



EXPLORATION

Authority & Leadership

Readings

The Authority of Heresy

by Elaine Pagels

This act of choice—which the term *heresy* originally meant—leads us back to the problem that orthodoxy was invented to solve: How can we tell truth from lies? What is genuine, and thus connects us with one another and with reality, and what is shallow, self-serving, or evil? Anyone who has seen foolishness, sentimentality, delusion, and murderous rage disguised as God’s truth knows that there is no easy answer to the problem that the ancients called discernment of spirits. Orthodoxy tends to distrust our capacity to make such discriminations and insists on making them for us. Given the notorious human capacity for self-deception, we can, to an extent, thank the church for this. Many of us, wishing to be spared hard work, gladly accept what tradition teaches.

But the fact that we have no simple answer does not mean that we can evade the question. We have also seen the hazards—even terrible harm—that sometimes result from unquestioning acceptance of religious authority. Most of us, sooner or later, find that, at critical points in our lives, we must strike out on our own to make a path where none exists. What I have come to love in the wealth and diversity of our religious traditions — and the communities that sustain them — is that they offer the testimony of innumerable people to spiritual discovery. Thus, they encourage those who endeavor, in Jesus’ words, to “seek and you shall find.”

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/13994>

The Authority of the Self: Not Born, But Made

by Alice Koller

I surround myself with silence. The silence is within me, permeates my house, reaches beyond the surfaces of the outer walls and into the bordering woods. It is one silence, continuous from within me outward in all directions: above, beneath, forward, rearward, sideward. In the silence I listen, I watch, I sense, I attend, I observe. I require



Photo by Moodywalk on Unsplash

this silence. I search it out. The finely drawn treble song of a white-throated sparrow is part of it. Invasions of it by the noise of engines are torments to me.

This is my solitude.

I do not cloak it among other persons, and I know how it appears. No sign of submission, in the eyes of most men; too assured, in the view of most women; not properly respectful, to the gaze of all those in authority. I have become that third gender: a human person, the being one creates of oneself. I fell in love with my work, became fiercely protective of my freedom, started to make new rules. In this, Sartre is surely right: persons are not born but made. The choice lies escapably within ourselves: we may let it wither away, or we may take it and run.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/21225>

The Abuse of Authority

by Ta-Nehisi Coates

I write you [my son] in your fifteenth year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you have seen men in the same uniforms pummel Marlene Pinnock, someone’s grandmother, on the side of a road. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the

destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Resent the people trying to entrap your body and it can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliations. All of this is common to black people. And all of this is old for black people. No one is held responsible.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28044>

Leading Change

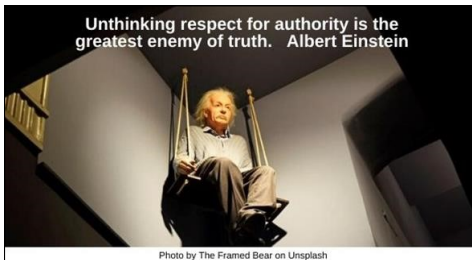
by Thomas Friedman

...Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously observed: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself.”

...I ...like the definition of leadership offered by...Ronald Heifetz, who says the role of a leader is “to help people face reality and to mobilize them to make change” as their environment changes....

...The power of a visionary leader to help a society and culture navigate its way through big moments requiring adaptation is beautifully depicted ...in the film *Invictus*. [It] tells ...how Nelson Mandela ...enlists the country’s famed rugby team, the Springboks, ...to win the 1995 Rugby World Cup and ...start the healing of that apartheid-torn land. The almost all-white Springboks had been a symbol of white domination, and blacks routinely rooted against them. When the post-apartheid, black-led South African sports committee moved to change the team’s name and colors, President Mandela stopped them. He explained that part of making whites feel at home in a black-led South Africa was not uprooting all their cherished symbols.

“That is selfish thinking,” Mandela, played by Morgan Freeman, says in the movie. “It does not serve the nation.” Then, speaking of South Africa’s whites, Mandela adds, “We have to surprise them with com-



passion, with restraint and generosity.”

...Mandela did a lot to change the culture of South Africa. He created a little more trust and healthier interdependencies between blacks and whites and, in doing so, made that country more resilient.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28254>

Leadership Beyond Anger

by Doris Kearns Goodwin

When angry at a colleague, Lincoln would fling off what he called a “hot” letter, releasing all his pent wrath. He would then put the letter aside until he cooled down and could attend to the matter with a clearer eye. When Lincoln’s papers were opened at the turn of the twentieth century, historians discovered a raft of such letters, with Lincoln’s notation underneath; “never sent and never signed.” Such forbearance set an example for the team. One evening, Lincoln listened as Stanton worked himself into a fury against one of the generals. “I would like to tell him what I think of him,” Stanton stormed, “Why don’t you,” suggested Lincoln. “Write it all down.” When Stanton finished the letter, he returned and read it to the president. “Capital,” Lincoln said. “Now, Stanton, what are you going to do about it?” “Why, send it of course!” “I wouldn’t,” said the president. “Throw it in the waste-paper basket.” “But it took me two days to write.” “Yes, yes and it did you ever so much good. You feel better now. That is all that is necessary. Just throw it in the basket.” And after some additional grumbling, Stanton did just that.

