



RETURN TO THE HOME OF YOUR SOUL SERIES

REASON TO HOPE

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Well, it's good to be back . For the last two months of my sabbatical, I've been writing my book on the Unitarian community in India and writing a series of prayers and some sermons also. I spent 10 days near my family in the Berkshire Mountains in western Massachusetts and the rest of the two months near my wife's family in Maryland and more specifically in the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay. I wrote the first half of my book near Arrowhead, where Melville wrote Moby Dick. This is his desk looking out over the mountains, Mount Greylock. And I wrote the second half of my book. This is my desk in Saint Michaels, Maryland, where James Michener wrote the book, Chesapeake. My writing is nothing like theirs, but they were inspiration enough to help me focus and write every day.

And when I wasn't writing, I was spending time with my wife and our family. I was riding a bicycle in the mountains and flatlands and finished my sabbatical on a bikepacking trip in West Virginia. I also read a lot, especially I was touched by Colson Whitehead's book, The Underground Railroad, which I read while staying in the town where Frederick Douglass was enslaved and near the home site of Harriet Tubman. Land which was once tilled by enslaved people for tobacco and grains to feed America now grows soybeans and corn to feed our gas tanks. Everywhere I turned, I knew I was in a place where it had been built by enslaved people and now the legacy of that land just builds division everywhere in that town and around that town were "Let's go, Taco" flags flying next to neighbors who had flags that said, "Take back America."

The place is beautiful in its own way. Pine trees and marshes, vast channels of water, sailboats dot the horizon. Estuary of the Chesapeake Bay is one of the largest in the world, and while I'm no bird watcher, I saw many birds including green herons, osprey, and one day I saw two bald eagles flying as fast as they could away from Washington DC. That occupied city, which I avoided in favor of not

having my head explode in anger. But overall, I had a lot of time to pay attention to who I am and what I'm doing and what matters and what's going on around me and kind of what I call this unhurried time-space sabbatical. And so I thank you for that and for that time I come back ready to face all of what we have to face. One thing I noted while I was on sabbatical was how much reason was making a comeback in America? I mean, everywhere you turn, things just seem reasonable.

While I was on sabbatical, Putin came to Alaska and convinced us that President Biden started a war in Ukraine. I mean reasonable, right? The mRNA vaccine research was stopped. The Texas Democrats allowed the state to be redistricted. I mean, it's reasonable times. I saw flags flying in the eastern shore of Maryland, which just said "Trump, no more BS," which depending on the punctuation, really could go either way. You know I'm kidding, right? You know I'm kidding. Seems like we're in the age of the unreasonable. Every time I turn around, I feel gaslit by the world, told what I thought was right is wrong, told that liberals are violent and in the need of the entire government's resources to root us out. Don't mind those organized groups of white supremacists spitting hatred and violent conspiracy theories. No, they're not endangering America.

I turn around and the news shows my senators participating individual in the Capitol Statuary hall for a man who, yes, did not deserve to be shot but did say, "I can't stand the word empathy, and Black women don't have the brain power to be taken seriously, and men who sleep with men should be stoned to death." Those are real quotes from speeches and podcasts, and this is the hero of our government that wants a remembrance day for him. Not to enter the breach too far on this, but I'm just saying. If I was looking at all this from, let's say New Zealand or India, I might think that reason itself has been benched in favor of the rewriting of American history. Standing in the Harriet Tubman welcome center of the National Park in Maryland, right near the town of her birth. I considered the murmurs of what cleaning up the Smithsonian images of slavery means.

And I remember that the Texas School Board is reviewing Texas educator's proposal to call slavery involuntary relocation as if it was the result of some flood or hurricane. All because slavery is too upsetting an idea. And I thought at least in some places, standing in front of Harriet Tubman statue reason is not on life support. Which makes all this so hard to preach about returning home to reason as a value in our church. All these tides. Consider all the unreasonable things that we are encountering in the world, and it makes it hard to center a place that believes reason needs a comeback in our lives, especially in religion. But the truth is that reason is a Unitarian value that dates back to the early roots in Europe and America when in the late 1700s churches were being swept up by the Holy Spirit movement and God's frozen people were falling out in the pews of the New England churches.

