

An Illiterate Ministry

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Is he indeed the *eminence grise*
Of certain ultramontane circles?
Or is he, as his friends – both of them
so mysteriously assert, more *grise*
than eminence? The man himself
is of little help to those who seek
education. He becomes noticeably
tongue-tied in the face of questioning,
and indeed has been known to break down
completely and admit to being just
an easily confused fat man with a poor memory.

A dust jacket piece for Peter Bowler's book, The Superior Person's Book of Words

Though I tried to persuade the Chair of Collegium that there were many much more distinguished scholars than I, he was adamant that I was the choice and I should, to quote Theresa Heinz Kerry, “stuff it” and accept it. I have never considered myself a scholar in the full and fundamental sense, more an apologist and advocate for real scholarship. I am a gleaner in the fields of scholarship – seeking the left behind and forgotten, the untold stories abandoned in the corners of fields swept by the trained and professional historians, a counter voice to scholarly and pseudo scholarly judgements that I believe were ill made and incomplete, especially in regard to Universalist history, the history of hymns and hymnody, the Unitarian and Universalist women's denominational history that is not yet treated as integral to our story, and the strange way we write history as if nothing was happening outside our squirmy little “Association.” That said, I accept the challenge in the spirit of a feisty Old School Presbyterian, The Reverend Mister Joshua L. Wilson, who in Cincinnati in the preface to an anti Methodist polemic penned in the early 1800's declared his abhorrence of “lengthy preface, pitiful apology, false show and disgusting errata. A milk and water course,” he asserted, “in matters of moment, is his implacable disgust. He does not pretend to be unqualified, or to have waited for a better hand.”¹ Let it also be said that my scholarly standards which I never reach but struggle toward are very high; and I relish the good and great scholars I have had the privilege of knowing. My mother, Phi Beta Kappa, Magna Cum Laude graduate of Syracuse (and Western Reserve University), and my father with multiple engineering degrees from Massachusetts Institute of Technology were, among all their faults and foibles, towering intellects – and they damn well didn't want to be embarrassed by slipshod intellectual standards in their children.²

As with John Adams, once I “discovered books” I too “read forever,” and I adamantly agree with Adams enshrining in the constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts his conviction that education was the foundation of the republic, including the inculcation of core values of honesty, virtue and generosity.³ Harvard founders declared that they established the college because they dreaded to “leave an illiterate ministry” when “we shall lie in the dust.” That dread has diminished markedly, and we have come far, perhaps more properly said, fallen far from Adams' ideals. Our educational system at every level wrestles with a public that imagines it can achieve high standards by testing, and defunding the toughest and most marginal schools, condemning hard working teachers in problem schools. and sending children with sufficient parental resources, added to public funds, to private schools and abandoning the rest. More and more children are “left behind,” despite presidential promises. The Center on

¹ William Burke, *The Methodist Episcopal Church*, John W. Brown & Co. (Cincinnati, 1812), p. 5.

² Glenna Beach Johnson's papers are a tour de force of fierce scholarship with no “facts” declared that were not in the clearest evidence. Glenna also insisted on the English language well written and carefully spoken. It was her conviction that anyone who had a lisp or other speech impediments beyond the age of five should be taken at once to a speech therapist for immediate remedial work. The spokespeople of the entire US broadcast media world obviously need swift and effective therapy. I don't think she would go as far as the “men of Gilead” in Judges 12/6 who said to a suspected Ephramite, “Say now shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him and slew him...” She probably wouldn't insist on that punishment, but for Tom Brokaw and Barbara Walters – maybe -, and for the fawning and obsequious manner in which the media tiptoe around the mighty – almost certainly if she believed in capital punishment – which she didn't!!

³ See “John Adams and the Good Life of the Mind” by David McCullough, Boston Atheneum Occasional Papers, Number 4 (Boston, 2004).

educational Policy notes that the current reliance on exams is misplaced, for they are “a poor gauge of success.” They continue, noting that “colleges and employers warn that high schools are graduating students who can’t communicate, analyze or reason well enough to succeed without remediation.”⁴ The rate of adult functional illiteracy is a scandal in this nation. “We are seeing, I think, a great dumbing down of America.” Says Dana Gioia, chair of the NEA. The decline in non work related reading among Americans is numbing. The National Endowment for the Arts, in a recent study reports that the rate of reading among adults has suffered a serious decline in the last decade. Banning and burning books is growing more popular again and reaching books like Rowling’s Harry Potter series.