Not only would Lincoln hold back until his own anger subsided and counsel others to do likewise, he would readily forgive intemperate public attacks on himself.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/28397>

My Father Is Not a Powerful Man: Lessons from My Refugee Father

by Kao Kalia Yang

My father is unemployed. His paperwork says that he is 61 years old. His only source of income is social security. He has a few chickens, some healthy, others not so much. He lives on a stretch of land in cold Minne-

sota, feet to the ground, eyes to the sky. He takes the weather in the ache of his bones, the burn in his back. My father spends a lot of time looking out the windows when he is not outside, walking along the tree line. There are many men like my father the world over. They give birth to daughters like me. My father is not a powerful man.

When I was young, I believed that my father was powerful.

When I was a little girl in Ban Vinai Refugee Camp ...it was the presence of my father that kept me safe.

...In Phanat Nikhom Transition Camp to America ...I did not cry because my father was holding me.

...In St. Paul, Minnesota, I grew from a skinny six-year-old girl who held his hands everywhere into a young woman who walked in front of him across the streets....

He said, “...*Calm your raging heart.*”

...He said, “*Tread lightly. You are a guest in this country.*”

Each time my father said these things to me, I heard him but I also did not hear him. ...I came to see my father not as a powerful figure, but a poor man.

Now, I am comfortable with the fact that my father is not a powerful man. In fact, he did not give birth to a powerful daughter. At 36, I’m reckoning with the lessons I’ve learned from my father and the lives of other powerless people.

One: you can grow up being poor, raise children being poor, and love them immensely and well in the process.

...We came to America. We grew here. ...In the process, our parents taught us, “We are poor but our hearts are not poor places.”

Two: your vulnerability is your grace. There is no room to hide when you need help.

...Three: you do not have to be powerful to live a powerful story. ...In my teenage years ...I told my father that I had not chosen this life, that I wanted something better for myself. My father’s response to me was, “*Life is going to teach you how strong the human heart is, not of its fragility.*”

His perspective has protected me all of my life.

...It does not take powerful men to live powerful lives.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/kao-kalia-yang-my-father-is-not-a-powerful-man-lessons-from-my-refugee-father/>

Reading: Walking the Walk

by Rev. Scott Alexander

At one point in her novel *Fly Away Home*, American writer Marge Piercy has a mother say of her daughters: “The girls had been

raised Unitarian (Universalist), which seemed a nice, sensible compromise between having no religion at all and having to lie about what we believed. Enough religion to be respectable but not enough to get in the way.”

Ouch. That hurts. It hurts if, like me, you are proud to be a Unitarian Universalist and strive to be *serious* about your own religious life. But whether we like it or not, this is precisely what many people from other faith groups think of Unitarian Universalists. Remember the old jokes?

Question: “What is Unitarian Universalism?” Answer: “*A weigh station between Methodism and the golf course.*” Question: “What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s Witness with a Unitarian Universalist?” Answer: “*Someone who knocks at your door...for no particular reason.*” One old “downeast” Maine fisherman asks another, “Unitarian Universalist—what’s that?” To which the other drawls back, “Well, best I can figure it, that’s someone who has no principles...and lives by ‘em.”

I used to laugh when someone told jokes about how laid back and lax we Unitarian Universalists are about our religion. But I’m not laughing any more. I’ve stopped laughing because I realize how terribly important it is for me to take my religious life seriously.

...The first dimension of getting serious about your religious life (this unashamed liberal evangelist will tell you) is talking the talk—taking the trouble (when appropriate and respectful) to share with others (your family and friends, neighbors and co-workers) what you religiously believe and why you believe it. But true religion—transforming, saving, compassionate religion—is then about walking the walk. It’s about rolling up your sleeves and genuinely living a theology of dirty hands. It’s about standing up for principles, living your values, and serving others.

Such religion, unlike the lackluster Unitarian Universalism Marge Piercy describes, very much gets in the way. It is not convenient to live by one’s most dearly held principles; there are many costs and sacrifices that are required. True religion limits, tests and challenges the individual. It is often anything but fun. For in this broken world of ours, it is hard to serve justice, difficult to work for peace and equality, demanding to live compassionately.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/183412.shtml>

Wisdom Story

The Mystic and the Scientist

from Tapestry of Faith

One day a Religious Man approached a Mystic and asked, “Does God exist?” “Allow me to go within for an answer,” the Mystic replied.

