

Liberal Beacon

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I particularly enjoy this—somewhat briefer than usual—issue of *Liberal Beacon*. It’s small but mighty!

We begin with an article by Emily Chamlee-Wright, President and CEO of the Institute of Humane Studies (www.theIHS.org), based on her inspiring presentation during the 2024 Heterodox Academy Conference in Chicago, Illinois (which I was privileged to hear in person). But “What Universities Owe to the Liberal Project” is just as timely today—maybe more so—given President Trump’s attempts to get control of U.S. universities. *Can they survive this unprecedented moment of government intrusion?* That’s one question; but a more important one, and the question I think Chamlee-Wright addresses, is, *why should they?* Having served as provost and dean of Washington College, and as the Elbert H. Neese Professor of Economics and associate dean at Beloit College, earned her Ph.D. in economics from George Mason University and published six books, she’s more than qualified to address this question. Read ahead to find out what Emily Chamlee-Wright has to say.

Speaking of Trump (must we?), I’ve included my own brief article about the importance of

maintaining a sense of humor during troubled times. Puns and punchlines can never come too soon when we’re in the thick of things. Check out *Drumpffounded* to find out why I believe this is so.

Reading is another way to cope, whether to help us escape our woes by temporarily entering into the world of fiction, or by diving into nonfiction, perhaps to help us better understand what’s really going on in the real world. There’s lots of good

reasons to read, which is why our regular contributor, Lynn Jinishian spells it out for us in her excellent article, “An Invitation to a Reading Life.” To find out more, you’ll just have to *read* it for yourself.

Lynn’s article is followed by three essays inspired by—guess what—books!

Following up her outstanding review of his

Escape from Freedom in our last issue, Candace Schmidt shares some of the insights she’s gained from social psychologist Erich Fromm’s most popular book, *The Art of Loving* (1956). *Can we love others without loving ourselves? Can we love ourselves without loving others? What does it even mean to love anybody?* Learn the answers to these questions and others in the pages ahead.

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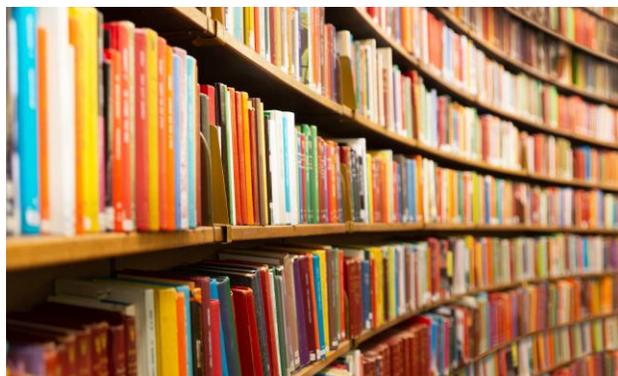
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This is followed by Lauriston King’s take on Paul Razor’s 2012 book, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness*, reminding us the “public square” should be a place for religious liberal voices as much as it is for conservative voices. Razor is a Unitarian Universalist minister and Director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom at Virginia Wesleyan College. King gives us just enough insight into the book to make us want to read it.

And don’t miss Kevin McCulloch’s enticing review of



Arthur C. Brooks’ 2019 book, *Love Your Enemies*. Subtitled, *How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt*, Brooks’ book seems to take what we learn from *The Art of Love* and *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness* to the next level, by applying their principles to the social context in which we are living right now, a context in which all of us could stand to be a little more tolerant of those with whom we disagree.

Given how well all of these offerings tie together, you’d think we planned it that way. Alas, devoted as our *Liberal Beacon* editorial board and contributors are to create a quality publication, we can’t take credit for being so well organized. Best I can say is, *I love it when a plan comes together!*

—Todd Eklof, Editor

Let Us Hear from You!

We welcome letters from our readers for potential publication in *Liberal Beacon*. Letters should address matters of interest to Unitarians and

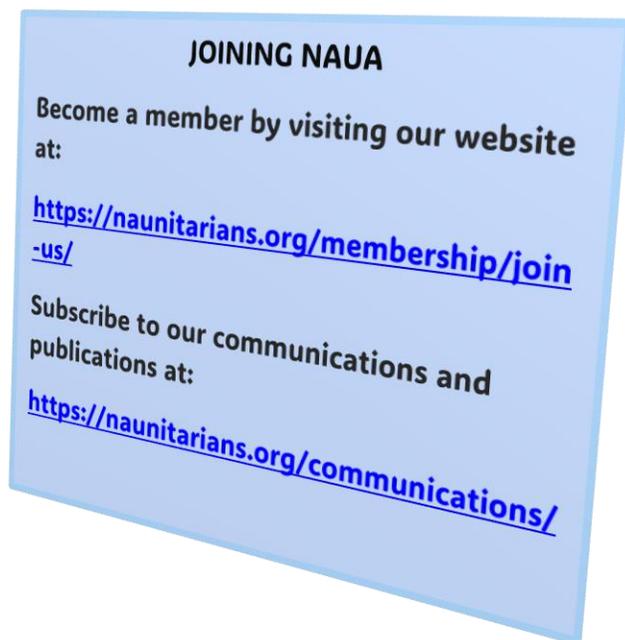
Universalists and other religious liberals, including current news and events.

Please email your submission no less than five business days before the end of the calendar month in order for publication in our next issue. Letters are shorter than opinion pieces and should be no more than 250 words. Form-letters and letters considered libelous, obscene or in bad taste will not be printed. Anonymous letters will not be printed. NAUA reserves the right to edit all letters for length. The decision to print any submission is completely at the discretion of the editors.

