

# **THE FREEDOM TO BE TOMORROW WHAT WE ARE NOT TODAY “THE NEWER TESTAMENT—THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THIS MOMENT”**

*Posted on May 29, 2019 by Andrew Brown*



# ***Becoming “Free Spirits” and “Archeologists of Morning”***

Andrew J. Brown

*Second Edition—2019*

*A revised version of a talk given at the “Sea of Faith” Annual Conference,  
Leicester University, July 2016*

## **A INTRODUCTORY CAVEAT**

I publish this talk with one important caveat by borrowing some words by Herbert Fingarette (“The Self in Transformation”, Basic Books, New York 1963, p.1). I want to make it clear that what follows is an outcome rather than a realised objective and, as such, it forms an intellectual footprint, not a blueprint. If it helps you personally to find your place on the intellectual map and the existential position in which you point, all well and good. If not, so be it, I wish you well in your own place and in following your own direction of travel.

## **I A BEGINNING**

The theme of the conference for which this essay was written was, “Religion—Where Next?” It seems to be an important question to ask because the state of our former, formal religious traditions appear parlous and, at least in denominational terms, probably terminal.

But was this, in fact, precisely the right question to pose? I ask because over the nineteen years of my ministry in Cambridge it has struck me more and more that a better question might be “Religion—Where Right Now?” To begin to get at what I mean I’d like to start with a little parable.

Many years ago I was in a denominational meeting where we returned to the perennial question about how we might deal with the fact that our inherited, basically liberal Christian, religious ideas and stories seemed not to be connecting meaningfully with most people in our own day and age. The conversation finally centred upon the word “worship”, especially as it was found in the phrase to be found on many of our noticeboards: “Such and Such Church meets for worship at 10.30am.” The general feeling in the meeting was that the word either meant nothing at all to

most people or, if they did know what it meant, it actively put them off from attending. What was needed, so the claim was made, was a new word and someone suggested “MetaK”. They explained that it was made up of two elements, “Meta” (meaning “after”, “higher”, “above” or “beyond”) and the letter “K” which stood for knowledge. But—although appreciative of the attempt, and certainly the felt need—I and others pointed out that no one would know what the word “MetaK” meant and so it would be utterly pointless to start painting it on our noticeboards. Ultimately we felt it was likely to be more off-putting than the word it sought to replace. They replied that perhaps it might intrigue people enough to persuade them to ask us what it meant and so someone enquired what was it that we should tell them?” The reply came that “We would tell people it was something like worship.” I rest my case and simply note that the word “MetaK” was not painted on our noticeboards.

I imagine, however, that, like me, most of you will feel some sympathy and affinity with the proposer of the word “MetaK” because we are all acutely aware that our inherited religious traditions are full of words and practices—such as “worship”—which simply no longer meaningfully and positively connect with many people—including, of course, ourselves.

This is, at least in part, why we are so tempted to ask the question “Religion—Where Next?” and all the evidence we come across strongly suggests that it’s not going anywhere if it simply and slavishly hangs onto old words, concepts and practices and also refuses to countenance the introduction of any new expressions of religion. But, surely, is it not also true that neither is religion going to go anywhere if it too hastily, and too strongly, tries to introduce, ahead of time, new words and practices that have no real, deep, collective meaning or cultural currency?

Given this bind how do I think we might be able properly to claim the freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today and so succeed in moving on? Well, I’m going to suggest something that might, at first, seem to be holding things back, namely that we need firstly to claim the freedom religiously to be what we are today. As Jesus wisely said, “Do not worry about tomorrow; it will have enough worries of its own. There is no need to add to the troubles each day brings” (Matt. 6:34). So, in this piece at least, I’d like to remain with today’s troubles.

Connected with this thought, I’m sure you all know the old joke about the tourist who asks a local for directions to some particular place in town. The local replies, “Well, if I were you, I wouldn’t start from here”. There is, of course, great wisdom in this joke because the only religious tradition we can ever start from is the one we have to hand right here and now; it is always-

already the place we must be starting from and this is so whether we like this fact or not.

But, the objection often goes, such an approach cannot possibly work because the religion we have access to here and now is a too heavy yoke, one impossibly weighed down by its many faulty and reactionary ideas and practices.

However, I don't think this objection is, necessarily, correct and on this point I'm very much with the great twentieth-century German philosopher of hope, Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), who could speak to us of "the still undischarged future in the past" (Ernst Bloch: "Principle of Hope", MIT Press, Cambridge MA 1995, 1:200).

