UNFOLDINGS II
DR. BERNARD M. LOOMER
UNFOLDINGS TWO

Further conversations from the Sunday morning seminars
of BERNIE LOOMER

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FOREWORD

For over five years Bernie Loomer conducted a personal theology seminar on Sunday mornings at The First Unitarian Church of Berkeley. In May, 1985, he began a series for the seminar on parables from the New Testament.

This volume is a transcript of his talks and the questions and answers that ensued. A similar volume of his talks from a year earlier was published as Unfoldings. In the earlier volume, Bernie had the opportunity to correct the transcripts. However, the transcripts published here were not corrected. He was gravely ill at this time.

Dr. Bernard MacDougall Loomer was a former professor and dean at the University of Chicago Divinity School and a professor emeritus at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. Bernie was a lifelong Baptist. Through his wife Jeanne, he was introduced to the Unitarian Church in Berkeley, and the minister, Dr. Richard Boeke, invited him to begin a series of seminars in personal theology. Bernie had, or came to have, a not-so-secret agenda: to reacquaint Unitarians with the rich religious tradition which is part of the Judeo-Christian heritage. Besides, he believed that forging a new (or personal) theology took hundreds of years, and most people are not up to that task.

Bernie’s major metaphor was the “Web of Life” to which everyone and everything belonged and through which everything was linked together. Life has its triumphs, its tragedies and disappointments, yet the Web contains the resources and capabilities to meet life head on. He also believed that the heights and depths of religious experience could be found in the common clay of everyday experience.

Bernie was an ordained minister who never had a church. The Sunday seminars became his church, and he sustained his flock as surely as they sustained him.

... Cal Baze
April, 1986
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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PARABLES

I would like to begin a series of seminars on the stories and parables taken from the Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament. There are several reasons for this. In my judgment these stories and parables contain the deepest, most far-reaching notes and dimensions that are to be found in the New Testament. I am prepared to have others disagree on this. But however moving and deep St. Paul is, we are dealing, in Jesus, with a mind of a very high order. Secondly, I would like to do this because these stories, myths, parables illustrate the kind of outlook one has to have in order to take life "head on". You need an outlook that is indicative of a reality, whether you call it "God" or not, to whom or to which you may commit yourself unreservedly. It must be a reality which you are finally able to trust, that you relate yourself to, a reality for which you are willing to pay whatever price is involved. With this kind of relationship you can accept and live through those aspects of life which will seemingly destroy you because you have something or someone who is your rock and your sustainer.

Unless you have the kind of God or object of trust who will make you wonder - at times - if you are worshiping an idol or a devil, chances are the God you are worshiping is too small. If the God you are worshiping is large enough, he or it will deal with all the dimensions of life sooner or later. You have to be able to say, "Even though he kill me, yet will I trust him." Unless you are able to pass through the gates of possible death and destruction in relationship to this God, chances are the God you relate to is too small. If your God is too small, you become selective about those aspects of your life you entrust to Him. You limit your relation to God in the interests of your own security.

This is why I have come to regard these stories and parables, in their various dimensions, as depicting a complex set of relationships wherein the heights and depths -
the possible risks and fulfillments - are set forth as the price of commitment. I hope what I am saying does not sound too abstract. This kind of God may appear, at times, to be our enemy. Discipline is required if you are to experience the transformation from God as enemy to God as companion. This involves a transition to a mature religious commitment. If God has never become your enemy, chances are he will never become your friend. This kind of friendship has an incredible price and an equally incredible fulfillment. The possible fulfillment correlates with the risks you are willing to take.

I don't mean to suggest that you have to come up with the same position that you find in these stories and parables. But you must relate to a God that functions in parallel ways, even if you want to identify this God in a different way or in different dimensions.

I have chosen six or seven parables to explore, and the first is one that Unitarian Universalists instinctively react against - the story of the Roman Centurion.

Luke 7:1-10

"After he had ended all his sayings in the hearing of the people he entered Caper'na-um. Now a centurion had a slave who was dear to him, who was sick and at the point of death. When he heard of Jesus, he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his slave. And when they came to Jesus, they besought him earnestly, saying, 'He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he built us our synagogue.' And Jesus went with them. When he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to him, saying to him, 'Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But say the word, and let my servant be healed. For I am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me: and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it.' When Jesus heard this he marveled at him, and turned and said to the multitude that followed him, 'I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.' And when those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave well."

Now, a few comments: here as elsewhere we are dealing with events and occurrences in everyday life. There is nothing esoteric about the story. People are healed every day. This is important for me because I think great faith and great wisdom have to root in the common clay of everyday life. It is from this clay that greatness emerges. One does not need esoteric aids in order to get beyond one's self. One does not need special devices, special kinds of glasses, to see and experience the depths of life, for good and for ill, to be found in our daily midst. At first glance, this sounds like a story of magic, superstition, supernatural forms of intervention. We have the ridiculous statement of a man saying, "Just say the word and my servant will be healed." One can say this is ridiculous until we take a look at what the centurion himself had said. In the world of the military with its hierarchical set up, the structure of life is arranged in such a fashion that the subordinate can go to his superior, ask for help, and receive it. The superior is adequate to meet the needs of the subordinate. He is a super-
rior officer. The order is given and the order is carried out. Now, you can ask, "What has that got to do with the religious life?" I suggest that here a military man has generalized his experience to present the picture of the world which is so organized, so structured, that you ask of God what you will, and God gives the order and it is carried out. This is how the world of the centurion was organized. If you believe, you have but to ask. Seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened unto you. Now, for sure, you must do the asking, the seeking, but your seeking and asking and knocking will not be in vain.

If you trust the structure of the world, then you can live with great dependencies, and you find you live in the midst of tremendous resources. However, you will not encounter these resources unless you do seek, ask and knock. If you do, the door will be opened to you. In other words, the God whom you worship must also be the source, or an important source, of your healing, of your fulfillment. The two dimensions, as it were, coincide. Putting it in other terms, a God who is not the source of your fulfillment but merely some imagined ideal is a God who can never be adequate to your concerns or needs. This is a limited God who cannot provide the resources if you are to be fulfilled.

I suggest that this is about as daring a hypothesis as I have ever heard. You ask God for help, for healing of those who are dying, and it shall be granted. This is set forth with such simplicity that Jesus himself is astounded. He had never thought it could be put this simply - this unambiguously. We trust. We believe that the world is so constituted, so structured, that all the resources for meeting life, or any dimension of life or death, are contained in life itself. "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith."

To me, this is also the story of the Web of Life. The connectedness, the sense of mutual advancement and support, and the vision are all set forth by a Roman soldier who grounded what he thought on the deepest foundation of his own life and of the military life. One does not expect religious generalizations of any depth to come out of the military life. But here is independent testimony to what we ourselves have great difficulty in believing. And to us, this sounds like superstition or magic. Whereas in reality it is an incredible theme stated with the utmost simplicity and clarity. One has the impression that this went beyond what even Jesus himself had been able to discover. And this vision came out of a noncovenental people - Romans - soldiers.

And now it is time for questions or comments:

Q: There are many gods, and we each must make up our own concept or reality. Concepts of God differ between you and me. How do we make our selection of God?
A: The test of life is in the living. An idolatrous God will eventually be shown to be inadequate or have severe limitations. It isn't a question of soliciting a God. A God must be forged over centuries. Sometimes a concept lasts for years, but sooner or later fails. Another God must emerge within you as an individual or as a people. In choosing a God, the idea that one person's opinion is as good as another's is not true. It depends on the range, the dimensions, the heights and depths that your God can take into account. In terms of your God you must be able to face every dimension of life "head on." The concept of God grows and matures in relationship to the dimensions of the world and of yourself. There should be no built in limitations. The Roman centurion had no limitations.

Q: Having faith means taking an incredible risk. What if your God fails you?
A: Most of the gods we have do fail us. So we place limited demands on them, we play it safe, so as not to test them.

Q: If you ask something of God, God makes the choice about whether he will answer. Is your profound faith sufficient to make God answer or is there a judgment involved?
A: This story doesn't answer all the aspects of the question you have in mind. "Knock and it shall be opened unto you" means the answer is always given. It may not be the answer you want, but the response is there, especially if God has to do with the fundamental structure of things. A response from this structure is always given, it may take forms that you don't understand or don't want to accept. But there must be no limit to the seeking.
The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Sons, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if one should rise from the dead.'"

I call your attention to a couple of points: first, the estrangement that life seems to bring to those that have riches as against those who do not. Lazarus did not exist as an actual human being in the eyes of the rich man. He wouldn't even give him the garbage that would result from his meal. In estrangement each person exists for himself or herself. Other people are seen as means to an end. Second, I am fascinated by the little points that occur in these stories. Here, it is first mentioned in passing that the dogs did for Lazarus what no human being would do - try to treat his sores.

This story contains one of the unequaled examples of gall in all the literature. After treating Lazarus the way he did, the rich man asks Abraham to let him come and minister to his parched tongue. We cry only when we are hurt or are suffering. Only then do we pay attention to suffering - and still not to the suffering of others.

There is in this story an element of divine judgment - even judgment beyond life. It is one of the few instances in which this notion of justice is carried out - is rendered in the long run. But even though this element of divine justice is present, the point of the story is not divine justice or judgment. The point of the story has to do with what is convincing, what is appealing, in human life. The obvious point being made is that the miraculous, the intervention of the supernatural, or however you want to put it, does not provide an element of convincingness to what is already given to us - to what persuades us.

By way of contrast, the miraculous does not add to the substance of law and and prophetic utterance. The persuasiveness is to be found within the law and within the prophets. If it isn't found there, it is not to be found anywhere. We have Moses and the prophets. What is contained in law and prophetic utterance - now as well as then - should carry its own persuasiveness. We are moved by the face or faces of the commonplace or we are not moved. Think of the Jews, they began as a people under Moses. Therefore, this guided every element of their daily lives, their ceremonies, or whatever.

The point can be generalized by saying that the great ways of living or the great interpretations of living finally rest on some embodiment that exemplifies what is involved. The persuasiveness does not finally lie in some ideal. The persuasiveness, most profoundly, is to be found in some concrete personal or social embodiment. To put it a little differently: all "oughtness" is translatable into some great "sense." What we "ought" to do (in terms of what is persuasive or convincing) is found or seen embodied in some person or society. There is not justification for the "oughtness" beyond some great embodiment from which we take our cues - that functions as our touchstone.

What you ought to do, how you ought to behave, is not finally derivable from, or justified by, some ideal or ideals. This is why one has to have a Christology. One has to have a figure in relation to whom we take our cues, direct our thoughts and
actions. This is because the embodiment contains the deepest understanding - the deepest of meaning - of which that people have been capable to date.