Please write “Letter to the Editor” in the subject line and email your submissions to nauaedboard@gmail.com or mail them to:

North American Unitarian Association
Letters to the Editor
4340 W. Whistalks Way
Spokane, WA 99224

Letters must include the writer’s name, full address, and phone number for verification purposes. Only the name and town will be published.



What Universities Owe the Liberal Project

Emily Chamlee-Wright

The following essay is based on remarks presented by Emily Chamlee-Wright at the 2024 Heterodox Academy Conference in Chicago, Illinois, and draws upon an essay by the same name, originally published by The Independent Institute and co-authored with Bradley Jackson, Vice President for Policy at the American Council of Trustees and Alumni.¹

There are many challenges facing higher education: the lack of intellectual diversity, cratering norms of academic freedom,

ensoriousness that closes down the open and civil exchange of ideas, and the paucity of principled leadership in the face of these challenges.

With the understanding that these are big problems, I want to suggest that an even bigger problem looms. The fate of our free, constitutionally constrained, liberal democratic order is hanging in the balance. And the case I'd like to make here is that American colleges and universities have a unique caretaker role to play in supporting the liberal project of a free self-governing people, and that universities' failure to play this role, in this moment is the bigger problem that too few people are talking about.

Higher education and the future of the liberal order are inextricably bound to one another. As goes one, so goes the other. Asserting higher education's



¹ “What Universities Owe the Liberal Project.” Author: Emily Chamlee-Wright, Bradley Jackson. Sections of this article are reprinted with permission from the publisher of *The Independent Review: A Journal of Political Economy* (Winter 2022/23, Volume 27, no. 3, pp. 371-379). © Copyright 2023, Independent Institute, 100 Swan Way, Oakland, CA 94621-1428 USA; info@independent.org; www.independent.org

caretaker role requires that we, first, name and reclaim the modern university's roots within the liberal tradition. Second, it requires that we stop treating the university campus as a battleground in the culture war. Third, it requires that universities are sites in which liberal concerns and principles are at the table when addressing critical challenges shaping our present century.

On the first point: naming and reclaiming the liberal roots of the modern academy ...

Enlightenment-era liberalism advanced, imperfectly and inconsistently, a radical idea: that individuals, by default, deserve respect. This default respect translated again, haltingly and inconsistently, into liberal democratic freedom. It's well understood that the political liberal ideal constrains government and populist impulses that would otherwise choke the liberties of individuals and minorities who do not hold the reins of power or conform to popular opinion. Liberalism, however, became more than a political apparatus that constrains power. As it evolved, liberalism also became a mindset, a cultural ethos that privileged openness, curiosity, ingenuity, and intellectual humility.

Consider, for example, the rollicking openness of 17th and 18th century intellectual communities within, for example, the Republic of Letters, the intellectual salons of Paris, and the coffeehouses of Great Britain. It was within these communities that Enlightenment-era thinking emerged. And it was this ethos of openness, paired with a healthy skepticism of authority, especially authority that flexed its power to shut down rather than open up debate and discovery, that eventually developed and advanced the concept of academic freedom.

Across the Atlantic, post-Revolutionary leaders clearly understood higher education's role in supporting the success of the fledgling American experiment. In their founding and leadership roles within institutions of higher learning, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and William Smith, for example, drew direct connections between the need to cultivate the habits of independent thought and the habits of a self-governing citizenry. They were self-conscious of the fact that American higher education would serve as a bulwark against tyranny, because only an educated citizenry would have the wherewithal to safeguard its own liberty.

Nineteenth-century liberal thought would also highlight the connections between intellectual freedom and cultural norms of toleration and forbearance. John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, were particularly sensitive

to the soft tyranny that public opinion could impose upon independent thought. Both advocated for norms of toleration for dissenting views and public reason as the means of adjudicating conflicting claims. The liberal sensibility that favored reason, the open contest of ideas, and intellectual humility informed the democratic ideal AND became the governing norms of American institutions of higher learning.

The campus-culture-war framing turns the peaceful exchange of ideas into combat.

Now, it's important to note that asserting the university's role as a modern legacy of Enlightenment thinking and a caretaker of the liberal tradition does not mean shutting out serious critiques of or alternatives to the liberal order. Individual scholars and intellectual movements must have the freedom within the university to explore alternatives to the liberal tradition. It is a distinct feature of liberalism that it defends and ensures space for its own critics.

With that said, the university itself has a stake in upholding its own liberal commitments. When it fails to do that, it ceases to be a university in any meaningful sense.

To my second point ...

Anyone who claims to care about the role that higher ed plays as a cornerstone institution of liberal democracy—whether professors, academic leaders, trustees, state legislatures, or members of Congress—must stop treating the university campus as a battleground in the culture war.

There's no precise date when the American college campus became the frontline of the culture wars, but fall 2015 is a good approximation. This was when a University of Missouri professor of journalism confronted a student photojournalist

attempting to cover a protest encampment responding to racially charged incidents on and near campus. When the young journalist asserted his right to be in the public setting, the professor pushed his camera aside and famously shouted, "Who wants to help me get this reporter out of here? I need some muscle over here."

In the moment, it was shocking to see a professor of *journalism* calling for physical force against a journalist exercising his First Amendment rights. A few years on, however, it became clear that this moment marked something bigger. Illiberal behavior like this became the red meat that conservative media were eager to serve up. Campus progressives seemed more than willing to oblige. And hard-right actors responded with their own illiberal attempts to intimidate scholars and shut down so-called "woke" ideas and disciplines.

