



# EXPLORATION

## Theological Reflection

### Readings

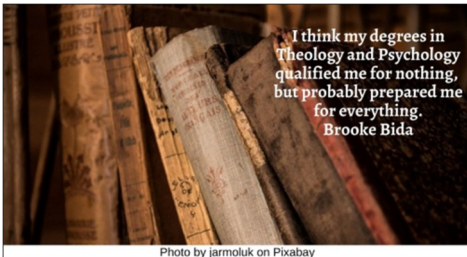


Photo by jarmoluk on Pixabay

#### 1. *Cathedral of the World*

by Rev. Forrest Church

Imagine awaking one morning from a deep and dreamless sleep to find yourself in the nave of a vast cathedral. Like a child newborn, ...you open your eyes upon a world unseen, indeed unimaginable, before. It is a world of light and dancing shadow, stone and glass, life and death.

...Welcome to the Cathedral of the World.

Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows without number.... Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.

Because the cathedral is so vast, our time so short, and our vision so dim, ... we are able to contemplate only a tiny part of the cathedral.... Yet, by pondering and acting on our ruminations, we discover insights that will invest our days with meaning.

A 21<sup>st</sup> century theology based on the concept of one light and many windows offers its adherents both breadth and focus. Honoring multiple religious approaches, it only excludes the truth claims of absolutists. That is because fundamentalists claim that the light shines through their window only....

Skeptics draw the opposite conclu-

sion. Seeing the bewildering variety of windows and observing the folly of the worshippers, they conclude there is no light. But the windows are not the light. They are where the light shines through.

We shall never see the light directly, only as refracted through the windows of the cathedral. Prompting humility, life's mystery lies hidden. The light is veiled. Yet, being halfway in size between the creation itself and our body's smallest constituent part, that we can encompass with our minds the universe that encompasses us is a cause for great wonder. Awakened by the light, we stand in the cathedral, trembling with awe.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/newuu/workshop1/cathedral>

#### 2. *Why Diversity?* by Anonymous *About The Author: The author self-identifies as African American and psychology professional.*

Frequently I am asked, 'Why should the UUA [Unitarian Universalist Association] spend money, time, and resources on racial and cultural diversity?' I sometimes feel burdened with the expectation that I should have an answer because I am a psychologist by profession and because I happen to be an African American.

...The reason I want racial and cultural diversity in the UUA extends beyond issues of numbers, theology, or money. It has to do with the fact that this is the right thing to do. The religious challenge of our time moves us to open our doors to all and to promote wholeness in the midst of diversity.

Many people seem to want racial and cultural diversity up to a point. I believe that true inclusivity removes that point.

Learning how to develop, value, and appreciate cross-cultural relationships is to everyone's benefit. To embrace a world where there is racial and cultural diversity, Euro-Americans, Native

Americans, African Americans, Hispanics, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, people of all sexual orientations and all ages, people dealing with physical and emotional limitations, women and men must be willing to examine themselves and reach out to the community.

When everyone comes to the table for discussion, there will be differences of opinion, and yet we can ignore no one. All bring gifts to be shared. All can be honored and enriched. To build a racially and culturally diverse community is to build a world of beauty and power. It is the right thing to do. Being able to honestly and lovingly share gifts, pains, and appreciations with each other is what religion is truly about. A blessing awaits us all, and it will come when we experience the richness of racial and cultural diversity.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/why-diversity>

#### 3. *Five Smooth Stones*

per James Luther Adams

Prior to going into battle with the Philistine, Goliath, the shepherd David chose five smooth stones out of a nearby brook to use with his sling. The stones were the weapons that he used to defeat Goliath. In a sense, they were his power arrayed against the power of the sword that Goliath wielded. In the end, the five smooth stones proved to be decisive. In a 1939 essay, *Guiding Principles of a Free Faith*, James Luther Adams identified the five smooth stones of liberal religion, which are the basis for the power that we wield in the world as a religious movement. **First**, Adams said that revelation is continuous, which means that truth is neither static nor absolute. New truth is always emerging and everything in existence is subject to critique and, as appropriate, modification. **Second**, relations among people should be based on consent, not coercion. This is the basis for democracy, which, when practiced



well, can be powerfully transforming.

**Third**, as religious people, we have a moral obligation to establish a just and loving community, both within a congregation and in the wider world. Our church does not exist solely for the benefit of our members, but for the benefit of the world. **Fourth**, good things don't just happen, people make them happen." **Fifth**, the resources available for change justify an ultimate optimism. This does not mean that the change that we desire on behalf of justice will be either easy or quick, but the resources do exist if we have the energy, courage, and wisdom to obtain and use those resources.