Picking up on this idea, in his recent book, "Hope without Optimism", Terry Eagleton feels that, in consequence, "We must strive, then, to keep the past unfinished, refusing to accept its appearance of closure as the final word, springing it open once again by rewriting its apparent fatality under the sign of freedom" (Terry Eagleton: "Hope without Optimism", Yale UP, New Haven 2015, p. 32).

To my mind, liberal religious people (whether rooted in the Christian tradition or not) most effectively gather together under the sign of freedom whenever they are able consistently to adopt what the contemporary Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo has called "il pensiero debole"—"weak thought", a philosophy implicitly already to be found in the Christian tradition in the writings of St Paul—"For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25).

Vattimo's work helps us sense that we perhaps best overcome our inherited religious traditions, not by overcoming them in a strong way, in a single "violent", revolutionary moment by forcibly replacing one word or concept with another (such as in the example of "MetaK") but, instead, by employing weaker, more subtle and creative ways that consciously surpass, twist, and reinterpret them. Vattimo borrows two German words from Heidegger to point to the difference in approaches. The hard, forcible way of overcoming he calls "überwindung", whilst the gentle way he calls, "verwindung" (twisting — to "go beyond" but in a transformative, incorporating, rather than destructive, way).

The action of water gives us an obvious analogy to "verwindung" and which the Tao Te Ching expresses beautifully: "Nothing in the world is soft and weak as water. But when attacking the

hard and strong, nothing can conquer so easily. Weak overcomes strong, soft overcomes hard” (Tao Te Ching, Ch. 78, trans, Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo, Hackett, Indianapolis 1993).

This is why in Cambridge—despite the odd personal wobble and moment of doubt (and who does not have them?)—I continue to be an advocate of remaining clearly and self-consciously close to the liberal Christian and radical Enlightenment traditions and of keeping in our liturgies and general religious language a great deal that we might otherwise be tempted to overcome in a strong way (“überwindung”) by abandoning or replacing them for some thing that only seems to be new, relevant and cutting edge.

In passing today, although I think this is a very important point, there are also good politico-theological reasons to maintain a real connectedness with the Christian tradition. In his recent book “The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology” (Verso Press, London 2012) Simon Critchley explores very powerfully some of these reasons—and I highly recommend to you this book and also his related volume “Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance” (Verso Press, London 2007)—but here I’ll simply note, as has the British philosopher, Peter Thompson, “that religion as both debate and way of life has not crumbled in the face of an apparently inexorable rationalist, scientific, modernising Enlightenment and globalisation of the market economy” and it has, contrary to most liberal expectations, “retain[ed] a potency and strength which remains far in excess of its ability to explain” (Thompson's introduction to Ernst Bloch’s “Atheism in Christianity”, Verso Press 2009, p. ix).

It seems to me that unless religious liberals (like myself) who come from the Christian tradition remain able fluently to use their own stories and language to help drive forward liberal and progressive visions of the world, then we are going to have an even harder time than we are already experiencing at finding effective, rhetorically powerful ways to challenge the conservative interpretations of monotheism that are currently being made in so many places around the world today and which are contributing to some of the worst imaginable examples of violence and repression.

Anyway, Vattimo feels, as do I, that if we can find ways to keep the past present, and consciously to engage with it in a dialectic conversational way through a process of “verwindung”, carried out with the patience of water upon stone, then, and only then, will we in time have a real chance of escaping many of our old and, to my mind, highly damaging religious thoughts and practices and be able to move into a genuinely new liberal and progressive religious way of being.

We can begin better to appreciate something of what is meant by this kind of approach by considering the point Karl Marx made in his oft quoted eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach:

“Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it.”

However, Vattimo (and his colleague Santiago Zabala) have come to feel, and I agree with them, that, today, Marx’s eleventh thesis needs to be rewritten thus:

“The philosophers have only described the world in various ways; the moment now has arrived to interpret it” (Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala: in “Hermeneutic Communism — From Heidegger to Marx”, Columbia University Press, New York 2011, p. 5).

Related to this observation (in a interview from 2002), Vattimo notes that:

“In a strong theory of weakness, the philosopher’s role would not derive from the world ‘as it is,’ but from the world viewed as the product of a history of interpretation throughout the history of human cultures. This philosophical effort would focus on interpretation as a process of weakening, a process in which the weight of objective structures is reduced.”

