

GROWING PEOPLE OF PROPHETIC FIRE

Richard S. Gilbert – SLUUD RE Conference –Rochester – 9/27/08

Introduction: What Is the Half-Life of What We Do?

In April of 2002 I helped escort 17 14-and 15-year-olds from this congregation's Religion in Life class on a pilgrimage to that hub of the Unitarian Universalist universe – Boston. It was Earth Sunday, and we split into groups to visit three downtown churches for worship so that we might compare notes on the way home before they fell asleep. The most passionate of the sermons dealt with what the preacher deemed to be the moral imperative of vegetarianism – a proposition with which I happen to agree. An accompanying father who heard that sermon, “Brad the Dad” we called him, a Xerox scientist, was impressed by its power which so forcefully challenged the ethics of his own eating habits. Afterwards he asked me, with ironic humor, “What is the ‘half-life’ of a sermon?”

Now, as I understand it, the term half-life usually refers to the process by which a radioactive isotope falls to half its original power. This process continues *ad infinitum*, but the power of the isotope never really reaches zero. There's a similar question: What is the half-life of matters spiritual? Ethical? After 47 years in our ministry I begin to wonder about the half-life of the hundreds of sermons I have preached, the lectures I have delivered and the classes I have taught over that span.

I rather like the idea that their value may never completely reach zero, that they will have an influence long after I have gone. It's what I call spiritual osmosis. Our souls have permeable membranes. We influence each other in ways we may never know. And who knows what the half-life of our work as Unitarian Universalist religious educators will be?

In June of 2006 I delivered the Sophia Lyon Fahs Lecture for the Liberal Religious Education Directors Association. The "half-life" of this RE pioneer is still powerful in me. I grew up on "The Gospel According to Martin and Judy," *How Miracles Abound* and *Beginnings of Earth, Sky, Life and Death* in a little Universalist Church in Bristol, New York, just down the road a piece. At 14 I sat at her knees as a student in a lab school she conducted at Camp Unirondack. In seminary I read all her books as I majored in religious education, particularly enjoying her role as a visiting professor. I met her several times over the years – cherishing especially an appreciative letter she wrote me after I preached about her ministry in May of 1974 and her inclusion of a myth created by a Rochester Unitarian Church school class in her last book, *Old Tales for a New Day*, completed near her 100th birthday.

Her book on liberal religious education philosophy, *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage*, made its mark on me – so much so that I am presumptuously trying to write a 21st century sequel on

Unitarian Universalist religious education history and philosophy. In that 1952 book she critiqued our sometimes self-serving individualism, illustrated in the 19th century Unitarian concept of “salvation by character:” She wrote, “This unfortunate pattern is that *character* has come to be thought of as *something self-contained, achievable singly*, apart from the nature of the society in which the individual lives. . . . we need to turn children’s attention to the ‘togetherness’ that is involved in worthwhile living. . . . we need to realize that life never ceases to be a giving and a receiving. If our long-time goal is the salvation of a world community rather than merely the salvation of a few select individuals within this universal community, our concept of individual responsibility is changed.”¹

We are contingent creatures. We are derivative creatures. We individuals were not in the beginning. We are precipitated out of that “web of all existence of which we are a part.” We didn’t make it; it made us. It preceded us in every respect. We didn’t create our family; it created us. We didn’t create our religious faith or our congregation; we joined what was already there. We are not only individuals, we are members. Without the cosmic context, without the human milieu, we are nothing.

People of Prophetic Fire

All of which leads me to my theme, “Growing People of Prophetic Fire.” One of the books that emerged under Sophia Lyon Fah’s editorship of the *New Beacon Series in Religious Education* was Rolland Emerson Wolfe’s *Men of Prophetic Fire*,² a study of the Hebrew prophets. Bible scholar Gerhard von Rad once defined the prophet as “one who participates in the emotions of God.”³ I’m not sure I do, but I have tried to practice a prophetic ministry. I remember my seminary bible professor, Morton Scott Enslin, who said that the prophets were not “foretellers” of the future; they were “forthtellers” who “spoke truth to power.”