Unitarians called for the use of reason and critical thinking in religion and especially the interpretation of the Bible. We would not disagree with them, I think. They lifted up the inconsistencies of the biblical interpretations of things like issues around slavery, issues around obedience, a woman's agency, what really was God's love, and Jesus's humanity. And if not his humanity, they focused on living up to his teachings as primary to being a real Christian. The man who firmly put in our pantheon the idea of reason was this man, Earl Morse Wilbur. Fellow alum of mine from the University of Vermont, a New

England minister and scholar who was the president of my seminary in Berkeley for 20 years starting in 1911. This portrait of Earl Morse Wilbur hung in the main hall of the school where I was on the board once. Wilbur looking over our work.

One day the board sat in the boardroom during a particularly difficult meeting and one disgruntled board member said something grim about our future and turned to the portrait of Wilbur and said, "Look, even Wilbur isn't smiling." To which I said, "What do you mean? That's a New England smile." Wilbur wrote a huge tome of Unitarianism. He learned Polish and Hungarian. He lived in Eastern Europe and was studying in Germany when Hitler was elected to office. In his analysis of our faith, Wilbur framed the main idea that we are made to preserve the principles of freedom in thought, reason in conduct, and tolerance in judgment. Which he said was crowned by uprightness of character, back then when character mattered. He understood our faith better than anyone I know alive and said, "Our story is this not so much a history of a particular sect or form of Christian doctrine, but rather as the development of a movement fundamentally characterized by its steadfast and increasing devotion to these three principles."

First, complete mental freedom in religion rather than bondage to creeds or confessions. Second, the unrestricted use of reason in religion rather than the reliance upon external authority or past tradition. And third, generous tolerance of differing religious views and usages rather than an insistence upon uniformity in doctrine, worship, and polity. Freedom, reason, and tolerance were placed in Unitarianism by Earl Morse Wilbur. For him, the key to freedom without its challenge to the authorities of the church or the unexamined traditions of authoritarian governments, be it the 15th or 16th or 20th centuries, freedom was at stake for him and reason was the key to unlock it. In 1920, in the Berry Street lecture that Beth read an excerpt from, he said, "Progress toward complete spiritual freedom, which is secured through emancipation from all external authorities is only accomplished with reason."

Wilbur translated 16th century works of Unitarians. He came to this very clear and thoughtful idea about who we are as religious people. And he said, "We use reason in religion to help prevent fanaticism and to cast out superstition." Reason serves as an antidote, he said, for the irrationality, superstition, and fanaticism in the world. Can I get an amen? 1920, he said this, preventing fanaticism, casting out superstition, standing up to authoritarian government or religion which restricts or redefines real freedom into bondage sounds like us. I think that you and I actually return here week after week and month after month and year after year. Not because the music is lovely and the coffee is good or the community is friendly, but because we are missionaries for reason. For pushing back on a world that seems to accept easy ideas, forged in scripture or practices that were once designed to increase love and freedom but are used to bind us to division and conformity.

We are missionaries for reason which pushes back on ideas rebuilt to closet, not free narratives that use all the right words but mean some people are more valuable than others and rituals that claim to honor the honorable but honor the hatred they spit. We are missionaries for reason. The challenges, movements that unleash violence upon enemies determined by loyalists to government or one kind of faith or another. Missionaries who point to reason when religion is co-opted by the few and forced on

the many. Friends, when Wilbur said, use reason to push back on irrationality and superstition and fanaticism, he is talking about theologies that tried to eradicate us in the 16th century in Poland and Transylvania and about standing in the streets of Berlin in 1933. While the church lined up behind Hitler to kill and destroy and turn in neighbors rather than to live up to that core Christian ideal, which is to love thy neighbor.

He knew then, and we know now that narratives constructed to turn people against one another was not only the tool of majority religion of the time, but also would rule over us if we let it. And just to be clear, what I mean by the use of reason, what Wilbur meant is that questioning is important first and foremost, that testing theories rather than swallowing them wholesale, that being in dialogue is of utmost importance in religious life. Here in this church you are free to question and that is the beginning of reason. And second, using reason in religion means three things, evaluating the logical consistency of religious doctrines, assessing the empirical evidence for religious claims, and comparing and contrasting different religious traditions.

