

The Five Smooth Stones of James Luther Adams  
by James Moore, Beth Williamson, Linda Parks, Pam Johnson and Marcus Gillespie

- 1) Introduction to Dwight Brown Leadership Experience
  - a) 2010 DBLE experiences – James and Beth
  - b) 2011 DBLE experiences – Pam and Linda
  - c) Results in our congregational culture
  - d) Significance of the Five Smooth Stones of James Luther Adams
    - i) Brief history of Adams life (1901-1994)
    - ii) Grew up in fundamentalist Christian home, with apocalyptic views prevalent
    - iii) Author, minister, and ministerial professor (Meadville/Lombard, Harvard)
    - iv) Went to Germany in 1935 and narrowly escaped the Gestapo
    - v) “I call that church free” poster on entry way, focus on diversity and worship
- 2) Stone One - A LIVING TRADITION (Beth)
  - a) Although we study our past history, we are always looking for further insights, more information, new ways of thinking and acting, and better ways of getting along with each other.
  - b) We have inherited and practice governance on the congregational level. We can ask for help from the district staff, but we are ultimately responsible for our local church and for each other. We get suggestions from the denominational structure, but there is no one demanding that we follow a particular set of rules. New ways of management can help us.
  - c) Since we are open to new ideas and understandings, we may not always agree, but we are not simply to tolerate but to be accepting of others and to make our best efforts to practice love and understanding. We have already created something wonderful. Now we must work not only to keep it but to improve it.
- 3) Stone Two - FREEDOM IN RELATIONS (Pam), which I believe is a continuation of the first stone, and a foundation for the rest of them.
  - a) Relationships are consensual and not coerced.
    - i. This is the opposite of many religions that use guilt and control to recruit and keep their members.
    - ii. The religious society needs to make its members want to come because they are benefiting from it.
    - iii. Exceptions are made for the greater good such as laws protecting people and compulsory education of children. A strict adherence might be construed as coercion.
  - b) Everyone has the capacity to discover their own truth.
    - i. Orthodox religion believes that there is a divine book or doctrine with the truth, and that some people are better able to know the truth and share it.
    - ii. Liberal religion believes that everyone is equal and “protests against economic and political pecking order”.
    - iii. Free inquiry is necessary for the fullest apprehension of truth or justice and the preservation of human dignity. However, excessive inquiry can be coercive.
  - c) An organized religion should rely on “attraction rather than promotion”.
    - i. AA popularized this notion that has its roots in the Bible from St. Peter. In his First Letter (3.15), he says, “always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in you, with gentleness and reverence.”

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- ii. Attraction is accomplished through actions and setting a good example. Liberals often fail to attract because of their fear of their actions being criticized, and that others will try to coerce them to stop.
  - iii. Rather than act as if it is our job to grow the Church at all costs, simply identify our task and be faithful to it.
- 4) Stone Three – A JUST AND LOVING COMMUNITY (Linda)
- a) Continuing with Adams' words:  
"A faith that is not the sister of justice is bound to bring us to grief. It thwarts creation, a divinely given possibility; it robs us of our birthright of freedom in an open universe; it robs the community of the spiritual riches latent in its members; it reduces us to beasts of burden in slavish subservience to a state, a church or party - to a self-made God."
  - b) Some theologians and others speak of the great gap between social action and spirituality. But there is no gap. They are entwined and they are on a continuum. We are who we are wherever we are and no matter what we are doing. The condition of our spirit or heart or conscience is directly related to the condition of this institution, of our local government, and of the world.
  - c) The formation of a just and loving world community needs also to be done right here in this church. Within this world. Within these walls. We can't, in any real sense, "do justice" outside until we have experienced it here.
  - d) And we can't experience it here, in this church, until each of us knows it in our own hearts. This reminds me of writing from Lao-Tse, who says this: (No. 602)  
If there is to be peace in the world,  
    There must be peace in the nations.  
If there is to be peace in the nations,  
    There must be peace in the cities.  
If there is to be peace in the cities,  
    There must be peace between neighbors.  
If there is to be peace between neighbors,  
    There must be peace in the home.  
If there is to be peace in the home,  
    There must be peace in the heart.
- 5) Stone Four – GOOD WORKS (Marcus)
- a) GOOD WORKS - "... [W]e deny the immaculate conception of virtue and affirm the necessity of social incarnation." Agency: Good things don't just happen, people make them happen.
  - b) There is no such thing as goodness in and of itself. Good is defined in terms of our relationships with others, and that is demonstrated by our actions. E.g., a "good" father or mother cares for their children by providing a nurturing environment. A good politician is someone who acts in the best interest of the people he or she represents, not in their own selfish interests.
  - c) The decisive forms of goodness in a society are institutional in nature because only these can provide freedom and justice in a community.
  - d) Faith is impotent unless it inspires people within a community to contribute their time and energy to those things which benefit the community