Wolfe, whose incisive short essay *What Is the Bible?* was published by the UUA, wrote that the prophets were mostly young and subversive, often heretics, rebels. They preached on the issues of the day, war and peace, poverty and justice. They were ancient figures in a long line of prophets of the human spirit which continues in our time. As I looked for a title for my book on Unitarian Universalist social justice, I found I could not do better than to lift up the term “prophet,” adding to it my own sense of urgency – “imperative.” So, *The Prophetic Imperative*. There is a history quiz in the study guide for that book, entitled “People of Prophetic Fire: A Friendly Quiz.” In it I included our own liberal religious prophets from Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller to John Haynes Holmes and Susan B. Anthony.

They were prophets of the human spirit – the great teachers and preachers of their time, social activists and reformers, the liberals of their days, the radicals of their times. They were also poets – poetry being memorable speech. You’ve read them. You know them: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Jonah and Jesus, as well as prophets down through the ages in unbroken line.

Even John Dewey, educator and humanist, spoke in this tradition when he wrote in "My Pedagogic Creed": "Every teacher should recognize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right of social growth. In this way the teacher always is a prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true Kingdom of God."⁴

Our own Theodore Parker, prophetic minister of the 19th century, said, “Shall justice fall and perish out of the world? Shall wrong continually endure? Injustice cannot stand. No armies, no alliances, can hold it up. The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”⁵ But does the moral arc of the universe bend toward justice? Surely there is nothing automatic about it; Parker knew, and we know, that it is we who do the bending. His prophetic words are true only if we Unitarian Universalists can learn to practice the prophetic imperative in the 21st century.

In sum, we need to become a prophetic church where we can walk the talk – where justice and righteousness flow down like waters – where we are not content to sit in the balcony, but are out there on the road – the proverbial road to Jericho. It is something like what Bill Moyers calls “the importance of being a public nuisance,” questioning the conventional wisdom and the status quo – trying to live out the spirit of those prophets of old. I see the political role of the church as prophetic - dropping Amos’ plumb line of righteousness; with Isaiah loosing the bonds of injustice, with Micah doing justice and loving mercy, with Jesus blessing the poor and the imprisoned. And so what is required of us is that we become a “saving remnant,” a militant minority mobilized to protect human rights, to raise the hard questions, to insist on different answers, to advocate for peace and justice.

I am inspired by Charles Schultz in *Peanuts*. Charlie Brown says to Linus: “When I grow up I think I’ll be a great prophet, I’ll speak profound truths but no one will listen to me.” Linus asks: “If you know ahead of time that no one is going to listen to you, why speak?” Charlie Brown replies in words I could not have chosen better: “We prophets are very stubborn.” And so must we be.

But where will our prophets come from? Are we growing them in our congregations or are we simply hoping they will miraculously appear in a kind of spontaneous generation?

The Problem: We Are Losing

A Garry Trudeau *Doonesbury* cartoon captures our problem as we set our sails in a tsunami of conservatism. Zonker, the 60's liberal, is in the radio studio watching TV. "Fox News: We report, you decide." He responds, "That has to be the most cynical slogan in the history of journalism." His fellow talk-show host, Chase the conservative, chimes in: "Drives you crazy, doesn't it? You know why? Because you liberals are hung up on fairness! You actually try to respect all points of view! But conservatives feel no need whatsoever to consider other views. We know we're right, so why bother? Because we have no tradition of tolerance, we're unencumbered by doubt! So we roll you guys every time." Zonker ponders as Chase pauses, and finally says, "Actually you make a good point...." To which Chase grins and says, "See! Only a loser would admit that!"⁶

A caricature, to be sure - some of my best friends are conservatives – political and religious - but it does cause one to reflect. As we array ourselves for encounters with the religious right, I think there is a kernel of truth here. Are religious liberals too tolerant, too open, too nice, too wishy washy? Do we expose our children to other faiths so generously they do not understand their own and cannot articulate its values?

