

**The Narrow Ridge:  
Martin Buber's Free and Responsible Search  
for Truth and Meaning  
February 7, 2010**

A week or so ago, I went on retreat for three and half days with about forty other ministers from the Southwest chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. The retreat, which happens at a place called Camp Allen, just north of Houston, is a combination of business meetings, worship, workshops, walks in the woods, and lectures. The featured speaker this year was Daniel McKanan, the Ralph Waldo Emerson Senior Lecturer at Harvard Divinity School. For those of you who read the *UU World*, McKanan is the author of the most recent issue's cover article, "The Religious Left: an Old Tradition for a New Day."

McKanan's presentation at the retreat focused on his forthcoming book, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the Left in United States History*. His general premise, as the book's

title hints, is that, in the history of the United States, people on the socio-political left generally have experienced prophetic *religious* transformation through particular types of encounters. In his lectures, McKanan offered three different examples of such encounters: during the abolition era of the mid 1800's, the *one-on-one* encounter between journalist William Lloyd Garrison and former slave Frederick Douglass led Garrison to become a leader in the abolitionist movement; during the social gospel era of the early 1900's, Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes encountered an *entire society* of working and immigrant families in the slums of New York City, and the struggles they faced, leading Holmes to write his prophetic book, *The Revolutionary Function of the Modern Church*; during the Civil Rights era of the 1950s and 60s, the encounter was *among and between* a particular group of people, namely African Americans living in the South, meeting

one another collectively, and thus empowering themselves as a people to fight against and rise above racial injustice.

Following shortly on that wave, there was also the rise of the women's movement, as well as the anti-Vietnam war movement and the gay rights movement.

Now, McKanan's lectures at the retreat went into much more depth, as well as breadth, about the left and religion in America than just those particular scenarios, but the central element I wish to hold up in McKanan's argument is that of *encounter* as a religious experience. For those here today with Christian backgrounds, the notion of encounter might remind you of Saul, sworn enemy of Jesus, who encounters the light of God on the road to Damascus, henceforth becoming Paul, one of Jesus' primary followers.

That's one kind of encounter. But as McKanan's examples illustrate, the kind of encounters I am thinking of

are not quite so vertically inclined between humankind and the divine, as Saul/Paul's encounter is. Rather, I seek to explore more along the horizontal lines of encounters between human beings, as well as with other life on earth, and to examine how such encounters keep us on a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Now, a note: horizontalness doesn't, in my experience, exclude notions of, or encounters with, the divine. Perhaps you felt during *Time for All Ages*, a *hint* of the divine, the holy, the sacred—*love*—when you witnessed that subtle shift from the *I-It* experience of two people to the *I-and-Thou* relationship of two people. Though not as dramatic as Saul/Paul's encounter, nor perhaps as magnanimous, such an encounter between *I and Thou*, as philosopher Martin Buber puts it, is the very thing which, I believe, affirms the divine, or perhaps more precisely, divine love, or loving-kindness, here on Earth.

Keeping that in mind, let me get back to this idea, expressed as our fourth religious principle, of the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Let me walk us, for a moment, along what Martin Buber calls, “the narrow ridge.” As we heard Lois read earlier, Buber himself wrote, in 1947, “I have occasionally described my standpoint to my friends as the ‘narrow ridge...’ I wanted by this to express that I did not rest on the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolute, but on a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed.”

Now, the two notions of, one, encountering the *Thou* and, two, of meeting what remains undisclosed may seem somewhat contradictory. For, once I encounter *Thou*, isn’t there a *knowing*, a certainty, such as when one person truly

sees the beloved and knows that that is the person with whom he or she wants to spend the rest of his or her life? And yet those who have been married or partnered for years know that marriage does not bring “the broad upland,” where life is lived in “a series of sure statements about the absolute.” Those who partner together for any length of time know, in a kind of ongoing unfolding, that that initial encounter between *I and Thou* is but a threshold into mystery, and that, as Buber says, there is a “holy insecurity” involved, a humility I might call it, in understanding that truth, in Buber’s words, “is not a having but a becoming.”