This metaphor—the university as the frontline in a war—has become so commonplace that we don't even think to scrutinize it. But once we do, it is hard to miss how misplaced this metaphor is. Far from a violent encounter in which we seek to destroy our opponent, in which only one victor emerges, scholarly inquiry, exchange, and debate is the opposite of war—it is an inherently peaceful enterprise that creates value, reveals solutions, and, if done well, leaves everyone better off. It is, in short, the greatest technology ever devised for advancing human progress.

My concern, however, is not merely that warfare is a particularly bad metaphor. It's that the metaphor does real damage. The campus-culture-war framing turns the peaceful exchange of ideas into combat. Intellectual rivals are no longer colleagues we seek to understand or persuade; they are enemies we seek to crush. Friends who issue challenges in our direction are not thought partners: they're traitors we must expel from the ranks of learned society. Worse still, the culture-war framing has led to both sides arming up, willing to use illiberal means to seize power and exercise control.

And this feeds a vicious cycle in which illiberalism at one ideological extreme justifies illiberal tactics on the other, causing both sides to abandon the core

principles that underlie the ideal of the open university and an open society.

Instead of an ideological war, we ought to be finding fellow liberals, whatever their political stripe, who still believe in those core principles, and working with them to identify solutions to hard challenges facing the liberal order, both on campus and in the broader world.

Which Leads me to my final point ...

Universities must be sites in which liberal concerns and principles are at the table when addressing critical challenges shaping our present course as a society. We're facing a lot of complex challenges. Backsliding of democratic norms. Rising polarization and declining social trust. Climate change. Healthcare. Housing. Design and governance issues in tech and innovation. The list is long. And ideally, solutions to these challenges will be liberal solutions that preserve liberty and foster human flourishing.

But that can't happen if liberal ideas and concerns are not at the table. Reigniting scholarly interest in the liberal project is not about insisting upon a list of preordained conclusions. It's about reminding ourselves and our fellow liberals that basic liberal principles—the inherent dignity of every person, individual liberty, equality before the law, intellectual openness, limits to government authority—require continued exploration and fresh application if we are to sustain and fortify a robust, inclusive, liberal democratic society.

So, to conclude ...

The history of the twentieth century teaches us what happens to the university, indeed what happens to free thought as such, when liberalism fails and authoritarianism takes the reins. Colleges and universities need not remain regime neutral. Even if a university adopts a policy of institutional neutrality on controversial issues, they cannot be disinterested bystanders with respect to the rules of the game that define the nature of the university itself. Liberal regimes foster the life of the mind and

allow it to prosper. Illiberal and unfree regimes stifle the mind and smother emergent ideas.

Higher education can play a key role in supporting the liberal democratic project in this challenging hour by modeling seriousness, evidence- and reason-based inquiry, healthy skepticism, and intellectual humility. Scholars must do this work *together*, across disciplinary and ideological lines, for the purpose of discovering how we may all continue to live together in a context of peace, prosperity, and widespread human flourishing.

Drumpffounded The Need for Laughter in the Face of Adversity

Todd F. Eklof

Prior to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, *HBO* comedian John Oliver poked fun at the fact that Donald Trump's family name had once been Drumpf. "It's the sound produced when a morbidly obese pigeon flies into the window of a foreclosed Old Navy. Drumpf!"

It does have a funny ring to it, phonetically close to words like "dumb" and "rump." While it's been suggested that one of President Trump's direct relatives changed the name to avoid such associations, it's more likely that the age-old German name naturally evolved—from Drumpf to Trumpf to Trump—over the centuries.

Still, it's given me an opportunity to coin a lighthearted term that expresses my ongoing bewilderment over both Trump's election and reelection.

I'm drumpffounded.

I'm drumpffounded that so many Americans voted—*twice*—for a man I find so obviously, intellectually, and morally unfit for office. I'm drumpffounded that he's alienated U.S. allies while cozying up to autocrats. I'm drumpffounded that he's derailing an economy that just last year was

called "The Envy of the World" on the October 2024 cover of *The Economist*. I'm drumpffounded by his contempt for due process and the courts—deporting and abandoning legal immigrants and some American citizens, including toddlers, to countries where injustice and cruelty await. Although my list is longer, suffice it to say, I'm completely drumpffounded.



Before continuing, however, let me say a little about addressing politics in a religious publication such as this. Many think that doing so threatens a religious organization's tax-exempt status. It doesn't. The law only prohibits religious nonprofits from endorsing specific candidates. But they remain free to take positions on issues, sponsor initiatives, hold candidate forums, engage in voter drives, and devote a limited portion of their budgets to lobbying. That's why the Christian Right and the GOP have become so intertwined, with no consequences from the IRS.

So, there's nothing illegal about criticizing the President in religious publications, but doing so does presume a relatively friendly audience that's as troubled by Trump as I am. *Given the nature of liberalism*, this seems like a safe assumption. But, *given the nature of liberalism*, it's also safe to assume that some, who are just as goodhearted and intelligent as the rest of us, disagree. Yet, *given the nature of liberalism*, we need not avoid or make apologies for saying things or publishing articles that some among us might differ with. On the contrary, *given the nature of liberalism*, we should be able to hear things we disagree with, remain friends, wonder together, and work together on our common goals.

