



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

**In the Face of Despair —
Choosing Hope, Community, and Meaning:
Reflections on Richard Rorty**

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10 January 2016

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One trillion, trillion, trillion years from now, the accelerating expansion of the universe will have disintegrated the fabric of matter itself, terminating the possibility of embodiment. Every star in the universe will have burnt out, plunging the cosmos into a state of absolute darkness and leaving behind nothing but spent husks of collapsed matter. All free matter, whether on planetary surfaces or in interstellar space, will have decayed, eradicating any remnants of life... [T]he stellar corpses littering the empty universe will evaporate into a brief hailstorm of elementary particles. Atoms themselves will cease to exist. Only the implacable gravitational expansion will continue, driven by the currently inexplicable force called 'dark energy', which will keep pushing the extinguished universe deeper and deeper into an eternal and unfathomable blackness."

—Ray Brassier, Nihil Unbound, 228

If you were to visit the Oval Office, you would see that one of the quotes President Obama chose to weave into the rug is from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: **"the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."** Dr. King, in turn, was quoting the nineteenth-century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. In the short term, King and Parker are right: seeking to live a moral life leads us to act for peace with justice in the world.

But as described in the opening quote, **in the longest of long terms, science tells us that ultimately it is *not* love that wins, but entropy.** And rather than bending

toward justice, we are heading toward the inevitable heat death of the universe. But that's "one trillion, trillion, trillion years from now." So, we're good.

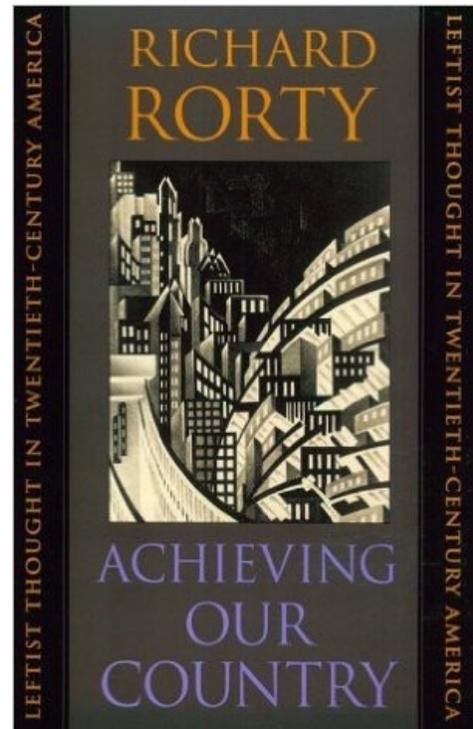
In all seriousness, though, many ethical systems hold that we should act morally because of a cosmic "carrot and stick" system: if you do good, you will be blessed eternally in an afterlife; if you do bad, you will be eternally punished. But given what we know about our marginal place in the 13.8 billion year-old story of evolution (in a universe with well over 100 billion other galaxies), what does it mean to *choose* meaning, community, and hope. **Even if our choices are not eternally significant, they are still deeply impactful here and now.**

In light of all that we know in the early twenty-first century — as heirs to Copernicus, Darwin, Freud, and so many other paradigm-shifters — one of the people who has helped me the most in reflecting on how to live ethically is the late American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty (1931-2007).

In the late '90s, as an undergraduate philosophy major, I first read his book Contingency, Irony, Solidarity, and as a graduation present, one of my favorite philosophy professors gave me a copy of Rorty's collection of essays titled Philosophy and Social Hope. Back in 1990, *The New York Times* called Rorty, "**the most influential contemporary American philosopher**" (5).

I've continued to read a lot of Rorty in the years since, including the 500-page Rorty Reader, which is a great overview of his work if you are feeling ambitious; but if this sermon leaves you

curious to learn *a little* more, **a much more accessible entry point is his short, 140-page**



book *Achieving Our Country*, which is a call for us to live into the best ideals of the American experiment.