High schools and colleges wrestle with a level of dishonesty that boggles the mind, from early copying of other’s work and the easy plagiarism the electronic web allows to similar games played by reporters, and faculty with torted up resumes and intellectual labors. Richard Mitchell (the underground grammarian) long ago noted that some arcane professors seemed to be accepted for their punditry on public issues (as retired generals are on military strategies today). “To them,” he declared, “we turn... What, we ask, is the meaning of it all?...How will it fare with us in the future? Their answers are prompt and lengthy, but unintelligible.”⁵ And they are often wrong in this all too complex world. One of my favorite newly found intellectuals is Robert James Waller (The Bridges of Madison County) Mathematician, former Dean of the Business School at UNI, musician, performer and essayist, who notes that our schools at every level fail to prepare us for the complexity of the issues we face, enhancing our propensity to flee from the same, and abetting our predilection for mediocre politicians who don’t challenge us.⁶ This is an all but lethal combination!

Our public corporate world is shot through with elaborate evasions and dishonesties of which Martha Stewart, Enron, World Com, Arthur Anderson et al are only the sacrificial lambs, really only Martha so far. One is reminded of a long ago column by Leon Wieseltier in the New York Times Magazine (Dec. 7, 1986):

For the White House, the truth is a problem to be solved. Since the Administration is always already right, since its confidence in its correctness is never shaken by events, it has become invulnerable to facts. The facts are there to be arranged, altered and assembled into a picture of the world that will never challenge, but always confirm. There is no binding truth. There are only different stories. If one story fails to please, another story must be loosed. The story told at the end of the day is true.

How much more true is that 18 years later. And the New York Times, the newspaper of record, regularly apologizes for a few of the gaffes it makes, though hardly all, since far too many are intentional to keep the Times on the right side of power. Where is Phillips Brooks now that we need him? When he spoke on the Lyceum circuit he would speak for free on the plight of the slave and abolition, but if the audience insisted on something safe and innocuous he would have to be paid well for it.

Fifty nine scientists recently complained that the present administration in Washington had no respect for serious scholarship. They declared that this administration chose and unchose scientists whose words to plug and whose wisdom to cite at will for political and not scientific reasons. Even the Pentagon’s study on global warming, seeing it as a security threat to the nation, was for a time suppressed and ignored. Congress is threatening to evaluate Middle Eastern studies programs in colleges and universities for “bias” that might be a security threat. Congress generally has as much respect for intellectual freedom as “a razorback sow” has interest in Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn,” to use a classic analogy. They are hardly the folk to defend academic freedom. Scientists working in bio-weapons research are being hamstrung in their work, because their labors could be used by terrorists. The President’s Council on Bioethics was gutted of an ethicist and a scientist, replaced by a political scientist, an anti-abortion champion and a physician seeking more religion in public life. Theologians with suspect Islamist credentials are being sent packing by our vigilant administration. Cat Stevens is denied entry to this country because he is a threat to the republic – what kind of possible threat? One third of our promised AIDS money is to be funneled through chastity and anti-condom programs despite the clear evidence that they are seriously ineffective. The list goes on and on. Lewis Lapham in the April issue of Harper’s laments the prevalent “substitution of ideological certainty for fact and reasonable doubt across the entire spectrum of issues bearing on the public health and welfare.” Who will speak for science and serious intellectual labors as once we did so forcefully?

We are, of course, not exempt from these problems ourselves. We all know Unitarian ministers who have claimed good Episcopalian, Clement Moore, as one of us, and repeated Mencken’s falsehood about Unitarian President Fillmore installing the first bathtub in the White House, and other such misstatements. But the matter is, of course,

⁴ As quoted in an Associated Press report in The Providence Journal, August 19, 2004.

⁵ Less than Words Can Say, Little Brown & Company (Boston, 1979), p 115.