Now, back to being drumpffounded. I like this "sniglet" because it sounds funny and because humor helps serious matters feel

more manageable. In *The Soul of Sex*, theologian Thomas Moore recounts how the ancient Greeks used statues of Priapus—a short, pot-bellied god with a constant erection—as scarecrows. This is the entire point of humor, Moore says, to scare away "all kinds of winged spirits—our lofty thoughts, our airy ideas, our flighty opinions, and our otherworldly aspirations."

Humor deflates our inflated worries like letting air out of a balloon that's ready to pop. It makes worrisome matters seem smaller and more manageable. It brings them down to Earth. It grounds us. This is what *humor*, like *human*, means—*humus*—earth. It's why all the best jokes poke fun at serious and delicate matters. They are often inappropriate jokes that come "too soon" because joking is an instinctive coping mechanism that helps get us through the worst of times.

In *The Humor Code*, behavioral scientist Peter McGraw explains that something is funny when it violates a cultural taboo without hurting anyone. The trick, he says, is "trying to find this sweet spot

between being too tame and boring people and being too risqué and offending people." The old joke, "Why did the chicken cross the road?" isn't funny because it breaks no rules. Yet we can laugh at the violent antics of *The Three Stooges* because nobody gets seriously hurt.

McGraw says, "A dirty joke trades on moral or social violations ... Puns can be seen as linguistic violations ... Sarcasm violates conversational rules by meaning the opposite of what is said ... tickling involves violating someone's physical space in a benign way." But the line between what is and isn't appropriate to joke about changes over time, which

is why older generations often complain that young people have no sense of humor. But it is also why we no longer tell dumb-blond jokes or Polish jokes, because we have come to realize they demean others, which isn't funny.

Humor deflates our inflated worries like letting air out of a balloon that's ready to pop.

During the 2019 Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly in Spokane—just a day before I was banned for distributing my book critical of the UUA's illiberal direction—I was invited to open a planning meeting with a brief prayer. As an atheist, public prayer makes me uneasy. But, as a minister, I've learned to cope by opening with a joke:

"I always feel a little awkward praying in public because the Unitarian part of me doesn't know who to pray to and the Universalist part doesn't know who not to pray to."

This line usually gets a few chuckles, especially from fellow UUs. But not this time. Not one smile. Just tense, puzzled glances. Everyone froze—not because the joke was offensive, but because they *feared* it might be (since we all instinctively understand that jokes make fun of something or someone). The UUA president was there and, with her head bowed, soon granted my absolution by quietly saying, "Let's move on."

Relieved there wasn't going to be a scene—that nobody (probably me) would be “called out” for “harming” somebody—everyone else bowed their heads, too, and I prayed—to the humanity in each of them.

This nervousness and inability to laugh gets at the heart of my criticism of the insidious mindset that has overtaken so much of our society and its institutions, including some mainline churches. Too many of us have become so fearful of offending somebody, or afraid of being publicly ruined for doing so, that we're afraid to even laugh, let alone joke.

But joking must be allowed if we are going to survive our difficulties. When Qantas Flight 32 suffered a catastrophic engine explosion in 2010, for example, the pilots faced over 100 cascading system failures. Captain Richard de Crespigny later described how he and his crew relied on dry humor to stay focused. “Humor helped us stay calm,” he said. “It wasn't flippant—it was professional.”

More than a distraction, their jokes were a psychological tool that helped the crew keep their cool under tremendous pressure. The resulting composure facilitated the safe landing of their crippled airplane—saving all 469 souls on board.

This is why, especially in light of the tremendous anxiety caused by Trump's presidency, we need to let ourselves laugh. Read the funnies. Watch *The Daily Show*, or *Real Time with Bill Maher*, or check out a Ricky Gervais or Dave Chappelle standup comedy special on Netflix. My favorite go-to for a belly-busting laugh is *South Park*. (Talk about irreverent!)

Having a laugh doesn't mean things aren't serious. It just makes serious matters easier to cope with so we can maintain our composure and wits and get through whatever we must. So, if you're feeling as drumpffounded as I am these days, give yourself permission to laugh. Comedy has always been the companion of tragedy because it gives us the extra little boost of strength that we need to get through anything.

An Invitation to a Reading Life

Lynn Jinishian

If you are not a booklover or a booklover-in-the-making, you can safely skip this article. It's intended for readers—and you surely have plenty of other good things on your mind, and your to-do list. But wait...before you go...clearly you *can* read—you're already on the third sentence...so maybe just stick around for a full paragraph or two...okay, just one, then...and make up your mind after that. Have you got a beverage nearby? Perhaps a snack? No? Well, neither is necessary, but both can add to a pleasant reading experience—I'm happy to wait if you...alright, alright...let's just get down to business. I understand you're a very important person with a lot of responsibilities and obligations. I can see that by your calendar and the number of emails in your inbox, and good heavens, look at that newsfeed; you're quite behind, aren't you? Just one paragraph, then...