The function of what we call a Christological figure is to give concreteness, to actualize what it is we are about. The deepest justification for this is to be found in the concrete figures and communities from whom we derive our fundamental notions of how life ought to be lived. It isn’t simply that these figures are just models for us to pattern ourselves after. Rather, these figures contain basic directions - lift up the deepest meanings - such that these meanings become what we ought to exemplify ourselves.

We can be lured or drawn to ideas and to ideals that are projected for us, but we are most profoundly moved by our encounters with concrete individuals and communities.

If we do not find these figures and what they represent, then the occurrence of some miraculous intervention is not going to change the situation. If they are not persuaded by Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded by someone who has risen from the dead. I take it that wisdom, as over against knowledge, derives from our capacity to see the deepest meanings in our commonplace experiences - in our common clay of humanity.

It seems to me Unitarians and Universalists are correct in not including the miraculous as one of the essentials in the spiritual life. However, they do lack something of a Christological or other concrete embodiment that goes beyond, or undergirds, their ideas, ideals, freedom and reason. None of these lends itself to concrete actualities. Only some visions of myth can convey the meaning. An individual or a people who do not have a basic understanding of myth have only a concept of ideas or of ideals. The concept doesn’t rest on a concrete embodiment.

Our forebears contribute to our understanding of ourselves in historical experiences. If we judge the present only by the present, and ignore the past and future, then we attempt to take a cross section of a moment of life. We draw conclusions from data to

be found only in the present. People have to include the fullness of historical experience - good and bad - otherwise, they don’t do justice to themselves as a people. Part of the problem of understanding history is that individuals or institutions of great virtue and great strength turn into their opposites.

Q: Don’t we also have embodiments, like Hitler, of evil?
A: Yes, and they have the capacity not only to move people but to move them in a particular dimension.

Q: What about Unitarians who fear the deification of embodiments of good?
A: Fear of the water is no reason for not swimming.

Q: How do we set our standards for deciding which embodiments or ideas to accept?
A: The standards we finally apply must take quite a while to work out. Standards may take years - or centuries - to refine and shape and reshape. We cannot develop standards wholly from data drawn from the present. We must recognize that, through history, our predecessors attempts to speak to us.
The Canaanite Woman

Matthew 15: 21-28

"And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.' But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she is crying after us.' He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.' And he answered, 'It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from your master's table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

This is a classic in import and brevity. What it includes is enormous. Underneath it all this is a brutal discussion in which Jesus discouraged her as much as is humanly possible. If you take the belief that Jesus was a God/man whose virtues, powers, self-understanding had all been perfected before he even began his ministry, then you can view this story as Jesus testing the faith of this woman. Just how deep does it go? If you take that line, why did he pick on her? Of all the people in the New Testament, she is the only one he picks on in this fashion.

Was it because she was a foreigner? A Greek, to be specific? Or, because in the eyes of the disciples, she was a noisy, clamorous, persistent pest? Yet with all the yelling, crying and screeching going on, she was demanding that her daughter be helped. She is disturbing the whole scene. Everything is subordinate to the fact that her daughter is ill.

If you take the position that Jesus was human, a person like ourselves, then you have a different possible interpretation. You have here Jesus being educated, instructed, shown that his version of his mission, "I came only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel," is incomplete. You have this woman telling him "Uh uh, that is not your mission. Your mission is to the lost sheep everywhere - anywhere - regardless." And whether she understood this in this explicit way or not, she got to this point out of the need that she felt. That underneath whatever he was doing and who he said he was, there was this simple, basic, elemental need to cure her daughter who was possessed of these demons. But since she is not of the house of Israel, he could say he had no obligation to her. But she said, "Yes, you do. Yes, you do!" And to further carry it on, he got about as insulting as he ever did in the New Testament and said it wasn't fair to take the food from children and throw it to the dogs. "You are nothing!" (to the Canaan woman). She said, "Oh, yes I am. I am a mother whose daughter is in need. Please help." This cuts through all this limited understanding that Jesus' mission is only to the Jews. The woman goes on to say his mission is to all those in need and all beyond that - all of nature is involved, even the dogs. All are fed by the same food - all of us: man, woman, Greek, Jew, Roman, animal. We are all within this web. She says to Jesus, "You have a mission that is a little different from what you say it is. You are called to a much wider task." And this from a young, screeching woman who only knows that her daughter is sick and needs help regardless of the costs. The parable concludes "...and the daughter was healed instantly."

Now, we can say this is magic. To which I want to say, "No, it isn't." The power within this group and within this particular figure was released once everything became clear as to who he was and what he was to do. The power was turned on, the energy of healing was administered to the daughter. I find this an incredible story. It has its parallel with the one about the Centurion.

Q: Why was the gift of healing beheaded? A: You have two interpretations. On the one hand, he was simply testing to see if she measured up. And if she did, he would take care of the problem. On the other hand, what has been stated here - or at least implied - is a vision of the Web in which all are members. There is no distinction between Jew, Gentile, Roman. They all belong. It is one seamless whole. Only by abstraction can we
break up into these divisions called nature, human, pre-human and all the rest.

Q: Why did he feel his mission was only to the Jews?
A: This was his understanding of who he was. That he was simply following the covenant and this is a new version of the covenant between these people and God. But this strange, half-crazy woman in effect tells him he has far greater power than he says he has. His mission is other than what he says it is. One begins in the middle here. There is no explanation of what went on prior to this.

Q: Did people view God as a God of just the Jews, or as the God of everybody?
A: There was a universal God, but for these people he had special covenant with the house of Israel. This story simply shows Jesus was following this covenant. We are not given to know when this story occurred in Jesus’ ministry. It was something like “when a man was on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho.” When it happened doesn’t matter to the point of the story.

Q: Was Jesus in full possession of his powers (at this time)?
A: That is not given here. You could say, he is aware when someone touches him; he is aware of a loss of energy. All these things cost, there is a price to be paid, and he can pay only so much. This is an extra load. I would think his understanding was that his powers were not unlimited.

Now, this leads to another point that is not explicitly stated but implied. The point has to do with equality. I have been concerned about this for many years from the time where I just had participated in a Great Books course. They start with something like the Declaration of Independence. In the Declaration of Independence it says that “All men are created equal.” I taught this to a class of teachers, lawyers, etc., and I said, “How many of you believe this?” Nobody raised his hand. Someone said, “I would like to believe, but somehow it isn’t real.” Someone else said, “it means all people are equal before the law.” I said, “Try telling that to a poor man.” You realize we are not all equal. Someone else said, “What about equality of opportunity?” I said, “Ask the poor man.”

I said, “What do you teach school kids about this? This is part of the foundation of our democracy. What are they to understand about one of the most important documents that is part of our heritage? What positive thing can you say to a student?” No one could say a word.

I would like to suggest that this woman represents the point that all people are equally dependent on the Web - equally dependent - that is, all eat from this common table. This doesn’t mean that some have only a little equality and others a lot, rather than we are all equally dependent on that process which creates us all. If you deny this, then you land in the mire of self-righteousness and pride. This is what Unitarian Universalists must guard against. The emphasis on personal responsibility leads to self-righteousness and pride unless there is the counterpoise of graciousness. I thank somebody for helping me. Without this element we take the ground out from under the concern for humanity. We lack humility.

This is the only trouble with the do-it-yourself-kit in spiritual life. You can fix your own car. You don’t need a mechanic. But after you have done your best, will the car run? Will you function spiritually in the way you were created to function? Or do you become your own block? Because it is important for you to say, “I am responsible for who I am. I can’t depend on anybody else. I shouldn’t depend on anybody else. I must do it all by my own resources.” When you think like this you are like President Reagan. Those who take this attitude of self-responsibility are not about to help others. Graciousness to others, even the poor and the handicapped, is a sign of weakness. When the woman in the story says, “I need,” she is expressing a need that all of us have. No one can venture far from the Web without losing all that one has.

One of the functions of tradition, I think, is to become an historical device whereby energy of past achievements is carried from the past to the present and that energy lives in the present. Without tradition it is difficult to have this. Tradition is not just something we make up and say it is a good idea that we do things the way are parents did. Rather, tradition is a way of preserving the “livingness” of the past in the present. Tradition is simply a way of speaking about resurrection - the resurrection that occurs in daily life all the time. Resurrection means that those who have labored, who have paid the price (of advancement), have not wasted themselves. They are the agents of a
power, greater than themselves, and their achievements and the energy of their achievements are passed on as an imperative. I can do things because certain people did these things before me, and thus past achievements become enabling acts of energy. This is what we mean by tradition. The bigger the tradition, the bigger the energy - the constructive energy that is preserved.

Roger Bannister ran the four minute mile. You could always say in an abstract way that this was always possible. Not really. It became possible for me to run the four minute mile because Roger Bannister did it. His act literally enabled me and thousands like me to run a four minute mile. Tradition is a way, also, in which you are reminded of the many ways that your predecessors in the past have turned their virtues into virtues. It is a virtue to have pride. It is essential for our sense of self worth. It is a virtue, a strength. But if you carry pride beyond a certain point it becomes a vice. It becomes destructive of yourself and others.

Q: So vice is virtue carried to extreme?
A: Quite. I agree. The role of tradition with respect to this point is that evil gets mixed in with the good, and you must take the whole package. You must be reminded of the ways you convert goodness into evil as well as being deeply aware of the good that has been accomplished.

So, this woman, yelling, screeching, demanding, was knocking at the door. It has been said, "Knock, and it will be opened. Seek and ye will find. Ask and you will receive," but only if you really believe in the asking, in the value of it. So, this woman knocked at the door and the door was opened. So that's it.

**The asking, the knocking lead to strange discoveries. Sometimes they became conscious discoveries, sometimes we stumble on them.

**Most of the Bible was written by those who believe Jesus was a good man. Whatever mistakes he makes are only apparent mistakes. He lacks nothing. He is complete. Yet we feel this (the story) is almost a putdown. Whereas I mean to convey the notion that Jesus was large enough to learn from everybody.

**What this story and the story of the Roman Centurion have in common is that Jesus was floored by the responses of the woman and the soldier. Jesus realized that what he had been talking about, the people in their own peculiar way had grasped. Not consistently, not clearly, only intermittently. That what he is talking about is not completely human, (new?) that the principle of it was part of his very constitution. **

This as a major intellectual discovery.

**Jesus became the Christ because he responded to the cry of the soul. He grew out of relationships. To me this is much more exciting than the notion that he was born as a completely effective agency who was adequate to every occasion. Knows what the questions are before they are asked. This is very dull, very unreal. The opposite version is that you are appointed to a position that is beyond you. But if you work at it hard enough and long enough, you may actually grow up to do the job. You will be created out of the doing.

