



EXPLORATION

Prophetic Imperative

Readings

White feelings should never be held in higher regard than black lives. Rachel Cargile



Photo by Life Matters from Pexels

1. *To Be a Hope* by Cornel West

Since the prophetic fire lit by hope has been so damped by neo-liberal chatter about “hope,” I prefer to be a hope rather than talk about hope. Being a hope is being in motion, on the move with body on the line, mind set on freedom, soul full of courage, and heart shot through with love. Being a hope is forging moral and spiritual fortitude, putting on intellectual armor, and being willing to live and die for the empowerment of the wretched of the earth.

Race matters in the twenty-first century are part of a moral and spiritual war over resources, power, souls, and sensibilities. In the face of the American way of war — defeat, destroy, devastate — I have the black freedom struggle and the Black musical tradition. I also pull from the rich resources of the LGBTQ communities, the feminist movement, Indigenous peoples’ struggles, the environmental justice and otherly-abled communities, and immigrant rights and anti-imperialist organizations. This moral and spiritual way of war — remembrance, reverence, and resurrection — yields a radical love and revolutionary praxis. We remember the great visionary and exemplary figures and movements. These precious memories focus our attention on things that really matter — not spectacle, image, money and status but integrity, honesty, dignity and generosity. This focus locates and situates us in a long tradition of love warriors — not

just polished professionals or glitzy celebrities — but courageous truth tellers who fell in love with the quest of justice, freedom, and beauty.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28560>

2. *Justice is Reestablishing “Right Relationships”*

by Jim Wallis

The politics of community will also require a more profound understanding of the meaning of justice. Both liberal and conservative notions of justice are based on widely assumed and well-established Western doctrines of individualism. Justice is rooted in individual human rights for both the Right and the Left. But such an individualistic idea of justice is now failing us in the midst of a global crisis that cries out for a new and deeper sense of connection and community.

Here again, religious insights can help us. In the Hebrew Scriptures, one finds the more holistic concept of *shalom* as the best definition of justice. It is a deeper and wider notion than the securing of individual rights. The vision of *shalom* requires us to reestablish ‘right relationships.’ It is a call to justice in the whole community and for the entire habitat. *Shalom* is an inclusive notion of justice extending even to the rest of God’s creatures and whole of creation. Restoring right relationships takes us further than respecting individual rights. It pushes us to begin to see ourselves as part of a community, even as members of an extended but deeply interconnected global family, and ultimately as strands in the web of life that we all share and depend upon. The biblical vision of *shalom* could be a basis for a new politics of community and the social healing we so need.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/quotes/quotations/view/23953/spiritual-quotations>

3. *Prophetic Congregations*

by Rev. Meg Riley

Prophetic UU congregations share three central characteristics. First, they draw from the deepest parts of Unitarian and Universalist theology, committing themselves to the wisdom of those theologies. Our work to co-create the holy in this world is most effective when it builds on perspectives gained by the hard experience of those who came before us. Prophetic congregations draw strength for today through connecting to the essential insights of our ancestors.

Second, prophetic congregations embody radical caring—radical in the sense of the very roots of the place, its central mission. You sometimes hear *caring*, the pastoral aspect of congregations, described as the opposite of prophetic, but this dualism is false and destructive. Radical caring is both prophetic and pastoral.

Third, while drawing on our past and on caring in the present, prophetic congregations orient themselves squarely toward the future. Prophetic eyes see through the lens of hope—not hope from naïveté, or from casting our gazes away from oppression and suffering, but hope as a spiritually disciplined response, a commitment to action.

Source: <http://www.uularamie.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Prophetic-Congregations.pdf>

4. *On White Supremacy Culture and Why I Use These Words*

by Carolina Krawarik-Graham

A common “issue” in anti-racism work is the use of the term culture of white supremacy or white supremacy culture, which many people view as charged, controversial, or even deeply offensive. Sometimes there are even challenges/dismissals from people in positions of power/authority about it.

