

## SOMETHING LIKE CONVERSION

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In the Babylonian creation myth known as the *Enuma Elish*, one of the foundational elements of the universe is a maelstrom of dark, roiling seawater, which is given the name Tiamat, the dragon goddess of the ocean. The union of Tiamat with Apsu, the freshwater deity, gives rise to the first generation of gods. According to the myth, these newly-created gods take advantage of their powers by living profligate and irresponsible lives. Enraged at their behavior, Tiamat spawns a horde of ferocious demons to destroy them. Her efforts are eventually foiled by the storm god Marduk, who ends up slaying Tiamat.

This ancient clash between the storm god of the heavens and the dragon goddess of the sea came to mind ten days ago. Hurricane Dorian had just been upgraded to a category 5 hurricane, with winds of 185 mph and wind gusts of more than 220. It was bearing down on the Bahamas and taking aim at the Florida coast.

A meteorologist on CNN had just pointed out that Dorian was the strongest storm on record to hit the northern Bahamas and had tied for the record as strongest to approach the US coast. The meteorologist went on to say that the storm had renewed discussion of whether a category 6 should be created for even stronger hurricanes, which are expected in the future and which Dorian could become.

“But where is Dorian going to make landfall on the Florida coast?” the CNN anchor asked.

“We don’t know,” the meteorologist replied. “Quite frankly, our models have very little data from storms this strong, and besides, storms like Dorian tend to make their own rules.”

The interchange prompted me to wonder whether the dragon goddess of the sea and the storm god of the heavens had again conspired to destroy its offspring for living profligate and irresponsible lives.

In substantive terms, this question has to do with the physical consequences of human behavior. According to the Fourth National Climate Assessment produced by 13 federal agencies and more than 350 scientists, the earth is warming faster than at any time in human history, and human beings are causing it. Writing about the Assessment recently in the *Washington Post*, Katherine Hayhoe, who teaches atmospheric science and political science at Texas Tech, points out that 70% of American adults agree that climate change is happening, but only 40% believe it will harm them personally. She says, “Sure, it’ll hurt polar bears, and maybe people who live on low-lying islands in the South Pacific. But the world has warmed by just 1°C, or 1.8°F, since 1900. What’s the big deal?”

The big deal, she goes on to say, is that “climate change is a threat multiplier that touches everything from our health to our economy to our coasts to our infrastructure.” It supercharges hurricanes, doubles the impact of wildfires, makes heat waves stronger, and rainstorms more intense. She concludes, “Climate change is no longer a distant issue in time or space: it’s affecting us, today, in the places where we live.”

The dragon goddess of the sea and the storm god of the heavens will destroy us — at least some of us, whether sooner or later — for living profligate and irresponsible lives.

There is also a symbolic dimension to this issue. In symbolic terms, the question has to do with the political consequences of human behavior, especially our behavior as American citizens. We look at the storm of nativism and nationalism that is fueling the rise of authoritarian tyrants around the world, and we assume that it’s not going to hit us here. And even if it does, or to some extent already has, we conclude that it’s not going to harm us personally. This is a dangerously seductive line of thought to which we as religious liberals are especially susceptible.

Our nation was founded on three pillars: a political theory of individual rights and civil liberties, an economic view of the beneficence of free markets, and a religious vision of souls that have been emancipated from the bondage of original sin. This emphasis on the freedom of the individual in the political, economic, and religious realms is known as liberalism.

Religious liberalism tends to have a forward-looking view of history and an optimistic view of humanity. It rejects the Calvinist view of human beings as totally depraved. Instead, it generally believes that growth is inevitable, progress is irreversible, and human beings are perfectible.

On these terms, there are no really bad people in the world; only people who, because of ignorance, negative influences, or lack of good options, end up doing bad things. Looking at human history from the perspective of Auschwitz, however, or Rwanda, or Bosnia, or Zimbabwe — this list could go on forever — it’s hard to believe that growth is inevitable, progress is irreversible, and human beings are perfectible.

