READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Human pride is pervasive. There is the familiar story of a writer who met a friend and talked to him a long time about himself, and then said, "I have talked so long about myself. Let's now talk about you. How did you like my last book?"

On a much more serious note, Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer said, as the first atomic bomb went off in the desert at Los Alamos, "I could think only of a phrase from the *Bhagavad Gita*: 'I am become death, the shatterer of worlds.'" He then added that the aftermath of that experience left with him "a legacy of concern. . . . In some sort of crude sense, which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose."

Sociologist of religion Will Herberg posited three basic understandings of human nature that have affected and are affecting Western culture. The first is the intellectualistic view that holds that the essence of human nature resides in the mind. This has Greek roots and is given classic expression in Descartes' dictum, "I think, therefore, I am." The essence of our being, in this view, is rational process.

A second viewpoint could be called the naturalistic, which contends we are not essentially mind at all, but rather a whole organism. This organism is biological and psychological in nature, and reacts to its environment. The dynamic interaction between person and environment is the key concept here, and education is designed to help us adjust to our surroundings.

A third view, even more ancient than the others, is the personalistic view, which has its roots in the Jewish and Christian traditions. While not denying we are mind and organism, we are more to be seen as a dynamic person meeting other persons in the context of time and history.

There are other ways of looking at human nature. Psychologist Carl Rogers once compared his understanding of human nature with that of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr spoke of "original sin" as a function of self-love, claiming too much, grasping after self-fulfillment, thinking of oneself more highly than one ought to think. Rogers looked at his years of practice and concluded that it is not self-love that is at the heart of the human predicament but self-hate. Only as a person comes to love the self can love for the other unfold. Self-love or self-hate: which is at the core of the human predicament?

Niebuhr's position can be illustrated in this story told by Rama-Krishna, a nineteenth-century Hindu mystic.

> Tapobana, the master, had a disciple who served him with irreproachable diligence. It was solely because of this diligence and the services he rendered that Tapobana kept him, for he found the disciple rather stupid. One day, the rumor spread throughout the whole region that Tapobana's disciple had walked on water; that he had been seen crossing the river as one crosses the street. Tapobana called his disciple and questioned him, "Is what people are saying about you possible? Is it really true that you crossed the river walking on the water?"
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> "What could be more natural?" answered his follower. "It is thanks to you, blessed one, that I walked on water. At every step I repeated your saintly name and that is what upheld me."
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> And Tapobana thought to himself, if the disciple can walk on water, what can the master not do? If it is in my name that the miracle takes place, I must possess power I did not suspect and holiness of which I have not been sufficiently aware. After all, I have never tried to cross the river as if I were crossing the street. And without more ado, he ran to the river bank. Without hesitation he set his foot on the water, and with unshakable faith repeated, "me, me, me" . . . and sank.

Writing in *Theology Today,* musician-critic-novelist Eugenia Zukerman called up childhood memories of how she formed her first

images of God, ". . . a figure appeared on the screen—a man, with streaming white hair and bushy eyebrows. A commanding presence. He stood on the podium, back to me; then, suddenly, he wheeled around, looking furious, placed a forbidding finger to his lips and hissed a loud and frightening 'Shhhh!' I was the only one in the room. He must be talking to me, I thought. I was mesmerized. This man had power. This must be God, I reasoned. And there are those who say Toscanini would have agreed."

Philosopher John Locke spoke of the "tabula raza"—human nature is a blank slate on which the environment writes. Or one could speak of philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau's "noble savage," who comes innocent into the world and is corrupted by it. One might speak of the behaviorist approach of psychologist B. F. Skinner, who believed human nature could be conditioned to almost any form of behavior. Sigmund Freud might be seen as a pessimist about changing human nature from a psychological point of view. The power of the Id often overwhelms the power of the Ego and the Superego. Naturalist Edward O. Wilson has recently championed sociobiology, the view that human behavior, including actions traditionally explained in terms of idealism, is ultimately understood as being genetically determined.