Q: Wouldn't the daughter have been healed if the woman had had faith in any object or anything? Jesus wasn't necessary as long as she had faith.
A: I read the story quite differently. It wasn't just faith as such. This involved a concrete relationship with another concrete entity. Energy is transacted. A price is going to be paid. You want your child healed. This will cost me. Nothing is free.

Q: Couldn't one get energy from the sun or the chair? Or another human being?
A: No. It is not the same energy. It can't be just anybody. A lot of history went into producing this particular figure. Jesus just didn't pop up. It took thousands of years of a covenantal tradition and the power that went with it to produce the figure of Jesus. The preparation is enormous.

** indicates answers to questions which were inaudible on the tape.

-14-

-16-
A Man Who Had Two Sons

The Prodigal Son

I think this is one of the richest stories of the New Testament. It’s got more angles to it than a dog has fleas. I’ll take a few minutes to comment on some of this, and I’d like to do this in terms of first the younger brother, then the older brother.

The younger brother wanted his freedom, and he was granted his freedom by his father. He wanted his freedom partly because all of this was going to go to his older brother anyway in terms of Jewish law. So he had nothing more to gain by staying around and decided to find out how the rest of the people lived. The son took himself away and spent his money the way that he wanted. When his money was exhausted his friends - new-found friends - left him, and it’s interesting that there was no complaint on the part of the young son that his friends had deserted him. I mean that there was an implied contract with them, and when the money runs out the contract, as it were, is over. So, in contrast to what he had been all his life he now finds himself alone, impoverished and hungry, and nobody will take him in. He bethinks himself of what the situation is at home, rehearses what he’s going to do and say. He heads for home hoping that his father will accept him as he accepts any hired hand. When he was a long ways off his father saw him, and one can assume that his father had watched for him ever since the son left. It was not accidental that he espied his son from a great distance. It is not as though he got up one morning and said “Ohoh! There is old Joe!” Rather, he was there every day, early and late, looking for him. He embraces his son. His son states what he had said to himself that he would state: “I have sinned against you Father. I am no longer fit to be regarded as your son. Treat me as one of your hired hands.” The father brushes this aside. Nothing is too good for his son. The lost has been found, and there is great rejoicing.

One doesn’t know whether the younger brother was sincere in his repentance or whether this is something he knew would convince the old man to take him back. In any event, the celebration goes on, and everything is wonderful except for the elder brother. You might think he was overjoyed, that he was glad that the celebration was going on and that his younger brother had returned. Not so. He was angry and would not join the celebration. His father comes out and entreats him and explains. “Your younger brother has returned. The lost has been found, the dead has come to life.” The elder brother makes this classic retort: “I have been with you all the days of my life. I have never disobeyed an order. You’ve never given me a kid. I was never praised by you, and I have been a faithful and loyal son. But when this son of yours comes back after having spent part of the family inheritance on loose living, what do you do? Nothing is too good for your son.” The father said, “But, son, your younger brother has returned. The lost has been found. Everything I have is yours.” The implication in the reply of the older brother is “Well, all that you have is mine. And I thought this would mean something to me, but all is ashes in my mouth. If this younger brother can get it wholesale with just an act of repentance whereas I have given my life to you and you have never acknowledged me, this is not fair, I will not join in.” The father says, “Everything I have is yours.” Then he didn’t add the implication, “everything I have is yours except my fatherhood. I choose to welcome my younger son, your younger brother back.” The implication is that the older brother then says to his father: “Well, you are rejoicing because you gained a son, but in the process of gaining that son you have just lost another.” And one does not need to speculate very long before it becomes clear that for that son to return it’s going to be an extremely difficult thing.

Now, why is it the older brother is angry? Partly because his father has taken him for granted, that he has not been appreciated. Perhaps he might have thought he was being appreciated until he saw how his father related to his younger son.
Luke 15:11-32

"And he said, 'There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 'But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry, for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I served you, and I never dis obeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.'

"But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fattened calf!" And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'

And in terms of that everything he was to inherit now means nothing to him. "I have worked for this all of my life, and you hand it out to your youngest son simply on the basis of repentance and the asking for forgiveness." Why is it that the older brother can't rejoice that his younger brother has returned? I mean that in one sense this doesn't change anything, that he is still the older brother and is to inherit the property and all this. Because he like everyone else needs to be celebrated, just for the fact that he is, she is. It's clear that the father has been remiss, that he has taken his older son for granted, counted on him. It is the sinner, as it were, who brings out the deepest in the parents, not the good kid, not the good child who always does what his parents ask him to do and is no problem. Therefore he does not call out from the parents the depth of relationship that the son who has messed things up does. It's a strange business. Sin when accepted creates parents of greater stature than the parents could be if both of the kids had been good and never caused their father a day's problem or a night's worry in their lives. The depths of the human spirit are sounded not in the presence of goodness, but oftentimes in the presence of great evil. Interesting. A hard lesson and a hard saying.

And on the other hand, the self-righteous cannot celebrate this. The son who pride himself the way that the older brother prided himself cannot forgive. He cannot forgive one who has failed to live as he has lived; namely, with hard work, faithfulness, steady dependency. Unless you earn it this way, you really haven't earned it. You're always confused in the presence of one who has not worked this way and nonetheless is accepted freely in the family of relationships. This is the way, or one of the ways, in which great virtues - honesty, hard work - turn into vices; namely, you take the pride that has accrued to you because of these virtues and turn it against those who live a little differently. Others are acceptable but acceptable only on your terms. Failing to live on your terms means they don't deserve any gifts. Consequently the older brother is absolutely confused when the greatest gift of all is given to his younger brother simply because he is willing to admit his error, to repent and to ask forgiveness.

The father has the last word. Mistaken in part though he is, the father says in effect, "Son, everything I have is yours except my fatherhood. That means the celebration will continue whether you come or not. I wish you would come, but the
Q: Would you say some more with regard to the relationship between the father and the older brother?
A: He loved this son essentially as much as he loved the younger brother. He tells the older brother "Everything I have is yours with one exception the fundamental direction of this household. If the father had acted as his older son wanted him to, the younger brother would never have been forgiven. But when the father says that everything I have is yours except my fatherhood, that means that I am acting out of my fatherhood, not out of your sonship.

Q: Could this parable be considered an attack on the religious establishment of the time? You don't have to follow the laws of the church as long as you repent.
A: For me, this is a story of how life should be lived. I don't see it as an attack on the religious establishment. This is usually called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but I like the opening sentence, "There was a man who had two sons." It isn't just about the son. It is about all the relationships. More importantly, in the presence of the Kingdom, the Web of Life, what is your first obligation? To repent! No exceptions. There isn't a person walking the face of this earth who doesn't have cause to repent. Regardless of how good, great, virtuous, etc. that person is, sooner or later, one way or another, his or her virtues will become sources of estrangement. Therefore, no one is beyond the need for repentance and forgiveness. If you do repent, the rewards are yours. We are all members of the Kingdom - the Web of Life - by virtue of birth. You don't have to earn your way there. This is given to you as a gift. Whereas from the older brother's point of view, you have to earn it, and you can't stand people who somehow get it without having to earn it. This just eats the guts of the older brother.

Q: This sounds like the viewpoint of Ronald Reagan, doesn't it?
A: I think the way of life proposed by the older brother is of long, long duration. It is something the [Christian] tradition knows is deeply present and must be overturned. The view point of the older brother seems to me to be more representative of the Republican Party than of the Democratic Party. This is partly because the wealthy of the Democratic Party inherited their money; the wealthy among the Republicans earned it. There has been a graciousness among the Democratic rich, in contrast to a lack of graciousness on the part of the Republican rich. If you have carved out a kingdom through your own efforts, hard work, savings, and all the rest, then anyone who doesn't live this way is irresponsible and doesn't deserve much if any help. If I may tread on very delicate toes, this is where you land if you take the Unitarian emphasis on personal responsibility too unqualifiedly. Unless the sense of responsibility is matched by a sense of gratitude for the gifts of life, you live estranged from your neighbors. Catholics, Unitarians, or anything else under whatever rubric, your estrangement can only be overcome out of repentance and forgiveness.

Estrangement is a social phenomenon involving two or more people. If it is to be overcome, all the people who are involved must meet. To the extent which someone does not repent or does not forgive, to this extent the fabric of life is torn. This is why one of the traditions has always emphasized grace. The extreme is Paul whose sense of responsibility was such that he took to stone those who did not live his way. Paul also believed that if we live our lives through our own sense of resolution and responsibility, we will miss it up. I am free to choose a way of life but my choice is limited by my self-centeredness. This hold can be broken only by the gift of grace. You cannot resolve to overcome estrangement by an act of will. You cannot participate fully in the gift of grace until you get down from your high horse. The receiving is always there. Sometimes you don't recognize it, and many times you don't understand it, but it is always there.

A: Love is not quantitative. We can read into ancient parables our concerns from the modern world; the inheritance of the older brother was unfair to the younger. You have here a failure, an inadequacy on the part of the father. (You need this to make the parable work). The father did not know the importance of celebration and the need to express his love for the older brother. The older brother was satisfied with his role in life until he saw the way his father treated his younger brother, then his system of meaning collapsed. His system of values could not include the forgiveness of the younger brother. The black sheep was getting all the
Q: I have always thought of repentance or confession as an easy way out. It is O.K. to do bad things as long as you apologize afterwards. What is repentance?
A: There is more to the act of repentance than just asking for forgiveness. It is also an implied resolution to let your life be transformed. Now sometimes it doesn't work this way. The older brother is one of the major themes of this parable. Let us suppose he were to continue in this fashion saying, "Well, the old man is going to give him another handout or whatever." This is no excuse for the older brother to feel estranged from his father and brother. This is an excuse but not a justification. Why can't he accept the fact that he had lived life in his own way and he had his rewards. Grace was given to him different than it was given to his younger brother. Why couldn't he accept this and admit that the younger brother was in the kingdom as much as he was? This wouldn't diminish him. As a matter of fact it would enlarge him, and that is precisely the problem. You have to give up what you have clung to all your life - your old ideas - in order to repent.

Q: Shouldn't the father have repeated to the older son?
A: Of course he should, but the father was inadequate to the older son. You can be a hard-working, good, even Jewish person and still be small in stature.

Seminar June 2, 1985

The Laborers in the Vineyard

I would remind everyone that part of the point of dealing with several parables is that they do bring out various facets of the Web or the Kingdom, and this one, while it sounds like the others, has a nice little twist to it.