Are we so open to other views, so cautious in our fear of being dogmatic, so enamored of the ambiguity and ambivalence in religious and political life that we are in fact steam-rolled by those who claim absolute certainty in religion – because the Bible tells them so – or in politics - because Karl Rove or Sarah Palin tells them so?

At its root liberalism means openness, humility, generosity of spirit, neighborliness, loving compassion toward the other, the stranger, even the enemy. But is it humane to form “soft selves in a hard world?” In an intensely competitive society, dare we teach our children empathy, compassion, community, cooperation? Are these values dysfunctional in the hardball religion and politics of 21st century life?

Let me share with you a few scenes from the American religious landscape that give me pause, that send theological and political shivers up and down my spine and that have serious implications for our life-span religious education programs.

Item: “Meditation of a Middle-Aged, (Upper) Middle-Class, White, Liberal, Protestant Parent,” was the title of an article in *The Christian Century* in which a mother described a peace rally during the Vietnam War. Pete McClosky, a liberal and anti-war Republican congressman from California, suggested that there ought to be a

universal draft with no exemptions but several service options – this would be fair to all. But his speech was greeted with hostility by most of those present. The students cheered the speaker who said the students were not obliged to do anything. The author concluded that her children and other children of liberal anti-war parents had no sense of commitment to the nation, no sense of responsibility. Their focus was anti-war, all right, but only to the extent that their stand did not affect them. She feared that we have raised a generation of children and youth who have a strong sense of entitlement, but not a strong sense of community responsibility. It was “me, me, me,” all the way home.⁷ Have our students – of whatever age – learned to say “we” instead of “me”?

Item: From *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2004: “Falwell’s Fast Talkers for Christ.” It seems that the late Jerry Falwell, Chancellor of Liberty University, was preparing his students to defend their brand of Christianity in the secular culture. As a result the debate team at Liberty University was one of the best in the nation – it was, in his words, “the most important of our 18 sports.” At a recent national championship debate, “Liberty racked up more points than any other school, including such prestigious institutions as Harvard, Dartmouth, Northwestern and Cornell.”⁸ What are we doing to prepare our young people so they can articulate and defend their faith and the social justice values we espouse?

Item: From *The New York Times*, March 8, 2004: “College for the Home-Schooled Is Shaping Leaders for the Right.” Patrick Henry College in Virginia is a college primarily for evangelical Christian home-schoolers, but it is also a pipeline into conservative politics. Of the nearly 100 interns working in the White House in the spring 2004 semester, 7 were from the roughly 240 students enrolled . . . An 8th intern worked on the president’s re-election campaign.⁹ What are we doing to prepare our young people to translate their Unitarian Universalist values into work for the Beloved Community?

Item: In the wake of the 2004 election *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman wrote that we are “Two nations, under God.” He said we have become divided into those who watch Fox News – “we report, you decide” – and those who read *The New York Times* – “all the news that’s fit to print.” He went on: “We don’t just disagree on what America should be doing; we disagree on what America is. . . .Is this a land where a woman has control over her own body? Is this a country in which organized religion seeks to end the separation of church and state? Is this a place where religious ideology replaces science in the schools? Is our nation a place where our leaders seek to unite us for the common good rather than divide us for political power?”¹⁰ I ask, “what is the covenant of agreement we share?”

Item: In 2004 political theorist Gary Wills wrote another post-election column, “The Day the Enlightenment Went Out,” pointing out that President Bush’s evangelical vote is perhaps William Cullen Bryant’s revenge for the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925. “Can a people that believes more fervently in the Virgin Birth than in evolution still be called an enlightened nation?” He further pointed out that “The secular states of modern Europe do not understand the fundamentalism of the American electorate.”¹¹ Wills fears American religious zealotry mirrors Islamic fundamentalism. It has been said our UU zealotry runs the emotional gamut from A to B.