Source: Touchstones

#### 4. *The Power of Reflection*

by Donald Altman

Stressed? Distracted? Disconnected? Burned-out? The ability to stop what we are doing and reflect is being lost in our modern, fast-paced world. Going on long retreats and sitting in meditation for hours is a luxury many can't afford. We need a Mindfulness for the 21st Century — a simple, accessible, and transformative practice to use throughout the day.

...Reflection brings us back to the original meaning of mindfulness (*sati*), which is self-recollection and self-remembrance. In other words, it helps us regain the fragmented parts of ourselves that are lost to distraction, multi-tasking, and an emphasis on speed.

We all possess this special capacity to pause and look inward. This is made possible through the most human part of the brain — that area right behind the eyebrow ridge — which is crucial for empathy and connection, as well as emotional regulation and even impulse control. Distraction produced by overstimulation, for example, keeps this part of the brain from getting activated and strengthened!

That's why pausing throughout the day and asking yourself questions such as, "How can I come back to this moment, how can I notice one precious, ordinary thing in my surroundings, and what is happening in my body?" is crucial to developing the whole self...

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/ecourses/course/view/10241/the-power-of-reflection>

#### 5. *Five Tasks for Doing Theology*

by Rev. Dan Harper

**First Task:** Learn basic Unitarian Universalist religious skills; learn how we Unitarian Universalists do religion.

**Second Task:** Learn what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist; learn and explore our faith tradition, our Unitarian Universalist identity. ...

**Third Task:** Learn to discern who we are as persons of faith, as religious beings. This task consists of at least three parts: (1) discerning your religious identity as an individual member of this faith community, (2) discerning your role within your faith community (which will change over time), and (3) discerning your role in the wider world as a faithful person.

**Fourth Task:** Engage in theological reflection; think about how you do religion and how to find the words to talk about what you think. This task often is ceded to theological schools...—but it should also be happening in congregations all the time.

**Fifth Task:** Having discerned who you are as a religious being and gone on to theological reflection, establish and refine your religious practices. You might learn new techniques of prayer or meditation, learn a new role in your congregation, engage in social action or find a job consistent with your faith.

These last three tasks can become an ongoing cycle leading to continued growth and deepening of faith."

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/youth/wholeness/workshop2/handout2>

#### 6. *Questions With Great Power*

by Peter Block

...Traditional questions ...have little power to create an alternative future. These are the questions the world is constantly asking. It is understandable that we ask them, but they carry no power; and in the asking, each of these

questions is an obstacle....

...The hidden agenda in ...

[traditional] questions is to maintain dominance and to be right. They urge us to raise standards, measure more closely, and return to basics, purportedly to create accountability. ...[Yet] these questions have no power; they only carry force.

...Questions that have the power to make a difference are ones that engage people in an intimate way, confront them with their freedom, and invite them to cocreate a future possibility.

...Powerful questions are the ones that cause you to become an actor as soon as you answer them. You no longer have the luxury of being a spectator of whatever it is you are concerned about.

...A great question has three qualities: (1) It is ambiguous. There is no attempt to try to precisely define what is meant by the question. This requires each person to bring their own, personal meaning into the room. (2) It is personal. All passion, commitment, and connection grow out of what is most personal. We need to create space for the personal. (3) It evokes anxiety. All that matters makes us anxious. It is our wish to escape from anxiety that steals our aliveness. If there is no edge to the question, there is no power.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/19406>

#### 7. *Doubting Rachel*

by Rachel Held Evans

...The generation before mine worked diligently to prepare their children to make an intelligent case for Christianity. We were constantly reminded of the superiority of our own worldview and the shortcomings of all others. We learned that as Christians, we alone had access to absolute truth and could win any argument. ...As a result, many of us entered the world with both an unparalleled level of conviction and a crippling lack of curiosity. So ready with the answers, we didn't know what the questions were anymore. So prepared to defend the faith, we missed the thrill of discovering it for ourselves. So convinced we had God right, it never occurred to us that we



All theological language is an approximation, offered tentatively in holy awe. Richard Rohr  
Photo by AD, Images on Pixabay

might be wrong. In short, we never learned to doubt. Doubt is a difficult animal to master because it requires that we learn the difference between doubting God and doubting what we believe about God. The former has the potential to destroy faith; the latter has the power to enrich and refine it. The former is a vice; the latter a virtue. ... If I've learned anything... it's that doubt is the mechanism by which faith evolves. It helps us cast off false fundamentals so that we can recover what has been lost or embrace what is new. It is a refining fire, a hot flame that keeps our faith alive and moving and bubbling about, where certainty would only freeze it on the spot. ... What my generation is learning the hard way is that faith is not about defending conquered ground but about discovering new territory. Faith isn't about being right, or settling down, or refusing to change. Faith is a journey....