Matthew 20:1-16

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for a denarius a day he sent them into his vineyard, and going out about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and to them he said, 'You go into the vineyard too and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Going out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour he did the same. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing and he said to them: 'Why do you stand here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You go into the vineyard too.' And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last up to the first.' And when those hired about the eleventh hour came, each of them received a denarius. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received a denarius. And on receiving it they grumbled at the householder saying, 'These last worked only one hour and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last as I gave to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? So the last shall be first and the first last.' "

Rose Kennedy was criticized for her philanthropy, or lack of it, and she was criticized in public. Her reply was: "It's my money; I can do with it as I will. I'm accountable to nobody." At first blush this parable sounds something like that, and if you think of it in terms of the economies it doesn't make much sense. It then becomes a study of injustice, not only in terms of equal pay for different hours of work but
because of the householder's contention that he can do what he pleases with his land or vineyard. "Do you begrudge my generosity?" What generosity? Toward whom? The last to be hired?

So this is not an economic proposal, although it is put in agricultural, economic terms. It is rather that this is a parable of the Kingdom. It is a story on the Web of Life, of which all are members, the last as well as the first. All are equally members of the Web, and all have access to the Web. And this is, if you will, something like the version of the parable of the father and his two sons, where those who are paid for working all day would be equivalent to the elder brother and those who worked one hour but received the same kind of pay would be equivalent to the younger brother. This is not a story dealing with the problem of each person getting what he or she deserves. Rather, each one receives what God's generosity determines.

The core of this, as far as I can see, is to announce that the structure of the Kingdom - the structure of the world, if you will - is not determined by humans. This is God's world, governed by His generosity - or its generosity - however you care to put it. Man is not the measure. God, or the Author of the Kingdom, is His own standard, is his own determiner of value. The world is organized in terms of his generosity, which is not necessarily our own.

Now to put the matter as briefly as I can, The world - or the Kingdom - is not organized in terms of justice but in terms of grace. We do not receive from the Kingdom what we deserve or what we think we deserve. Rather we receive rewards beyond anything that we have earned.

I regard this as an incredible hypothesis. Remember that so much of Jewish thought and Jewish action has to do with justice. And here a man comes among us and says, "This is not how the world is put together. It is not put together in such a fashion that you get what you think you deserve. Of the many things that the Kingdom is, this is not one of them."
forms or levels of appropriateness. That is, there is what we call a rational order: things are supposed to make sense rationally. There is a moral order, we say, and moral order in one sense is peculiarly related to the capacity for justice. There is a psychiatric, if you will, or psychotherapeutic order, and only in terms of this kind of order can a therapist understand what is being said. If he looks at the patient out of moral eyes or rational eyes, he will miss the patient. For me the aesthetic form of order is the widest, most subtle form of order. It can deal most appropriately with the various situations that we bump into. It is from my viewpoint the most adequate way of looking at life.

What Jesus has done is simply to take the notion and generalize it, and it wasn't simply done. It is a tremendous generalization. You fly in the face of all the evidence, or most of the evidence, that surrounds you. But for those who believe, for those who trust, your life is enriched far beyond what you have yourself earned or deserved. The last shall be the first and the first last. I don't know of very many people who dare make this hypothesis today: that the world is organized in terms of categories of grace.

Anyway, that's a start. The floor is yours.

Q: Is grace like parental love? This is a kind of love that is very hard to diminish or destroy. It has a certain core that remains regardless of what happens, a reservoir of love that is not based on rationality or ethics. It is always there, so it was in the father for the prodigal son.

A: Yes. The daring part comes in when you generalize this to cover the structure of the entire Web. This is much more difficult to see. The category of grace includes what moves beyond the categories of justice. Grace doesn't imply that you have injustice, but rather that justice is inadequate to deal with the situation that confronted the laborers. Ethics, in this sense, has its place but not as the final basic category - just as beauty is deeper than truth.

Q: Aren't we starting in the wrong place? Grace has always been there. It is the human mind that has created our separation from it. This is another way of defining the fall of man.

A: It has always been there but we haven't always acted that way. There isn't any way of life or virtue that cannot be abused. For example, there is one religious view that is the enemy of the church - that keeps people out of the church. This is the view that says you must earn your way into the Kingdom, and there is no other way to do it. We are all members of the Kingdom, but this doesn't mean that your efforts are useless or vain. If your efforts are grounded on grace they lead to one thing but if they are grounded more on justice, this leads to something else. One leads to an enrichment of life, the other to a reduction of life. One doesn't mean that individuals don't count. Obviously, they do, but the way they count finally is not ours to determine. This is what is meant, it seems to me, by, "This is my world. I do as I please with My world, and if it doesn't suit your concepts of justice and righteousness, well isn't that too bad? I determine this world; you don't. And I say in terms of that determination, the essence of things in life is in the category of grace." The interesting thing is that there is a ruthlessness to this viewpoint.

Q: Is there an "It" god?

A: God is a living organism; God is the Web. The Web includes everything.

Q: You can think all you want but how can you see the Kingdom?

A: I assume that the most difficult thing to see is that which lies closest to us. The perception of what is deepest within the commonplace takes a very unusual mind to see it and have the courage to generalize it. This is somewhat in the fashion of the Roman centurion's concept that life is organized in such a way that one's superior is able to take care of the inferior's needs. But within this parable of the laborers is a proposition in which the mystery of life is closer to us than our hands and feet, and that there are depths within this mystery that surpass what categories we construct in order to understand what our experience has been. We must realize that that which is deepest will overrun our categories, and we are here to worship more than we know.

Q: Was grace unique to Jesus?

A: It's a pretty Biblical notion. But it's a concept or word we rarely talk about. And I think this is especially true for Unitarian-Universalists, because grace sounds like the opposite of responsibility. And in a way Unitarians are afraid of that which is not of their own making and responsibility. So that if you make reason one of the great virtues - one of the great cornerstones of your outlook - unless you're careful this becomes its own idolatry and you lose the sense of grace. And you're forever engaged in this business of reducing the meaning that's being talked about to where it's more and more graspable by us little folks. One has to fly with the eagles if one wants to exemplify the faith that is talked about in these parables. No limit can be set upon how high one can fly. Reason will do that; mystery will not. And grace will not. Anyway, I've told you what you wanted to know.

Q: What did the Greeks think about grace?

A: I would be unable to quote one single bit of Greek wisdom or philosophy that
contained within it the idea that life was grounded on grace. The dialectic of the Greeks was somewhat equivalent to Jewish law in that you worked your way up to success and rewards. When Socrates was faced with these ultimate questions, he gave up the dialogue and returned to myth. Regardless of other reasons, I would have loved Socrates for this one reason alone. He was too smart not to realize that the gods do strange things, and one should not try to figure them out too closely. There is a strangeness, a wildness, a capriciousness about the authors of evil. But to see this finally in all its diversity and to still grasp the core is a tremendous achievement, a sheer intellectual achievement. A mind that can conceive of that is of the first order.

Q: In Judaism, as in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is the notion that we all have the opportunity to return home. Is grace guaranteed?

A: I would say grace was not created only upon the younger son’s return. Grace was there. His return enabled him to receive what was there to be had. So that you don’t have forgiveness, for example, to put it differently, forgiveness is not dependent upon confession. Maybe the forgiveness is experienced only if you confess, but in terms of the giver, this is, or can become, an abiding attitude. I try to suggest that these parables are made up of commonplace events and experiences. Once the wisdom is drained from these commonplace experiences, the generalization occurs, and you assert boldly that life is like this. The risk is rather large. But if you believe what others believe, what’s the fun in that? If you don’t extend beyond their outreach you are impoverished.

Q: Is grace implied in God’s covenant with the Jews?

A: As far as I can see, the notion of grace arose early in this whole position. It was used to explain what they had no other way of explaining. How else explain their special covenant? They recognized that they didn’t deserve it any more than any other people. Nevertheless, they had this covenant. Because of what? Because of God’s decision to have this covenant, and as far as the people were concerned, it was a gift. Maybe I should use the word relationship instead of gift. It was a relationship that extended far beyond what they had merited, deserved or wanted.

Q: What were the concepts of grace in the Catholic and Calvinist Churches?

A: Well, to put it briefly, to the Catholic Church only if you experienced the energy of grace are you free to do the good; without it what you do will be devoted to yourself. Without grace everything gets turned back into you. You become your own author of your own destiny and the rest. Either that or you end up with this overwhelming sense of pride, and grace is a term used, among other things, to counteract the notion of sinful pride — pride that is a sense of your worth but always at someone else’s expense. You can be released from yourself only by the presence of grace. Only so can you be free of your hold upon yourself.

Moderns look upon this ancient thing and say: Well, see, these ancient people did not believe in the freedom of the individual. I say they did, but their freedom was such that they were bound to themselves. Everything they did was to serve their own particular special needs or ambitions, or whatever. So that the cycle of frustration, defeat, and so on could be broken only by some agency, as it were, coming to us from beyond ourselves. Otherwise we are doomed.

As for the Protestants, Luther took the position that you can’t earn your way to salvation either.

Calvin thought more or less the same thing, though he had a different twist to it. In Calvin what you did, the way you lived, was indicative as to whether or not you were already saved. Doing it didn’t bring you salvation but it was a testimony that you were, or were not, saved.

Editor’s Note

Afterwards, Bernie remarked that this seminar had been a major breakthrough for him. The idea of a “world organized in terms of grace” was not something he had developed over the years. Instead, it had come to him as an inspiration just a few days before this seminar.
The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

"And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." He said to him, "You have answered right; do this, and you will live."

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half-dead. Now it happened that a certain priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion, and went to him and bound his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back."

He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

To take one of the simpler points first: A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. ANY man, no particular specification beyond the fact that he was a human being. ANY man. And he fell among thugs and thieves and got beaten up. So that there is this note, I think, of universality intended in this parable.

Secondly, the thing begins by attempting to answer the question, "Who is our neighbor?" And in terms of what follows the story seems to indicate that the neighbor is anyone in need. But that is not how this parable ends. The story ends: "Which of these three do you think proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?"

I think there's a switch here as to who the neighbor is. In one case the neighbor is one in need. This is ostensibly how it stands. At the end the neighbor is one who ministers to the one in need. There is no neighbor in need simply by himself, as there is no neighbor simply who is willing to serve. It takes both, and both are within this web. I think that this is not simply an inadvertence with regard to a textual interpretation. The end should be translated a little bit differently in order to be wholly consistent with the notion that the neighbor now is one - any man - going from Jerusalem to Jericho. That's the neighbor, ostensibly. But that isn't the only neighbor. Where there is one neighbor, there must be at least two.