Item: Christian evangelicals are perhaps the most powerful single voting block in the nation - a kind of massive religious political action committee. A few years ago there was a sign draped across the balcony at a National Association of Evangelicals conference during a piped-in speech from President Bush: “What can 30 million evangelicals do? Anything they want.” The religious right has what Mark Twain called “the calm confidence of a Christian with four aces.” I doubt we Unitarian Universalists are so confident.

My fear is that Unitarian Universalists are not prepared to stem the rising tide of theocracy in this nation; that we have not understood our history of heresy and reform; that we are not equipping ourselves spiritually and morally and politically to be effective agents for our vision of justice; that, even more important, we are

not adequately preparing our young to become tomorrow's people of prophetic fire. The fact of the matter is that we are losing – losing the battle for the heart and mind of America – and perhaps losing our nerve and confidence.

Getting Personal

What will be our response? Let me get personal, sharing stories out of my own life that give me hope – and lead me to believe we can respond effectively. I share them because they are ingrained in me and inspire me to a confidence that we can grow people of prophetic fire. They are not merely narratives, but suggest the kind of experiences I believe need to be incorporated into our religious education programs. As I speak, think of your own experiences that feed your soul, that have made or might make you a person of prophetic fire.

My wife Joyce and I grew up Universalists here in Upstate New York – we collected money for Universalist-sponsored Clara Barton and Eliot P. Joslin Camps for Diabetic Children from our own resources – our pennies and nickels and dimes and quarters. Early on we learned to give to our church to help repair the world. Joyce worked in a settlement house during her college years and has been a church and community volunteer all her life.

In the summer of 1965 she and I led a delegation of 8 Unitarian Universalist and other youth working at UUSC's Jordan Neighborhood House in Suffolk, Virginia, helping to launch the Head Start Program there. I think these adolescents learned something from the harassment of the local sheriff, police and business people who had not yet outgrown their racist ways, as well as from the courage of the black people who struggled against them. They learned a sense of empowerment – they could and did make a difference. Next summer I'm hoping to revisit Jordan for an anniversary celebration.

One evening in the summer of 1983, I took our older son, Matthew, then 16, to the Women's Peace Encampment at Seneca Army Depot in Upstate New York. The Depot was reputed to be a neutron bomb storage site. Ever since attending the UU United Nations Youth Seminar that spring, he has been an activist. We visited the farm where the women lived, and then set out to find members of our congregation who were to participate in a vigil at the Depot entrance. The scene was ominous. The police were there with their flashing lights. A growing knot of unfriendly townspeople formed a gauntlet between our parking space and the protestors. They had come to stare and heckle at best, to do mischief at worst. I was apprehensive; I could sniff violence in the wind. We did not immediately spot our friends and so I was prepared to leave, when he asked me "why?" and persuaded me to stay. My heart was in

my throat, but I could not deny his challenge to me to practice what I had been preaching. We walked the gauntlet, joined the women for the vigil, and departed unharmed.

I learned something about myself that night - my own anxiety, my son's commitment, and my sense these women were laying their lives on the line for what I, and they, believed in. Matthew and I came closer together that night. We both clarified our values and what they meant for our behavior. Out of a simple gesture of social action came enhanced life meaning. I knew then that one reason I seek to "change the world" was the son who made me face up to my convictions.

Some years later, during the run-up to the War in Iraq in 2003, we were talking on our cell phones. I was in Colorado Springs, heart of conservatism, home of Focus on the Family, the Air Force Academy and NORAD. He was in the midst of Manhattan, at the enormous peace demonstration in the heart of liberalism. Father and son peacemaking. Now he is President of the board of Fourth Universalist Church in Manhattan and a committed UU. I am proud.

Years ago the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee sponsored an Urban Youth Experience program to involve high school youth 16 and over in social action, but sadly it failed for lack of congregational support. I was on the UUSC Board at that time.

However, in 1985 our younger son, Douglas, participated in a similar program created by three Denver-area congregations. A group of six UU youth lived with local families and were linked to community programs from the ACLU to Planned Parenthood, from soup kitchens to homeless shelters. Two weekly reflection periods with a ministerial student, the late Marty Griffith, who later became an intern here at First Unitarian in Rochester, provided opportunity for them to analyze their experience in the light of Unitarian Universalist values.