⁶ Just Beyond the Firelight, Iowa State University Press (Ames, 1993), p 113.

much more serious. As one who has taught theological students I am profoundly aware of students who should be sent back to high school, scholarship that borders on plagiarism, and slipshod work that gets the “graduate student B” though it hardly deserves to pass, and even shoddy “Doctoral” standards. Having served on Doctoral committees I am profoundly aware of work that had few solid, primary sources, academic footnotes, work that I was told must be passed with the hope that any eventual publication would require the proper footnoting. There are ministerial colleagues who have edited and ornamented their resumes with falsehoods. Two women who did so are safely dead and thus could be named, Augusta Chapin who straightened out her chaotic blend of career and family and suppressed untoward events, and Rowena Morse Mann, who recreated the highlights of her career as the spirit moved her. Doubtless there are many more. There are four living or recently deceased colleagues (all male) I have known who stole sermons outright and published them as their own. Once I worked with a theological aspirant on a major educational endeavor. Soon I discovered that all of her work was directly plagiarized, and had to redo every bit of it. When it came to writing a letter of recommendation for her to the Ministerial Fellowship Committee I noted the plagiarism among other fatal flaws. This candidate received a “One” and pursued a ministerial career unhindered. Plagiarism does not seem to be taken as seriously with us as with the Methodists who recently yanked the credentials of a Massachusetts minister for his copying sermons of what is today a freshly minted Southern Methodist Bishop.⁷

Several years ago the MFC asked me for “Universalist questions” that could plumb aspirants knowledge of the distaff side (that’s Universalist isn’t it?) of our Association. I submitted five, sufficiently general to invite whatever tidbits of knowledge the candidates might have.⁸ I soon discovered that none of the questions were used by the MFC. When I asked a friend on the MFC, I was told that no one on the Committee could answer them. Now we have an MFC reading list that, in history, hardly requires contact with a serious scholarly footnote if the candidates select from the book list carefully.⁹ The most popular complaint in my last UU history class at Andover Newton was, “Why do we have to do a 25 [minimum] page paper, with original research, primary sources when we will never in our ministerial lives have to do this again?” The thought did not occur to the complainants that doing some tough original research has several outcomes. Having done it you can begin to imagine how hard it is to do well! You come to some awareness how to sift and sort sources, primary and otherwise, how to evaluate conflicting

⁷ William Willimon, who on being told of the plagiarism, quipped, “I hope he does it with a Southern accent, The Christian Century, August 24, 2004, p 13.

⁸ The first question asked how they might divide Universalist history into periods. What would be the change or turning points? Another invited them to name three persons they valued from the Universalist pilgrimage. Another invited them to reflect on different varieties of Universalist theology. (There were so many I figured they couldn’t miss.)

⁹ As a historian I would hope that our Unitarian Universalist ministers would have at least a passing acquaintance with the early Universalist histories of Ballou and Whittemore, the work of Blanchard, and most especially Richard Eddy’s two volumes. The last century brought Clinton Lee Scott’s brief history, Elmo Robinson’s personal tour de force, Ernest Cassara’s very useful volumes, the magisterial two volume set by Russell Miller and much more new work. Ann Bressler’s overview is, I think, most recent. There is too a regional and itinerant history showcased by George Rogers’ Memoranda...., Abel Thomas, A Century of Universalism in Philadelphia and New York..., and his delightful Autobiography. Thomas Sawyer’s biography of Stephen H. Smith (Clinton Liberal Institute and the “burned over district”), Erasmus Manford’s Twenty Five Years in the West and several more. (Formal regional histories, like Asa Bradley’s unpublished “Pacific Coast Universalism” are few, but McCarthy’s “Universalism in the Mid South” and my own works on Cincinnati and Chicago Universalism [and even a brief piece on Louisville Universalism] have encouraged many other researchers.) Women’s Universalist history is a fertile ground today with the new work on Judith Sargeant Murray, Clara Barton, Olympia Brown, Mary Ashton Rice Livermore, Sarah Oelberg’s (sadly unpublished) thesis on the inclusive “Iowa Sisterhood” and now many more. Eliza Hanson’s 1880 Our Women Helpers, Dorothy Emerson’s Standing Before Us, The Hitching’s issue of the UU Historical Society Journal (revised) on “Unitarian and Universalist Women Ministers,” and many of the publications of the Women’s Heritage Society are good basic resources. All of these ought to be on any historically literate UU minister’s reading list, but very, very few - I believe -are.