Source: *Faith Unraveled: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask Questions* by Rachel Held Evans

## Wisdom Story

### Turtles

Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher and mathematician, gave an astronomy lecture about the sun and the planets orbiting it, as well as on other information about the solar system. He spoke about the rotation of the earth and its annual elliptical journey around the sun. He described how the sun orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars and planets called the Milky Way galaxy. At the end, he asked if there were any questions.

An older woman in the back of the lecture hall stood up and objected. "Well, that all sounds good. But it's not true, in fact it's just plain silly. How can you speak all that gibberish and poppycock? That's not at all the way things are."

"Well how are they?" asked Russell. "The earth is a flat plate," she said. "And it's resting on the back of a giant turtle."

Russell smiled. "I don't see how that can be true," he said. "Because if the earth is a flat plate being held up by a turtle, what is holding the turtle up?"

"You think you are very clever, don't you, young man?" the woman replied. "But the fact is it's turtles all the way down."

Source: Adapted from an anecdote told in *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking

## Snippets

God language can tie people into knots, of course. In part, that is because "God" is not God's name. Referring to the highest power we can imagine, "God" is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each. For some the highest imaginable power will be a petty and angry tribal baron ensconced high above the clouds on a golden throne, visiting punishment on all who don't believe in him. But for others, the highest power is love, goodness, justice, or the spirit of life itself. Each of us projects our limited experience on a cosmic screen in letters as big as our minds can fashion. For those whose vision is constricted (illiberal, narrow-minded people), this can have horrific consequences. But others respond ... with broad imagination and sympathy. Answering to the highest and best within and beyond themselves, they draw lessons and fathom meaning so redemptive that surely it touches the divine. *Forrest Church*

We feel we can capture something by thinking about it. In reality, when we grasp at thoughts, the very process of trying to possess a piece of life ensures that it continually eludes us. ...

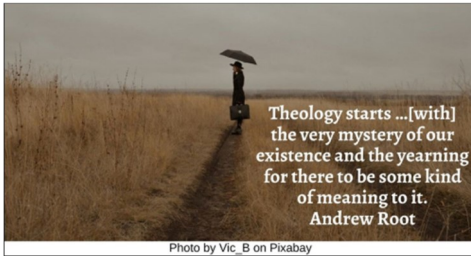
Awakening means a fundamental shift takes place. It is a shift from looking for ourselves outside in the ten thousand things to recognizing that our true nature is beyond definition. That transformation of understanding is the work of wisdom.... Wise reflection does not stop at the superficial cognition of the world, but it plumbs the depths of awareness, exploring the unmoving

ground of "knowing" within which all the apparent differences of life manifest. I like ... [the term] "radical reflection," ... since it echoes the "re-mem-bering" of ... the matrix of awareness.... The word radical has its etymological connection to "root." Radical reflection contemplates the root, the origin, the place where all things merge. *Kittisaro*

The best listeners I know pause over words. "That's an interesting way of putting it," they muse, or they ask, "What exactly do you mean by that?" The consciousness that every word is a choice, that each word has its own resonance, nuance, emotional coloring, and weight informs their sense of what is being communicated. ... The shape of sentences, the enunciation and emphasis, the images and metaphors, the idioms all give a particular character to the thoughts being expressed—sometimes, indeed, complicate or modify or even belie them. So, if we are to listen well, we must learn to listen for the "how" and "why" as well as the "what." A good listener loves words, respects them, pays attention to them, and recognizes vague approximations as a kind of falsehood. *Marilyn Chandler McEntyre*

My theology understands humanity as simultaneously fragile and resilient, weak and strong, greedy and generous, mean and compassionate. I see the divine spark in the tension between those opposites. I see the divine in the generosity of those who often have the least to give, in kindness offered by those who would arguably have the most reason to be bitter. The divine is like love in this regard: irrational, unexpected, and beautiful. *Dawn Fortune*