After meditating for quite some time, expanding her heart-consciousness to embrace the totality of existence, she answered, “I do not know what you mean by the word ‘God,’ but I do know that this world is more mysterious and more wonderful than I could ever imagine. I know that you and I are part of something so much larger than our own lives. Perhaps this ‘something larger’ is what you seek.”

Then the Religious Man approached a Scientist. “Does God exist?” he asked. “Let me think,” the Scientist replied.

And so, she thought. She thought about the vastness of the universe—156 billion light-years, or something like 936 billion trillion miles, in diameter—and the almost immeasurable smallness of a quark. She thought of how the energy of the Big Bang fuels the beating of her own heart. And then she answered, “I do not know what you mean by the word ‘God,’ but I do know that this world is more mysterious and more wonderful than I could ever imagine. I know that you and I are part of something so much larger than our own lives. Perhaps this ‘something larger’ is what you seek.”

The Religious Man then thought to himself. He thought of what he knows and what he does not know. He thought about how he knows what he knows, and how he knows he doesn’t know what he doesn’t know. He thought about his experience of the world and how it is but one tiny, infinitesimal fraction of all experience. He thought about his dependence on forces larger than himself, and he thought about the interdependence of all existence. He experienced wonder and pondered mystery. And then he knew—he knew in his soul the truth of what the Mystic and the Scientist said—that he is part of something so much larger than his own life.

And then, only then, did he think about what he’d call it.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/practice/workshop5/59475.shtml>

Snippets

Authority

“There’s no point in questioning something if you’re not interested in finding the answer. We’re right to question authority when

we think that authority is unfounded, unjust, or otherwise just screwed up somehow. But if we ask the question, we need to be willing to help find the answer, understanding that the answer might be complicated, that it might be difficult, or that the answer might be different from what we initially think it is.” *Steve Novicki, White Dean and Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education at Duke University*

“I believe in human rights for everyone, and none of us is qualified to judge each other and that none of us should therefore have that authority.” *Malcolm X, Black activist*

“To become a leader requires taking personal initiative and thinking about how an organization can work differently. It also requires networking, self-promotion, and self-assertion. It’s racist to think that any given Asian individual is unlikely to be creative or risk-taking. It’s simple cultural observation to say that a group whose education has historically focused on rote memorization and ‘pumping the iron of math’ is, on aggregate, unlikely to yield many people inclined to challenge authority or break with inherited ways of doing things.”

Wesley Yang, Korean-American writer

“Don’t be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of other’s opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”

Steve Jobs, White founder of Apple

“Traditional authority is a form of authority based on custom and habit, which has its roots in the distant past and often is religiously sanctioned. Christian fundamentalists, for example, use the Bible to support claims that men should have authority over women—arguing that not only is it divinely ordained, but also that it has been that way ‘since the time of Adam and Eve.’ Traditional authority is usually hereditary and based on ascriptive statuses (age, race, sex, religion), and people typically obey those who have it because they always have done so—not because their leadership is especially good, just, or wise.” *William E. Thompson, White Professor of Sociology & Criminal Justice and Joseph V. Hickey, White Professor Emeritus of Sociology*

Leadership

“The leadership that can deliver a world

from the realm of ignorance toward enlightenment still needs to be demonstrated by someone, somewhere. Will the United States, that place on earth that holds the promise of democracy, peace, dignity for all—no matter what race, nationality, or religion—be that leader? I, for one, truly hope so.”

Angela E. Ob, Asian American Lawyer

“I did not know how to lead. It was the children who taught me how. The children, through their innocence, curiosity, joy, and willingness to take part showed me the power and source of their creative energy. Their participation forced me to figure out a different way of doing things. That was when I learned how to be a leader. A real leader understands the art of following.”

Lily Yeh, Asian American artist

“[There was] an assumption that those who were trained were not trained to be part of the community, but to be leaders of the community. This carried with it another false assumption that being a leader meant that you were separate and apart from the masses, and to a large extent people were to look up to you, and that your responsibility to the people was to represent them. This means that the people were never given a sense of their own value....”

Ella Baker, Black Civil Rights Activist

“I knew that violence was a problem in my life, but I never really saw myself as being a person to do something about it. I would see a story in the news where someone got shot, and I would think to myself, ‘Man, it’s really crazy out here—someone needs to do something about this.’ But I always overlooked the fact that I was somebody and that maybe the somebody that needs to do something about this was me. When you just stand by and let things happen, you silently condone it.”

Sherman Spears, Black Activist

“We tend to defer too much to the insiders to provide leadership when in fact they are being socialized by their new institutional arrangement to function in traditional ways, not transformative ways.” *Lani Guinier, Black professor an American civil rights theorist*



Photo by Randy Tarampi on Unsplash

Power

“Challenging power structures from the inside, working the cracks within the system, however, requires learning to speak multiple languages of power convincingly.”