One might imagine that Unitarianism is far better covered. But who reads the early UUA pamphlets on Unitarian history, Joseph Henry Allen’s ground breaking work, the AUA’s self promoting turn of the last century, Unitarianism in America by George Willis Cooke, or even Wilbur’s magnum opus any more? The works of C. Conrad Wright, David B. Parke (Epic - though it is still in [unrevised except for the introduction] print) Walter Donald Kring, Conrad Edick Wright, Daniel Walker Howe and so many others old and new seem hardly noticed in our ministry (though someone must buy these books - else they could not be printed). The regional histories are long out of print, and though new volumes come out almost weekly touching Unitarian stories few seem to garner appropriate denominational attention. Dean Grodzin’s magnificent volume one on Theodore Parker, and George Hunston Williams’ final edition of The Radical Reformation, including so much new material on Transylvanian Unitarianism seemed to pass by our ministry with little notice. Only the Center for Free Religion and its connection with the Partner Church Council saves the valuable material in their reprints and publications from potential oblivion. Our women’s history, though replete with many biographies still awaits the kind of teller that creates an inclusive denominational story. Am I mistaken or when volumes like Hemenway’s exciting work on Mary Moody Emerson, and Sarah Ann Wilder’s intriguing work on Anna Tilden [Gannett], which are wonderfully suggestive of a different way of composing and understanding our history, are published they are met with a deafening silence? I know that Meadville/Lombard is experimenting with telling the denominational stories through a few biographies of women. There is so much more we could, should, must do.

This is a useful beginning of a list, but only a beginning. Canadian Unitarianism and Universalism has a few published sources including Phillip Hewett’s Unitarians in Canada, and Chuck Eddis’ The CUC from Colony to Nation, 1961-2002. I would love to speak of our historic theologies, our changing ethical and moral arguments and stances, and more but this paper is already too long. Almost no one in our ministry would even recognize leading figures in these areas like George Washington and Cordelia Quinby, Orello Cone, Mary Billings, Emerson Hugh Lalone, Armenia White - just to name a few landmark Universalists. I believe we have indeed “an illiterate ministry.”

sources, and most critically how to speak within the boundaries of your knowledge.¹⁰ If you do it right you come to recognize good, solid, well done intellectual labor, and don't fall for the latest popular rendition of a demanding subject. Apparently academic standards are not what they used to be even among us!

It is not, of course, just a ministerial issue. A good friend of mine, a Ph. D. in Rhetoric and Composition, wrote to the Editor of the UU World a few months ago asking if they were interested in a study article on the effects of narrowing or expanding the voice of the congregation vs the minister's exclusive voice in Sunday worship. The proposal was summarily dismissed. We obviously have a problem if we expect the UU World to be scholarly and reflective about touchy issues. A beloved colleague has been involved in adult education, using the UUA's "Telling our UU story" and finds it "very wanting for substantive material." Most of our newer adult education material seems to me dumbed down. And most of the new materials seem to be based on the theory that what we "feel" is much more important than the serious results of intellectual inquiry – read "facts." How quickly we have put behind us the critical issue in the battle between the AUA, President Frederick May Eliot and many distinguished ministers over whether the AUA should create a category of congregations called "Fellowships," to be lay led, on their own without trained ministerial leadership. Who, without the educated ministry, would interpret to them our heritage, standards, practice? It was a good question, and it still is, but where today do you find an educated UU minister who can do that for churches or fellowships? It is my impression that they are "few and far between."

Let us look back once more to Frederick May Eliot, whose leadership on the 1936 Commission on Appraisal produced the thoughtful and even scholarly, Unitarians Face a New Age, widely reviewed and commented on in the Christian Register, and elsewhere. Eliot was a defender of an enlightenment attitude toward ministry. He looked back all the way to Charles Chauncy's words:

The plain Truth is [that] an *enlightened Mind*, and not *raised Affections*, ought always to be the guide of those who call themselves Men (sic); and this in the affairs of Religion, as well as other Things.... If we would act up to our Character as Men (sic), or Christians, we must not submit blindfold to the Dictates of others.... Nor can we be too solicitous, so far as we are able, to see with our own Eyes, and believe with our own Understandings.

