

“IT IS NO LONGER I WHO PURSUE PHILOSOPHY, BUT RATHER REPENTANCE THAT THINKS THROUGH ME”—A MEDITATION ON AN INSIGHT OF TANABE HAJIME’S

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[Window in St Olaf's Church, Wasdale Head](#)

READINGS: Psalm 121 (AV)

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The LORD is thy keeper: the

LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

Mark 1:14-15

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news (NRSV).

The proper time has been fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has drawn near; change our hearts and have faith in the good tidings' (trans. [David Bentley Hart](#)).

From [‘After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism’ by Nancy McDonald Ladd \(Skinner House Books, 2019, pp. 131-132\)](#)



In her new book [Nancy McDonald Ladd](#), a Unitarian Universalist minister, summarises the four major sins of estrangement and disconnection that she thinks we in liberal church traditions have committed and for which we desperately need to repent and seek atonement.

- *A profound and sometimes naive faith in the upward trajectory of history, guided by an equally profound and equally naive faith in humanity's capacity to affect that upward*

trajectory of change.

- *This faith in human capacity, while abstractly universalist in character, is mostly circumscribed around a very specific set of people — usually a small circle of uniformly elite, largely male, and overwhelmingly white intellectuals — who personally construct a broadly stated vision that lays claim to their ultimate loyalty.*
- *A habit of parachuting in from out of town or out of context on projects of benevolent paternalism that are not grounded in authentic relationship to the communities in which such reforms are planted.*
- *An inability or persistent refusal on the part of the privileged reformers to place themselves within their social location or to acknowledge and atone for the ways in which they have benefited from the oppression of others.*

Job 42:1–6

Job answered the LORD: 'I know that you [God] can do all things and that no purpose is beyond you. You ask: who is this obscuring counsel yet lacking knowledge? But I have spoken of things which I have not understood, things too wonderful for me to know. Listen, and let me speak. You said: I shall put questions to you, and you must answer. I knew of you then only by report, but now I see you with my own eyes. Therefore I yield, repenting in dust and ashes.'

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ADDRESS

“It is no longer I who pursue philosophy, but rather repentance that thinks through me”—A meditation on an insight of Tanabe Hajime’s

Last week I explored with you one way by which we might experience two ethically motivating energies which used to be tied-up inextricably with belief in god/gods. They are transcendent energies we have historically labelled ‘grace’ and ‘law’ and traditional religion abounds with examples of people moved to powerful ethical action following an experience of events which were received by them as either unmerited and unexpected gifts freely given by God (grace) or as God’s commands to act on behalf of this or that cause (law).

However, given our historical practice of equating the ‘transcendent’ with the ‘supernatural’ (vertical transcendence) I pointed out that, for many people today, a loss or abandonment of belief in a supernatural God means that these transcendent, transformative and creative energies seem definitively no longer to be available to us. In this they have experienced something of the deep anxiety expressed by the ‘Madman’ character in Nietzsche’s famous parable who believed

that, unchained from our sun (i.e. God) we have been condemned to plunge aimlessly in a meaningless universe in which we are left solely to our own resources.

Fortunately for us, however, one of our own liberal religious tradition's philosophers, [Jerome A. Stone](#), has been amongst those who have recognised that the 'transcendent' need not be understood vertically but horizontally, i.e. in ways that are wholly naturalistic, this-worldly, situational and relative. Last week I suggested that such a horizontal understanding of transcendence can give us access to transformative natural energies that are at least analogous to the putative, supernatural energies of grace and law — but you'll have [to read last week's address](#) to see how I, thanks to the gracious help of Jerome A. Stone, played out that thought.

Anyway, in the convivial, two-hour long conversation over lunch at 'All Bar One' which followed the service it became apparent that it might be worth bringing another example of this to you, not least of all because it concerns a transcendent energy which, at this moment of time we, on the democratic centre/liberal/left of the religious and political spectrum, have considerable need of — or so it seems to me.

It is an energy which can only be released when we admit to ourselves in private and public that a) our various progressivist projects/institutions have not proved to be as effective, universally appealing or as long-lasting as we thought they were, for which act of hubris we need to repent and, b) that we haven't got either a clue about how next to proceed nor the energy to bring it about even were we able to figure out what it was we should be doing next.