As I've learned more about Rorty, I've been fascinated to find out that not only did this world-class philosopher get two C's in college, he received those two C's in philosophy classes (100)! Part of the reason was that Rorty was wrestling with depression. Over time and with help, he was able to continue his studies.

Another significant part of Rorty's story is that his **maternal grandfather was Walter Rauschenbusch, one of the leaders in the Social Gospel movement in the early twentieth century.** The Social Gospel emphasized that following the gospel (the "good news") that Jesus lived and taught was *less* about saving individuals from hell in a next world and *much more* about creating a just and peaceful world for all people in *this* world. This *Social* Gospel was what Jesus called the kingdom of God and what more contemporary leaders like Dr. King have called the Beloved Community (16).

Following in these footsteps, both of Rorty's parents were freelance writers and activists (337). And looking to the current generation, it is also significant to note that Paul Raushenbush, Walter Rauschenbusch's great-grandson, is an ordained minister and activist. Paul and his husband Brad Gooch have one son who is the namesake of his famous ancestor: Walter Gooch-Raushenbush.

I've taken the time to lay out those generation-spanning connections because, following the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, I think there is truth in the claim that, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" In that spirit, consider this quote from Rorty's autobiographical essay:

When I was 12, the most salient books on my parents' shelves were two red-bound volumes, *The Case of Leon Trotsky* and *Not Guilty*. These made up the report of the Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials. I never read them with the wide-eyed fascination I

brought to books like Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, but **I thought of them in the way in which other children thought of their family's Bible: they were books that radiated redemptive truth and moral splendor.** If I were a really good boy, I would say to myself, I should have read not only the Dewey Commission reports, but also Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, a book I started many times but never managed to finish. For in the 1940s, **the Russian Revolution and its betrayal by Stalin were, for me, what the Incarnation and its betrayal by the Catholics had been to precocious little Lutherans 400 years before....**

I grew up knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists.... Working as an unpaid office boy during my twelfth winter, I carried drafts of press releases from the Workers' Defense League office.... On the subway, I would read the documents I was carrying. They told me a lot about what factory owners did to union organizers, plantation owners to sharecroppers, and the white locomotive engineers' union to the colored firemen (whose jobs white men wanted, now that diesel engines were replacing coal-fired steam engines). So, **at 12, I knew that the point of being human was to spend one's life fighting social injustice.**

What story or stories did you find yourself a part of as a child? Even more importantly, **what story or stories are you *choosing* to weave into your narrative now and for the future?**

As we considered earlier, realizing that we humans are *not* the center of the universe — but merely the “third rock from the sun” that is on the periphery of one spiral galaxy, that is only one among as many as 500 billion other galaxies — could lead one to nihilistic despair at our insignificance as a species in the grand scheme of things. After Darwin, we know that we are not “a little lower than the angels,” but merely “a

little higher than the apes” and deeply interconnected with the ecosystems of this fragile planet.

But there are ways we can choose to reframe that narrative. From the perspective of American Pragmatism, Rorty writes:

to say that we are clever animals is not to say something philosophical and pessimistic but something political and hopeful – namely, **if we can work together, we can make ourselves into whatever we are clever and courageous enough to imagine ourselves becoming.** This is to set aside [questions such as] ‘What is man?’ and to substitute the question ‘What sort of world can we prepare for our great grandchildren?’ (357-358)

That sort of “Seven-generation thinking” — that ethical decisions should honor the wisdom of the three generations that preceded you (*back to your great-grandparents*) and consider the legacy you are leaving for the three generations that will follow you (*your great-grandchildren*) — can be an incredibly fruitful way of being in the world.