Chauncy declared, "The voice of reason is the voice of God,"¹¹ to which Eliot adds a hearty Amen. Frederick May Eliot argued that the liberal minister must not only be educated to the standard of other ministers, but far beyond, for we must be seriously grounded in a world of religions, and congregations that speak a multitude of heady new languages of disciplines with which we had better at least have a nodding acquaintance. Chauncy and Eliot sound like echoes from another world. When Robert James Waller suggests that "educated" folk need intellectual reach, size, grasp he calls for it as "a recreational level of competence" substituting "hard leisure" (actually studying) for "easy leisure" (passive spectator stuff).¹² Perhaps that is the only way to persuade this generation to take up the tough intellectual tasks of responsible citizenry and ministry.

Let us take up a document in the near distance, "A Plan of Education for the Unitarian Universalist Ministry," the Taylor Report, the report of the Committee to Study Theological Education for the Unitarian Universalist Ministry (UUA, 1962). It affirms "education as an instrument of personal and social change....to open up new thinking, to develop citizens who will think and act independently, critically and imaginatively within the framework of a liberal philosophy which tolerates dissent and nourishes objective inquiry."¹³ It goes on to declare that "the role of the lib-

¹⁰ A.D. Nuttall in an article on scholarship in The Wilson Quarterly for Autumn, 2003, a wonderful Oxford scholar, reflects on scholarship as, in addition to being "intelligent" and "right," having "a quality of completeness." He goes on to lament a hypothetical "brilliant" article coherently advancing a new theory, but failing "to specify which editions are being used, quot[ing] "from two different translations of the same continental work (without noticing the fact that they differ), betrays the fact in passing – though it does not destroy the main thesis – that he or she has not consulted the German original....Getting all your references right becomes, in the context of widespread intellectual endeavor, a sort of good manners, like not slamming doors in people's faces." Nuttall suggests that scholarship must have "complete documentation; complete accuracy, even with reference to matters not crucial to the main argument" and evidence "that the writer's knowledge of material at the fringe of the thesis is as sound as his or her knowledge of the core material." Pere Daniel, undertaking a history of France, was given access to fourteen hundred folios of primary source material. After two hours he left, sending a cursory note to the devoted king's librarian noting that he needed no more of this paper-rubbish. Count Boulainvilliers said of the resulting history that it "contains ten thousand blunders." Real scholarship is difficult and grows increasingly rare.

¹¹ Frederick May Eliot, "Interpreting the signs of the times," in Frederick May Eliot: An Anthology, Selected and edited by Alfred P. Stiernotte, Beacon Press (Boston, 1959) p. 120. Most of this collection of Fred Eliot's addresses and papers deal with intellectual standards and public commitments.

¹² Less than Words Can Say, pp. 70-71.

¹³ Taylor Report, p. 26.. Joan Waugh's excellent new biography of Josephine Shaw Lowell, Unsentimental Reformer, Harvard University Press (Cambridge, 1997) p 124-125 records a delicious practice of Ms Lowell. She delighted in forthright discussions of controversial issues at breakfast, fiercely defending her positions, and often just as clearly labeling her father Frank's positions to be in error, threatening in good humor to declare him "an infidel, to be excommunicated from the Progressive Scientific Church, and consigned to the dark, moss covered chapel of holy St. Fogg." But who today cogently discusses any serious public issues at breakfast or any other meal any more? Where is a venue for serious wrestling with public issues? One might suggest the church, but is it so?

eral church is to act on the front edge of intellectual, spiritual and social change in the American religious community...”¹⁴ One of its sharpest judgments is Harold Taylor’s own reflection, “As I look at the sermons and the publications of the liberal church I find little of original thinking, no grand conceptions. One can detect the primary and secondary sources on which the preachers and writers have relied. There is no hot white flame burning. There is only a smoldering of branches with an occasional spurt of fire.”¹⁵ The Commission is obviously advocating serious intellectual standards, a powerful core set of values and an institutional and individual commitment to grounded thought and action. I wonder if Taylor and the Commission would not be still more troubled by the training, wisdom and performance of ministers today.

I want to keep the focus on scholarship and intellectual standards, though I heartily agree with the other issues raised by the Commission in the preceding paragraph. I see all the labeled issues, and more, as intertwined. Let me remind us of a story told long ago by Loren Eislely, reflecting on a young man in one of his classes:

“I hope not a forerunner of the coming race on the planet – [who] remarked to me with the colossal insensitivity of the new asphalt animal, “Why can’t we just eventually kill off everything and live here by ourselves with more room? It was his solution to the problem of overpopulation.