Indeed, most of us here know only too well that our inherited religious traditions and their their strong objective structures (such as, for example, the idea of a supreme being who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient or the various institutions of an organised, hierarchical church) desperately need to be overcome. Despite this, however, Vattimo is, as am I, in agreement with Heidegger when he said, “Overcoming is worthy only when we think about incorporation” (Martin Heidegger: “Overcoming Metaphysics” in the “End of Philosophy”, trans J. Stambaugh, Harpur and Row, New York 1973, p. 91).

The point I’m trying to tease out here is that the religion we have in the here and now on our own bend of the river (whatever and wherever it is) need never be allowed to be taken simply, “as it is” but can always taken as, “fluid, labile and suspended” (Walter Benjamin quoted in Terry Eagleton: “Hope without Optimism”, Yale UP, New Haven 2015, p. 32); it is always something capable of being radically, but gently, reinterpreted so that it can continuously gift us things intensely valuable and meaningful, things both new and old. As Jesus is once reported as having said: “. . . every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a



household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52).

Today I want strongly to claim that our treasure (our hope) is to be found in our past—indeed I don’t know where else it could be found—but it is only found there when we recognise, as Jesus did, that the past isn’t what we usually think it is, i.e something done and dusted, but something always unfinished and ever-present and, as Eagleton says, that “. . . the meaning of past events lies ultimately in the guardianship of the present” (Terry Eagleton: “Hope without Optimism”, Yale UP, New Haven 2015, p. 32).

This feeling has, for a long time now, made me ask how we might become ourselves modern equivalents of scribes of the kingdom of heaven, people who are truly able to affect this guardianship of the present and, therefore, able to claim the freedom to be tomorrow what we are not today?

The first thing to observe in answering this question is that scribes are made not born. They are slowly formed through a long, self-conscious, disciplined practice and it seems to me that one of the most pressing things required in contemporary liberal religion is not to make some new, relevant contemporary religion but rather, firstly, to set about making and shaping contemporary liberal religious subjects who, like Jesus, are both able to bring out of their treasure what is new and what is old and also capable of effectively challenging the way our current dominant cultures are so successfully creating conservative religious and/or neoliberal subjects (with regard to the creation of the neoliberal subject cf. Wendy Brown: “Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution”, MIT Press, Connecticut 2015).

In an attempt to create such liberal religious subjects in Cambridge I try to encourage the people around me to combine in themselves an understanding of Nietzsche’s idea about how a “Free Spirit” is made with the poet Charles Olson’s desire to become what he calls an “Archeologist of Morning.”

## II FREE SPIRITS

Let me begin with Nietzsche’s understanding, found in his prefaces of 1886, of how a “Free Spirit” is made. He sees it as a therapeutic journey unfolding in four phases. I owe a great deal of what follows in this section to Gordon Bearn’s account in his book “Waking to Wonder” (SUNY Press, New York 1997).

Nietzsche thought the therapeutic journey started with “the hearth health” of our old inherited religious tradition which, even though it once gifted us with things we thought were of the highest value, today it “feters us the fastest”, keeps us captive to old ways and beliefs which simply no longer work for us. I’m sure most of us here have, at times, felt the powerful emotional, sentimental desire to hold on in some way to the old faith and, consequently, we know intimately how easily the old faith can come to fetter us the fastest and how it can still fetter fast so many people in the world today.

But it is the recognition of our own loss of faith in the old “hearth health” that—whenever and however it comes—brings on the second phase, one in which we enter a time of profound sickness, the dreadful sickness of nihilism in which there is “the hateful assault on everything that had seemed so comforting.” It’s a time when nothing counts, when everything seems utterly meaningless and there is only anomie and emptiness. In this sickness we find ourselves living the kind of life Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) thought most people lived, one of “quiet desperation”.

As many of us are acutely aware, our own age as a whole is dangerously and deeply mired, both passively and actively, in this nihilistic mood. But for those of us who come to understand this sickness as necessary (because it alone can break the fetters that once bound us and is, therefore, a potentially radically freeing and transformative sickness) then we are able slowly to begin to enter into a third period of real convalescence which itself has two phases—one cool, one warm.