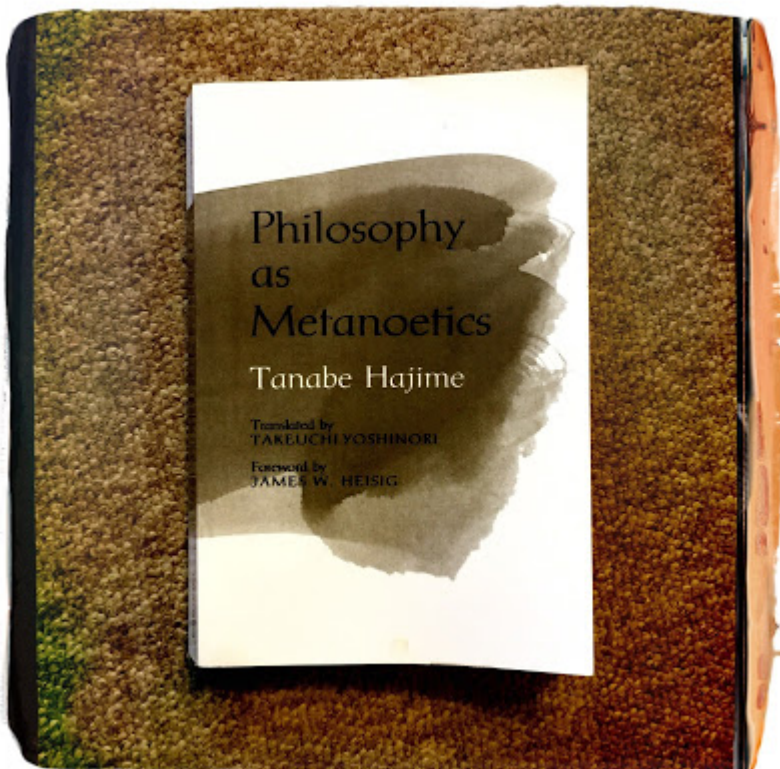
In traditional religious language, the energy released by such an act of repentance would be — it is hoped — the coming into our lives of a transcendent, supernatural God. For someone like me with a Christian upbringing and education this hope was expressed beautifully and pithily in Psalm 121; after my act of repentance I would be able to 'lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.' But, for all the reasons I have already noted and many more besides, the idea that such a transcendent energy could still come into my life following such an act of repentance seems both impossible and ludicrous.

And so it seemed to me for many, many years until 2008 when, during my first sabbatical following my appointment here as minister in 2000, I discovered the writings of the important early twentieth-century Japanese philosopher [Tanabe Hajime \(1885–1962\)](#).

Tanabe was a key member of what is known as the [Kyoto School](#) of thinkers centred at Kyoto University who studied various aspects of Western philosophy and religious ideas and used them to re-explore and re-interpret certain religious and ethical insights that were unique to their own Buddhist, East-Asian cultural tradition.

After becoming Associate Professor at Kyoto University in 1919, between 1922 and 1924 he

travelled to Germany to study at Berlin University, Frieberg University (with Husserl) and at the University of Marburg (with Heidegger).



Although on his return to Japan during the pre-WWII period of expansion Tanabe worked with other thinkers in the Kyoto School to maintain the right for free academic expression Tanabe was, alas, drawn into supporting the Japanese war effort. We know from some of his letters and short essays that he felt able to use many of the same militaristic and nationalist terms used by the Japanese regime and was also able to defend ideas about Japanese racial and state superiority. Although Tanabe published very little during the war years something dramatic and life-changing was clearly going on in his heart and mind which would eventually lead to the writing of what is generally considered his 1948 masterpiece, [‘Philosophy as Metanoetics’ \(University of California Press, 1986\)](#). In this he stated, quite startlingly, that if you want to be a philosopher you must confess your sins and repent. The title of his book refers to the Greek word ‘metanoia’ which literally means ‘afterthought’ from ‘meta’, meaning ‘after’ or ‘beyond’ and ‘noesis’, meaning ‘thinking,’ ‘reasoning’ or ‘intuition.’ For Tanabe this ‘involves the giving up of any expectation that one can solve practical matters of importance through one’s own efforts (jiriki, or ‘self-power’) ([cited in Robert E. Carter, ‘The Kyoto School: An Introduction’, SUNY Press, 2013, p. 67](#)).

In the form of ‘metanoia’ it’s also the Greek word lying behind the English word ‘repent’ used in the famous saying of Jesus’ found at the beginning of Mark’s gospel which we heard in our

readings.

‘Philosophy as Metanoetics’ was, in part, written as a kind of confession of repentance (metanoia) for his support of the war effort. However, despite his confession and the philosophical gains he made in the book, his own actions, and those of Japan itself, continued to haunt Tanabe until his death. Something of what he felt can be sensed in these words of his written in 1951:

> [A]s the tensions of World War II grew ever more fierce and with it the regulation of thinking, weak-willed as I was, I found myself unable to resist and could not but yield to some degree to the prevalent mood, which is a shame deeper than I can bear. The already blind militarism had led so many of our graduates precipitously to the battlefields; among the fallen were more than ten from philosophy, for which I feel the height of responsibility and remorse. I can only lower my head and earnestly lament my sin ([James Heisig, ‘The Self That Is Not a Self,’ in Taitetsu Unno & James W. Heisig, ‘The Religious Philosophy of Tanabe Hajime: The Metanoetic Imperative’, Asian Humanities Press, 1990, Unno and Heisig, p. 284.](#))