Theology is—or should be—a species of poetry, which read quickly or encountered in a hubbub of noise makes no sense. You have to open yourself to a poem with a quiet, receptive mind, in the same way you might listen to a difficult piece of music... If you seize upon a poem and try to extort its meaning before you are ready, it remains opaque. If you bring your own personal agenda to bear upon it, the poem will close upon itself like a clam, because you have de-



nied its unique and separate identity, its inviolate holiness. *Karen Armstrong*

To make bread or love, to dig in the earth, to feed an animal or cook for a stranger—these activities require no extensive commentary, no lucid theology. All they require is someone willing to bend, reach, chop, stir. Most of these tasks are so full of pleasure that there is no need to complicate things by calling them holy. And yet these are the same activities that change lives, sometimes all at once and sometimes more slowly, the way dripping water changes stone. In a world where faith is often construed as a way of thinking, bodily practices remind the willing that faith is a way of life. *Barbara Brown Taylor*

A new theology was evolving, one that had a faith-in-death clause. It was evolved when I kicked a dead waterbug on the pavement. It was dried out, hollowed, emptied, like some kind of shell. Maybe, I thought, its body is a shell, maybe all bodies are shells. We hatch and die. Our spirit or something like that is the yoke: it lives the real life, the true life. It wasn't comforting. *Arthur Nersesian*

There is a thought among some brands of theology that souls are waiting up in heaven to be born. Now how in the world anybody comes up with that is beyond me, and how you can be so sure of that is also beyond me. I always like to go back to Snoopy's theological writings, which he called, *Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong*. And that's the way I feel. These things fascinate me, and I like to talk about them with other people, and hear what they think. But I'm always a little bit leery of people who are sure that they're right about things that nobody's ever been able to prove, and never will be able to prove. *Charles M. Schulz*

If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, of self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God's name, it was bad theology.

*Karen Armstrong*

So, it's pretty simple for me: Love when you can. Do the work that is yours to do. Be the person that is yours to be at any given time. Think to wish for what is yours at this very moment. To love. To serve. To touch. To know. Think to wish for all that is yours to have. Think to wish for all that is yours to do. And think to wish that you might be who it is that you might most fully be. Avoid wishful thinking. Avoid the traps and pitfalls of nostalgia for the past. Savor every moment as it passes. And enlist yourself in saving that which can be saved this very moment, in order that it, too, may endure for others to enjoy.

*Forrest Church*

## Questions

1. In reading #1, Rev. Forrest Church writes about the “cathedral of the world” with its many windows and countless chapels, only some of which we will experience in a lifetime. His 21<sup>st</sup> century theology of “many windows, one light,” is the classic UU goal of unity within diversity. Do you agree? Why or why not? Have you glimpsed the light of which he writes? What was the experience like? What did it teach you?
2. In reading #2, an anonymous African American psychologist pleads for racial and cultural diversity within the UUA. In your experience, how has/does racial and cultural diversity in a room change/enrich a conversation? Is our theological reflection constrained/impoverished when racial and cultural diversity absent? Why/How? As voices become more diverse in the process of conversation and theological reflection, what are some of the challenges that might arise? How can these be addressed?
3. In reading #3 about the *Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion*, James Luther Adams asserts that (1) revelation is continuous, thus truth is not sealed, (2) relations should be based on consent, not coercion, (3) a moral obligation exists to establish a just and loving community, (4) good things happen because of people's actions, and (5) the resources available for change justify an ultimate optimism. Which of these are especially important to theological reflection? Why? Is there something you would add? Why? Which of our seven principles are in service of theological reflection? Why?
4. In reading #4, Donald Altman writes about the importance of reflection. He likens it to mindfulness and suggests that it become a daily practice. Have you turned inward and reflected about your life and other matters of consequence? If no, why not? If yes, was it a useful activity? Why or why not? It would seem that self-reflection is the precursor to theological reflection, since Unitarian Universalism values experience so highly. How can self-reflection inform and enrich theological reflection? What is the value, per Altman, about noticing one precious ordinary thing in your surroundings?
5. In reading #5, Rev. Dan Harper lists five tasks in undertaking theological reflection. These are (1) learn how Unitarian Universalists do religion, (2) deepen your Unitarian Universalist identity, (3) discernment, (4) undertake theological reflection, and (5) engage in meaningful actions like spiritual practice or social action. What does Unitarian Universalism mean to you? What has deepened your identity as a Unitarian Universalist? In what ways does your congregation engage in theological reflection, in making meaning, in seeking wisdom? In what ways do you do this?
6. In reading #6, Peter Block writes about questions with great power, noting that traditional questions are



about dominance and being right, not about new possibilities. Have you encountered traditional questions and discussions that yielded next to nothing and/or maintained the status quo? What were the circumstances? By contrast, powerful questions are (1) ambiguous, (2) personal, and (3) anxiety generating. Why do you think these three qualities are important? Block writes, “All that matters makes us anxious. It is our wish to escape from anxiety that steals our aliveness. If there is no edge to the question, there is no power.” In the current global environment, what makes you anxious? How do these things affect you? What questions can you create to engage one of these issues that might move people beyond the status quo and generate personal power and/or collective grassroots power?