So I think that this interpretation is not inadvertence, a mistake, or that someone got careless in the copying, or whatever. I think rather that both ends of the relationship were meant to be included within the one single story. One who needs, and one who serves.

Thirdly, in the classic tradition only God was capable of selfless love, that all other forms of love contain the element of "What's in it for me?" Some self interest is involved and only in God was the notion of self interest absent. And here it seems to me is a beautiful illustration that this kind of life is possible not simply for God, but it's also available to and possible for us finite mortals.

And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying "Take care of him. Whatever more you spend I will repay you when I come back." Here there was no hint that he was to gain anything out of this transaction except helping this poor guy who was in tough straits. One has no idea as to what happened to this one who was willing to help. But there was no sense of limitation as to what he would be willing to spend in order that this helpless one would be ministered to.

Here again I find that in these gospel parables, growing out of common everyday experiences, thrown out of the common play of our mutual lives together, - here is an example of one who counted no cost to himself, who did what he did without expecta-
tions with regard to himself. He did what he did because someone was in need.

So that a high-falutin' theological stance saying only a God can exemplify selfless love is here denied, and denied in the simplest of terms. It is interesting. A man, any man, not specifying who that man is or what tribe he belongs to or anything, - any man is capable of responding in a quite selfless way to the one who is in great need.

So, just to repeat something I've mentioned before: These stories of the Kingdom in one sense all sound alike. You can say, "Well, if you've read one you've read them all." I think this is not quite true. Each in its own way brings out dimensions of the Kingdom or the web of life that the other stories do not quite contain, at least not in such explicit terms. Here, the perspective of the web indicates that in a strange way what is deepest among ourselves as individuals has its own way of becoming relational, something more than just an individual status, that you are caught up into this web whether you will or you won't.

So it isn't that the lawyer in this case is to get rid of all his money and distribute it to the poor. It is that if you love God with your whole heart and your whole soul and with all of your strength and all of your mind, you, too, can exemplify a fundamental selfless form of existence. The priority of your relationship to God involving your fundamental strength, your soul, your essential spirit will be, if not the fundamental, certainly one of the fundamental means by which you can be any man who meets any other man who is in dire straits and minister to that other with no thought of self interest. We do it because this is the nature of the Kingdom, the web in which we are all members one with another. So the story is entitled The Story of the Good Samaritan. It could also be named The Story of the Transformation, of the enrichment of the self or the selves involved because of the peculiar character that was called the Kingdom of God.

Sometimes I had the wit I would like to preach on the subject that Unitarians, we Unitarians, have a great difficulty with. We emphasize the role of responsibility, but there is a built-in limitation almost to a man. We say we are not responsible for what we feel but we are responsible for what we do with what we feel. So long as we do not carry out our feelings into overt actions, then our behavior is acceptable. This is not according to the parables, the stories, of the web of life. You are responsible for how you feel, and not just responsible for what you do about your feelings in terms of overt action. I think Buddhism, certain forms of Buddhism, emphasize the same point. But the suggestion here is that one way in which this desirable result occurs is that you assert the prophecy of the Philistine communities that thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all the whole strength in you. I think the suggestion is that unless this is so, unless this is a kind of priority for you, then you have great difficulty moving from a sense of responsibility for your actions to a sense of responsibility for the feelings that lead up to these actions. In any event I do not wish to stretch the text beyond its proper limits.

Thus endeth the scripture for today. The floor is yours. If you want it.

Q: What price would the Samaritan have paid in terms of his own feelings if he had not acted as he did? Can one ever extract the element of self interest, even enlightened self interest, in anything we do?
A: The answer is yes.
Q: But how about an inefficient swimmer trying to rescue a drowning man, and both drown? Or how about the Good Samaritan Law, when one can be sued for helping someone who may afterwards die?
A: It seems to me you are all missing the point. The lawyer asks what he has to do to inherit eternal life, and he was answered in terms of the two fundamental commandments. There was, if you will, a singleness of mind in this answer. There is no question about: Is this a stupid act? Is it that this person really isn't worth saving, merely a beggar living from handout to handout, as it were. There was no question as to whether there is an element of self interest in all our actions. I would assume that Jesus who tells the story was as much aware as anybody of the mixture of motives. But the mixture of motives isn't going to bring about the
kind of life that Jesus is talking about. That brings this about in a single
ness of mind and purpose, whether you are a damn fool, for
saying one 'who is not worth saving' - this does not enter into the calculations.
As a matter of fact there are no calculations in this story.
A man, any man, was on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among
thieves. Two men, perhaps out of mixed motives or whatnot, passed by - for an
nothing that should interfere with this singleness of purpose of mind and body.
Your first duty is to minister to someone who is in need. Even a Samaritan.
thing: it isn't just serving another. You are also
outside the covenant: it isn't just serving another. You are also
the one in need as well as the
finding your place within the Kingdom. You are also the one in need as well as the
who has involuntarily fallen among thieves. There is no singleness of action
that doesn't have a double-barreled effect, and that is the peculiar human nature
of relational life, or the web of life.
Q: I don't understand. How do you see the Samaritan as in need?
A: You can say he is demonstrating or he is simply living the life of a kind of single
ness of purpose; of obedience to the fundamental commandments.
Q: Is this a need?
A: Yes, that's the deepest part of his need as a human soul.
Q: Doesn't this take away from the total act without thought of gratifying his own
need in any way? If I'm going to become a part of the Kingdom, this act becomes a
necessary act.
A: To love of God with his whole heart and his neighbor as himself...
(Interruption: Forget about God...)
Q: But the lawyer asks how to obtain eternal life? He saves himself by saving another
person. Must you love God in order to love your neighbor? Can you love your
neighbor without loving God?
A: No, not adequately. Not adequately.
Q: How can one be responsible for feelings?
A: Whoever looketh at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery in
his heart. I'd rather not try to press it beyond that point today.
I take it one of the points of developing civilized conditions, of developing civilized
systems of value, is that systems become translated into your feelings, that if
you absorb them, it isn't simply that you ACT toward others in certain ways, you
FEEL differently about these people. It's a situation that this friend of mine is
finding about the the El Salvadorans, when he said he was convinced absolutely
that these people do not hate. They do not hate. It isn't a question of they are
The Rich Man

I've selected something this morning that I think I'm not too sure about. It's something that's been on my mind for many, many years and has not come to a resolution. So I'll let you bear part of the brunt of this. This is Luke beginning with verse 15. As far as I can ascertain this is not part of The Sermon on the Mount, but it is a serious statement that involves quite a multitude of people.


"And he told them a parable, saying, 'The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully, and he thought to himself, "What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?" And he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.' " But God said to him, "This night your soul is required of you: and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

"And he said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, or about your body, what you shall put on. For life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds. And which of you by being anxious can add a cubit to his span of life? If then you are not able to do so as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow, they neither till nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass which is alive in the field today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O men of little faith? And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well.'"

Without the kingdom you are anxious about small things, large things, important things, trivial things. You will be anxious about what tomorrow is to bring. You will be anxious, concerned, how you look, how you feel, how you dress, the status of your life as viewed from your neighbors' as well as your own eyes. Once you seek the kingdom, your anxiety about these things disappear. Within the kingdom perhaps this is putting it a little too strongly, within the kingdom there is no anxiety. The fundamental reason for your anxieties has been taken from you. So, when you seek the kingdom first, all these things will be added unto you, but they won't be added to you in the way that they were prior to your seeking the kingdom. You will be clothed, and fed and housed. You will in certain respects have what other people have, but you will have them as though you didn't have them. And if you lose them by happenstance, you haven't lost that which is the basis of one's standing or self-worth.

This was said in an essentially agricultural society in contrast to our own, but I think I'm not clear that the principle changes from one society to the next. You can be anxious while living in any kind of society, agricultural, industrial, whatever, and you can worry about your salary, your salary increase, the upkeep of the family, and the myriad number of things you have to turn to day by day about which you are terribly anxious. Will there be work for next week? What do you do when you face these kinds of anxieties? Do you attempt to reconstruct the nature of society in an attempt to remove all the anxieties that trouble most of us most of the time? The implication of this is that there is no way of reconstructing the society so your fundamental anxieties are taken care of. In any society you seek the kingdom first and one way or another these things shall be yours as well. But they'll be yours in a different way than if you forget the kingdom.

You can have possessions without anxieties, and you can have relationships without anxieties. This is quite an achievement.

You will recall, I have attempted to take different aspects of the kingdom (Web) to show the interesting dimensions of the kingdom. Not one parable does justice to all the dimensions of the kingdom. The kingdom is such, that if you live it you will have
achieved what no form of society can possibly achieve for you.

The floor is yours.

Q: How do you seek the kingdom and relieve anxiety?
A: Obviously, seeking first the kingdom is not a trivial pursuit. It takes quite a discipline. Secondly, lack of anxiety does not apply primarily to the little things you do during the day. It is a state of your soul. It is how you feel about life, what you are finally in tune with, what you are concerned about. Socrates, before his death, said, "Will you kindly take care of this?" Well, this was evidence that he was not anxious.

Q: Would you say some more about the kingdom and the nature of anxiety?
A: Well, I selected this parable because it seems to fly in the face of some deeply held truths that appear to be somewhat in opposition to all this. I would repeat at the risk of being doubly wrong if you are truly oriented to the kingdom, your soul is no longer in the state of anxiety. You may have some anxiety or concern about some matters, your children for example, but the way in which you have these concerns and express them will differ radically whether or not you are fundamentally moving within the kingdom.

Q: How can you not be anxious in view of the mass starvation in parts of the world?
A: When you are within the kingdom this doesn't mean you have given up a passion for justice. It does mean that you are no longer anxious about the state of your soul and your orientations towards the kingdom. This is not with the idea of finding that nobody is doing anything, but that whatever is done, whatever is undertaken, is undertaken in a certain spirit. Justice when it is dispensed without the kingdom is one thing; Justice when it is dispensed within the kingdom is something else.

Comment: It doesn't seem to me we are talking about anything very practical.
A: But we are. I don't understand this to be a purely theoretical stance. How can you keep yourself from anxiety living among the hungry of Calcutta? To the extent that you are fully in the kingdom you are already freed of anxiety. This is not just a theoretical stance, as I get it. This makes a difference.

Q: You said at the beginning of today's seminar that there was something in this parable you had not come to a resolution about. What was that?
A: I am not sure about this business of anxiety. One of the basic problems of human beings is how can you be like one of the lilies of the field or one of the ravens and not be anxious? Is it the understanding of many psychologists and philosophers that being human means that anxiety lies at the core of your being. For many peo-
The Beatitudes

Matthew 5:1-12

"Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them saying:

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.
'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
'Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.'"