In ‘Philosophy as Metanoetics’ Tanabe makes it clear that, given his own abject failures, he felt he was simply not fit ‘to engage in the sublime task of philosophy’, Indeed he was forced to admit both his powerlessness and give up the self-pretence of being a philosopher. He writes:

‘At that moment something astonishing happened. In the midst of my distress I let go and surrendered myself humbly to my own inability. I was suddenly brought to new insight! My penitent confession — metanoiesis (zange) - unexpectedly threw me back on my own interiority and away from things external. There was no longer any question of my teaching and correcting others under the circumstances — I who could not deliver myself to do the correct thing’ ([‘Philosophy as Metanoetics’ \(University of California Press, 1986, p. 1\).](#))

The British philosopher, Michael McGhee, commenting on this passage notes it was not so much that Tanabe ‘decided . . . he should do one thing or the other: the point is that he no longer had to make a decision’ ([Michael McGhee: Transformations of the Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice, CUP 2000, p. 11](#)). Here’s Tanabe again:

‘It is no longer I who pursue philosophy, but rather repentance that thinks through me. In my practice of repentance, it is repentance itself that is seeking its own revelation. [In the original this reads: ‘It is no longer I who pursue philosophy, but rather zange (metanoiesis) that thinks through me. In my practice of metanoesis, it is metanoesis itself that is seeking its own revelation’] ([‘Philosophy as Metanoetics’ \(University of California Press, 1986, p. 1\).](#))

The crucial point to grasp here is that Tanabe sees that his insight comes about, not because of his ‘self-power’ (jiriki) but because of an ‘other-power’ (tariki). Tanabe continues:

‘This Other-power brings about a conversion in me that heads along a path hitherto unknown to me . . . This is what I am calling metanoetics, the philosophy of Other-power’ ([‘Philosophy as Metanoetics’ \(University of California Press, 1986, p. li\).](#))

Now, during the first sabbatical of this my first, and only, ministry I was in a right mess. Seven years of it had laid me extremely low and shown me clearly that a) I was not fit to engage in the sublime task of being a theologian and a minister and had absolutely no right to consider myself as this thing called ‘the Reverend’ — indeed, I ceased to use the title myself or in church contexts (even though people continue to insist on pinning it upon me now and then) and b) I had to admit that the liberal Unitarian, Free Christian and Universalist religious project into whose ministry I had entered was simply no longer working and, in fact, had a great deal of repentance to make for those sins of estrangement and disconnection so succinctly summarized by Nancy McDonald Ladd in her powerful and timely book ‘After the Good News: Progressive Faith beyond Optimism.’

In 2008, like Tanabe sixty years before me, I discovered to my surprise, however, that it was only when I finally had the courage to admit those sins and truly repent that some kind of transcendent ‘other-power’ did, astonishingly, come to me and help me to carry on in some limited fashion. Of course, this was not the coming to me of an old-school powerful, transcendent supernatural God down from out of the hills but something much more modest and local — that God was, and is, dead to me. However, poetically speaking, and at a personal level, it was to experience a transcendent ‘other-power’ seemingly ‘coming down’ to me from ‘above’.

But in the relief of partial recovery and a return of a modicum of health and strength, the human condition, being what it is, hubristically inclines all of us to slowly to forget the valuable lessons experienced in our former sickness and subsequent repentance and so old, life-long, destructive habits and delusions slowly return into play. That certainly happened to me and I’ve come to realise in the last year (and very strongly in last few months) that the practice of repentance for my own continued sins of estrangement and disconnection needs to be daily, if not (on occasions) hourly.

But I tell you this personal story, not merely to make public confession of my sins to you but, instead, so I can use personal experience properly to ground (i.e. in a non-abstract, grounded, local way) a more general question germane to our current wider, religious and political situation.

Has not our whole democratic centre/liberal/left religious and political culture, and we as participants in it, clearly committed many great sins of estrangement and disconnection which have helped facilitate the return of all kinds of racist, nationalist, xenophobic, authoritarian and planet destroying ideologies and behaviours?

Our grand liberal, democratic, Enlightenment inspired project has not come to pass as we would have hoped it would and we are today deeply distressed at what is filling the significant vacuum our failure has left behind. Equally distressingly is the fact that we haven't got a clue about what to do next nor any energy to do it.

Personal experience strongly suggest to me that appropriate, less hubristic and delusional ways forward, along with the energy required actual to implement those ways, will emerge for us only **after** we have self-consciously stopped and begun genuinely to repent for our many liberal sins of estrangement and disconnection. Such acts of repentance are, in my opinion, the pre-condition for the coming of the transcendent other-power which we on the democratic centre/liberal/left so badly need.

So, like a latter-day John the Baptist, I'm here today (so what unwillingly and uncomfortably) at the beginning of a new year and decade to proclaim in a wholly naturalistic, but still religious key, the need for a repentance for the forgiveness of our sins.

Not yet ready to repent in dust and ashes? OK, I understand and respect that, but at least seriously think about buying, reading and reflecting deeply upon the contents of Nancy McDonald Ladd's book . . .