

Prophetic Religion  
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I did not want to go.

I have always had trouble waking up in the morning and this required that I be awake and dressed at 6:30 in the morning. I was a student at Arizona State University. Although people think of Arizona as warm, actually in January, because the air in the desert is so dry, it can be 70° in mid-afternoon and the temperature can plunge to 40° at night.

So when the alarm went off, I did not get out of bed.

My friend Jay pounded on the door of my dorm room to awaken me. He shouted, "Roger, are you in there? Get up! We need to get going."

I crawled reluctantly out of bed, let Jay in, dressed in five minutes, and we were out the door into his parents' Volkswagen Beetle, heading toward the induction center. We were part of a group of volunteers who went to the military induction center in Phoenix every morning five days a week and distributed leaflets. We gave the 60 or so young men who were arriving for their physicals a flyer with the phone number of a voluntary draft-counseling center. Counselors at the center, clergy, lawyers and law students and others volunteered their time to talk with young men about their legal alternatives if they decided that they did not want to serve in the military in Vietnam.

Thursday morning was our day. I hated getting up in the morning, not only because it was cold and I like to sleep, but because there was always the possibility that this would be the morning that they would try to arrest us. I would never have gone alone. Jay and I supported each other in doing something neither of us could do by ourselves. We arrived at the induction center a few minutes before seven, and by 7:45 we were done, heading off for coffee and a doughnut. As each young man arrived, we said, "You don't have to go if you don't want to. Call the draft-counseling center." The men who worked in the induction center left us alone if we did not step onto their property. They provided a trash can inside the front door where the draftees could throw away the flyers.

I was a reluctant radical. On the one hand, I had then, and still have today, enormous respect for the men and women who are willing to serve in the United States Armed Forces. I have seen young men and women grow and mature because of their service in the military.

On the other hand, my own study of the history of Vietnam led me to the conclusion that we were caught up in a civil war and that the inevitable outcome would be a victory by the Vietcong.

Prophetic religion is simply the act of trying to predict the future and then trying to act in moral and ethical ways to influence that future. I had learned growing up in the Unitarian Universalist Church that I had a moral responsibility to speak out against war if I felt it was wrong.

Therefore, as an undergraduate I found myself joining with the coalition of religious groups that were providing draft counseling to help young men legally avoid being sent to fight in Vietnam. The biggest contributor to the effort was the Lutheran Church, which provided the Lutheran Student Center at Arizona State University as the office for draft counseling. The money and other support came from many other religious groups including Roman Catholics, Methodists, Quakers and Unitarian Universalists to pay for a phone and one staff person who got a stipend of \$1,500 a year. He was Jewish. His wife, who subsidized her husband's draft counseling by working full-time for the phone company as a telephone operator, was Mormon.

Justice Dr. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference was a coalition of more than 80 such organizations. Most of the social action groups I have been involved in have been coalitions of religious organizations. Social action takes many forms, but I have usually had to overcome internal resistance to bring myself to participate.

I remember attending a Unitarian Church in San Francisco on a Sunday morning when I was a graduate student in Berkeley. My friend Harlan Limpert had talked me into going. "If we are going to be ministers," he said, "we should attend church Sunday mornings and learn from the experience of preaching and worship." During the announcements, the minister told us that there would be a blood drive immediately following the service and everyone was encouraged to donate blood. Harlan said, "Come on, Roger. This is important. We need to participate. Let's go and donate blood after the service." I was 25 years old at the time and I had never donated blood. In addition, I thought the idea of letting someone stick a needle in my vein and drain blood out of my body was awful.

However, Harlan was persistent. "This is part of becoming an adult," he said. "Donating blood can save lives and it's just as important as preserving the environment, or feeding the hungry, or opposing war. Donating blood is a social action activity. If you're going to serve as a minister in a church, you need to model mature, responsible citizenship."

"All right, Harlan. I'll do it if you'll do it." We got in line. When it was my turn, I went to the table and answered the questions, and Harlan went to another table and answered the questions. Then I was led to a cot, a needle was inserted into my arm and my precious red fluid began to flow into a plastic bag. I looked around for Harlan; he was across the room sitting at a table eating a cookie and drinking orange juice. "You're done already?" I asked.

"They rejected me," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

“I have a low heart rate,” he explained. “They always reject me. I have never actually been able to give blood. You’re giving blood for me, Roger.”

It turned out that it was not a very painful procedure, and I felt fine afterwards; I actually felt very good that I had done something useful with my morning. I started donating blood on a regular basis and have done so for many years. However, in the same way that I would never have gone to the induction center and passed out leaflets about draft counseling on my own, I would never have gone and donated blood on my own. I needed a friend to encourage me.

As you can see, prophetic religion is often very practical. We can predict that to save lives we need donations of blood and that the moral action is to donate if we are healthy enough to do so.

By the way, I forgave Harlan for tricking me into donating blood. I was actually thankful that he had done so; it is an example of his skill as a religious leader. Today he serves as Vice President of Ministries and Congregational Support at the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Over the years, the encouragement of others has been a key for me. Because of your encouragement I have visited a free medical clinic in the District and Mobile Med here in Montgomery County. I have visited Martha’s Table. I have visited the homeless shelter run by Interfaith Works, a coalition of religious groups doing social work in our county. I have attended County Council meetings about taxicab regulations, and funding for low-cost housing as part of Action in Montgomery, the coalition of religious groups in our county. I have met with a senator on Capitol Hill to lobby for the separation of church and state, working with a coalition of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish lobbyists. In addition, I have met with a member of Congress to encourage the protection of immigrants’ rights in the proposed health care bill.

Every time I had to overcome some reluctance, some resistance to bring myself to participate in these social action activities. The thing that made the difference was the knowledge that I would not be alone, and that I would be letting someone down, someone I cared about if I did not show up. Sometimes that person is a member of this congregation. Sometimes it is a member of a Jewish temple or an Islamic temple or a Buddhist temple or an Episcopal church or another religious organization. Once I go, once I get involved, I am usually glad that I did.

A Christian friend of mine once wrote: “The most important organization in anyone’s life should be a church, which I define as a fellowship of people who cherish, practice and develop traditions concerning the purpose of human life. There may be a few persons who do not need a church. But most of us are too easily distracted from the values we want to devote ourselves to. A church should supply encouragement to the individual ...” to do what we already feel called to do.

The Social Justice Council has prepared a list of activities, and in the lounge today there are people who are available to give you information about these activities. They are hoping you will spend some time looking over the list to see if there is something that speaks to you. Each of us

has strengths and weaknesses. Assessing your own abilities is important. Select an activity that is a good match for you.

Moreover, it is easier if you have a buddy. As noted earlier, as a college student I participated with a friend in a coalition of religious groups trying to end the war in Vietnam. As a young adult, a friend at church got me to overcome my inhibitions and fears to donate blood. Here in Bethesda, as your minister you have encouraged and supported me in social action.

You may find yourself standing next to someone at a table and you both seem interested but you are a little reluctant. I encourage you to take a risk and say, "Hey, I'll sign up if you will."

Dr. Martin Luther King, in his letter in the Birmingham jail, said, "I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, we have some 85 affiliate organizations across the South....We are all caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."

Most of us have within us a resistance, a shyness, an anxiety, a fear of becoming involved. However, we know we are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality. So let's take each other's hand and support each other in participating in life.