

## **Meditations on Liberal Religion**

**Sermons for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst**

**by Betsey Johnson and Chad Johnson**

**October 2, 2005**

### **A. POWELL DAVIES, HIS LIFE AND MESSAGE**

**Betsey Johnson**

Over the years that I have been a Unitarian, I have seldom heard mention of Reverend A. Powell Davies. Yet he was one of our denomination's most powerful leaders.

Born in 1902 in England, he was ordained and served as a Methodist minister for several years there. In 1928 he came to America and became a Methodist pastor for two small churches in Maine and then served in Portland, Maine. His gradual move to Unitarianism perhaps began when he ceased to use the Apostle's Creed in his services. "Creeds," he said, "have no place in the world today because they transgress the free domain of the mind." In 1933, he received a fellowship with the American Unitarian Association and became minister in Summit, New Jersey for eleven years and subsequently at All Souls Church in Washington, DC where he served from 1944 until his death in 1957.

As Warren Ross, a UU World contributing editor, has written, "His eloquence and courage were matched by keen insight into national and world affairs. The conviction that freedom grows from free religion led him to preach passionate sermons denouncing both communist tyranny and Congressional persecution." At one point Davies reflected on his criticism of the McCarthy era tactics (of which we shall hear more later), "I am," he said, "what is called a controversial person: that is... one who does not keep quiet in the presence of evil." He denounced all manner of injustice and led his congregation in protesting segregation in restaurants and theaters. (In fact, and this is an example of the wry sense of humor that permeated all his writings, he proposed a new plan of integration for DC theaters: There could be a section for those willing to sit with anyone and then sections for those only willing to sit with those of their own race.) He sponsored the city's first integrated boys' club and collected supplies for the school children of Hiroshima. He was also active in liberal causes such as the control of atomic energy, Planned Parenthood and Americans United for Separation of Church and State. He was a religious evangelist who established eleven new congregations in the Washington area. As I read of all he did, I began to think of him as the Leonardo DaVinci of Unitarianism.

One of his most famous sermons was given November 25, 1945, at a time when the aftermath of World War II had left thousands hungry and homeless. Here is an excerpt that might stay with us as we approach our Thanksgiving observances.

*"We kept Thanksgiving in this country last week. We did indeed. And we polluted and desecrated it. We profaned and violated every decent thing about it. We turned it into a sacrilege – a sacrilege against the soul of humanity. We were thankful that we were not as other countries – we whom other countries by their blood and famine helped to save. We were thankful for the opportunity of gluttony – Gluttony unbridled and unlimited."*

As a result of this scathing denunciation, his congregation in the following weeks gathered thousands of tons of food to send overseas.

Forest Church, currently minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan and an equally renowned preacher, wrote these words about Davies in his introduction to *“Without Apology.”*

*“He believed in progress but tempered this belief by a profound understanding of evil. He had faith in reason, yet also knew how often we humans err and how stubborn we can be in rationalizing our least attractive tendencies. He had no truck with superstition but was completely in awe of life’s mystery. He confessed a profound, if undogmatic, faith in God.”*

Many of us do not have that faith in God, but as I end by reading this last excerpt from a sermon entitled *“Is This Your Religion?”* you may find yourself answering yes to that question. Here is the excerpt.

*“We are the consummation of thousands of years of religious history. We are thousands of years that have stripped off superstition and battled with tyranny; thousands of years that struggled to take fear out of religion – to take it right out of human life. We are indeed the consummation of something. Yet in this world of blood and sorrow, it is scarcely important, unless in addition we are the beginning of something, unless our religion is new – the religion that has always been new in every prophet who died rather than forsake it; the religion that has been buried over and over again in creeds and rituals and sacred sepulchers and yet has always come to life. The religion that says freedom! – freedom from ignorance and false belief; freedom to seek the truth, both old and new and freedom to follow it; freedom from the hates and greeds that divide humankind and spill the blood of every generation; freedom for equal justice; freedom to seek the true, the good, and the beautiful with minds unimpaired by cramping dogmas and spirits uncrippled by abject dependence. The religion that says humankind is not divided – except by ignorance and prejudice and hate; the religion that sees humankind as naturally one and waiting to be spiritually united; the religion that proclaims an end to all exclusions – and declares a brotherhood and sisterhood unbounded. The religion that knows that we shall never find the fullness of the wonder and the glory of life until we are ready to share it.”*

As you have listened to me, have you thought perchance that this is your religion? If you have, do not congratulate yourself. Stop long enough to recollect the miseries of the world you live in: the fearful cruelties, the enmities, the hate, the bitter prejudices, the need of such a word for such a faith. And if you still can say that this of which I have spoken is your religion, then ask yourself this question: *“What are you doing with it?”*