I had no response to make, for I saw suddenly that this man was in the world of the flight. For him there was no eternal, nature did not exist save as something to be crushed, and that second order of stability, the cultural world, was, for him, also ceasing to exist. If he meant what he said, pity had vanished, life was not sacred, and custom was a purely useless impediment from the past....

There before me stood the new race in embryo. It was I who fled. There was no means of communication to call across that roaring cataract that lay between us, and down which this youth was already figuratively passing toward some doom I did not wish to see. Man’s (sic) second rock of certitude, his cultural world, that had gotten him out of bed in the morning for many thousands of years, that had taught him manners, how to love, and to see beauty, and how, when the time came, to die – this cultural world was now dissolving...

[We have] come dangerously close to bringing into existence a type of man (sic) who is not human. He no longer thinks in the old terms; he has ceased to have a conscience. He is an instrument of power. Because his mind is directed outward upon this power torn from nature, he does not realize that the moment such power is brought into the human domain it partakes of human freedom. It is no longer safely *within* nature; it has become violent, sharing in human ambivalence and moral uncertainty.¹⁶

We have come perilously close to creating a society obsessed with the freedom of power, unmoved by the wisdom of the past, philosophy, thoughtful religion or science, incapable of recognizing its own peril or hearing the voices that might guide it to a way that promises not death but life.

Let us leave that question for the moment and pick up Frederick May Eliot again, in an address on “The Fame and Influence of Emerson’s Divinity School Address.”¹⁷ He declares that ministerial education is “life long,” of necessity “self directed,” and “should be more intensive than that of” any other minister. Rejecting the old canard that liberalism is easy, he sees it as just the opposite for the church, the members, and the minister especially. The liberal minister must understand the whole human “story wider and deeper” than the well educated in any more orthodox ministerial venue. Our understanding of our faith and calling demand higher and more holistic standards. For Eliot, this applies to all the traditional ministerial skills as well, and a world of knowledge that many of our laity are immersed in. If we are clueless, badly educated or uncaring we often cannot helpfully communicate “[T]here are no short-cuts, no answers in the back of the book, no infallible authorities, no institutional guarantees.” He is simply advocating that ministers must be superbly trained in all the wisdom and discipline traditional to them, and they must be more than that – in essence – public intellectuals. And their education must never end in their active lifetime. Public Intellectuals used to be, two generations and more ago, quite often clergy but it is not so now for there are few if any who could claim that title with any conviction or public agreement. It should be said that Unitarian Universalist ministers are called and covenanted to pursue life long education. Many, perhaps most, are like the aspirant to ministry who approached the devoted Universalist itinerant, George Rogers, and declared that she

¹⁴ Report, p 27.

¹⁵ Report, p 37.

¹⁶ Loren Eislely, *The Firmament of Time*, pp. and p 137.

¹⁷ In *Frederick May Eliot*, An Anthology selected and edited by Alfred P. Stiernotte, Beacon Press (Boston, 1959), pp 128 – 132.

was called to the ministry. After hearing her Rogers recorded in his Memoranda that she had either misunderstood her call or was called to little purpose. How many seem “called to little purpose” in their continuing education?¹⁸

Richard Posner’s new book Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline seeks appropriately to define his prey, generally seen as “seriously and competently interested in the things of the mind.” He favorably goes on to quote Edward Shils, The Intellectuals and the Powers and Other Essays: “There is in every society a minority of persons who, more than the ordinary run..., are inquiring, and desirous of being in frequent communion with symbols, which are more general than the immediate concrete situations of everyday life and remote in their reference in both time and space”¹⁹ Posner names several such figures in the 20th Century, specifically disavowing the popular scientist who explains science to the general public, and the “safe specialist” without “the requisite perspective, temperament, character or knowledge”²⁰ necessary to grapple with the great and gnawing questions that the public may or may not even be aware should, indeed must be addressed. Posner notes that the much noticed “compartmentalization of competence” may produce an “academic...able to use his success to reach the general public on matters about which he is an idiot.”²¹ But even scholars of this ilk seem rare in a world without the towering figures even of the recent past like Einstein, Schweitzer, Hannah Ahrendt, Robert Hutchins, our own James Luther Adams and so many more; and we certainly don’t have a public that is capable of recognizing, respecting and demanding public intellectuals and serious scholarship, not even in many of our churches.