Along those lines, in the late 1700s, our forebears from the *Universalist* half of our UU heritage began rejecting the idea that God would damn any human being to *infinite* suffering in hell for what at most would be *finite* sin in this life. Over time, that Universalist emphasis on rejecting hell in a “next world” evolved into a focus on “loving the hell out of *this world*.” Relatedly, Rorty writes, it turns out that “**willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward [is] transferable from individual rewards to social ones, from one’s hope for paradise to one’s hopes for one’s grandchildren**” (85). Can you hear the influence in that quote of his grandfather Walter Rauschenbusch, two generations back?

Admittedly, none of us know with certainty what the universe will look like “one trillion, trillion, trillion years from now” or what will (or won’t) happen after we die. But Rorty’s vision calls us to do what we know we can do: choose *meaning*, choose *community*, and choose *hope* for ourselves and for the sake of generations to come.

In that spirit, The Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, wrote recently that despite all the theological and philosophical diversity within the big tent of Unitarian Universalism, one of the common threads he continues to see is that:

We all believe that things do not have to be the way they are. We refuse to accept that inequality, hatred, environmental destruction, racism, and war are inevitable parts of the human condition. **We believe that we can make things better, especially when we act together.**

Part of how we live into that promise is by being intentional about the stories we choose to tell about ourselves — and that we choose to pass on to future generations.

In so doing, we really can shift paradigms and create a “new normal.” In a little more than a week, as a nation, we will celebrate The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday. And in recent years a significant monument was built in his honor on the tidal basin, looking toward the Jefferson Memorial. Consider, though, **“how implausible the idea of celebrating King’s birthday would have seemed to J. Edgar Hoover at the time of Selma”** (329). Things really can change. To update that analogy, the generations growing up in the wake of this 2015’s Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* will come into awareness in a world in which marriage equality is normal in all fifty states.

Earlier, I referenced Rorty’s call for us to live into the best ideals of the American experiment. And expanding our focus to the past few centuries here in the U.S., Rorty writes about the potential of increasing numbers of people coming to more fully appreciate both the social progress we have made and accordingly how much more is possible through choosing meaning, choosing community, and choosing hope. Such a shift would mean

acquiring an image of [ourselves] as **heirs to a tradition of increasing liberty and rising hope**.... wanting [ourselves and our] children to come

to think of [ourselves] as **proud and loyal citizens of a country that, slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its...moral tolerance, and built colleges in which [increasing percentages] of its population could enroll.** A country that numbered Jefferson, Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, Eugene Debs...Rosa Parks, and James Baldwin among its citizens (121-122)

This “narrative of freedom and hope” is a story we can learn to tell better, more boldly, and more robustly.

Rorty continues by noting that **few people at the turn of the twentieth century would have predicted the Progressive Movement, the forty-hour week, Women’s Suffrage, the New Deal, the Civil Rights Movement, the successes of second-wave feminism”** or what we saw in 2015 (eight years after Rorty’s death): the successes of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Right Movement. “Nobody in [2016] can know that America will not, in the course of the next century, witness even greater moral progress” (106). But there are no guarantees. We must join together to act for what our Sixth Principle calls “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

Before I move toward my conclusion, I want to share with you one more of the many passages from Rorty that have stuck with me even years after I first read them. This quote is from an essay Rorty wrote back in 1996 titled, **“Looking Backward from the Year 2096”**:

Just as twentieth-century Americans had trouble imagining how their pre-Civil War ancestors could have stomached slavery, so we at the end of the twenty-first century **have trouble imagining how our great-grandparents [that’s us] could have legally permitted a C.E.O. to get 20 times more**

than her lowest paid employees. We cannot understand how Americans a hundred years ago could have tolerated the horrific contrast between a childhood spent in the suburbs and one spent in the ghettos. Such inequalities seem to us evident moral abominations, but the vast majority of our ancestors took them to be regrettable necessities... [— just as our nineteenth-century ancestors took slavery to be a regrettable necessity.]
(243)

Along with global climate change, wealth inequality is one of the great challenges facing our species today. What stories will we *choose to tell* that might shape our actions and the stories that generations to come will inherit?