." ³⁴ James Luther Adams wrote, "The holy thing in life is the participation in those processes that give body and form to universal justice."³⁵

A convictional theology provides personal meaning. It strikes me not enough attention in ethics has been paid to the moral actor. The result has been moral and spiritual "burn-out". Without the empowerment of a theological vision our actions often lack total commitment; our staying power is limited; we become victims of the "demonic of privatisation". I affirm what James Luther Adams calls the "pragmatic theory of meaning". ³⁶ Meaning emerges in lived human experience.

The French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery states it poetically: "To be (human) is, precisely, to be responsible. It is to feel shame at the sight of what seems to be unmerited misery. It is to take pride in a victory won by one's comrades. It is to feel, when setting one's stone, that one is contributing to the building of the world."³⁷

William Butler Yeats wrote: "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold. The best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity." ³⁸ It is to regain the centre, to rekindle the passionate intensity that convictional theology seeks. It becomes our "centrestance in the midst of circumstance," (James Luther Adams) — a place to stand in the midst of a world that seems to have lost its way.

In my judgment, to work for the Beloved Community of Earth is simply part of what it means to be a Unitarian. Faith exists by mission. Charles Peguy believed religion began in mysticism and ended in social action.

Religious Education as Convictional Theology

I have brought you on a long and tortuous pilgrimage through the jungles of theology. I have suggested that theology is the reflection on religion — that core of meanings and values out of which we live our lives. I have asserted that religious education is that life-span process of growing those meanings and values.

I have suggested that Unitarian theology exists on three levels (1) that of operational principles — the methods by which we do theology in religious community; (2) that as Unitarians we are free to enjoy the smorgasbord of diverse theologies which greets our palates; (3) that we are obliged as free souls to build our own theology out of these meanings and values.

This three-part understanding of Unitarian values constitutes a framework for life-span religious education. It entails the embodiment of the inquiry method of religious education at all ages; it involves the serious study of today's religious options; and it requires the on-going work of building one's own theology.

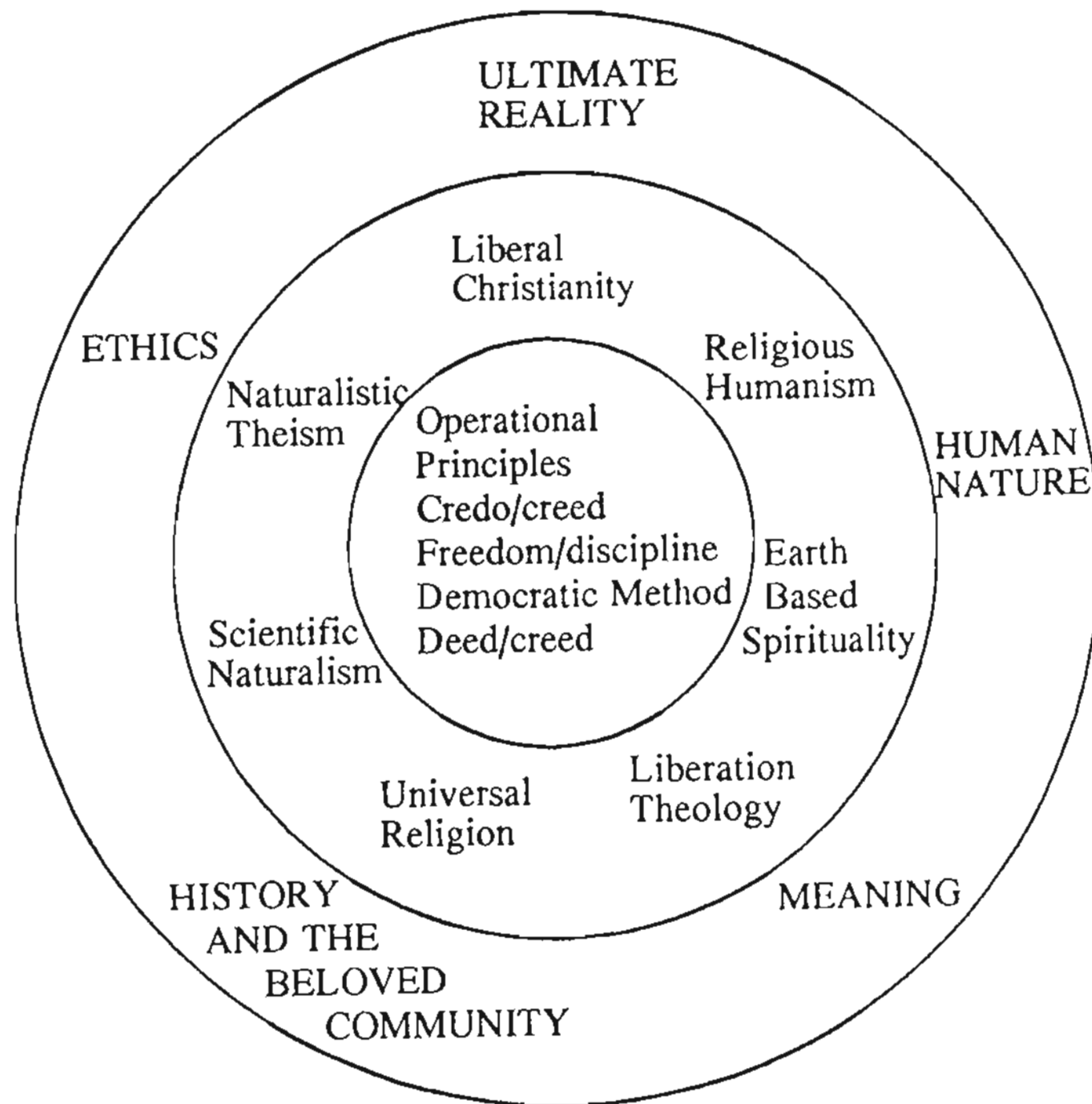
The question is can we Unitarians, with our vaunted and cherished freedom, experience the enthusiasm of fundamentalists, who so dominate our world, while preserving the rationality of liberal religion? Do we have the vision and the will and the stamina to take our free faith into the next millennia?