During the 1930’s, a Unitarian theologian named James Luther Adams spent a considerable amount of time in Germany, where he observed firsthand the rise of Nazism. He made friends with a few religious leaders who covertly worked against the Nazis, even as he saw most German church leaders succumb to Hitler’s demands. Adams’ experience convinced him that the basic tenants of religious liberalism needed to be revised.

Adams says, “In Nazi Germany I soon came to the question, ‘What is it in my preaching and my political action that would stop this?’” He went on to say, “It is a liberal attitude to say that we keep ourselves informed and read the best papers on these matters, and perhaps join a voluntary association now and then. But to be involved with other people so that it costs and so that one exposes the evils of society... requires

something like conversion, something more than an attitude. It requires a sense that there's something wrong and I must be different from the way I have been."

Adams spent 20 years on the faculty of Meadville Theological School in Chicago, before joining the faculty of Harvard Divinity School for the remainder of his career. He became the most influential Unitarian theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His response to the apathy of the German church led Adams to focus religious liberalism on two things that it had previously ignored: the tragedy of history, and the necessity of power.

In his essay titled, "The Changing Reputation of Human Nature," written in 1941, Adams says, "When we say that history is tragic, we mean that the perversions and failures in history are associated precisely with the highest creative powers of humanity and thus with our greatest achievements... The very means and evidences of progress turn out again and again to be also the instruments of perversion or destruction."

Adams goes on to give several examples of this paradox. The national culture of a people — their language, their poetry, their music, their common social heritage — is their most cherished treasure. Yet, he says, "Nationalism is also one of the most destructive forces in the whole of human history." Progress in transportation has helped raise the standard of living, yet it has also brought a new rootlessness and instability. Improved access to literacy has been a powerful instrument both for education and for demagoguery. And so on.

Adams concludes, "Certainly, if there is progress, it is no simple configuration of upward trends. At times, it looks more like a thing of shreds and patches. The general tendency of liberalism has been to neglect this tragic factor of history."

The storm of nativism and nationalism that is fueling the rise of authoritarian tyrants around the world has hit us here. It's eventually going to harm all of us personally. To turn the tide requires something like conversion — a sense that something's wrong, and I must live differently as a consequence.

Because of the tragic factor in history, Adams insists that religious liberalism must come to terms with the necessity of power. He puts it this way: "Anything that exists effectively in history must have form. And the creation of a form requires power. It requires not only the power of thought but also the power of organization and the organization of power." A lifelong activist, Adams saw participation in organizations dedicated to reform as a mark of authentic faith. "A purely spiritual religion," he said, "is a purely spurious religion."

Despite the tragedy that bedevils history and the necessity to wield power in response, Adams believed we have the resources available to make meaningful change in our world. These resources, in his view, justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. I agree. There's always reason to hope.

What are these resources? The ability of human beings to work together toward a common purpose. Adams says, "It is through group participation that sensitivity and commitment to values are given institutional expression. It is through groups that social power is organized. It is through groups that community needs are brought to the focus

that affects public policy. It is through groups that the cultural atmosphere of a community and a nation is created."

All Souls is one such group. Today we begin the 200<sup>th</sup> year of this congregation, an anniversary we will celebrate to a fare-thee-well in November. In 2019 as in 1819, storms of nativism and nationalism fuel the rise of authoritarian tyrants, both here at home and around the world. Now as then, people came to All Souls motivated by something like conversion — a conviction that there's something wrong and that something needs to be different. We need to be different. I need to be different.

We achieve meaningful change through the power of organization and the organization of power, which has for two centuries been a hallmark of this congregation. We have worked together to make a difference and will again. Together, we have the power.

The contemporary American poet Marge Piercy illustrates our collective power in this excerpt from her poem "The Low Road."

Three people are a delegation,  
a committee, a wedge. With four  
you can play bridge and start  
an organization. With six  
you can rent a whole house,  
eat pie for dinner with no  
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.  
A dozen make a demonstration.  
A hundred fill a hall.  
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;  
ten thousand, power and your own paper;  
a hundred thousand, your own media;  
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,  
it starts when you care  
to act, it starts when you do  
it again after they said no,  
it starts when you say We  
and know who you mean, and each  
day you mean one more.