



TOUCHSTONES

Theological Reflection

April 2022

Our theme for April is “Theological Reflection.” You may wonder, “what’s that??”

There are plenty of answers to that question, but here is one: it can mean to reflect on the events of the world theologically. To consider what’s happening in the world or in our own lives with a theological lens.

It could also mean to reflect on the subject of theology, but let’s stick with the first possibility for now. What would it mean to reflect on life with a theological perspective?

It means to ask certain questions, such as “what am I valuing as ultimate here?”, “How does this demonstrate radical, transformative love – or not?”, or “what narrative are we telling about the relationship between the sacred, the “profane”, and time and history?”

Let me give some examples.

When we talk about climate change, you might theological issues show up when people consider their responsibility. Are they “stewards” of the earth? Or interdependent with all of life? Or is this world only a temporary sojourn before the afterlife, so it doesn’t really matter? Those are theological questions, and they greatly affect how we might respond and act.

Or, in the work I do on early childhood, I often note that I do it because each child is holy, and should be able to live a life of meaning and joy. This is a different reason than “preparing children for the workforce” or “reducing juvenile crime.” When I say this, it brings people up short – they are so used to giving only secular answers. But isn’t the theological reason deeper and more powerful? It shifts the conversation in ways that I think are important.

In your personal life, one theological question to reflect on is “what I am making ultimate?” Whatever we make ultimate is our god, even if we don’t call it that. Is it money? Safety? Adventure? Identity? Power? or, is it, as I seek but do not always make it, Love? Asking yourself this question can clarify your every-day choices and shape how you interact with others.

Thinking theologically is a hard habit to get out of once you get started. You begin to see these hidden theological and religious questions behind everything. Reflecting on them may be illuminating for you.

In faith,
Matthew

Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: "Everyone is a theologian, either conscious or unconscious, in the sense that everyone has some conception of the nature of reality, of the demands of reality, and of those elements in reality that support or threaten meaningful existence."

James Luther Adams



Day 2: "Theological reflection is the process of seeking meaning."

Patricia O. Killen & John de Beer

Day 3: "Unitarian Universalism, at our truest, comprises a shining theology that can deliver saving words to our world. It is life-affirming, liberating, and loving... here and now." Tom Owen-Towle

Day 4: "...Theology is first of all not the study of doctrines, but a process of reflection.... The classic definition of theology, 'faith seeking understanding,' remains always valid."

Luke Timothy Johnson

Day 5: "How can one maintain a theological confidence in what one claims to be true while acknowledging the existence of multiple religions that also claim to be true?" Namsoon Kang

Day 6: "Alimentary theology ...is ... theology as nourishment: food as theology and theology as food, food for thought ... [which] addresses some of the spiritual and physical hungers of the world, and seeks ways of bringing about nourishment." A. F. Mendez Montoya

Day 7: "You don't need a Master's in Theology to love people." D.R. Silva

Day 8: "Much of what hinders us is that we have had a lot of mistaken theology in our head and it has gotten down into our heart." Dallas Willard

Day 9: "The world doesn't judge us by our theology; the world judges us by our behavior." Carolyn Mahaney

Day 10: "It's sloppy theology to think that all suffering is good for us, or that it's a result of sin. All suffering can be used for good, over time, after mourning and healing.... But sometimes it's just plain loss,

not because you needed to grow, not because life ...or anything is teaching you any kind of lesson." Shauna Niequist

Day 11: "'See that's where it falls apart for me!' Anne cried. 'What sticks in my throat is that God gets the credit but never the blame. I just can't swallow that kind of theological candy. Either God's in charge or he's not....'" Mary Doria Russell

Day 12: "The ...drive for justice-making lies at the core of my theology... the belief that we—humans, not God—are responsible for making and sustaining a just world." Engaging Our Theological Diversity

Day 13: "Our theology must be demonstrated, not only by our words but, more importantly, by our actions." Freeman-Smith

Day 14: "If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology." Karen Armstrong

Day 15: "Art is so often better at theology than theology is." Christian Wiman

Day 16: "The distinction between faith and theology is itself a matter for theological reflection." Francis Cardinal George

Day 17: "Theological reflection is the most important activity a person can perform." Vincent Cheung

Day 18: "Searching for meaning through theological reflection is not easy, because it does not yield the security of absolute answers."

Patricia O'Connell Killen & John de Beer

Day 19: "Liberal theology with its riskiness, its openness, and its tentativeness is not apt to fare well in a time of political crisis." Bruce Southworth

Day 20: "One good thing about being a cat, apart from the extra lives, was that the theology was a lot simpler." Terry Pratchett

Day 21: "Life is a mess. And theology must be lived out in the midst of that mess." Charles Colson

Day 22: "Theological discourse can be, in and of itself, a form of identity and solidarity." Namsoon Kang

Day 23: "We ignore the question of how we talk about and manifest theology in our congregations at our peril." Engaging Our Theological Diversity

Day 24: "Who, then, is qualified for theology? The theological task is implied by the very life of faith itself. Every ... [one] is therefore called to do theology in this sense." Luke Timothy Johnson