Our forebears, Unitarian and Universalist, have generally held to an optimistic view of human nature in response to a Calvinism that stressed innate evil. The quote from William Ellery Channing on page 30 illustrates that position. Virginia Satir's stress on the environment generally expresses the optimistic liberal religious vision of human nature. The traumas of twentieth-century history have called that easy optimism into serious question. In "The Changing Reputation of Human Nature," theologian James Luther Adams holds that "history is the realm of both necessity and freedom. Humanity is both fated and free." There are conditioning factors over which we have little or no control. Despite them, "humanity is fated also to be free; we are compelled to make decisions." This is similar to theologian Paul Tillich's concept of human nature as "finite freedom."

A Jewish aphorism sums up this view: We are born with two pockets so we can reach in one or the other according to our needs. In the right pocket are the words "For my sake was the world created." And in the left pocket are the words, "I am dust and ashes."

Human beings, Unitarian Universalist theologian William Jones points out, are not ontologically ultimate—that is, we are not gods. However, we are functionally ultimate in the sense that in the final analysis it is we who must determine our own authority for truth and meaning. We are not, as Protagoras said, "the *measure* of all things," the standard by which all else is judged. We are instead, according to Jones, the *measurers* of all things theological—only we can determine what is true for us. Therefore, we clearly need to know something about ourselves—the issue is human nature, which as Mark Twain suggests, "is a commodity which seems to be widely distributed among the human race."

Many Unitarian Universalists might agree with what Roman Catholic creation theologian Matthew Fox calls "original blessedness" as opposed to the traditional orthodox Christian doctrine of original sin. We have understood human beings are rational creatures, creatures of evolution. We have not paid nearly as much attention to our capacity for sin. Sin is a concept we don't much like to talk about. We don't do very well explaining, for example, the Holocaust, or that "the best and the brightest" brought the world Vietnam, in terms of human nature. We don't have a fully developed tragic sense of life. Is it possible we neglect the "shadow side" of human nature at our peril?

In 1885 this liberal confidence in human nature was given classic expression by the American Unitarian James Freeman Clarke, who affirmed faith "in the progress of mankind onward and upward forever." The 1936 Universalist Avowal of faith unequivocally stated the belief "in the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the Kingdom of God." In the 1967 Goals Survey, nine in ten Unitarian Universalists agreed that our "potential for love can overcome our potential for evil." The 1985 Purposes and Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association Bylaws state: "We

affirm and promote . . . justice, equity, and compassion in human relations," and "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." Unitarian Universalists are irrepressibly optimistic, almost to a fault. But, if people are so good by nature, why does humanity so often seem to be in such a mess?

Against this typically optimistic view is the more traditional Christian view of original sin. It holds we are willful, even arrogant creatures. Reinhold Niebuhr said, ". . . the view that men are 'sinful' is one of the best attested and empirically verified facts of human existence." He once suggested that each person secretly thinks he/she is the "end-product of evolution—what God was really trying to accomplish all this time."

The inevitable humility we experience in the face of the evidence was colorfully put by writer Isak Dinesen: "What are we when you come to think of us, but minutely set, ingenious machines for turning, with infinite artfulness, the red wine of shiraz into urine?" Or, as anthropologist Ashley Montague subtly put it, "At last we have discovered the missing link between our anthropoid ancestors and truly civilized [beings]—us."

Human nature may be best described by Paul Tillich's phrase, "finite freedom." Or to use James Luther Adams' formulation, "We are both fated and free." We have the potential to transcend ourselves; we can also be utterly selfish. Our potential for creativity is matched by our propensity for destruction.

Viktor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning,* dramatized this view with his vivid description of his concentration camp experience, "Man could be defined as the being who invented the gas chambers for human extermination. But man can also be defined as the being who entered those gas chambers with the stirring tune of the 'Marseilles,' or the Lord's Prayer on his lips."