For me, use of the term is a necessity for these reasons: Because it’s used commonly by many prominent writers



and speakers on the subject of race and privilege, and one cannot actively pursue this work without coming across it

Because it's very uncomfortable for me to read/write/say white supremacy culture on so many different levels, not the least of which has to do with sensitivities around my own national/cultural heritage, so it's my way of directly challenging my own right to comfort

Because when this term is used by someone from the dominant group (in this case, white), it is a very different experience, generally less antagonizing, and a bit more difficult to dismiss than when it comes from someone who's marginalized (in this case, someone of color)—and it is a way that I exercise my privilege toward laying groundwork for others' voices

And lastly, because I have been asked to use these words by people in oppressed communities, both directly and indirectly, because “white supremacy culture” most accurately and succinctly describes the/their harsh experience of systemic discrimination. It is one of the ways in which I express my ally-ship.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/white-supremacy-culture-and-why-i-use-these-words>

5. *We Are Not Done* by Rev.

Audette Fulbright Fulson

Do not think we are finished—oh no, we will never be finished, never just done until the light of justice is lit behind every eye.

Do not think we will be silent—no, there will not be silence until the world has sung the names of the dead with full throats and, still, we will sing on.

Do not think fear is the end of us—oh you are broken in mind and heart if you even imagine that our fear for our lives is the end of this story.

We are braver than you have ever conceived and you will not be the end of us.

We have come to take back the world, the world that is the inheritance of better children, better lovers, better days.

There will be love again but justice is our demand now. You will not take us down. We are endless, firelit, determined, and we are coming for you.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/we-are-not-done>

6. *Prophetic Love*

by Tavis Smiley & Cornel West

How can we fulfill Walter Rauschenbusch's call for “justice for all, service to others, and a love that liberates” in the troubling 21st century? ... We need leaders in the prophetic ... tradition, like Rauschenbusch, King, and Gandhi.

... We ... ask the central question raised by ... Mark Taylor: “Whatever happened to the notion of love in our public discourse?”

... Love for us means everyone is worthy of a life of dignity and decency — just because. Not because of where they were born, who they know, where they live, where they were educated, where they work, or what the size of their annual income is. The sheer humanity of each and every one of us warrants our steadfast commitment to the well-being of each other.

This is what Dr. King had in mind when he suggested that justice is what love looks like in public.

... This is what Dorothy Day had in mind when she embodied a dark and dangerous love.

This is what Nelson Mandela had in mind when he opted for justice over revenge.

This is what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel had in mind when he spoke of the compassion of the Hebrew prophets.

... This is what Mahatma Gandhi had in mind when he lived the loving soul force he talked about.

This is what that first-century Palestinian Jew named Jesus had in mind when he commanded us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Lest we mislead you, this is not only about a loving heart; rather, it is also about finding loving social (structural and institutional) alternatives to the nightmare of poverty that can be the

dawning of a new day for poor people everywhere.

Source: <https://www spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28346>

7. *Peaceful Neighbor*

by Michael G. Long

... When we place [Fred] Rogers's spiritual beliefs in their historical perspective — a time when Billy Graham's judgmental God was wildly popular — we can clearly see just how prophetic Rogers's compassion was. (Fred Rogers was actually first on television briefly in Canada. He was followed there by the children's show, *Mr. Dressup*, starring Ernie Coombs.)

... Rogers took his cues from the parables of Jesus. His compassion did not come to expression in marches, rallies, and public protests, but in the quiet of a studio, behind the staring eye of a camera, and on a set he built for sharing stories ... — a place where individuals seek to resolve conflicts peacefully and love one another and the world as fully as possible. ... This is the rich legacy of Fred Rogers; out of compassion, he built a neighborhood of peace and love just around the corner from the violent and unjust center of U.S. politics and economics.

... As a compassionate human being, he was also a ... prophet and peacemaker who sought to accept us as we are, with all our violence and injustice, while at the same time inviting us to visit a neighborhood marked by unconditional love for one another and the world ... so that we can go back home and build similar neighborhoods in our own communities.