Patricia Hill Collins, Black scholar on issues of race, gender, social class, and sexuality

“Power isn’t control at all—power is strength, and giving that strength to others. A leader isn’t someone who forces others to make him stronger; a leader is someone willing to give his strength to others that they may have the strength to stand on their own.” *Beth Revis, White author of fantasy, science fiction, and writing books*

“Sometimes people try to destroy you, precisely because they recognize your power—not because they don’t see it, but because they see it and they don’t want it to exist.” *bell hooks, Black author, professor, feminist, and social activist*

“Never underestimate the power of dreams and the influence of the human spirit. We are all the same in this notion: The potential for greatness lives within each of us.” *Wilma Rudolph, Black athlete and Olympic champion*

“Our society is founded on a very limited definition of power, namely wealth, professional success, fame, physical strength, military might, and political control.” *Thích Nhất Hạnh, Vietnamese Buddhist monk*

Questions

1. Elaine Pagels writes of the harm that can “result from unquestioning religious authority.” What are some historical and contemporary examples of this? How has Unitarian Universalism called into question the problems with this? In terms of correcting falsehood, what is the value of heresy?
2. In our tradition, the most important source of authority is the self. Alice Koller writes of the importance of “creating oneself” as necessary to becoming an authority, of making “new rules.” How have you created yourself? How have you relied upon your own authority?
3. Ta-Nehisi Coates writes compellingly about the abuse of authority and its consequences for black people. How does such abuse undermine the rule of law? How does such abuse reinforce existing power structures? How does such abuse undermine the legitimacy of

4. authority? Does all of this promote lawlessness? Why or why not?
5. Thomas Friedman writes about the challenge of leading change. He quotes Daniel Patrick Moynihan speaking about culture. In many ways, our culture is being destabilized. How can politics be used to save our culture from being undermined?
6. Friedman quotes Ronald Heifetz who said that “the role of a leader is ‘to help people face reality and to mobilize them to make change’ as their environment changes....” Do you agree? Why or why not? How does this apply to the issue of climate change and the intransigence of climate deniers?
7. Finally, Friedman shares a story about Nelson Mandela depicted in the film, *Invictus*. What does the story reveal about Mandela’s authority and leadership style?
8. Historian Doris Kearns Goodwin writes about the way Lincoln managed his anger as a leader. How is partisan anger destroying bipartisanship and dumbing down national leadership? What can be done to reverse this cancerous, long-term trend?
9. Authority and leadership combine to confer power. Our society places disproportionate value on power. The problem is that power tends to be “power over” rather than “power with.” It is easily abused. Kao Kalia Yang concluded that her father was not powerful in any traditional sense. She then extends that conclusion to herself despite the fact that this Hmong-American write, who lives in St. Paul Minnesota, has won many literary awards. Her piece suggests that power must be tempered by humility. Do you agree? Why or why not? She concludes, saying that it does not take powerful people to live powerful lives. Do you agree? Why or why? How is it that our culture discounts the powerful lives lived by those who are at the margins of our society?
10. What lessons about authority do you take from the story, *The Mystic and the Scientist*?
11. The quote by Steve Nowicki suggests that questioning authority is significant, but not sufficient. Questioning authority also requires seeking the answer, which often is not easy. Do you agree? Why or why not?
12. Wesley Yang writes that the ability to question authority is culturally conditioned. What would it be like/feel like to be in a culture or a position of pow-

- erlessness where you could not question authority?
12. Per William Thompson and Joseph Hickey, what are the limitations of traditional authority? The harder question is this: “What are the values of traditional authority when, as above, per Wesley Yang and Kao Kalia Yang, culture and/or a position of powerlessness require dependence on traditional authority?”
13. Angela Oh laments the absence of leadership that can deliver the world from the realm of ignorance. In what ways has the realm of ignorance been expanded? Can we depend on a leader to “save” us or is it up to us to save ourselves? Why?
14. Lily Yeh writes, “A real leader understands the art of following.” How can an understanding of “followership” inform leadership?
15. Ella Baker concludes that true leadership must be radically connected to a community, rather than being separate from that community. What are the consequences of losing touch with the community, a situation that too often occurs when the power of leadership is misunderstood?
16. Lani Guinier suggests that a co-opted leader cannot be a transformative leader. Do you agree? Why or why not?
17. Beth Revis suggests that real strength and, thus, effective leadership is “power with” not “power over.” How can a leader empower others?
18. bell hooks writes that some people will try to destroy you because they want to destroy your power. What are some contemporary examples of this? How can this abuse of authority, leadership, and power be countered?
19. Thích Nhất Hạnh writes that society operates on a very limited definition of power. What would a more constructive definition of power be? How would this inform both authority and leadership?
20. What insights or lessons do you take from the Rev. Scott Alexander’s piece, *Walking the Walk*?



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