This is part of a lengthy talk, and one is not sure of what the connection is between what is just read and what follows in the New Testament.

This Sermon on the Mount is also to be found in Luke, and this is one of the few times I prefer Matthew to Luke. Now I tend to think of these remarks as another way of stating what Jesus is all about. These are a set of theses, even though they are not labeled as such, and the theory is that there is no price that you have to pay in a disciplined life - the discipline within the kingdom - that the kingdom itself is not equal to.

Regardless of what is required, there are powers within the kingdom, within the Web, which are forth-coming and which will enable you to be fulfilled even under the most difficult of circumstances. I find this a hard set of lessons, but in a way they are summarizations of all that we have talked about before with regard to dimensions of the kingdom. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn, Blessed are the meek, and those who hunger and thirst, and are merciful - the pure in heart - the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, or if you will, theirs is the kingdom of the Web of life. Every condition is a very, very difficult condition and you cannot be fulfilled under these conditions unless your commitment is to the First Commandment, and without the First the Second is not workable.

I think it is not an exaggeration to say that these conditions can be fulfilled only in terms of your commitment to the First Commandment. Without the First these conditions cannot be fulfilled because no individual or group of people have power and the insight or are as trustworthy as those who believe in the First Commandment. I find this for myself to be a very hard set of conditions, but then the basic conditions are likewise difficult to fulfill. They do not come easy. And when you put them all together, this series of preachments contains as they do the various dimensions of the kingdom or the Web. I think we are aware even more deeply just how difficult this kind of life is. The particular conditions are themselves subject to interpretation, and certainly my own interpretations are.

I think when we discussed this before we talked about the "meek" and the difficulty one has with this notion. Perhaps the French have a better word: their translation is "debonair". This has the meaning of courage under stress. If by "meek" is meant those who make no claim on life, then I don't see how they will inherit the world. But "debonair" - that is something else.

For myself, the meek are those who make the largest claim of all, not just for themselves but for all. To do this they operate in terms of a relational kind of power as ever against a unilateral conception of power. I do not see how the meek can inherit the earth. The earth belongs to those who make the greatest claim for others as well as themselves, and they do this through relational power.

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1 Spring, 1984. See his book, UNFOLDINGS.
So it is with every other condition in the kingdom. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. We know that if we operate just in terms of the second commandment, we will not obtain mercy. No other individual has the power to give us the kind of mercy we long for.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. This may be the easiest statement to understand. Those who are pure in heart already perceive God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Once again no group of people, no organization, can give us the kingdom of heaven even though we are concerned with righteousness. This is a fundamental gift from inside the Web itself.

Q: Are you including the poor in spirit and the meek as being one? Humble is depressed?
A: I think so, and Huston Smith here says that his immediate reaction is the same; yet he thinks Jesus wouldn’t repeat himself.

Q: The poor in spirit have the kingdom of heaven, but the meek inherit the earth. Isn’t meekness a behavioral poverty of the spirit?
A: When you are in this state, poverty of spirit, or suffering for righteousness, in certain respects this is the worst thing that could happen to you.

Q: Who is doing what to whom! The poor in spirit - is God blessing them for being in this state, or does the state confirm the blessing?
A: When you are in this state, it is the worst thing that can happen to you. Then you must avail yourself of the ultimate resources of the kingdom, so that you are now open in a way that you were never open before. When you are merciful, when you find yourself persecuted, as I understand it these states are not rewards in themselves. But they are the means by which the deepest resources are yours for the asking. Whatever it costs, this cost will be compensated.

The worst thing that can happen to you is to be set adrift in a sea of nothingness where you feel deserted without resources either internal or beyond yourself. Or you feel persecuted in ways you think are unjust. These are the worst things that can happen. The loss of a loved one for example: Blessed are those that mourn. To my mind, you have lost someone of great worth, and life seems empty and hopeless. You want to hide from life, and you deny that life is worth living. This is a state that isn’t desirable in itself, but it is at this point that you are at the openest to receive what you have never received before. You are most open because you have been denied most, suffered the greatest loss. At this point of loneliness, this state of mourningfulness, is where the greatest gifts are given even if - at the moment - it seems like just the opposite.

Comment: This is the point where it seems like there is no place to go.
Comment: Only in some kind of suffering is there a chance of some kind of spiritual growth.

A: All the conditions are conditions of risk. That is why, for me, these are ways of putting all the things we’ve talked about into a single solid state; meaning that whatever it is you need as a result of your loss or lack or mercy, this will be fulfilled.

Q: How do you teach the first commandment?
Comment: When a student is ready, the teacher appears.
Comment: We live in a secular world.

A: In two easy lessons. The first consists of the parents. Secondly, I think there must be a degree of sexual maturation for a depth of understanding and appreciation. When I say parents, that covers a whole world of meaning that depends on so many things. If the parent hasn’t suffered along any of these lines, then he or she can’t teach teenagers. And a teenager can’t teach himself.

Comment: Some of the greatest persecutions visited on our heads are by teenagers.
Comment: We have all been teenagers. In their idealism they see the parent’s apparent hypocrisy and lack of telling the truth.

Comment: One of the concepts of reincarnation is that we choose our parents. We need to accept this idea, otherwise there can be no reconciliation.

Comment: We are supposed to honor our parents, not love them.
Comment: It is part of the Eastern Buddhist tradition that everybody is perfect just the way they are. Everything is unfolding the way it is supposed to.

A: No, I don’t have a sense of perfection. There are problems. Jesus said, “I came to divide parents and children.” This is a difficult concept to accept - that we can’t always live in harmony. Implicit in the Beatitudes is a fundamental condition of the kingdom that enemies are created.

Comment: I think what is created is separation.
A: Unless you give up a loved one, you can’t reach the kingdom.

Q: What is the importance of creating enemies?
A: The importance is that you will choose the kingdom, over wife, husband, child. If you do this, you are living at a greater depth. You have created an
opposition. You can't live with your family to achieve what needs to be achieved.

Seminar July 7, 1985

The Evil Tenants

Matthew 20:1-16

"And he began to tell the people this parable: 'A man planted a vineyard, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, that they should give him some of the fruit of the vineyard, but the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant, him also they beat and treated shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed.

Then the owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; it may be they will respect him.' But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, 'This is the heir; let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.' And they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants, and give the vineyard to others.' When they heard this, they said, 'God forbid!' But he looked at them and said, 'What then is this that is written: 'The very stone which the builders rejected, has become the head of the corner'?"

Every one who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but when it falls on any one it will crush him.'"

This is the story, it seems to me, of the evil that evil men can cast on good days and good people. One can draw a conclusion that this is the story of the rejection of Jesus by others who would kill him. But on the whole it is the story of the price people will pay in order to purchase what they want: namely, there are no limits - no limits to which evil people will resort in order to purchase what they think they want. There are no limits unless, in fact, they kill themselves.

I suggest that this parable is put in the midst of this sermon on the mount (or one of the sermons on the mount) and it has the effect of causing us to realize that for every good deed or person there is another evil deed or evil person. This is not simply an easy kind of evil, as it were. This is an evil that is the source of the second commandment. This is not a parable showing that evil has limits to it and that these limits are
contained in the very heart and soul of the person himself. I suggest that if you take this seriously, that this is an indictment of the whole notion of goodness right at the heart of things.

We usually don’t emphasize guilt, at least to this depth, to this height, or to this intensity. But here it is made clear that there is no price that evil people will not pay to achieve what it is they want to achieve. They tend to think that goodness contains limits concerned with evil, as though evil had within it the power to direct even the evil that is directed against them. Here the reverse is the case: there is no evil that can be controlled by the power of goodness.

Q: Are you saying that evil is all powerful?
A: At times, yes. If this were not so we would have a different gospel than we have. There are other times when goodness seemingly is in control of evil, that there are limits to evil, and that these limits are contained within the very processes of earth itself. This may be true, but at least in the case of this particular parable, they killed the son of the vineyard owner. This is, I suggest, a very hard truth, and the price of overcoming evil is the price of which the cross is the symbol. I think the cross in this sense is the only adequate symbol of what we have to do.

Comment: There is retribution implied in the end of the parable: the cornerstone will crush one who comes against it.
A: It may be, but it doesn’t sound like retribution to me. It sounds like the price that evil costs. In terms of this particular parable, there is no final price where you say, “that is enough”.

The sense of what I wanted to say this morning is that there is no limit on evil. Goodness may be overcome by evil, and that battle goes on all the time. And there is no progress with regard to that particular battle. It is not the case that we can become more loving, more disciplined in such a way, that we can increase goodness and decrease the power of evil. I think this is not true. If this seems like a hopeless system of thinking and feeling, then that’s the nature of the world in which we live. As I have mentioned before, every advance in so-called goodness brings with it the opportunity for greater evil. And, again, depending upon what you want, you will pay any price to get it.

Q: When we first got the atomic bomb, people said it was so horrible it would stop

A: Yes. We have in our grasp greater capacity for good and for destruction.
Q: What about the capacity in oneself for evil? Can a good person defend himself against an evil person?
A: The average person has the capacity for both good and evil. Sometimes a person can overcome evil. There is always the potential for good to become the winner, but rarely in this case.
Q: What about the battle of good and evil within ourselves?
A: One of the classic arguments against liberal forms of thinking and acting is that the liberal person is liberal because he fails to understand the evil in himself. I think it is possible to at least gain a temporary advantage over evil. When we say “evil” usually, we are talking about people like ourselves. But the only way you can stop a really evil person would be to kill him or her.

Comment: It seems that more attention should be paid to the end of the parable: the cornerstone. The parable seems to be saying that you can exot out the prophets and kill the son but the “word of the Lord endures forever” and that they who align themselves against it will be destroyed.
Comment: I think liberals are people who are tolerant of many approaches because they see “the eternal verity” in the many different approaches and can align themselves as a larger people to confront evil. The logical consequence of what you are saying is that we can’t handle nuclear war or that man who killed 26 people, and I don’t believe that.
Q: Why should I be good? I would be better off being evil. I get screwed when I try to be good.
A: Because without us, you would be even worse off. Part of being good is that the satisfactions of your attempts to be good outweigh the desires, the intensities, the evil heights and depths of your life that are possible. Life may not be so intense and meaningful when you are evil. This seems like a contradiction. Since we continue to struggle and the battle is so often against us, why go on in the first place? I still say that even though we sometimes are defeated it is still important for us to try.
I would think that the way for us to defeat evil is to strengthen those forces within ourselves and others such that we are more fully able to struggle and hopefully to gain some vantage.