I want to extend an invitation to you. Insert your name here: _____,

You are cordially invited to join me in the radical act of slowing down—

to become more grounded,

to reclaim your own mind,

to shape your own inner life,

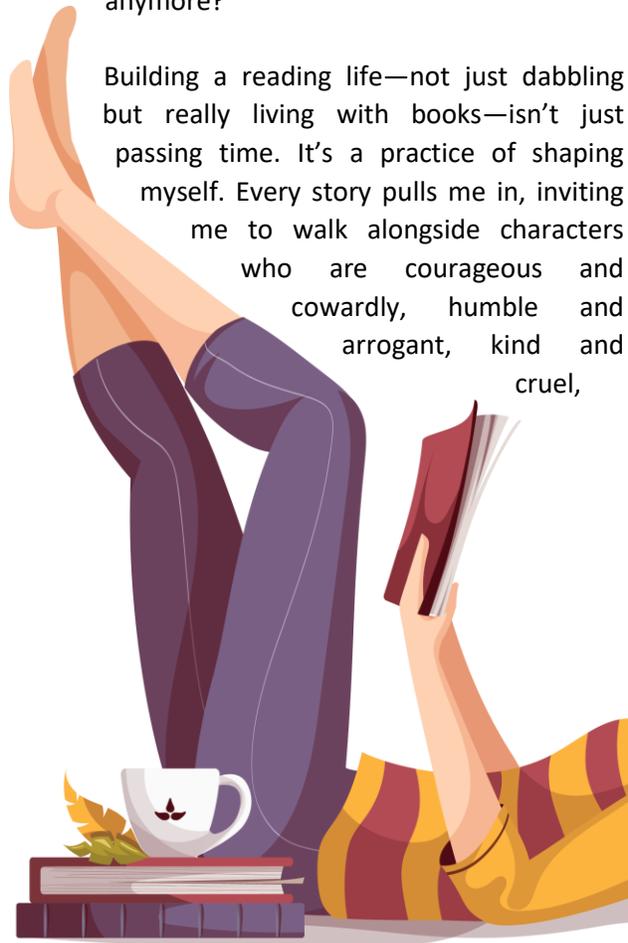
to deepen your understanding,

to become more fully human—

by reading books—whole books—slowly, thoughtfully, willingly.

Ah, c'mon now—that hardly counted as a full paragraph, what with all the styling and everything. Stay with me for just one more...please?

Here's the thing: I'm tired of this attention-grabbing, focus-blasting world we're living in. And when, exactly, did we get the idea that reading books was only something to do in school—or worse, only in our “spare time”? What the hell is “spare time”? Who even has “spare time” anymore?



Building a reading life—not just dabbling but really living with books—isn't just passing time. It's a practice of shaping myself. Every story pulls me in, inviting me to walk alongside characters who are courageous and cowardly, humble and arrogant, kind and cruel,

authentic and manipulative, steady and chaotic, funny and pathetic, triumphant and complete, utter failures.

They broaden my perspective and become companions in my lifelong project of becoming. Without these characters, how could I possibly encounter enough people in real life, or learn deeply enough from them, to fully understand the human condition? On social media? Please.

And it's not just novels—nonfiction, too, introduces me to ideas, histories, and real lives that stretch and strengthen me. Little by little, book by book, I want

to take the time it takes to gather materials for building my inner architecture. And I want that for you, too—if you're interested. What could be more important than that? How could we possibly accomplish it if we relegate reading books to our nonexistent “spare time”?

I should let you get to that to-do list...but first... are you, too, maybe just a little interested in pushing back on this economy of distraction? Of course, I'm not the first to notice what's happening to us. Maryanne Wolf, in her book *Reader, Come Home*, warns that the fast, fragmented reading of our screen-driven world is changing our brains—making the deep, sustained attention needed for real thought harder to come by. My boyfriend, Wendell Berry, no stranger to cultural resistance, called the ability to read and to write well essential to freedom—not just political freedom, but interior freedom, the kind that allows us to think our own

thoughts and live our own lives. (Side

note—Wendell doesn't know he's my

boyfriend yet. If he

ever happens to read this in Kentucky, well... surprise!) And Simone Weil, the fierce philosopher and mystic, saw attention as a sacred faculty, and went so far as to call it a form of prayer. When we turn our attention to reading—truly reading—we are not escaping the world, but rather engaging in an activity that not only entertains but strengthens us and allows us to re-enter this world more fully.

Are you still here? Well, you've come this far... might as well stick around for the big finish! How do you like your endings—happy, challenging, thoughtful, reflective? All of the above?

Well, here goes:

I love the reading life I'm building. I can't think of a better investment of my time—one that yields such enormous returns at so little expense.

Would you like an invitation—or a challenge—to join me? So be it.

You, _____ (insert name here), are warmly invited to join me in this radical act of slowing down, paying attention, becoming more thoughtful, and more fully yourself.

No rules. No book club membership required. No color-coded tracking system (unless you fancy that, of course). No need to post about it anywhere. Definitely not publicly. This is solely and soul-ly for you (and me).

Just pick up one whole book. Sip a beverage if you like. Take whatever time you have, or whatever time it takes. Pay attention. Let it do its slow, quiet work on you.

I'll be doing the same over here with my own book.

Together (even when alone), we can choose a different way of living—one that values depth over speed, wonder over distraction, soul over spectacle.

When you finish, pick up another one. I will too. And together (even when alone), we'll keep trying to make sense of all the beauty and the horror in this world.

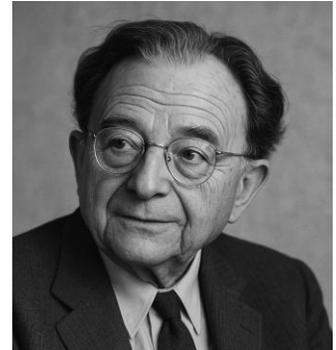
Lynn Jinishian is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane, the Liberal Beacon editorial board, and the NAUA Board of Trustees.