7. In reading #7, Rachel Held Evans writes about being so indoctrinated by her faith growing up that it left her “with both an unparalleled level of conviction (uppercase truth) and a crippling lack of curiosity.” By contrast, how has Unitarian Universalism moderated your conviction (lowercase truth) and nurtured your curiosity? As she laments, she never learned to doubt growing up. What is the value of doubt? While Evans’ journey is in another faith tradition, she discovers a liberating truth writing, “Faith isn’t about being right, or settling down, or refusing to change. Faith is a journey....” In what ways has your faith and theological reflection involved a journey? What beliefs have you abandoned? What new truths and beliefs have you embraced along your journey?

### The following questions are related to the Snippets.

8. The Rev. Dawn Fortune sees “the divine in the generosity of those who often have the least to give.” She sees the divine, as well, in the kindness of those who could be bitter, and in love, which can be “irrational, unexpected, and beautiful.” What is the divine to you? Where have you seen it disclosed?
9. The Rev. Forrest Church shattered traditional God language by offering a new definition writing, “God’ is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each.” Some will embrace “a petty and angry tribal baron” sitting on a throne in the sky, while others envision “the highest power” as “goodness, justice, or the spirit of life itself.” Unhinging God from traditional concepts can be compelling. In this context, what could “God” be for you? Why? What are some of your ultimate values?
10. Arthur Nersesian does not take comfort in the “faith-in-death clause” in Christianity. Theologically, have you struggled with Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity? About what? Nersesian wonders if our body is the shell and if our spirit (or soul, personality, mind, etc.) is the essence, is our true life. What are your thoughts about this kind of dualism?
11. Kittsaro writes about the importance of reflection, which he calls “radical reflection,” as an aspect of awakening. (Reflection has a process of learning from experience using self-inquiry.) How have you used reflection (i.e., self-reflection, theological reflection, etc.) as a means of learning from your experience, about your life, and/or about life?
12. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre writes about the process and importance of listening well (aka deep listening), listening that goes beyond the words to understand the what, how, and why, as well as non-verbal cues. Have you been deeply listened to by another person? What were the circumstances? What impact did it have on you? Have you practiced deep listening? What challenges did it involve? What benefits?
13. Karen Armstrong writes that theology should be regarded and engaged as poetry. Of course, poetry can also be a source for theological reflection. In her poem, *The Summer Day*, Mary Oliver wrote, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” How would you answer her question? Armstrong observes, “If you bring your own personal agenda to bear upon it, the poem will close upon itself like a clam....” How does a personal agenda get in the way of listening? Of discussions about matters of consequence? Do you have a favorite poem? Could it be a source of theological reflection? Are there lessons that you have taken from that poem?
14. Barbara Brown Taylor writes that many important “activities require no extensive commentary, no lucid theology.” These include making bread or love, digging in the earth, feeding an animal, or cooking for a stranger. Yet all of these can be sources for theological reflection. The best theology may be the one that grows out of these earthly tasks. Consider cooking for a stranger. What does this involve beyond the cooking, and why? What gets in the way of such an activity? What surprises and delights might emerge from it? Such questions prompt theological reflection.
15. Charles Schulz was concerned about some brands of theology that claim “they’re right about things that nobody’s ever been able to prove, and never will be able to prove.” He notes that Snoopy called his theological writings, *Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?* How would you answer this question? At its best, our tradition expects that we may be wrong. Emerson wrote, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds....” He counselled, “Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though



it contradicts everything you said today.” Have you been able to do this? Why is it so hard to admit that we were/are wrong about something? Have you encountered the “hobgoblin of a little mind?” What did you think/feel? How did you respond? (Note: Emerson’s admonition reflects James Luther Adams first smooth stone: “revelation is continuous, truth is not sealed.”)

16. Karen Armstrong distinguishes between good theology and bad theology. Her analysis is based upon “deeds, not creeds,” which has always been an interpretive lens in our tradition. What, for you, are important aspects of good theology? Why? Have you encountered bad theology? What elements were involved? How did you react? Why?
17. The Rev. Forrest Church sums up his theology in very personal terms, beginning, “Love when you can. Do the work that is yours to do. Be the person that is yours to be at any given time.” In a way, it is characterized by mindful action. Since the purpose of theological reflection is to “build your own theology,” as Rev. Richard Gilbert teaches, what are some of the tenets of your own theology? How did you come to embrace these? How have they changed you?