So, take one 16 year old from a white liberal and idealistic family and drop him into Denver's ghetto. Let him be an intake worker in a shelter for street people or dishing out food in a soup-kitchen. He learned at first hand something of what it takes to make the world even a tad better. I will never forget his describing one of his experiences at a homeless shelter (happily after he returned home). One night he opened the door only to find a man “dancing around on the stoop with a large knife in each hand.” Douglas encountered some harsh social reality in a program sponsored by his religious community. He was there at the point of need. It was a powerful experience for my son - one that ought to be replicated for others. Now the UUSC has its Faith Works program providing opportunities for youth and adults to do hands-on work.

Then in 1991, taking a year between high school and college, he spent 13 weeks at the Unitarian Universalist Peace Network in Philadelphia as an intern. He lived with the director's family, doing child care, house and yard work for room and board. This second-born furthered his education by spending his junior year of college in Kenya, befriending a farmer in the remote hills and taking us on an illuminating student's-eye-view of that Third World country. Now, as a world history teacher in an independent school he has his students engaged in working with new refugees in Rochester, working with Habitat for Humanity and otherwise reflecting on the world into which they will soon move. I am proud.

During the summer of 2003 Douglas, his wife, child, two dogs and a cat were burned out of their Rochester area home. The following summer we helped them move back in. Side by side with professionals who knew what they were doing, we painted, laid flooring and did assorted odd jobs. What I did not know when I volunteered for this work was that these particular workmen were all born-again Christians from the same fundamentalist church. Soon it became apparent that we did not share many theological and political beliefs, and there were gentle rejoinders about God and Jesus, faith and salvation, George W. Bush and the election. These were serious men with a serious religion and not hesitant to proclaim it. We tweaked one another from time to time, stopping just short of real barbs, and finally settled for agreeing to disagree

agreeably. Gradually, I came to like these guys – their hard work ethic, their fundamental decency, their sincerity – even though I could not share their beliefs. It tested the parameters of my liberal religious respect for all people. Maurice, a stocky, steady and skilled workman, summed it up on his last day by saying that perhaps liberals learned that not all fundamentalists were nuts and fundamentalists learned that not all liberals were flakes. We had celebrated our common humanity – the fundamental tenet of the Universalism that spawned me.

These family experiences are mirrored in similar church-based experiences. While I was doing an interim ministry in Ithaca a few years ago, a number of church youth visited a migrant labor camp to learn how people are exploited in their own back yard. One reported movingly on her trip during a Sunday service and staffed a letter-writing table after the service to lobby for legislation to remedy this injustice.

On yet another Rochester Religion in Life pilgrimage our group wound up at UUSC headquarters in Cambridge after a long and tiring day. In the past, this event often found our kids dozing. However, the imaginative young staffers knew their audience and after briefly telling them about the UUSC campaign to boycott oil companies doing business with the Burmese (Myanmar) military dictatorship set them in action.

Our kids were invited to create colorful posters for a demonstration that was coming up. They attacked the project with energy and were awake for the entire visit. They were actually doing something to make a difference, not merely talking about it.

For years the Rochester Unitarian youth group served the soup kitchen at Blessed Sacrament Roman Catholic Church; they worked with Habitat for Humanity for a weekend experiencing at first hand an urban ghetto. Not only this, they were supervised by an orthodox Muslim couple with whom they had fascinating conversations about the similarities and differences in their respective faiths. More recently some of these youth went to the maquiladora factories on the US-Mexican border with the New York State Labor and Religion Committee – reprising a trip I had made there some years before. They saw at first hand some of the results of the North American Free Trade Agreement. In each case they had class-time opportunities for religious reflection. More recently they and other youth groups have gone to the Gulf Coast to help with the rebuilding of those communities in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

One of our Religion in Life youth, Brad the Dad's son, became a supervisor in a Catholic Worker soup kitchen, a leader in the peace movement and spent six months volunteering at a home of homeless and street children in Asuncion, Paraguay.