Background Reading

Adams, James Luther. *On Being Human Religiously*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1986, pp. 33–56.

SESSION 4

Human Nature—Some Self-Understanding

I do and I must reverence human nature. Neither the sneers of a worldly skepticism nor the groans of a gloomy theology disturb my faith in its god-like powers and tendencies. I know how it is despised, how it has been oppressed, how civil and religious establishments have for ages conspired to crush it. I know its history. I shut my eyes on none of its weaknesses and crimes. . . . But injured, trampled on, and scorned as our nature is, I still turn to it with intense sympathy and strong hope. I bless it for its kind affections, for its strong and tender love. . . . I thank God that my own lot is bound up with that of the human race.

—*"Likeness to God"* by William Ellery Channing

I am convinced that there are no genes to carry the feeling of worth. It is learned. *And the family is where it is learned. . . . Feelings of worth can only flourish in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible—the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family. . . . Since the feeling of worth has been learned, it can be unlearned, and something new can be learned in its place. The possibility for this learning lasts from birth to death, so it is never too late. . . . There is always hope that your life can change because you can always learn new things.*

—*People Making* by Virginia Satir

Purpose

- To consider theories of human nature
- To develop a statement about one's own nature and human nature in general

Materials

- Newsprint
- Felt pens
- Easel or masking tape
- Copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*
- Chalice or candle in holder and matches

Preparation

- Set up newsprint on an easel or by taping pages to a smooth surface.
- Draw the human continuum on newsprint (see Human Continuum activity on page 32) and leave space for participants to add to it.
- Read through the optional activities in this session and decide if you wish to include them.

SESSION PLAN

Probing Human Nature 30 minutes

Read aloud the following quotations. Ask participants to choose the quotation that comes closest to their view of human nature. Why have they chosen it?

Man is the most recalcitrant creature in the universe.

—Loren Eisley

You have millions of virtues, but you postpone their practice.

—letter from a friend to May Sarton

The child is born with a natural desire to give out, to do, to serve.

—John Dewey

Humans can learn to like anything, that's why we are such a successful species. . . . You can drop humans anywhere and they'll thrive—only the rat does as well.

—Jeannette Desor

To whom can I speak today? The gentle man has perished, the violent man has access to everybody. To whom can I speak today? The iniquity that smites the land, it has no end. To whom can I speak today? There are no righteous men, the earth is surrendered to criminals.

—ancient Egyptian quote

There are no bad people; only bad institutions. . . . Given sun, soil, air, and water, a plant does not need to be told how to grow.

—Urie Bronfenbrenner

Hate-hardened heart, O heart of iron/iron is iron till it is rust./There never was a war that was not inward; I must/fight till I have conquered in myself what causes war, but I would not believe it./I inwardly did nothing./O Iscariotlike crime!/Beauty is everlasting and dust is for a time.

—Marianne Moore

Born on this Isthmus of a middle state/A being darkly wise and widely great/He hangs between; in doubt to act or rest/In doubt to deem himself a God or beast. In doubt his mind or body to prefer/Born but to die and reasoning but to err/ Sole judge of truth in endless error hurled/The glory, jest and riddle of the world.

—Alexander Pope

We are what we do.

—Erich Fromm

I see the right, and I approve it too, condemn the wrong, and yet the wrong pursue.

—Ovid

He that falls into sin is a man; that grieves at it may be saint; that boasteth of it is a devil.

—Margaret Fuller

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

—The Apostle Paul

Bein' good is so much trouble, while bein' bad ain't no trouble at all.

—Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn

Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name!

—Emma Goldman

The lower half of a picture shows a line of babies—pink, sweet, delightful, innocent, lovable. The top half of this picture shows passengers in a subway train—glum, gray, sullen, sour. The caption underneath says: "What happened?"

—Frontispiece of an abnormal psychology textbook

Man has always been his own most vexing problem.

—Reinhold Niebuhr