Erich Fromm's *The Art of Loving*

Candace Schmidt

The *Art of Loving* by Erich Fromm was published in 1956 and was the renowned author's most popular book. It joined other popular works of the time, such as Dale Carnegie's 1936 book,



How To Win Friends and Influence People, and Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, as those writings embraced by the American public during the mid-20th century. In the latter two books, readers are encouraged to utilize specific techniques and mindsets to enable them to attain personal needs and desires, happiness and, above all, success. Peale wrote with a Biblical framework in mind, while Carnegie advocated the use of empathy, sincerity, and good social skills in order to facilitate the reader's ability to gain friends and enhance the capacity to influence others in order to further the reader's personal goals.

Some critics argued that Carnegie's emphasis seems to encourage the obtaining of personal success and happiness by manipulating others and using them as a means to an end. In contrast, Fromm's emphasis in *The Art of Loving* is on enhancing an individual's capacity to love others in an active way, by giving of oneself in order to enhance their lives: "Love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love. Where this active concern is lacking, there is no love."

Fromm describes love for others as involving qualities present in all forms of love: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge. *Care* and concern for those we say we love will involve laboring for that person's well-being and flourishing and working to provide the conditions for positive growth. *Responsibility* is defined as a voluntary

action that responds to the needs of another. As Fromm put it: “The loving person responds.” *Respect* means the capacity to see another as he or she is in their uniqueness and necessitates the absence of exploitation. *Knowledge* of the loved person makes possible the accurate responding to that person’s needs, vulnerabilities, strengths, and hopes. According to Fromm, “It is possible only when I can transcend the concern for myself and see the other person in his own terms.”

Love as described by Fromm is not, in essence, a one-to-one relationship with another, but is an attitude shaped by a person’s character orientation “which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not toward just one ‘object’ of love. If a person loves only one other person and is indifferent to the rest of his fellow men, his love is not love but a symbiotic attachment, or an enlarged egotism.”

Fromm addresses the widespread belief, perhaps more prominent in his era, that it is sinful to love oneself; a view that was promoted by Calvin and Freud. Fromm explores the contrast of narcissism and selfishness with the healthy love of the self. He stresses that love for others and love for oneself are not mutually exclusive. “The affirmation of one’s own life, happiness, growth, freedom is rooted in one’s capacity to love. If an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love only others, he cannot love at all.” Fromm further believed that selfish people incapable of loving others are also incapable of loving themselves.

In *The Art of Loving*, Fromm critiques contemporary Western society and its deleterious influence on the character of individual citizens, which he believed reduces the capacity to love, and in its place promotes forms of pseudo-love. Capitalistic society

is described as being dependent on the market as the regulator of all economic activity. The primacy of the exchange of commodities in our culture necessarily seeps into relations between people, both in the labor market and in personal relationships. Fromm believed the “radical division of labor” in the economy led to a loss of independence by the average citizen, whereby the worker “becomes an expendable cog in the machine.” In other words, modern man experiences a profound separateness from himself, from others, and from the natural world. He becomes a commodity who trades his “personality package” with others and hopes the transaction will be fair. He is not able to see past his need for belonging to the group and is unable to formulate independent thoughts based on reason and humility.

“The affirmation of one’s own life, happiness, growth, freedom is rooted in one’s capacity to love. If an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love only others, he cannot love at all.”

Fromm begins his discussion on the practice of love by admitting it’s much more difficult to attain than understanding the theory of love. His approach is to present the essential premises of the art of

loving and then the practice of these premises. As in the learning of any art, he says that one must be willing to meet certain requirements, such as discipline, concentration, patience, and supreme concern with mastering the art.

Fromm believed it is essential that the impetus for *discipline* should come from the individual and not be imposed by some external presence. Discipline in the art of loving involves the gradual inclusion of loving attitudes and behaviors into one’s lifestyle to the point where a person attains a degree of stability in how relationships are shaped.

An important step in learning *concentration* is to learn to avoid distractions and enjoy being alone. Fromm explains, “If I am attached to another

person because I cannot stand on my own feet, he or she may be a lifesaver, but the relationship is not one of love. Paradoxically, the ability to be alone is the condition for the ability to love ... To be concentrated means to live fully in the present ...” Learning to be mindful of one’s own thoughts and behaviors is necessary in determining whether personal actions are motivated by self-serving goals or by the desire to further the well-being of others.

Patience in learning new patterns of thought and behavior is necessary to achieve the transition from one state of living in the world to another more loving state. Prioritizing learning the art of loving, or *supreme concern* with mastering the art, requires the overcoming of self-absorption, or narcissism.

Fromm believed the opposite of narcissism is objectivity, described as the faculty to “see people and things as they are” and not as we might want them to be. The ability to think objectively stems from the use of reason and promotes a sense of humility. Fromm explains, “I must try to see the difference between my picture of a person and his behavior, as it is narcissistically distorted, and the person’s reality as it exists regardless of my interests, needs and fears.”

Erich Fromm’s writings about the misguided focus in our society on being loved rather than on actively loving others are still relevant today. The commodity orientation to personal relationships, he says, is not compatible with human beings’ naturally social and loving nature. The themes discussed in *The Art of Loving* remain relevant to current issues in psychology regarding the pervasive problems of loneliness and alienation experienced by many in our culture. Fromm’s insights into the nature of society and how people can learn to lead genuine and fulfilling lives still resonate in our world today.

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Paul Rasor’s *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness*

Lauriston King

Print, visual, and digital media have called out-sized attention to the role of religious conservatives, particularly evangelical Christians, in American politics. Based on biblical fundamentalism, they have aligned themselves so closely with political conservatism that it’s hard to untangle the religious from the political. For decades religious conservatives have become better funded, louder, more extreme, and above all, more politically engaged than their liberal counterparts. Religious liberals, it seems, have gone quiet, perhaps taking faith that the meek will indeed inherit the earth.