To expand on this, while I won’t go into too much detail about Martin Buber’s own journey of becoming, let me tell you at least a little bit about him, so we might better know some of the context out from which Buber came to his own understanding that, in his words, “he who lives life in genuine,

realizing knowledge must perpetually begin anew....” Born to Jewish parents in Vienna in 1878, during the rule of the Catholic Austro-Hungarian Empire, Buber was propelled into change at the age of four, when his parents separated and he was sent to live with his paternal grandparents in the city of Lemberg, in current-day Ukraine. There he was schooled primarily by his grandmother, and studied not only in Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, and German, but also Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and English.

As a young married man, Buber moved to Berlin in 1900, and later to a small town outside of Frankfurt, where he and his family would remain until 1937, when they emigrated to Palestine. There he would live and work until his death in 1965.

Throughout Buber’s life, both in Germany and in Palestine, later Israel, Buber embodied the kind of paradox

which a “holy insecurity,” a free and responsible search for truth and meaning demands. Exploring the apparent contradictions in Buber’s life, one source candidly writes,

The preponderance in Buber’s writings of abstract nouns such as “experience,” “realization,” and “encounter,” and his predilection for utopian political programs such as anarchism, socialism, and a bi-national solution to the conflict in Palestine point to a characteristic tension in his personality. The philosopher of “I and Thou” allowed very few people to call him by his first name;” [the critic says.] “The theorist of education suffered no disturbance of his rigorous schedule by children playing in his own home; the utopian politician alienated most representatives of the Zionist establishment; and the innovative academic lecturer could hardly find a proper place in the university he had helped to create—the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

And perhaps most poignantly, this particular critic writes, “some of the dedicated students of this inspiring orator

and writer found themselves irritated by the conflict between their master's ideas and their own attempts at putting them into practice.”

Now, while I would hardly call myself your master as I share my own ideas, usually stemming from the ideas of others, from this pulpit, as your *minister*, I imagine there may be days when you think to yourselves in response to my sermons, “Easier said than done.” I, for one, completely agree.

And yet that might be the very point of a life lived on the narrow ridge. It is *not* easy. It is *not* secure. Not just once in our lives, but every day, we must be willing to experience the kind of encounters that redirect us toward acts of compassion, love, and justice. Every day, we must be willing to ask ourselves, “How am I, or how am I *not* joyfully nurturing myself and my kindred Wildflowers on our lifelong spiritual journeys?”

Martin Buber himself perhaps most powerfully exemplified such a questioning, searching life on the narrow ridge when, less than a decade after World War II and the holocaust that led to the deaths of millions of Jews, Buber returned to Germany to receive the Goethe-Prize of the City of Hamburg in 1951 and the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, in Frankfurt in 1953. In his book about Buber, Maurice Friedman quotes Buber as saying of this experience, “The inner battle of every people between the forces of humanity and the forces of inhumanity... is the deepest issue in the world today.” Friedman goes on to quote Buber, who writes of the prizes, “Manifestations such as the bestowal of the ... Goethe Prize and the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade on a surviving arch-Jew... are moments in the struggle of the human spirit.... The solidarity of all separate groups in the

flaming battle for the becoming of one humanity is, in the present hour, the highest duty on earth.”

Buber’s statement and his acceptance of the prize point not only to his own willingness to encounter the other, to walk the narrow ridge toward a new understanding of the German people, but of the willingness of the people of Germany themselves to leave behind the Nazi absolutism that Hitler had proclaimed to be Germany’s saving grace, by indeed bestowing such an esteemed award upon a Jew.

Such an encounter leads me to ask, in the future, what narrow ridge will we see walked by the survivors of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? In the here and now, in our own city, what narrow ridge might we walk with those we encounter every day, whether in the grocery store or on the street, whether in city hall, or within the walls of our own congregation? As we grow as a community, stepping ever

closer toward a home of our own, how will we each and all be open to encounters not only with one another, but with all who might walk through our doors? How will we be open to perpetually beginning anew, perpetually risking all, so that our truth remains not a having but a becoming?

Let us begin by awakening our senses. Let us begin by awakening our reason, our compassion, our conscience, our vision. If we but open ourselves to encountering the Thou in all whom we might meet, we shall see once more that all real living is meeting, and that in meeting, we are transformed.

Amen.