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- e) Faith should lead to actions that attempt to shape the future in a positive way – and that requires an organization of institutional power to coordinate the required efforts to effect positive change.
  - f) It is not enough for individuals to focus their efforts only on their family or work, because this can result in cloistered loyalties that are not concerned with the greater good. The efforts, based on a belief in the common good, must extend to politics and economics in order to address injustice in the community, the country, and the world.
- 6) Stone Five – HOPE FOR THE FUTURE (James), as opposed to apocalyptic view
- a) Optimism is not necessarily immediate, but long term.
    - i) War, famine, and widespread bigotry may seem to doom us in the present.
    - ii) "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice." ~Theodore Parker
  - b) We must live life with an optative mood for life to be worth living.
    - i) "Paul with his joyous faith in redemption, Augustine with his vision of the City of God, Joachim of Fiore with his hope of a new era – the reign of the Spirit – Lessing with his expectation of a third era, Channing and his prophecy of a new spiritual freedom, Marx with his battling for a new humanity, all speak in the optative mood without neglecting the realistic and the tragic."
    - ii) Without hope for a better tomorrow, the present seems less worthwhile.
  - c) An optimistic perspective leads us to pursue achievement of a more just world.
    - i) "The affirmative answer of prophetic religion, which may be heard in the very midst of the doom that threatens like thunder, is that history is a struggle in dead earnest between justice and injustice, looking towards the ultimate victory in the promise and the fulfillment of grace. Anyone who does not enter into that struggle with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark and thwarts creation as well as self-creation."
    - ii) These sentiments are the basis for all the social justice work we do as a group.
- 7) Conclusion – Significance for Thoreau Woods over the next five years
- a) Stone 1 – In selecting a minister, do we want someone who will always agree with the congregation, or someone who will challenge it to grow and evolve?
  - b) Stone 2 – How do we create in the community a desire for more people to join our congregation, and how will these new relations change Thoreau Woods?
  - c) Stone 3 – What is our common vision to create a just and loving community both within our walls and in our community?
  - d) Stone 4 – Which good causes will we dedicate our combined resources in an effort to live our mission of "Just Help"?
  - e) Stone 5 – As we look toward the next five years of our free church, do we see divisiveness and dissension, or a united vision of what we can be together?

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James Luther Adams' "I call that church free"

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ground of freedom... .

It protects against the idolatry of any human claim to absolute truth or authority....

I call that church free that in covenant with that divine community-forming power brings the individual ... into a caring, trusting fellowship that protects and nourishes ... integrity and spiritual freedom. Its goal is the prophethood and the priesthood of all believers – the one for the liberty of [speaking the truth], the other for the ministry of healing....

I call that church free which liberates from bondage the ... powers of the world, whether church or secular, and which promotes the continuing reformation of its own and other institutions. It protests against routine conformity or thoughtless nonconformity that lead to deformity of mind and heart and community.

I call that church free which ... promotes freedom in fellowship, seeking unity in diversity. This unity is a .. gift, sought through devotion to the transforming power of creative interchange in generous dialogue...

I call that church free which responds ... to the Spirit that ... invites and engenders liberation from repression and exploitation... It bursts through rigid cramping inheritance, giving rise to new language, to new forms of cooperation, to new and broader fellowship. The church of the Spirit is a pilgrim church on adventure.

I call that church free which is not bound to the present, which cowers not before the vaunted spirit of the times. It earns and creates a tradition binding together past, present, and future in a living tether, in a continuing covenant and identity, bringing forth treasures both new and old.... I call that church free which is not imprisoned in itself... It is open to insight and conscience from every source.... But the church is never wholly free; It tolerates injustice, special privilege, and indifference to suffering, as though it were not accountable to a tribunal higher than the world's. It passes by on the other side, thus breaking the covenant. In the midst of this unfreedom the church comes together to adore that which is holy, to confess its own brokenness, and to renew the covenant.

I call that church free that does not cringe in despair, but casting off fear is lured by the divine persuasion to respond in hope to the light that has shown and that still shines in the darkness.