The first, cool phase, is one of detachment where, as Bearn puts it:

“Everything is small. Everything is flat. Nothing matters. This is the mood equally of a scientist sure ours is a world of valueless facts and [also] of those literary characters who float through a world from which they have been estranged and which they look on with a species of tender contempt” (Gordon Bearn: “Waking to Wonder”, SUNY Press, New York 1997, p. 8).

And this is not only the mood of the (convalescent) scientist, but also that of the (convalescent) art critic, the historical, critical theologian, the philosopher, the social anthropologist, the sociologist and minister of religion. We no longer hate our inherited religious tradition but can now look upon it coolly, as if from a great and chilly height; we can admire it from a scholarly distance. In this cool phase of convalescence we do not, of course, believe our inherited religious tradition for one minute, instead we look upon it with a species of tender contempt, but the point is we can



begin to look upon once more.

The warm, second phase, is one in which we recognise that if our convalescence is to continue then we must find ways to come back to earth “where the sun warms.” Here is how Nietzsche beautifully put this (figuratively speaking) descent to earth in his 1886 preface to “Human, All-Too Human” (1879):

“A step further in convalescence: and the free spirit again draws near to life—slowly, to be sure, almost reluctantly, almost mistrustfully. It again grows warmer around him, yellower, as it were; feeling and feeling for others acquire depth, warm breezes of all kinds blow across him. It seems to him as if his eyes are only now open to what is close at hand. He is astonished and sits silent: where had he been? These close and closest things: how changed they seemed! what bloom and magic they have acquired! He looks back gratefully—grateful to his wandering, to his hardness and self-alienation, to his viewing of far distances and bird-like flights in cold heights. What a good thing he had not always stayed “at home,” stayed “under his own roof” like a delicate apathetic loafer! He had been beside himself: no doubt of that. Only now does he see himself—and what surprises he experiences as he does so! What unprecedented shudders! What happiness even in the weariness, the old sickness, the relapses of the convalescent! How he loves to sit sadly still, to spin out patience, to lie in the sun! Who understands as he does the happiness that comes in winter, the spots of sunlight on the wall! They are the most grateful animals in the world, also the most modest, these convalescents and lizards again half turned towards life:—there are some among them who allow no day to pass without hanging a little song of praise on the hem of its departing robe. And, speaking seriously, it is a radical cure for all pessimism (the well-known disease of old idealists and falsehood-mongers) to become ill after the manner of these free spirits, to remain ill a good while, and then grow well (I mean “better”) for a still longer period. It is wisdom, practical wisdom, to prescribe even health for oneself for a long time only in small doses” (Friedrich Nietzsche: “Human, All-Too Human” trans. R. J. Hollingdale, CUP 1996, pp. 8-9).

These words form for me a beautiful prologue to what Thoreau calls in his essay, “Walking”, “a newer testament—the Gospel according to this moment.” I’ll briefly return to this “Gospel” at the very end of this essay.

But, you might object, is not this warmth, this bloom and magic of things close and closest to us, merely an indication of a return by another route to the old hearth hearth? Not at all, because you cannot easily undo the experience of the transformative sickness of nihilism you have gone through; neither can you easily throw away the chilly detached knowledge you gained in the first

period of your convalescence. You are very nearly an irrevocably changed creature.

These moments of warmth are, naturally at first, short lived. Chilly but tender contempt will from time to time most assuredly return. It is also the case that, like malaria or lyme disease, the hateful sickness of nihilism will return now and then, laying you low for weeks on end. However, you are able to sense that you are now truly convalescing and, sometimes, you begin to notice that the occasional moments of warm sunlight come more frequently than they used to and this gives you real hope that, in time, you may slowly be led into what Nietzsche calls the “great health”, a state in which, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it (and which Nietzsche quoted on the title page of the first edition of “The Gay Science”): “To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine” (Emerson: “History”).

On your best days, as Bearn observes, you are now able to live “as neighbour to precisely the things that the metaphysical tradition only found valuable as indicators of another metaphysical world” (Gordon Bearn: “Waking to Wonder”, SUNY Press, New York 1997, p. 32) and you begin to see, as Heidegger saw, that “When we live in the firsthand world around us, everything comes at us loaded with meaning, all over the place and all the time. Everything is within the world [of meaningfulness]: the world holds forth” (cited in “What, after all, was Heidegger about?”, Thomas Sheehan, 2014 p. 8). This, in turn, reveals to us a startling and hopeful truth beautifully summed up by Thomas Sheehan, that “there is nowhere else for a human being to live except in meaning” (ibid. p. 8).