He graduated from high school in 2005. The Rochester Catholic Worker newsletter wished him well: “Mike Freeman, who has been coordinating our Sunday meal, left to spend six months doing volunteer work in Paraguay. They are blessed to receive his energy and dedication as we have been.”¹²

This congregation for nearly 20 years has partnered with two inner city schools with adults tutoring and assisting teachers. Then along came the Saturday Academy in which the tutoring was preceded by a breakfast put on by First Church families – an intergenerational project. Intergenerational was also the motif when the congregation sought out a whole-church project. One of the criteria was that it had to include people of all ages. Now School 33 and the surrounding community are enjoying a state-of-the-art playground provided by the church community in cooperation with the neighborhood.

A few years ago I received a letter from the parents of a high school graduate who had been part of our Religion in Life program. After quoting the adage, "It takes a whole village to raise a child," they listed the "elders" in their son's village, including me and others in church. Following the list was a moving statement of gratitude by parents who realized the variety of people who made up their son's "village-web," as they called it.

It has been said that the congregation is the curriculum, but I would add, it is the congregation serving the wider world that is the curriculum for growing people of prophetic fire.

We Learn by Doing

Now, what religious values are embodied in these narratives?

Heresy – choosing to challenge conventional wisdom and entrenched power. I have come to the conclusion that to raise children of good will one must constantly question the prevailing cultural values. Our culture has become terribly self-indulgent. We must struggle to overcome the dominant narcissism and preserve the basic values of human service and social responsibility.

Cognitive dissonance – learning by exposure to a radically different environment. Students of human development tell us that basic values are formed in the decisive adolescent years. Without such experiences children of affluence do not experience the clash of idealism and reality necessary to moral growth. Greed, once a vice, has become a virtue, and infects us all. We need to serve not only children at risk from poverty, but children at risk from affluence.

Empathy – a “feeling with” the other, especially with the dispossessed of this world. We all need to have experiences that

take us out of our comfort zone into contact with the “others” with whom we have little experience. In the class warfare of our society these experiences don’t often come naturally; they need to be planned. Religious educators need to build on the natural empathy that is part of the package human nature grants us.

Stewardship - participation in a religious community that means something – that models love and peace and justice – in which the whole congregation is part of the teaching team. As historian Conrad Wright says, “Joining a church should not be the same as joining the National Geographic Society.”¹³ We are not only individuals; we are members of a community. And as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “No member of a crew is praised for the rugged individuality of his rowing.”

Empowerment – education against feelings of helplessness. There is a Christian concept called "equipping the saints," a rather pretentious way of saying that religiously motivated change agents need education and training to engage in peace and justice work. In a world where we are being outmaneuvered by a highly-motivated and resource-rich religious right we need to do more than casual preparation for social action. We have models for this: the Faithful Fools of San Francisco’s Tenderloin District, a Unitarian Universalist street ministry which invites people to an urban immersion experience; the Industrial Areas Foundation or

similar groups who create community-based change organizations. There is the UUSC Guest at Your Table program; its Faith Works project helps provide opportunities for action; UUSC has put on a curriculum specialist in social justice work. The point is we need to be serious about religious education for social change. We need a UU Academy for Social Transformation.

Action – walking the talk in a world of paralysis by analysis. We can begin by giving opportunities for our very young to make linkages with our very old, for example, distributing flowers to our sick and shut-ins as an outgrowth of a worship service. Every religious education program and every class level ought to have a social action component. Our goal is to grow people of prophetic fire who will understand helping to repair the world is no extra-curricular activity; it is simply part of what it is to be Unitarian Universalist.

I envision a program for high school youth called YEAST, Youth in Education and Social Transformation, to expose our mostly suburban youth to social reality – suburban, rural and urban. This could be patterned on the Denver program of which I spoke or the Faith Works projects, doing volunteer work and engaging in ethical reflection on its meaning for them in a Unitarian Universalist context. "We live ourselves into religious thinking more than we think our way into religious living."¹⁴

This is praxis – learning by doing - the human dialogue of action and reflection. The experiences I have described are immensely enriched when participants have opportunity to put them in theological and ethical context.