This is a critical issue if our ministry is usefully to help congregations grapple with the life and death issues of our time. Garret Keizer, a UCC minister, in his beautiful book, A Dresser of Sycamore Trees, speaks of a monastic retreat undertaken to discern his calling, where he realizes that all of the monks had given up much of what the Western world judges to be essential, needed, deserved. Keizer reflects that each and every monk had declared with his life and very being that “you can’t have it all.” No one can have it all, for the earth and its resources are not unlimited. The advertisement may shout, “Yes, you can have it all,” but that’s not true. The monks for twenty centuries, Keiser observes, in the simplicity of their lives and faith quietly declare that, “If other persons, peoples, species, and generations are to have justice, no one ‘can have it all.’” There are choices to make and prices to pay for those choices.²² Pope John Paul II for all his faults and inability to see other quandaries, keeps this issue in clear and bright focus. Perhaps the ancient Roman Church has wisdom we must learn to hear and share. My old friend Gary MacEoin, who long worked for Catholic authorities and once sought to be a priest, laments the inability of American industrial leaders to see that world demands more than good manners, “business honesty” and social graces, if indeed it demands even these. He found our affable business leaders to be “typical products of an American philosophy of education that turns out highly competent but morally neutral people, people with the sophisticated techniques to create a Watergate [could we substitute an Iraq war?] but no suspicion that their actions have sinister implications.... All means were legitimate” in pursuit of business. They paid “scientists to conduct experiments, knowing that some would shade the results in anticipation of upgrading from the modest payroll of a research institute to the rich rewards of company-directed laboratories.”²³ In this generation so many well intended endeavors miscarry because we listen to one authority when quite another has the wisdom we require. We say that genetically modified foods are safe in our diets without adequate testing over time, and without comprehending the fearsome damage they can do when released in a world of other lives, “other nations” as Henry Beston called the great community of lives. We declare radioactive waste safe as long as it is buried carefully in some other state. We declare deeply contaminated land fit for development as long as the toxins are contained, but what is containment

¹⁸ Abel Charles Thomas in his Autobiography, J.M.Usher (Boston, 1852) pp 77-79 describes first meeting this outstanding itinerant, George Rogers, in 1830, a beardless boy, very slight of build, “roughly dressed, having great metal buttons on a coat that might have fitted almost any other man as well – a sadly-worn white hat, ‘run to seed’ – the other extremity of his person bearing muddy shoes with strings untied.” It was Thomas who convinced Rogers to help make up the deficit in numbers of Universalist ministers. He was mostly self taught, and earned a well deserved reputation for “talent and knowledge.”

¹⁹ Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 2001) p 17.

²⁰ Posner, p 5.

²¹ Posner, p. 51.

²² A Dresser of Sycamore Trees, The Finding of a Ministry, by Garret Keizer, pp 7-8, David R Goodine Publisher (Boston, 1991)

²³ Memoirs and Memories, by Gary MacEoin, pp 95-96, Twenty-Third Publications, (Mystic, CT, 1986). One wishes for the savage honesty of a George Bernard Shaw. You will remember in his play “Man and Superman” Don Juan replies to the Devil’s taunt: “Why should I be civil to [your friends] or you? In this Palace of Lies a truth or two will not hurt you. Your friends are all the dullest dogs I know. They are not beautiful: they are only decorated. They are not clean: they are only shaved and starched. They are not educated: they are only college passmen. They are not religious: they are only pew-renters. They are not virtuous: they are only cowardly. They are not even vicious: they are only “frail.” They are not artistic: they are only lascivious. They are not prosperous: they are only rich. They are not loyal: they are only servile: not dutiful, only sheepish; not public spirited, only patriotic; not courageous, only quarrelsome; not determined, only obstinate; not masterful, only domineering; not kind, only sentimental; not social, only gregarious; not considerate, only polite; not intelligent, only opinionated; not progressive, only vindictive; not generous, only propitiatory; not disciplined, only cowed; and not truthful at all – liars every one of them, to the very back-bone of their souls.” No wonder Shaw is not often heard “on the boards” in this day. We have not the stomach for him, but Damn, he’s got our number!

and for how long? Scientific wisdom miscarries because we listen to the wrong scientists, we support remediation programs that compound problems – listening to the wrong experts. Professor of Entomology, Jeffrey Lockwood, in his new Skinner House book Grasshopper Dreaming suggests that scientists can “both comprehend facts and transform them for the sake of the spirit... With time,” he says, “technical data give way to a deeper kind of knowledge that relies on intuition, tradition, experience, and faith – and beyond knowledge lies the possibility of wisdom.”²⁴ Who takes the time and attention for the deeper issues and outcome? Perhaps there’s hope for us too if we take the life of wisdom seriously.