... Can we really build neighborhoods of compassion? By taking Fred Rogers seriously, rather than dismissing him as a lightweight or deifying him in the clouds, perhaps we can at last see that his own steadfast commitment to peace in a time marked by relentless wars and terror gives us reason to hope against hope that the *Neighborhood of Make-Believe* — where King Friday orders his troops to put their weapons away — can indeed become our very own.

Source: <https://www spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/27923>



Wisdom Story

Wake Up to Injustice

by Gail Forsyth-Vail

...Rip van Winkle ...liked to share stories and was kind ... to children, but he avoided hard work or anything he thought unpleasant. One day ...he found a nice grassy place on a mountain and ...fell fast asleep. But this was no ordinary nap. Rip Van Winkle slept for over 20 years!

...When he went up the mountain, he lived in a British colony. When he came down 20 years later, he lived in the new United States.

This ...old and famous story ...was a favorite of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. It is one he told a lot. ...He talked about the Civil Rights movement, and urged all those who heard him to wake up, to not sleep through the big changes that were happening all around as Black people and their supporters worked to gain equality rights. He asked white people in particular not to be asleep and ignore injustice. He urged people to Wake Up!

...A new set of leaders from [Black Lives Matter] ...are sending the same message..., "Wake Up! Many of the injustices- much of the unfairness- is still here. And there are some new injustices. Wake up!"

... "Wake Up to Injustice!"

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/story/wake-injustice>

Snippets

"We are a gentle and generous people. But let us not forget our anger. May it fuel not only our commitment to compassion but also our commitment to make fundamental changes. Our vision of the Beloved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the

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privilege of the few to be accepted

as just and even holy. Our religious vision must again and again ask the Gospel question "Who is my neighbor" and strive always to include more and more of us as we intone the words that gave birth to this nation, "We the people..." We are, and we should be, both a gentle, and an angry people."

Rev. William G. Sinkford

"The burning of a book is a sad, sad sight, for even though a book is nothing but ink and paper, it feels as if the ideas contained in the book are disappearing as the pages turn to ashes and the cover and binding--which is the term for the stitching and glue that holds the pages together--blacken and curl as the flames do their wicked work. When someone is burning a book, they are showing utter contempt for all of the thinking that produced its ideas, all of the labor that went into its words and sentences, and all of the trouble that befell the author...." *Lemony Snicket*

"Prisoners are ideal employees. They do not receive benefits or pensions. They earn under a dollar an hour. Some are forced to work for free. They are not paid overtime. They are forbidden to organize and strike. They must show up on time. They are not paid for sick days or granted vacations. They cannot alter working conditions or complain about safety hazards. If they are disobedient, or attempt to protest their pitiful wages and working conditions, they lose their jobs and are often segregated in isolation cells. The roughly one million prisoners who work for corporations and government industries in the American prison system are a blueprint for what the corporate state expects us all to become. And corporations have no intention of permitting prison reforms to reduce the size of their bonded workforce. In fact, they are seeking to replicate these conditions throughout the society." *Chris Hedges*

"I told them we're tired of the culture wars, tired of Christianity getting entangled with party politics and power. Millennials want to be known by what we're for, I said, not just what we're against. We don't want to choose between science and religion or between

our intellectual integrity and our faith. Instead, we long for our churches to be safe places to doubt, to ask questions, and to tell the truth, even when it's uncomfortable. We want to talk about the tough stuff—biblical interpretation, religious pluralism, sexuality, racial reconciliation, and social justice—but without predetermined conclusions or simplistic answers. We want to bring our whole selves through the church doors, without leaving our hearts and minds behind, without wearing a mask."

Rachel Held Evans

"One of the biggest issues with mainstream feminist writing has been the way the idea of what constitutes a feminist issue is framed. We rarely talk about basic needs as a feminist issue. Food insecurity and access to quality education, safe neighborhoods, a living wage, and medical care are all feminist issues. Instead of a framework that focuses on helping women get basic needs met, all too often the focus is not on survival but on increasing privilege. For a movement that is meant to represent all women, it often centers on those who already have most of their needs met."