What we have here is "a church without walls." One of our tasks as religious educator/activists is to expand the Unitarian Universalist horizon beyond the confines of a religious institution. All of this is in the context of a teaching-learning, life-span religious community. However, despite all the programmatic innovations we may make, despite all the new curricula we can create, it remains true that we communicate our values as a religious community by what we are and do. The church teaches by what it is and does. "Examples," as religious education pioneer Horace Bushnell once said, "are the only sufficient commentaries."¹⁵

Gardeners of the Spirit

There are many goals we cherish as religious educators: spiritual growth, theological literacy, healthy sexuality, ethical responsibility, institutional stewardship, among others we might name. But all these goals will pale if we do not commit ourselves to grow people of prophetic fire who will be part of that creative minority whose task is no less than to help repair a broken world.

After all, life is our only chance to grow a soul, to love and be loved and to help repair the world.

In her poem "Invocation to Kali," the late Unitarian Universalist poet May Sarton, wrote,

**"Help us to be the always hopeful
Gardeners of the spirit
Who know that without darkness
Nothing comes to birth
As without light
Nothing flowers."¹⁶**

I have been reading the *Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony* by Ida Husted Harper, 1600 pages of how one woman became a person of prophetic fire – as part of my research for a book on *The Religious Life of Susan B. Anthony: No Consorting with Angels*. Harper's is a congratulatory, rather than a critical biography, but it has moved me to tears, having served Miss Anthony's Unitarian congregation here for 32 years. When I despair of the world and my work in helping to repair its brokenness, I repair to those people of prophetic fire for whom despair was an unknown word. She said: "Oh, if I could but live another century and see the fruition of all the work for women! There is so much yet to be done – I think of so many things I should like to do and say – but I must leave them for a younger generation. We old fighters have prepared the way and it

is easier than it was fifty years ago when I got into the harness. Young blood, fresh with enthusiasm and with all the enlightenment of the new century, must now carry on the contest.”¹⁷

Susan B. was a gardener of the spirit and what are any of us but gardeners of the spirit, getting our fingernails dirty with the work of the world, celebrating the growth we experience and observe? We take the mud of the earth, mix with holy water, and behold - a human being. Our church communities are the rich soil in which people of prophetic fire will grow in this mystical spiritual osmosis. We are gardeners of the spirit whose essential mission is to grow people of prophetic fire. Let's get busy.

¹ Sophia Lyon Fahs. *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage*. Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952, pp. 151-2.

² Rolland Emerson Wolfe. *Men of Prophetic Fire*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1951.

³ Gerhard von Rad. *The Christian Century*, 5/23/79, 589.

⁴ John Dewey. *My Pedagogic Creed*.

⁵ Theodore Parker. Unknown source.

⁶ Doonesbury, 7/13/03.

⁷ "Meditation of a Middle-Aged, (Upper) Middle-Class, White, Liberal, Protestant Parent," *The Christian Century*, August 15-22, 1979.

⁸ "Falwell's Fast Talker for Christ," *The Washington Post*, 2/16/04.

⁹ "College for the Home-Schooled Is Shaping Leaders for the Right" by David D. Kirkpatrick, *New York Times*, 3/8/04.

¹⁰ Thomas Freedman, *New York Times* ???

¹¹ Gary Wills ???

¹² Rochester Catholic Worker Spring 2006.

¹³ Conrad Wright, 10.

¹⁴ Henry Munroe. (see RE quote card)

¹⁵ Horace Bushnell.

¹⁶ May Sarton, "Invocation to Kali," *A Grain of Mustard Seed: New Poems*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971, 23.

¹⁷ 1902 interview in *Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony: Volume 3*, Ida Husted Harper, Ayer Company Publishing, reprint edition 1958, p. 1258.