Sensitive and compassionate church leaders like Dom Helder²⁵ in Latin America found themselves out of their depth in trying to cut through the gordian knot of issues affecting the poor. Neither he, nor they, “nor the entire college of cardinals in Rome had studied business, biology, physics, computerization, cybernetics, communications, population, ecology, future planning, or other sciences that... are needed to make informed judgments on the issues that agitate the world today,”²⁶ says MacEoin. We find ourselves now in a country where too many seem to think morality is to be found in restricting abortion, denying women’s rights and trashing the simplest demands for equality of Gay Americans. Despite our newfound UU ability to speak to women’s and gay rights, we still have little skill or wisdom to face a nation where the rich get richer and the poor poorer, scrambling for scraps from the laden tables of the wealthiest nation on earth, and where the very earth itself and its great community of life cry out in the face of our silence, as our species consumes 40% of the output of the entire biomass! We have shirked the educational responsibilities that our tradition has spoken to from John Adams to the Taylor Report. Frederick May Eliot was right, we do have to be better educated, and with a breadth and depth we have hardly touched. Otherwise our compassion will almost certainly lack the voice and hands that could make it effective. Without wisdom we shall never find justice just as without embracing love we shall never find our common dignity and inclusive community.

The time grows short. We find ourselves just where Loren Eiseley said we were. He recounted this tale in his Night Country:

“...Along a particularly wild and forbidding section of the English coast a place of moors, diverging and re-converging trackways, hedges, and all manner of unexpected cliffs and obstacles – two English gentlemen were out riding in the cool of the morning. As they rounded a turn in the road they saw a coach bearing down on them at breakneck speed. The foaming, rearing horses were obviously running wild; the driver on the seat had lost the reins. As the coach thundered by, the terrified screams of the occupants could be heard.” The gentlemen had the same thought, and quickly distanced the coach and passed it. One flung open the gate just in time for the coach to plunge through. The man who opened the gate shouted, “Thirty guineas they go over the cliff!” The other replied, “done,” and the bet was made.

The two men stood “listening minute by minute...” “No sound came up from below.” Eiseley notes::

There is an odd resemblance in that hundred-year-old story to what we listen for today. We have just opened the gate and the purse is in our hands. The roads on that fierce coast diverge and reconverge. In some strange manner we are both the sporting gentlemen intent on their wager and the terrified occupants of the coach. There is no sound on all this wild upland....The lunging rocking juggernaut of our civilization has charged by. We wait by minutes, by decades, by centuries for the crash we have engendered. The strain is in our minds and ears....There is no report...

Perhaps Eiseley was wrong, and we have not yet thrown the gate wide. Perhaps there is still time to redeem what we so proudly and pretentiously call our civilization. Perhaps if we Unitarian Universalists took ourselves seriously we might have a roll to play.²⁷

²⁴ Page 42 in Grasshopper Dreaming.

²⁵ Dom Helder Camara, archbishop of Brazil, the militant outspoken “slum bishop.”

²⁶ Gary MacEoin, pp 203-204. Dom Helder’s conversation with Gary MacEoin took place the year before the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Columbia and its magnificent declaration that attempted to create for the Latin American church a “preference for the poor.” MacEoin goes on to favorably quote Gunnar Myrdal’s pithy observation that “the best way to help poor countries is to abstain from organizing corruption among them. Widespread fraud characterizes the relations between [us and] them: bribes, false or misleading statements, and shady deals in finance and trade.” (quoted from Jose Comblin in LADOC, U.S. Catholic Conference, #64, May-June 1976, p23, MacEoin p 269.

²⁷ Loren Eiseley, “The Cresmologue” in The Night Country, Scribners (New York, 1971) pp60-61