The relationship between good and evil is a dialectical one. We do get stuck with this business of finding evil within ourselves and others, in spite of our efforts to change this. I still come back to this: evil people will pay any price for what they

1 Refers to a notion of murder being reported in the media.
want to achieve, and they will do this with an intensity and to a degree that so-called "good men" will not do.

The Evil Tenants

The parable is about the tenants who would not pay their rightful owner and killed three of his coworkers. And when this didn't do the job, they decided to kill the owner's son. One can take this as a pre-statement of the early church and Jesus. Regardless of how anybody felt, they carried out their plans.

So, point one: evil men will go to any lengths to establish whatever ends they want to establish, regardless of what it costs others. I think this point is basic. That evil men, or men who have evil capacities and intents. (interruption).

Q: How can good men talk about evil?
A: We are not talking about good men but about evil. When we care to, we will resort to any means to accomplish what we have in mind.

(Resumes) Last time I did say that according to this particular parable, actions of good people cannot control, do not have sufficient strength, to have evil - especially the evil within ourselves - brought to some point of stoppage. There are limits involved. There is no evil that cannot overcome goodness. And by the same token, any set of goodness is subject to being turned into an evil goal or set of intents.

I think for most people this is too strong a point. It doesn't leave enough freedom, enough opportunity for goodness to set limits to that which is evil, whether the evil we are talking about applies to any individual or whether this applies to a fundamental structure of evil. Evil in this sense is not simply derived from your intent or my intent but is something inherent within the human situation that enables evil, or ourselves under the aegis of evil, to turn into something less than we set out to be or to do.

To correct myself from last week, this does not mean that one thing is equal to another thing; that evil is always and everywhere equal to the goodness that lives within
the individual or group. Evil is not a function of my doing or your doing. Or as
Rauschenbush used to say "There is a kingdom of evil as deep as the kingdom of
goodness." Until we face this, we have not done justice to the evil within ourselves and
within society that takes the form of various structures. To this extent, at least, no per-
son is entirely free of the structure of which he is himself a member. Struggle as he or
she might, there are limits to the goodness and to the evil. The limits are derived in
part from the very structure into which you and I are born. In spite of ourselves, we are
captured into racism and femaline and masculine forms of understanding. Try as we
might, we can succeed to a reasonable degree. But try as we might there are limits that
are set for us. Last time I made an overstatement that there are no ways by which
goodness can contain evil. In this sense evil seems to be stronger than goodness and
evil within ourselves seems to be stronger than the goodness within ourselves. I think
this is an overstatement, and yet one rotten apple will spoil the whole barrel. The
reverse is not true. Even if it is an overstatement, evil does carry limits.

Earlier in the week I attempted to say that evil is not a quality that can be erad-
cated from the human spirit. The advance that we want to have in life is an advance
one of whose prices is the development of more discipline or set of disciplines than previ-
ously were required. This is one meaning of advance; namely, that dimensions of
thought and sensitivity are required of us in degrees and ways that have not been the
case before. If we are concerned about emphasizing the positive versus the negative
side, then to accomplish this, society must develop the kinds of sensitivities, the kinds of
interactions, the kinds of relationships that alone can satisfy what it is we are struggling
to achieve.

In my own particular history in the atomic energy situation, what I found out (in
and beyond the university) is that there are fundamental resistances to making creative
use of atomic energy. We resist this. It isn't simply that if we had the opportunity we
would do much more with it than we apparently have done. Rather, resistance to
advance is inherent within ourselves. The extent to which we are all part of the web,
and we are born into this web. Evil is also inherent in the web. It follows that evil is
also inherent in the various structure of our common existence. The very fact of the
web means that there are requirements set for us and there are resources there to
use. We seem to want to refuse to utilize these resources.

Q: Are there graduations of good and evil?
A: I think "yes". We have within our reach technical means, forms of knowledge,
that could be used for creative purposes. Unfortunately, the knowledge may be one
thing, the wisdom may be something else. I would think there are depths and
heights of evil whether one speaks racially or whether one deals with various forms
of cultural limitations as well as cultural opportunities. Some are deeper to root
out than others. To this extent there are graduations of evil even there are gradu-
ations of goodness.

Martha [Helming] says I make this subject sound too abstract as though we were
talking about a substance we call evil. The stronger the evil forces in our society,
the more abstract we can develop in our interpretations of each other.

Comment: On the other hand, Bernie, you had a very concrete concept: every advance
for good has unwanted side effects - unanticipated increase in the capacity for evil.

Q: Could we have a definition of good and evil?
A: Evil is a situation in which destructive acts and destructive consequences ensue.
Evil is that element within ourselves either as individuals or societies which tends
to negate the worthwhileness of our constructive, positive force. Goodness is a lit-
tle different. It is our attempt to subdue the rampant consequences of evil within
ourselves. It is the effort to strengthen the creative aspects of the human spirit.
That which is opposed to it is evil - to a greater or lesser extent.

Comment: I sense that evil is as much a principle as a force. When we rush out to do
something that is positive and humanitarian, invariably we do something that is
less than desirable.

A: Yes, and there are limits to what we can do about our situation. We can purify our
intentions, and yet something else happens. The price of advance is enormous (in
this parable).

In the Jewish-Christian tradition, the price of advance is symbolized by the cross.
It is our basic symbol because it is the extreme understanding that this is the price
that has to be paid.

Q: Is there such a thing as pure good or pure evil?
A: I would think not. Purity in any form is not possible. We struggle to achieve a
common good, where you and I might act out of a common concern. Yet even so, people get together for other [limited evil] purposes. Even as we search for goodness or try to advance the human spirit, we must not give ourselves to our own creations. [Editor: Bernie always warned against the human tendency to idolatry – worshipping our own creations.]

Q: Is evil a lust for power, a machine gun, a star ship? We are wedded to weapons, but we think we are good. Are we evil?
A: Evil does not lie "out there" in somebody else. Oft times evil lies within ourselves. In either case we are not talking about pure evil or pure goodness, we are usually talking about a mixture of good and evil.

Q: Is evil punished? Would you comment on that part of the parable that says the evil man will not inherit the vineyard? In my experience of life evil often goes unpunished and good unrewarded.
A: This form of parable is subject to various forms of interpretation. One can say that eventually these tenants who refuse to pay their owner adequately do receive a kind of justice. Again I want to say, the price is heavy. There may be a final kind of retribution, and it may be a long time in coming.

It is sometimes said, you can kill the messenger, but the word itself or the message cannot be gotten rid of so easily.

Q: Is that Pauline?
A: Yes, it could be. It could be that aspect of Luke that prefigures Jesus. This is the price that will be paid one way or another, sooner or later.

Back to the question of punishment (or reward): to a great degree we have believed that suffering pays off in the long run or has its reward. It, too, will have its lasting. One aspect of the holocaust is that Jews don’t believe this anymore. To a great extent suffering is meaningless. It is not redeemed.

Judas Iscariot and St. Paul

I warn you beforehand that this is not based on New Testament scholarship, but on what seems to me must be the case if we are to have any sense out of the whole picture. All great figures, great causes, have their antagonists. As it stands now, Jesus had no antagonist, unless we say that sin was in general the antagonist. And in the tradition this role is played by Judas Iscariot.

Judas is made out as a small, conniving, small-minded, small-souled individual who “sold out” for a mere nothing. Now I don’t think this is the case. But Judas, who was pictured as the guy in charge of the run-of-the-mill, day-by-day activities of the group, making sure that there was enough food or money to take care of bare necessities, plays a different role. And I based all of this on one very, very dramatic point, namely that small-minded figures, conniving little souls - I call them at one point Iago characters - these people shift with the wind. They don’t care who wins as long as they are on the winning side, and that means they shift sides; they have nothing at stake. And in the tradition, Judas Iscariot is at the beck and call of either the Sanhedrins or other groups who want to do away with Jesus. This is the so-called great betrayal of Jesus. But what was betrayed always seemed a little bit unclear in my mind, since Jesus had engaged the major powers of his day, - political, ecclesiastical and the rest, - in that he didn’t need to have his being pointed out by Judas Iscariot or anybody else. He was well known. Therefore, in this sense there was no betrayal.

My own thesis is that Judas Iscariot alone of all the disciples understood what was going on. This is not a small figure. This was the greatest of all the disciples. This is the person who took the measure of Jesus and of his dream, of his ideas, and realized that if you went the way of Jesus then you had to give up your inheritance; this would
have to go by the boards. In Judas's mind this was too big a price to pay. Therefore either the battle had to be given up, the struggle had to be given up, or Jesus had to go. And Judas decided that Jesus had to go.

The struggle apparently was external. But if we know anything about human nature then we know the struggle is never just outside ourselves. It is also within ourselves. The battle between this dream of Jesus and this inherited faith of Judas's people - this was a tremendous struggle. In this Judas looked upon himself as one who was attempting to save his people, to save them from the threat of the meaning of Jesus.

I pause to point out incidentally that here as elsewhere evil men, or men with evil intentions, draw no lines about what it takes to bring about whatever it is that they are trying to do; that such a thing as killing is no great problem. It's no great problem compared to the struggle that is going on. With a greater struggle a greater end would be called for, and more devious means would have to be used to bring about the goal that Judas wanted.

Q: Wasn't Judas himself killed shortly thereafter? He didn't care about his own life? Did he expect that?

A: There are a couple of versions: he was killed or he killed himself. I would say there is a third: His system could not contain the struggle that he was going through and that he literally burst. His outside system burst from the pressure generated by this struggle.

And, as in other cases, when we actually have gotten rid of what we think is the main source of our trouble, that settles the matter, we will have no more trouble. Except things get worse.

I, in my mind's eye, have the imaginary story of Jesus and Judas on the last night, the night of Passover, when the whole series of developments is coming to a very, very close result, and that Jesus and Judas are talking for the last time. There are no more special pleadings. There are no more arguments and discussions. Jesus had to do what he had to do, and he knew that Judas had to do what Judas had to do. Again in my mind's eye Jesus can say to Judas: "You are betting your life that you are right, and that I am wrong. I just want you to consider one thing. Supposing you're not right, supposing in the last analysis that what you want does not come about. What do you do then? I'm going to die. This is the price that has to be paid - for me. What is the price you are going to pay?"

So the death was carried out on the part of Jesus, regardless of who it was that finally brought about the death of Jesus, other Jews, or the Sanhedrins, or the hirelings of the Sanhedrins, or the hirelings of the rich and powerful, or whatever. Nonetheless, the act was carried out.