Doing this means we attempt to see and understand another's perspective and are willing to embrace their definitions while measuring them against the multi-faith, multi-faceted world, the kind that we live in. Examining the difference between what the scripture says and how people behave, what they say they believe and what they do. It means coming to some sense of things like what is God for yourself rather than me demanding that upon you or you to conform to the concept of my God or by some higher religious authority. Without reason, practitioners or religion can ignore the core teachings of their faith in favor of ancillary tactics for self-preservation. Sinners are the ones who disagree with the Pope or the Fuhrer. The guilt is a tool to imprison souls even in benign religious ways. Ignore Jesus's example to love everyone without checking their belief system or what their birth certificate says.

Is there a consistency in the faith you witness between ritual words and behavior and does it matter as reason? Now, I know you all out there. I know that you have stood or knelt in churches where you didn't agree with what was being said and you finally uttered aloud that statement I have heard so many times in newcomers classes in our church. "It all stopped making sense to me." And you weren't quoting the talking heads. You and I were saying that something wasn't right in the logic of the faith you were practicing and so you sought out a freer step, a more reasonable approach, a more loving embrace, and maybe found it here. This story was reiterated four times this week in our newcomers class. Each one of the newcomers said in their own way that they started asking questions, reasonable questions in the churches of their child and were told, "Just have faith" or "Just stop."

One new member said, I asked, "What about the person in the far reaches of the world who never heard of Jesus? Why would they be damned forever?" And was told, "Well, they have airplanes to leaflet drops over them so everything will be fine." The seed of reason is planted in those questions, to easy answers. Because we know what easy answers do. The poet said it in today's poem, "I let small answers be a buhlwork of my fear, the huge abstractions I keep from the light, small things I handle and caress and love. I let the stars assume the hold of night, but the big answers clamored to be

moved into my life." This is what we're doing here because reason says, "Let the big questions clamor in your hearts and minds and burst forth in freedom."

Now, just so we're clear, I am not saying that all faiths don't have what we have or promoting some exclusive right to the spiritual food we give here over others. And I am not saying that setting aside those questions is a bad thing from time to time. Reason can also drive us mad. Sometimes we just need to rest in the palm of whatever spiritual food is available to us this summer in that town in Saint Michaels, I attended an Episcopal church. A little Maryland Episcopal church where I found the services nourishing and loving. I spoke those prayers aloud with the congregation from their prayer book. Remember, I grew up Unitarian with Jewish and Christian family. And I said those prayers, "Almighty God, father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants to give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all goodness and loving kindness to us and to all people."

Episcopalians repeat after me. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of thy mercies, that our hearts be [inaudible 00:19:55] thankful and that we show forth our praise not only with our lips, but with our lives by giving up ourselves to thy service and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness in all our days. You see, I can go to Episcopal church and translate all that. I don't actually carry a lot of the trauma that some of you carry, and that was a gift growing up as a Unitarian. This makes sense to me, to speak these prayers to God that I know is beyond and within me. And each week I spoke with the priest and she and I decided that we had the same mission to increase love in the world. Her framework is just different. She's a Christian, not a Christian nationalist who's trying to destroy our country.

She's just trying to get her people to live like Jesus wanted us to live like. I loved worshiping in that little church despite the fact that the beams of that church were literally forged by enslaved people in the late 1700s. Its wealth built on the tobacco plantations of the area. The people were loving and welcoming and did not flinch when I told them who I was and I stood beside them and took communion with them because they were not fanatics, they were not superstitious. They were just faithful people and in their own way, reasonable and free and embracing. We need that kind of nurture as much as we need to return again to reason. In fact, side note here, we would not be here if for the last five, 600 years people did not stand up through reason for our religious freedom.

Those people who lived through authoritarianism and lived through Christian nationalism and other forces that tried to eradicate us. This is where my Unitarian faith lives, friends. Living, balancing that sense of what is important and divine. The God I can feel when I pay enough attention, when I pray for real, when I sit quietly and know something holds me. And as I let those big questions clamor for attention. I balance that with reason, enacting the challenge to superstitions and fanaticism. Asking good questions about religious dialogue that aims to make captive of people's hearts, not to liberate them. That's the balance of what we're doing here. Letting God hold us and utilizing reason as a key to freedom. So I invite you, friends, again and again to return to this church where so much happens, the spiritual nurture and where reason lives.

If you are like me, you are a seeker for a faith of love that welcomes God's holy presence and comes to our senses for answers about what that means. That is who we are. Long live reason and all its gifts and amen.