Despite their commitment to social justice, survey data suggests that religious liberals are less likely than other religious groups to engage in or to support political action by clergy or denominational leaders. Some religious liberals are simply too skittish to raise their voices on social issues. There’s a feeling that it’s uncomfortable, even inappropriate, to mingle the spiritual with the political, so they prefer not to get mixed up in matters of church and state. Since about 1990, for example, religious liberals have drawn back from a vigorous defense of the First Amendment, particularly defense of the establishment clause (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”).

Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian Paul Rasor calls on religious liberals to reverse this retreat by taking a more assertive, religiously grounded voice in public affairs. In his brief but provocative book, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness – Liberal Religion in the Public Square* (Skinner House Books, Boston, 2012) he suggests that the power of religious liberalism in our time is based on its commitment to engage contemporary society and culture; a focus on the present not the past; and moral positions based on modern knowledge and experience.

He draws on social surveys, religious and political philosophy, law, history, and the Bible to embolden religious liberals to reclaim the heritage of prophetic witnesses. As God’s agents, the prophet’s role was to call out unjust, corrupt, and abusive leaders, especially when their power was directed toward the weak, poor, and outsiders. Biblical scholar D.N. Premnath notes that one big thing we learn from them is that “poverty or injustice is no accident. They knew exactly what the causes were and who was responsible for it. They did not speak in abstraction. They knew what the oppression/injustice was, and who the oppressors and oppressed were.”

Through a careful analysis of survey data, Rasor determined that religious liberals are not outnumbered by religious conservatives. Despite their quiet voices and near invisibility in the popular media, he estimates that between 25-30 percent of respondents could be considered religious liberals with, interestingly, Christians being the least religiously liberal of all respondents. That’s about the same percentage as those who identify as religious conservatives.

This rough parity belies the reality that the values embraced by religious liberals, those that smooth the rough edges of social relationships – freedom,

reason, tolerance, empathy, justice, equality – don’t fit easily in the hardball rhetoric of public debates. Religious language can, however, add force to prophetic claims by providing justifiable reasons, not simply claims based on personal religious experience or divine revelation. In accord with liberal theology, “theological claims must be intelligible to and consistent with other areas of human knowledge.” In other words, these reasons should reflect shared cultural reference points and be offered in terms understood by most citizens.

Reclaiming the moral voice of prophetic witness is hard. Few citizens are comfortable confronting

power. This seems especially true for religious liberals whose embrace of moderating values like tolerance, mutual respect, and commitment to individual dignity, make confrontation with power just feel like bad form. These inhibitions are even more complicated because liberal religious values are also core parts of democratic culture. Sorting out what’s religious, political, or just cultural is not easy. A key problem for Rasor is that when the religious, political, and cultural blur, theological clarity gets lost. “Religious identity may become so thin that liberal religion becomes indistinguishable from liberal politics, liberal spirituality dissolves into pop psychology, and liberalism’s prophetic edge becomes blunted.”

A deeply fractured America requires legions of prophets to bear witness to the abuses inflicted on its citizens by the powerful and corrupt. Indeed, a recurring theme for Rasor is that “religious liberals have always been among those who call society to account in the face of injustice, challenge the cultural status quo, and work for the dismantling of unjust institutions and the creation of just ones.” He points to the many efforts to undermine America’s

“Religious liberals have always been among those who call society to account in the face of injustice, challenge the cultural status quo, and work for the dismantling of unjust institutions and the creation of just ones.”

liberal democracy and the drive to use its economic, cultural, and military power to expand an imperial dominion. Allegiance to free-market

fundamentalism, growing wealth disparities, and normalization of violence, conspire to erode freedom, equality, and commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of all.

Positions based on enduring religious values, he suggests, bring a moral weight to public debates that common, every-day rhetoric does not. Too often, these debates are about personal, economic, or political self-interest, not about the common good or social welfare. To redress these distortions in public discourse, Rasor derives values shared by religious liberals, across individual, denominational,

historical, or cultural orientations. They provide a starting point for religious liberals to reclaim the role of prophetic witness. Together, they assume the *inherent worth and dignity of all persons; the fundamental unity and interdependence of all existence; human and religious freedom; social justice and cooperative power; the rejection of moral dualism* (the sharp distinction between good and evil); the *transforming power of love*; and *theological openness*. Spelling these out, even in a preliminary way, is important because theological clarity is critical to effective witness.

Throughout, he has done the challenging theological and philosophical work to build – or rebuild – the liberal religious foundation for speaking truth to power. Whether contemporary witnesses will step forward as individuals, denominations, interfaith coalitions, or form broad-based alliances of liberal religious and political organizations to raise their voices on behalf of human rights and social justice remains to be seen. Should they do so, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness* provides an excellent intellectual foundation for that calling.

Lauriston King is a member of our Liberal Beacon editorial board, lives in Connecticut with his spouse Judi, and likes to be counted as one of the quiet religious liberals.

Arthur C. Brooks' *Love Your Enemies*

Kevin McCulloch

I picked up Arthur C. Brooks's *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from the Culture of Contempt* (2019) at the recommendation of an old friend and fellow Unitarian Universalist who shares my concern about increasing political intolerance in our church and in America at large. I am glad I read it.