But the price Judas was about to pay was far worse than the price Jesus was to pay. It was impossible for him. Now I base this on many things. Dramatically speaking, people with small souls and small minds who are cut to serve whatever side that seems to be in ascendancy at the moment, the one thing that they do not do is to commit suicide. Nothing in life is to them that important. They'll take this side or the other. It doesn't make that much difference. They will attempt to be on the winning side, whatever side that is, and if they shift sides, well, that's the way life is. The one thing they do not do is to commit suicide, and the second thing they never do is to let their system burst, unable to contain the struggle that's going on within them.

I sometimes think of Victor Hugo's Les Misérables to illustrate something of the same point. Jean Valjean is the criminal, and like a criminal he was supposed to do certain things and act in certain ways. And Javert, the cop, believed in those principles, and his system attempted to contain the pursuit. Then it becomes a question as to who was pursuing whom. Like Judas, he could not contain the struggle any more. All his life he had lived in a certain way and Jean Valjean had broken all the acceptable ways that criminals are supposed to act. Javert didn't know what to do with this. He had to keep on believing that Jean Valjean was the criminal and he, therefore, must be
doing the things that criminals do. Must be. Regardless of what appearance looked like.

I happen to believe that Judas Iscariot is the twin brother of St. Paul. That St. Paul attempted to do in his time what Judas had already accomplished in his. That Paul underwent the same kind of struggle, a struggle in which he does everything he can to down the battle, to keep the struggle within limits. He in his way did what Judas did in his way. Kill them. No price is too big to pay when the stake is that important, when the battle over the meaning of life is that significant. No quibbling about niceties of manner. When something has to go then something has to go, and it's important that it be done. So Paul in his way killed Christ as Judas did. Paul did not know Jesus in the flesh and therefore the nature of his struggle took on a different form.

Judas was wrestling with another person representing a different understanding of life and this had extended over a period of time, and the longer it went on the worse the struggle became. Well, Paul in his own way did the same thing. Killed the Christians. Did anything that would enable Paul and others to continue in inherited faith, the faith of their fathers, wherein Israel would be vindicated.

I always get a little bit of a smile on my face when I read Paul's letters urging the people in these churches to behave themselves, be nice people, never mention their own extreme forms of behavior where they thought of killing someone to get rid of the bothersome somebody, regardless of the cost.

Now this is a make-believe story in a sense, not based on scholarship. I base my case on one essential point, namely, that to maintain the kind of struggle going on inside requires a certain degree of size, of importance, - not the small figure who, for some strange reason that the tradition never makes clear, does now betray the figure called Jesus. What was there to betray? This is the interpretation that makes sense to me. Judas Iscariot hustling around busy with the purse strings of the day. Who was it that understood Jesus? Who of the candidates available? Who except Judas? There was a tremendous difference between what his inherited faith had been and the kind of life that Jesus taught.

Q: Jesus said that "one of you will betray me." But Peter also denied Christ. Peter was a small character?
A: Yes, the role of Peter becomes quite ambiguous at this point. Peter who after all shared so much with the rest of the disciples. But in the story that I am telling Judas stood alone. I can imagine that on the night of the last supper shortly after the meal and the arguing about who was to sit on the right or beside Jesus - I can imagine Judas thinking. "Have they missed the whole point? Hadn't they caught any vision of what involved in this?"

Q: Didn't Peter deny him because he was saving his own life?
A: Yes. But only one, Judas, actively searched out and made the cause of death. This is not true of any of the other disciples. The others may have wished they could understand, partly cowardly and partly brave, in a very difficult time. But it was the starkness of Judas Iscariot alone taking on this tremendous battle and attempting to save the outlook of his people. It was Judas who thought that Jesus had betrayed his people and not the other way around. It was Judas who thought the people had been betrayed and people were not seeing this. They did not understand what was really going on. I think it was a powerful scene.

Q: Judas understood the teaching of Jesus best of all?
A: Yes, Judas was drawn to it and repelled by it. Like a symbolic battle, the death of the old and the birth of the new. And Judas could not give up the old. And could not contain the new.

Paul finally was put in a condition of psychic blindness. He could no longer see to kill the Christians. Quite a little scene. "Paul, Paul, why persecutest thou me?" Well, this question coincides with the transformation of Paul.

Judas and Paul were psychological twins with this difference: One said yes; the other said no. A mystery of life. We are free to make our choices but we are not free to escape the consequences of our choices.

Paul has an effrontery that to me is amazing. He says to the disciples: "You fellows take care of the little eastern end of the Mediterranean and I'll take care of the rest of the world." Now this is a wild man who's been empowered - crazed or empowered - who says "Before Jesus returns I will have conquered the ancient world," and just about did. Something that was never made possible for Judas.

Q: Why wasn't Judas considered a hero by his people?
A: A good question. Partly because the figure gets destroyed, ruined by virtue of Christian considerations. Once the Christians got hold of him, used him for their purposes, he was ruined as far as Jews were concerned. He was a hero.

Comment: He couldn't be a Jewish hero because he didn't succeed in stamping out the teachings of Jesus. If he had succeeded it might have been a different story.

Q: What was there in the message of Jesus that Judas could not find acceptable?

A: The life Jesus offered was for everyone, not just the chosen people.

Q: Judas was killed by others or did he commit suicide?

A: Possibly the latter. The struggle that he was attempting to maintain was too big for his system to manage.

To accept the Kingdom that Jesus was talking about, Judas would have to grant that, to be sure, the Jews were of a special kind, one God, and special opportunities, special obligations on the part of certain people within this general, overall picture. He would have to give up the notion of vindication of any kind; that what the Jews had been called to do was not to enjoy the fruits of a good life lived in obedience to God's command. It was rather that their mission was to lead all the peoples into the mysteries of the Kingdom where it would then be pronounced forever by God, as it were, to the Jews. But Jesus said: "I never gave you the interpretation that you give it. This is your distortion of what I have in mind. What I have in mind for you goes far beyond what you and your people, my people can even contemplate. If you can't buy this, then you can't know what I am saying." This is the whole thing that Judas cannot accept. This is too big a price. This is asking too much of Jews to pay. Far too much. And therefore it becomes a struggle.

Q: Was it basically the sectarian's difference between the Jewish religious precepts, or was it that Judas thought the basic message of Christian love that Jesus was preaching, if taken in depth at its deep seriousness, was asking too much of anyone?

A: It was too much to ask of a people who had a tremendous understanding of themselves - not just as a series of individuals, but as a group - who thought they had received a fundamental understanding.

The Final Seminar

[Editor] Bernie had been in Kaiser Hospital in Oakland for several weeks. There he would rally and fall back in his struggle against his illnesses. On Saturday, August 10, he was up and dressed in his hospital room and persuaded his doctors to give him a pass so that he could lead his seminar. On Sunday morning he was driven to the church in Kensington, and he took his usual easy chair at the front of the room. He announced his topic as "Repentance" and began to talk. It was soon apparent that he was having a problem. As he himself said, "My mind isn't where my tongue is."

Bernie began talking about his recent time in the hospital and referred to a Biblical statement. "The Kingdom of God is present; repent." He said he had been guilty of passing over this statement and not doing justice to the whole notion of repentance. "... One of the things I have failed to communicate is the notion that repentance is not a one-time affair ... there is no limit to the notion of repentance."

Bernie went on to say in contrast to the repentant person, "we have talked about the perfectibility of men or the perfectibility of living a life of completeness in a very incomplete world. We have thereby spent a disproportionate amount of time and energy on the notion of perfectibility and this notion has usurped the role of the endless seeing of the relationship of what we are, what we pretend to be, to what we do and what we practice."

"Unitarianism has split up this religious outlook and celebrates the goodness of the gospel and overlooks the side that acknowledges our imperfection and the need for repentance."

This led Bernie to say that one of the problems with colleges and universities is the way that the curricula are organized - that the way knowledge is divided into separate
fields leads the student to believe the ways of looking at the real world can also be divided up. People look at life, come to interpret life, in the same way that the curriculum is divided up. “We spent our lives trying to get together things that were never disjointed.”

He illustrated this point with a story about his father who had been the Captain of a sailing ship. Bernie said that when he was a fifteen-year old he would watch his father’s eyes as he looked out of a window to gauge the weather. He said his father would take one look and instantaneously decide what the weather would be. Only then would he look at other factors such as snow, wind or temperature. Bernie said about this, “Unless you begin with unity, there is no way in which you can achieve a unified outlook on life. The intuition, the sense of unity, has to be there fundamentally. If it is there, then you can understand the various roles and parts in relationship to this unity. But if you don’t have the unity to begin with and you try to create the unity out of the parts, this never works ... Once you have seen [the unity], you can divide life in various ways providing that the centrality of the unity never leaves your mind ... The strange business is that once you have grasped the unity or been grasped by the unity, the fearlessness is gone.”

It may be best to close with that thought.

Bernie returned to the hospital and on Tuesday slipped into a coma. His wife Jeane was at his bedside when death came for Bernie on the afternoon of Thursday, August 15, 1986.

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Two things there are
That skirt the borders of our lives . . .
The waitings and transcendency of love
The certainty and unknown-ness of death’s finality

Caught, as of necessity we are,
Between an infinity of that which has been
And that which is yet to be

There flares a momentary reach of consciousness
And only one-ness of self identity

An outward slanting movement prowed innately
Toward some translucency, some indelibility of light

A spiraling of unenumered seeking
A sometimes wonderment of who or what we are

A circling of distances fringed to the outposts of perception
An intrusion of within-ness

Groping the layered recesses of ceaseless being
Connecting the I that contains
With the I beyond containment

Gathering in a hovering of closeness
A harboring of that which invites
A wanting for that which recedes

Furtively day unfolds into night
And night collapses into spawning tides of light
Strewing gratuitously the flowers of morning stars
Still slightly crumpled from the dawn’s unruffling

And mingling the colors of touching
With the voices of banished winds retreating
Is there no breathing of a now that is
And a now that is no longer
Are there no leavings of sound
No unhurried remainings of sight
Beyond the tentativeness of memory's fragility
Or the trailings of a star's demise?

Oh dear friend ... "blithe spirit"
You who were a centering of within-ness
A sojourner of unfettered distances
A giver and receiver of disclosings
Now outward coursed along infinities of webbed encounter
Leaving only a swoon of light as a flame to our yearning
An unspokenness of grief, a desitude of waiting
A drinking of unsaidness for all there was left still to be said

Yet beyond those unmargined pilgrimages of mind
Those transient unequalled moments
When the infinite seems within a subtlety of grasping
When those slight nearings of intangibleness
Those untrammelled elevations of revealment
Seem our only indulgences of lasting
Is there still not some spiraling of ineffability
Some unattainability of apprehending
Some veiled intruding of a truth
We never can unmask, nor wholly live without?

... Lawrence Berger

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