In this phase a person begins ever more fully to understand that we don’t need another metaphysical world to underwrite and give meaning to our life in this world; all that is required is that we see this world differently and have the courage to remain with the close and closest things, things that have now acquired for us such bloom and magic.

For Nietzsche, this warmth gives us the hope of entering the fourth and final phase of great health in which a person is able to live completely and fully in these moments of natural warmth through their life. As Bearn says, “This spirit freed from the tradition that seeks metaphysical comforts is surprised by a new happiness and a new love for all that is delicate. The great health is a life attuned to what is near”. This attitude is seen most clearly expressed in the epigraph that Nietzsche chose to grace the first edition of his “Gay Science”:

“To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine” (Emerson: History).

The hope is (and it’s a reasonable and rational hope in my opinion) that the more and more we come to understand ourselves as pilgrim, convalescent free spirits, the better able we are slowly to become what the American poet Charles Olson (1910-1970) called “archeologists of morning”.

### III ARCHEOLOGISTS OF MORNING

In a short essay of 1952 called “Present is Prologue” (in “Collected Prose” eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander, University of California Press, Berkley 1997, p. 205-207) Olson suggests that we need to come to see that the past is always-already present and it is, or at least can be, for us the prologue of our unfolding, creative life. To borrow another term from Thoreau, one that Olson doesn’t use (though he might have), it is to understand this past-as-present as the “perpetual morning”. To help us better to understand this image of perpetual morning it’s helpful to hear these words of Thoreau:

“All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, ‘All intelligences awake with the morning.’ Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep” (“Walden”, Chapter 2, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”).

Now, for Olson the past is available to us in only two living ways and it is important to see that both of them are available to us only in the present, in this perpetual morning. Keeping in mind Olson’s image of the archeologist, it is into the soil of this always-already perpetual morning that he is encouraging us to do our digging.

None of this is, of course, to deny that something we have traditionally called the past and/or history has a meaningful reality—that would be ridiculous—but it is to acknowledge the existential truth that for each of us, everything we call, identify and have available to us as “the

past”, as “history”, is something which we are always-already carrying with us right now, in the present.

So, as I have just indicated, Olson suggests that the past is available to us in two living ways and he uses the example of his own parents to illustrate the first of these; he calls this first way “our own” history.

Olson notes that “the work of each of us is to find out the true lineament of ourselves by facing up to the primal features of these founders who lie buried in us”. The point he is making is that his dead parents and, by extension, all the past people, things and events and echoes of things and events coming to us from our own and other cultures that are our founders and which have made us who we are—all these are only available to us in the perpetual morning of the here and now, buried in the soil of our own personal and cultural memories. This is an important part of the present ground, earth or perpetual morning, into which we must dig.

The second available, living past is, according to Olson, not “our own”. It is a somewhat allusive “past” because Olson thinks it is one for which we, in the West (unlike those in the East), don’t yet have a vocabulary. He “invokes it” firstly by saying it is “the mythological”, but he immediately says that is “too soft” a way of putting it. He then suggests the following: “What I mean is that foundling which lies as surely in the phenomenological ‘raging apart’ as these queer parents rage in us”.

I take Olson here to be gesturing towards the powerful natural, animating and “raging” fluxes and flows of matter in constant motion—gifted to each of us like a foundling child from who knows what parent—out of which every living and non-living thing is constantly being made (and unmade).

I think it’s important to point out here that we should hear Olson use the word “raging” in the sense that a storm rages and not in the sense that an angry or disappointed man or woman might rage. Olson’s “raging apart” is a natural phenomenon that is as present in the apparent stillness of stone as it is in the seed’s drive to become a flower or a tree or in the caterpillar becoming a butterfly. This “ancient foundling”—this ever-present flux and flow of matter that makes the “perpetual morning”—is “buried” in us in the present in the same way that our parents and other founding elements of the past lie “buried” in our present being.

But why are we to dig? Well, Olson tells us that the work of the morning “is methodology: how to use oneself, and on what”—in other words he is suggesting that it is only by digging in the soil that is this perpetual morning that we can genuinely come to be the kinds of beings we might most fully be. This, he tells us, is his “profession” and why he proclaims himself “an archaeologist of morning.”