Day 25: "When we recognize that our theology is not the moon but rather a



finger pointing at the moon, we enjoy the freedom of questioning it from time to time." Rachel Held Evans

Day 26: "Question the answers, I repeated every class. Reevaluate your conclusions when the evidence changes." Craig Mullaney

Day 27: "Theology is never any help; it is searching in a dark cellar at midnight for a black cat that isn't there." Robert A. Heinlein

Day 28: "Our theology, far from being mature in any evolutionary or historical sense, is in fact in its early stages." The Free Church in a Changing World (1963)

Day 29: "...My faith goes beyond theology and religion and requires considerable work and effort." Jimmy Carter

Day 30: "Theology is—or should be—a species of poetry.... You have to open yourself to a poem with a quiet, receptive mind, in the same way you might listen to a difficult piece of music...." Karen Armstrong

Day 31: "I wish that there were more of a focus on [conversations about theology and beliefs] because I've been personally really struggling with it...." UU Youth, 2005

Family Matters

Windows and Mirrors

Sydney Harris observes that, "Most people are mirrors, reflecting the moods and emotions of the times; few are windows, bringing light to bear on the dark corners where troubles fester. The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows." Lucille Clifton, a Black poet, writer, and educator, offers a more nuanced view suggesting that we give children, "Mirrors in which they can see themselves, windows in which they can see the world."



The *Tapestry of Faith* program, *Windows and Mirrors* by Gabrielle Farrel, Rev. Natalie Fenimore, and Dr. Jenice View, is a springboard toward theological reflection. The curriculum

- ◆ Introduces the reality and the impact of multiple perspectives and multiple experiences as we live in this world.
- ◆ Use the metaphor of a window and a mirror to help children better understand themselves in relation to others.
- ◆ Presents the windows and mirrors metaphor as an effective tool for understanding and living our Unitarian Universalist Principles.
- ◆ Guides children to identify and respect their own values, views, and needs as well as those of others in a variety of contexts; teaches that to do so is a faith practice.

- ◆ Provides children with practice in observation, interpretation, and critical thinking.
- ◆ Develops children's empathy, open-mindedness and respect for differences, seen and unseen.

These elements are also instructive for adults as they participate in theological reflection.

Source: Touchstones & http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/winmirrors_column.pdf

Family Activity: *Windows & Mirrors*

Using a large piece of cardboard for each child, invite them to create a "window" on one side and a "mirror" on the other side. On the mirror side, invite your children to describe how they appear to the world using words, drawings, or symbols. This is their outer self, how others may see them. Have them consider the fact that different people may see them differently. Then invite them to turn the cardboard over to work on the window side, the side through which they look into themselves. Ask them, "Who is your true self? What are the dreams and thoughts that maybe just a few people—or maybe only you—know?" Finally, ask them to talk about the differences between their outer self and their inner self.

Our House for Hope

Questions for Theological Reflection

The following questions are from a graduate course, *Unitarian Universalist Systematic Theology*. In *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, the *Commission on Appraisal* wrote, "We ignore the question of how we talk about and manifest theology in our congregations at our peril." The first six categories are aligned with the book, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century* (2011) by John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, which also has a discussion guide, <https://www.beacon.org/Assets/PDFs/AHouseForHopedg.pdf>. These questions both define theological categories and prompt engaging discussions.

The Garden: Eschatology

Where are we headed? Where are we going? What is the purpose of existence? What is the horizon to which our lives are oriented? How do we contend with eschatologies of destruction? What are the components of a progressive eschatology of a world made fair and all her people one? What constitutes hell on earth? What constitutes heaven on earth (e.g., liberation of the oppressed, food for the hungry, peace for all people, reverence for the earth)? How do we make sense of the world if, as Rebecca Parker suggests, the apocalypse has already occurred?

The Sheltering Walls: Ecclesiology

Who are we/Whose are we as a people of faith? Who are we when we gather in beloved community? What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? What role, if any, does conversion play in becoming a Unitarian Universalist? What is the process of conversion? To what are we converting? How are we transformed (i.e., second order change) by conversion? What is the role of covenant in terms of how we understand who we are? What is the nature and purpose of a religious community? What brings religious community into being and binds it together? How is a

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The Unitarian Universalist Church
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- Members and friends of the church who live at Wesley Willows are invited to join others and Rev. Matthew on the 4th Tuesday of most months at 9am. We will meet in the fellowship hall at Aldersgate United Methodist Church.

Want to have a group – a book group, a parent group, a “circle supper”, or whatever you like?
– just email Autumn at office@uurockford.org and she can give you the Zoom login and password

Theological Reflection & Repairing the World

We may believe that we know how to repair the world, but the work of repair is far more complex than we imagine. The repair has to do with society writ large, as well as the planet, and any repairs that we propose must be persuasive and effective, both morally and strategically. Per James Luther Adams (p. 2), our work involves constructing and implementing a prophetic theology that is authentic, socially (and ecologically) relevant, and morally grounded. This is a theology of hope. Rather than running toward answers, we must spend time with questions and live into answers about the nature of repair. In this work, the discipline of theological reflection as a communal exercise will serve us well.