## MCCARTHY, DAVIES, AND ME

### Chad Johnson

Let me begin my story by telling you of the question a child asked my ancient (over 100) mother-in-law. The child asked, “What was it like when you were alive?” So this tale today is of long ago times when I was “alive.” It begins on June 24, 1950, the day my wife, Betsey, and I were married and the day that North Korea invaded South Korea. We began our married life in Philadelphia where I was a lawyer. But suddenly I was called back to active duty with the Marines in the fall of 1950, serving for about a year and one-half. During that period I became convinced that the life of a Philadelphia lawyer was not for me. I suppose I had a yen for adventure and a desire to be of some use in the world. I decided to try for the foreign service; so, I took the exams, which I passed. After my discharge from the Marines, we went to Washington expecting that I would soon join a pre-assignment foreign service training class. But at this point I encountered the malevolent influence of Senator Joseph McCarthy. If you were around then, or have read your history, you know how he terrorized the civil service with charges of subversive behavior. Loyalty oaths were being required of all civil servants. A general fear of the Russians gave him free rein to say the word “communist,” and those so designated were thrown to the wolves. Congress was quiescent as he rampaged. Because of his disdain for all the alleged “subversives” in the foreign service, no new pre-assignment training was started. So we lingered on in limbo – with our future very much in doubt. At last, in the spring of 1953 the training began and in June it was completed. Overseas assignments were given out to the class members; that is, they were given out to everyone but me! Why not me? At that time, one of McCarthy’s henchmen, Scott McLeod, was in charge of State Department personnel. He and his minion were wreaking havoc throughout the Department spreading unsubstantiated charges far and wide. I was caught in that maelstrom. My inquiries met a blank wall. I was informed that since my appointment as a foreign service officer had not yet been confirmed by the Senate, I had no right of appeal. I would be barred not only from the foreign service but also from any other government job. And my private sector job prospects would be seriously damaged. A hint surfaced that I had been accused of being a communist.

It was at this dark point in our lives that Betsey and I found ourselves one Sunday at the All Souls Unitarian Church of Washington. I cannot remember how we learned of this church. We were not Unitarians nor churchgoers of any stripe. But the sermon we heard that day, given by A. Powell Davies, lifted our spirits and gave us courage, as did being in the presence of hundreds of people who were clearly ready to stand against the pernicious doctrine being expounded by Senator McCarthy and his gang. I don’t remember the title of the sermon Davies preached that day, but I’m sure it was along the lines of one he had given earlier entitled “*Human Right and Religion*,” an extract from which I’ll read you now. (from “*Without Apology*,” edited by Forrest Church, pg 71 – “*Human Rights*”)

*“The belief that there are natural rights that all people may justly claim relied, in the end, upon religion. This is not to say that they rely upon some particular creed or that their basis is dogmatic, but only that they cannot be credibly asserted except upon the assumption that human nature is moral and spiritual, and that we so accept it. Wherever this assumption is rejected, it quickly becomes evident that there is no right but might: Whatever prevails does so because there are those who have the power to enforce it.*”

*We need to understand this, I think, far better than we do. At a time when rights that we have held in veneration are being encroached upon, and in the name – so we are told – of necessity, it behooves us to see exactly what it is that we are losing and what ground we must take if we intend to resist the loss. Human rights are not natural in the sense that they are biological or anthropological. The physical species homo sapiens might well exist without these rights being claimed at all – as indeed it has, and for much longer without the rights than with them.*

*There are those who tell us that it was better so, that such rights never should have been acknowledged. The philosopher Auguste Comte, for example, says that ‘the word right should be excluded from political language because it is a theological and metaphysical’ conception. He agrees with some of our modern security-people that the idea of human rights is ‘immoral and subversive’ – those are the very words he uses. But the dominant American tradition does not agree with him. It says that human rights are natural rights. The fiery Samuel Adams in 1772 declared that among the natural rights of the colonists are these: first, a right to life; secondly, to liberty; thirdly, to property; together with the right to defend them in the best manner they can. These are the propositions, of course, amended as to the third of them, that Thomas Jefferson wrote into the Declaration of Independence four years later. He said that such rights were based upon truths that were self-evident, that they were endowed by the Creator, that they were inalienable.*

*The theological way of putting it was that each human individual possessed these rights because he or she was the child of God. The soul was sacred. To encroach upon its independence was sacrilege. Each person was accountable at the last not to society, certainly not to the state, but to his or her own conscience and to the Creator. A less theological but equally religious way of asserting it was to say that human beings, no matter what their earlier condition, had reached a stage when their moral and spiritual nature required freedom, and that in order that each individual might exercise this freedom, society must guarantee it. One would be only a serf or a chattel if one lost part – the most important part – of one’s humanity. It was therefore unnatural, contrary to human nature as it had now developed, to infringe the rights by which men and women grew in freedom. Tyranny had become unnatural. Human moral and spiritual development had reached the point where it was self-evidently true that a person’s individual liberty was essential to his or her progress. Because, therefore, of the advance of our moral, spiritual nature, our rights were not privileges that might be conferred or taken away, but inalienable – not merely legal, but natural.*

*This is the background that we neglect at our peril when we talk loosely of the need to limit human rights. Because we are in peril, some of these rights – so we are told – must be curtailed. Very well. It may be so. But at least, let us see that their curtailment is not just a matter of procedure, an external device to protect our security: It is a deep injury to human nature itself and lowers that level of the one society we are trying to make secure. In the United States, it is forsaking of the principle upon which this nation was founded, a debasement of our chosen way of life. From the standpoint of religion, it profanes the sacred; it sins against the human soul, the breath of the spirit of God.”*

At the end of the sermon, the congregation rose and sang “Onward Christian Soldiers” – not a hymn that could make it into a modern Unitarian hymnal. But I have to confess, Betsey and I sang it with all our hearts and went out into the world renewed in our determination to seek – and obtain – my vindication.

You may want to know how this story ended. Happily – for my case was taken up by a wonderful lawyer, Adam Yarmolinsky, who, pro bono, demanded that my right to a hearing be honored. It was – and the ridiculous charge, probably originating with influential Republican friends of my parents, was dropped and I received an overseas assignment. I suspect my real sin all along was to marry a confirmed Democrat.

As you hear Davies’ words today, I’m sure you wish as I do that they could be heard throughout our land, for our times require his tough inspiration even more than fifty or so years ago – when I was alive.