Mikki Kendall

"Saving the world requires saving democracy. That requires well-informed citizens. Conservation, environment, poverty, community, education, family, health, economy- these combine to make one quest: liberty and justice for all. Whether one's special emphasis is global warming or child welfare, the cause is the same cause. And justice comes from the same place being human comes from: compassion."

Carl Safina

"I found myself pondering the specific Christian American obsession with abortion and gay rights. Phil Zuckerman For millions of Americans, these are the great societal "sins" of the day. It isn't bogus wars, systemic poverty, failing schools, child abuse, domestic violence, health care for profit, poorly paid social workers, under-funded hospitals, gun saturation, or global warming that riles or worries the conservative, Bible-believers of America." *Phil Zuckerman, 2008*



“Avoiding conflict isn’t peacemaking. Avoiding conflict means running away from the mess while peacemaking means running into the middle of it. Peacemaking means addressing those issues that caused conflict in the first place. Peacemaking can never be separated from doing justice. They go hand in hand. Peacemaking means having to stir the waters on the way to peace. Peacemaking means speaking the truth in love, but speaking the truth nonetheless.” *Peggy Haymes*

“Entomologist Dr. Ovid Byron speaking to television journalist, Tina, who said, re: global warming, “Scientists of course are in disagreement about whether this is happening and whether humans have a role.” He replies: “The Arctic is genuinely collapsing. Scientists used to call these things the canary in the mine. What they say now is, ‘The canary is dead.’ We are at the top of Niagara Falls, Tina, in a canoe. There is an image for your viewers. We got here by drifting, but we cannot turn around for a lazy paddle back when you finally stop pissing around. We have arrived at the point of an audible roar. Does it strike you as a good time to debate the existence of the falls?” *Barbara Kingsolver, 2012*

“I have received no assurance that anything we can do will eradicate suffering. I think the best results are obtained by people who work quietly away at limited objectives, such as the abolition of the slave trade, or prison reform, or factory acts, or tuberculosis, not by those who think they can achieve universal justice, or health, or peace. I think the art of life consists in tackling each immediate evil as well as we can.” *C.S. Lewis*

Questions

1. In reading #1, Cornel West makes an important shift from hoping “to be a hope rather than talk about hope,” a shift from a somewhat passive stance to a very active one. To be a hope is, in a sense, to be both a prophet (i.e., a truth-teller and a forth-teller who speaks of a better future) and what West calls a “love warrior,” which, as he writes, is a courageous truth teller who falls “in love with the quest of justice, freedom, and beauty.” In these trying times, what role does hope play in your life? What are the challenges and rewards in the shift from “hoping” to “being a hope?” How does a prophetic imperative rely on hope to motivate us in struggles for justice that are both long and difficult? What would you need to do to “be a hope?”
2. In reading #2, Jim Wallis asserts that *shalom* is “the best definition of justice,” because it moves beyond individual rights to what we would call beloved community, and then goes further, per our 7th principle, to “the web of life that we all share and depend upon.” The work of *shalom* is the work of restoring “right relationships.” Why is this important in pursuing any prophetic imperative? What are the challenges of restoring right relationships across political differences? How would you balance individual rights with the justice for a community? Wallis wants to extend *shalom* to all of creation? Does this make sense? Why or why not?
3. In reading #3, Meg Riley enumerates three central characteristics of prophetic UU congregations: (1) they draw deeply on UU theology; (2) they practice radical caring; and (3) they focus on the future through the lens of hope. Which of these are particularly relevant to you? Why? Are there other characteristics that you would add? What? Why? Is your congregation prophetic? Why or why not? Should UU congregations work to become prophetic?