Olson thought archaeologists of morning were the type of people always getting on with it, digging deep into the present soil of ourselves and the world, now, in this instant, with no drag and ourselves as the only reader and mover of the instant freed from all restrictive theories and creeds. Olson felt that the “work and dogmas” of such a free, morning way of being were three-fold. Although, today, we might not be overly fond of the word dogma it’s important to understand that Olson seems to be using it to express how strongly he thinks we need to hold to them—they are perhaps better described not as dogmas but as necessary “know-how”.

The first work and dogma (know-how) is “How by form, to get the content instant”. By this he means he wants us to create things where the form they take perfectly, and immediately, expresses the content; where our poetry, music, acts of social justice and worship, etc, are fullest possible expressions of ourselves and not merely arty or moralistic clothing.

The second work and dogma (know-how) is “what any of us are by the work on ourself, how to make ourself fit instruments for use (how we augment the given—what used to be called our fate)”. Here Olson is tapping into the sacred energy that allows us to keep hope alive and not to succumb to despair in the face of often deeply challenging, contingent events.

The third work and dogma (know-how) of Olson’s way of being is to assert that “there is no such thing as duality either of the body and the soul or of the world and I, that the fact in the human universe is the discharge of the many (the multiple) by the one (yrself [sic] done right, whatever you are, in whatever job” this “is the thing” and he goes on to say that this helps us see that “all hierarchies, like dualities, are dead ducks.” Here Olson is tapping into a second sacred energy that is able to challenge the dangerous human hubris that always threatens to make us believe we are individual, independent creatures wholly in control of our existence and unfolding life.

But let us be clear, like all free-spirited archeologists (of morning or of any other kind), we are never going to be absolutely sure beforehand precisely what we are going to bring to light from out of our treasure that is both old and new. All we can, and need be assured of is that, to

paraphrase a well-known hymn, there is always more light and truth to break forth from the world.

**IV**  
**MEN & WOMEN WITHOUT A POSITION,**  
**THE NEWER TESTAMENT &**  
**THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THIS MOMENT**

So, to conclude, what do I think it means to become a free spirit who is also an archeologist of morning? Well, first of all, I think it is important to be clear that, although we in the Cambridge Unitarian Church necessarily start firmly within the liberal Christian and Radical Enlightenment tradition (for this is our community's basic religious substance and soil into which we must dig), this approach is not likely to, or intended to, make old-school liberal Christians.

Instead, I have a real hope (if not much optimism) that it can help genuinely to free some men and women who find a home among us to be more fully alive, awake and present in this world than they might otherwise have been.

In the end I know of no better summation of what this approach leads a person to than these words by one of the greatest influences upon my thinking, the (alas) little known American philosopher Paul Wienpahl, and with them I'll begin to draw to a close:

“As I see it, the point is not to identify reality with anything except itself. (Tautologies are, after all, true.) If you wish to persist by asking what reality is; that is, what is really, the answer is that it is what you experience it to be. Reality is as you see, hear, feel, taste and smell it, and as you live it. And it is a multifarious thing. To see this is to be a man [or woman] without a position. To get out of the mind and into the world, to get beyond language and to the things is to cease to be an idealist or a pragmatist, or an existentialist, or a Christian. I am a man without a position. I do not have the philosophic position that there are no positions or theories or standpoints. (There obviously are.) I am not a sceptic or an agnostic or an atheist. I am simply a man without a position, and this should open the door to detachment” (“An Unorthodox Lecture”, 1956).

To understand what Wienpahl and I mean by becoming “a man [or woman] without a position” it is helpful to consider how I, at least, try to go out into the world as a (convalescent) photographer. I always try to pick up the camera without a theory or plan and, instead, attempt



to keep myself open to whatever arrives, whether that is an obvious “subject”, “view”, or a simple passing play of sunlight and shadow. When something whooshes-up or shines before me, I stop and take a photo. To do this I must, of course, temporarily “take a position”—if I were never to do this no photo (good or bad) would ever be taken. However, it is important that I never become wedded to that particular position, that subject, that view, that passing play of sunlight and shadow, that photo (good or bad)—instead I must move on, find another perspective (cf. Nietzsche’s idea of “perspectivism”) and allow another photo to whoosh-up or shine before me. It is in this sense that I understand what it is to become a man or a woman “without a position”, ever open to the “newer testament—the Gospel according to this moment”.

It is this gospel that I try to offer week by week in my rôle as minister of the Memorial (Unitarian) Church, Cambridge.