I read recently an amusing story of confused syntax about the Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo, California, who asked members at their 40th anniversary celebration, and I quote, to "turn toward the future as we pack time capsules with our current church children." ³⁹ That, I submit, is not what we want to do, as much as they might be eager to go. But we do need to realise that we are always one generation from extinction. That is a thought to greatly concentrate the mind. We need a convictional theology for ourselves and to pass on our passions to those who follow.

Harnessing our deepest explosions. To conclude, I report a personal experience that graphically demonstrates the point. I was visiting a church school class of 3 and 4 year olds to talk about the flaming chalice as a symbol of our faith. We sang "This Liberal Light of Mine", and we sang it lustily. I spoke about the Flaming Chalice, its history and meaning. All very wise, I thought, and I said "Amen". The service over (so I thought), I

placed the cover on the sterno can to extinguish the chalice flame and complete the ceremony, paused, ready to rejoin the adult congregation, when with a gigantic "POP"! the can cover flew to the ceiling — to the astonishment not only of the 3 and 4 year olds, but to me — one who fancies himself at times a "technician of the sacred". How miracles abound if only I, if only we, can harness that latent energy.

THE THREE LEVELS OF UNITARIAN VALUES



NOTES

1. D.H. Lawrence, quoted in *Quotations of Vision and Courage* edited by Carl Hermann Voss (New York: Association Press, 1972), 108.
2. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, Jess Stein, ed. (New York: Random House 1967), 1471.
3. *The Free Church in a Changing World* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1963), 4.
4. Cartoon by Thaves, (16/2/85).
5. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance", *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume II* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1865 and 1876), 57.
6. Edward Wagenknecht, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Portrait of a Balanced Soul*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 36.
7. See Conrad Wright, *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches* (Boston: Skinner House Books, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1989).
8. *Chicago Tribune*, (24/10/81).
9. Reported by Leonard Sweet, "Not All Cats Are Gray....", *The Christian Century*, June 23-30, 1982, 721.
10. Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, Lowell Lectures, (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 152.
11. Unitarian Universalist Association statement of Purposes and Principles. See *Unitarian Universalist Association 1994 Directory* (Boston: UUA, 1994), 443.
12. James Luther Adams, "The New Narcissism: Dissolution of Covenant", monograph, Meadville/Lombard Lectures, January 1977, 35.
13. See John Stuart Mill: "One person with a belief is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests."
14. Hosea Ballou - source unknown.
15. Morton Scott Enslin: "Theology is the result of the tough experiences of life." Classroom notes 1958-1961, Theological School at St. Lawrence University.
16. See William Jones, "Functional Ultimacy as Authority in Religious Humanism," *Religious Humanism*, Winter 1978, 28-32.
17. James Freeman Clark, quoted in David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, Connecticut: The Greenwood Press, 1985), 235.
18. See Russell E. Miller, *The Larger Hope: The Second Century of the Universalist Church of America 1870-1970* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1985), 114.

19. See Robert B. Tapp, *Religion among the Unitarian Universalists* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973), 225.
20. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Sin" *A Handbook of Christian Theology* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 349.
21. Al Carmines, *Christianity and Crisis*, March 29, 1976, 65.
22. Quoted in "Credo of an Unbeliever", *Unitarian Universalist Register Leader*, March 1967, 5.
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24. Bob Mesle, *The Christian Century*, 7/15-22/87, 622.
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27. See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, (New York: The Free Press, 1973).
28. *The Talmud*.
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30. See Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children*, (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).
31. *Unitarian Universalist World*, 8/7/93, 19 (told by Elizabeth Strong).
32. Abraham Maslow, *The Further Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 43.
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36. James Luther Adams, *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment*, ed. by George K. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 308-322.
37. Antoine de St. Exupery, "The Need for Others", quoted in *Searching for Meaning*, edited by Charles Burke and Robert Cummins (Winona, Minnesota: St. Mary's College, 1970), 59.
38. William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming" (1921), *Familiar Quotations*, edited by John Bartlett (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955) 826.
39. Reported by Martin Marty, "Revisionist Religion", *The Christian Century*, July 29-August 5, 1992, 727.

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