- Why or why not?
4. In reading #4, Carolina Krawarik-Graham writes about why she used the term “white supremacy culture.” While many people focus on racism, the admission of the existence of a white supremacy culture raises the discussion to a whole new and more disturbing level. Are white supremacy or white supremacy culture terms with which you are comfortable? Why or why not? Work on any prophetic imperative requires social analysis to understand what factors are involved. How does a shift from racism to white supremacy culture shift your understanding of the challenges face by people of color? What can be done to address white supremacy culture?
 5. In reading #5, Audette Fulson offers a moving litany about our ability to act on behalf of others and ourselves despite our fear. As you survey the world, what elicits fear and/or despair in you? When this happens, what helps you overcome the fear, the despair? Is Fulson being too combative when she concludes, “we are coming for you?” As you think about individuals and groups who are intent on “destroying domestic tranquility” and “oppressing people,” who deserves your anger? Why? What would be the goal of your concerns? Her goal, though motivated by anger, is focused on those who “are broken in mind and heart.” As Fulson writes, “we will never be finished ...until the light of justice is lit behind every eye.” For Fulson, the prophetic imperative is driven, in part, by a desire to transform those who do harm in order “to take back the world.” When have you experienced righteous indignation? How could that be channeled into action “to take back the world” “until the light of justice is lit behind every eye?”
 6. In reading #6, Tavis Smiley and Cornel West urge us to cultivate and act upon a prophetic love, a “love that liberates” motivated by the belief that “everyone is worthy of a life of dignity and decency.”



Photo by StockSnap on Pixabay

This recalls our first principle. Notably, for them, a loving heart is not enough. Their prophetic imperative is “loving social (structural and institutional) alternatives to the nightmare of poverty.” How does poverty undermine “a life of dignity and decency?” In the typical concern for and focus on the middle class, are the poor ignored? Why or why not? How can poverty be addressed through “structural and institutional alternatives?”

7. In reading #7, Michael Long portrays children’s television personality Fred Rogers (similar to Ernie Coombs in Canada) as a “prophet and peacemaker who sought to accept us as we are, with all our violence and injustice, while at the same time inviting us to visit a neighborhood marked by unconditional love for one another and the world ...so that we can go back home and build similar neighborhoods in our own communities.” In a sense, Rogers’ *Neighborhood of Make-Believe* was a Beloved Community. What value do you place on Beloved Community? Have you experienced it, or at least a glimmer of it in some setting? What was that like? What contributes to the creation of a Beloved Community? What hinders it from coming into reality? For Long, a Beloved Community is a neighborhood of compassion. How can congregations, at a minimum, work to create a neighborhood of compassion where they are located physically?

The following questions are related to the Snippets

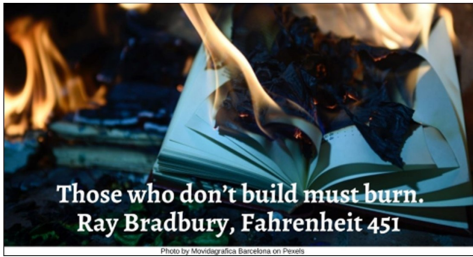
8. Bill Sinkford writes that, “We are, and we should be, both a gentle, and an angry people.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Sinkford also writes, “Our vision of the Be-

loved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the privilege of the few to be accepted as just and even holy.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Ironically, many with privilege are conveniently blind to having it. Lord Acton wrote in 1887, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Could we also state, “Privilege tends to corrupt and absolute privilege corrupts absolutely.” How does privilege corrupt? What can be done about the incredible power of privilege?

9. Lemony Snicket writes about the desecration that book burning involves. While book burning is not yet an issue, book banning is growing rapidly in the US and it occurs some in Canada. How does book banning infringe on free speech? Going back to reading #4 by Carolina Krawarik-Graham, does book banning in the US protect white supremacy culture? Why or why not? How? Looking back to your adolescence and young adulthood, what books engaged you, enraged you, transformed you, or even saved you? How would your life unfolded if those books had been banned and unavailable to you? Is the book banning protecting children or their parents who are agitating for banning this or that book? How does this enforcement of a specific moral position affect freedom of speech? What needs to be done to effectively oppose book banning, since it is a tactic employed by a small number of vocal conservative activists?
10. Chris Hedges writes about prisoners who are forced to work earning a low wage. This condition exists in the US, and, to a lesser extent, in Canada. This low wage benefits the corporations involved, but not the imprisoned workforce, many of who have a family who could benefit from fair wages earned by prisoners. Should this be considered as part of prison reform? Why or why not? What else should prison reform address? How should we understand the fact that the US has by

far the highest incarceration rate in the world, one that disproportionately consisted of people of color? Consider that, in the US, Blacks represent 13% of the general population, but over 38% of the prison population. How can this be explained or justified? How might this be addressed? How could addressing this incarceration imbalance eventually affect Black communities in positive ways?