Brooks is a center-right columnist and commentator. His chief conservative credential is that he is the former president of the American

Enterprise Institute, a free market-oriented think tank in Washington, DC, but he is probably best known as the author of the "How to Build a Life" column in *The Atlantic*, where he dispenses uplifting self-help advice based on psychological and philosophical insights into human happiness. His work there is not overtly political, and I tend to think of him as the kind of virtue-oriented conservative I don't always agree with but whose ideas are worth engaging. At any rate, his book was inspired by a concern about the damaging effects of political polarization shared by many on the left. He calls on Americans of all political stripes to engage people they disagree with. I put the book down feeling that his exhortations are basically right, but without being able to shake the sinking feeling that, here in 2025, his advice is too little, too late. Then again, maybe a book like this is exactly what we need now: a reminder that it's important to do the right thing even when the situation seems hopeless.

Brooks argues that contempt, a toxic blend of anger and disgust that manifests itself as "an enduring attitude of complete disdain," is uniquely harmful not just to the body politic but to us as individuals. He maintains that it can be effectively countered if we answer it, not with mere tolerance or civility, but with love. His idea of love is all-embracing and challenging. Following Thomas Aquinas and the philosopher Michael Novak, he writes, "To love is to will the good of the other *as other*." It's a concern for the well-being of others that does not demand their transformation into something we might easily consider lovable. This ideal is entirely in keeping with the Christian ethical traditions that informed our congregational forebears, but it's a tall order. (Despite the recent push to define love as the central Unitarian Universalist value, it's unclear to me how many UUs are prepared to love so expansively.)

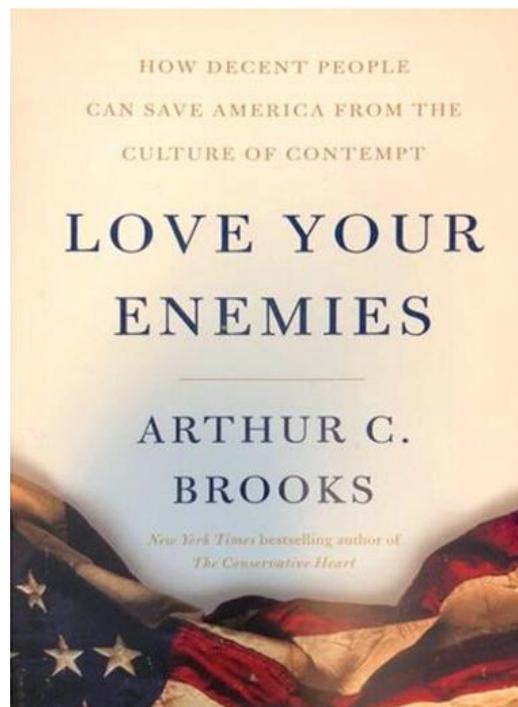
His lofty ideals aside, the book is not particularly philosophical. His emphasis on warmth and kindness puts him more in the tradition of American self-help giants like Dale Carnegie and Stephen R. Covey, both of whom he cites approvingly, than moral philosophers like Aquinas and Novak. He

does throw in solid doses of empirical research, such as psychologist Daniel Goleman’s study of whether bullying or inspiring leadership styles are more effective. (It’s better to be inspiring.) Fans of the “viewpoint diversity” movement will be pleased to see him leverage Jonathan Haidt’s moral foundations theory to give concrete advice on how to frame arguments in ways that help define common ground between progressives and conservatives. Although he’s a trained economist, he spends a chapter arguing that stories do a better job convincing others than throwing facts and figures around, and he mostly takes his own advice, peppering the book with anecdotes. He tells a story of responding to a lengthy email critiquing one of his books not with umbrage or a rebuttal, but by thanking the writer for taking the time to read his book so closely. It’s hard not to be inspired by the warm exchange that followed. On the other hand, his story of a Black Lives Matter activist who, in 2017, was able to win a crowd of Trump supporters to his side by emphasizing their shared values feels so unlikely today that it reads like fantasy.

Whether or not these kinds of small acts are enough to save our society is an open question, but Brooks is certainly right that they’re good for our soul. As with his writing for *The Atlantic*, there’s considerable emotional intelligence behind his prescriptions. He encourages us to approach disagreement not as a threat but as an opportunity: ideally, an opportunity to make a connection with someone who thinks differently, but, at the very least, an opportunity for us to grow in grace and gratitude by changing our own hearts. His advice is simple and direct. If you’re not feeling particularly friendly toward your adversaries, he recommends

that you fake it, offering the ancient wisdom (here attributed to Thich Nhat Hanh) that attitude follows action.

Brooks argues that disagreement is ultimately a good thing, and that we should be grateful for our disagreements. Unsurprisingly, for a free markets guy, he offers a marketplace-of-ideas argument that competition fosters excellence. We wind up with better ideas when competing ideas can be debated freely and openly. (The caveat is that, for the competition between, say, left-wing and right-wing ideas about alleviating poverty to be productive, both sides need to recognize that they share the common goal of a fair, free, and abundant society. This doesn’t work if their ideas just boil down to a desire for dominance, as I fear is true of so many arguments today.) Brooks’s emphasis on the value of gratitude is one of those self-help shibboleths that I’ve always found utterly convincing, as an argument, and next to impossible as a personal practice. There’s ultimately a kind of eat-your-vegetables quality to the



book. Brooks is not just trying to inspire you to think differently. He wants you to actually get outside of your comfort zone, go out into the world, find people you disagree with, and talk to them. You know you should do it, but do you really want to?

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