11. Rachel Held Evans (1981-2019) was an American Christian columnist, blogger, and best-selling author. She wrote about many Millennials’ profound dissatisfaction with Christianity. Evans noted that, “we long for our churches to be safe places to doubt, to ask questions, and to tell the truth.” While that is the case in our UU congregations, did you share her concern if and when you were involved in a Christian church? Why or why not? Evans added, “We want to talk about the tough stuff—biblical interpretation, religious pluralism, sexuality, racial reconciliation, and social justice—but without predetermined conclusions or simplistic answers.” How do predetermined conclusions or simplistic answers in these areas affect the common good? How do UU congregations avoid these pitfalls?
12. Mikki Kendall, a Black author, activist, and cultural critic criticizes mainstream (white) feminism in her book, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women That a Movement Forgot*. For her, traditional feminism represents the voice of the privileged. Do you agree? Why or why not? How might the concerns of feminism change if the plight of all women were considered, not just that of the privileged? While abortion is available in Canada and not threatened, the decision of the US Supreme Court to overturn *Roe V. Wade* will eliminate a constitutional right. How should feminism respond to this? How might that response be influenced by the fact that women of color will be the group most negatively impacted by this change?



How can feminism be enriched by inviting all women to the table and listening to their experiences and wisdom?

13. Carl Safina writes, "Saving the world requires saving democracy." Do you agree? Why or why not? According to Freedom House, democracy worldwide has been in a state of ongoing decline since 2006. Have you taken democracy for granted? Why or why not? Is democracy fragile? Why or why not? How does the "Big Lie" in the US undermine democracy? What other things weaken or undermine democracy? Safina notes that democracy "requires well-informed citizens." How are citizens being ill-informed, by whom, and with what result?
14. In 2008, Phil Zuckerman pondered the "Christian American obsession with abortion and gay rights." Why has their obsession continued for some 50 years? Do you agree, as some have suggested, that the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* will eventually result in the end of privacy rights in America? Why or why not? Is the society that Canadian author Margaret Atwood's dystopian vision portrayed in her novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, a future that awaits American women, especially give legislation by Republican controlled states? Why or why not?
15. Peggy Haymes writes that, "Peacemaking means having to stir the waters on the way to peace." Why is this important? What is often not understood is that peacemaking is not smoothing over the conflict, it is going deeper into it to understand the true extent of the conflict. Why is papering over a conflict an approach that often invites more conflict? What are some examples of the end of wars being

papered over and then reigniting again? In this regard, what might peacemaking require in Putin's war in Ukraine? Is the desire for a quick ceasefire by some European leaders a recipe for papering over what has happened? Relative to Carl Safina's remarks above, how is Ukraine saving the world by fighting to save democracy?

16. In Barbara Kingsolver's 2012 novel, *Flight Behavior*, entomologist Dr. Ovid Byron is interviewed by a "television journalist ...who said, re: global warming, 'Scientists of course are in disagreement about whether this is happening and whether humans have a role.'" Why does this opinion, unsupported by science and fact, get equal air time in public discourse? A new Ipsos poll (April 2022) of people in 31 countries found that 48% worry a great deal/a fair amount about climate change. Unfortunately, the percentage in the US was 38% and, in Canada, 34%. Relative to climate change, what causes you despair? What makes you hopeful? What is our obligation relative to climate change?
17. C.S. Lewis wrote, "I have received no assurance that anything we can do will eradicate suffering." Is that your opinion? Why or why not? Lewis did not believe that we simply quit. He suggested that we "work quietly away at limited objectives, such as the abolition of the slave trade, or prison reform, or factory acts, or tuberculosis..." All prophetic imperatives. What prophetic imperative are you most interested in? Why? What would it mean to pursue it and even impact it in a positive way? Given all of the above issues, what motivates you? What gives you hope?