Footnotes to Plato: A Response to Neville Buch's "Preliminary Conclusions In Search of Philosophical Grounds for Contemporary Unitarian Identity"

by

Wesley V. Hromatko, D.Min. M/L 1973

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Neville Buch's point that Unitarian Universalists would do well to set their light on a stand rather than hiding it under a bushel¹ is well taken. However, there are a number of problems in his article "Preliminary Conclusions in Search of Philosophical Grounds for Contemporary Unitarian Identity." Notwithstanding Buch's assertion to the contrary, there is much to tie process thought to the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Indeed, one might conceive of its identity as a certain route of occasions with the ingression of novelty. There are also contemporary Unitarian Universalists unlimited by gender or ethnicity of other schools of thought who have contributed to understanding our philosophy, theology, and religious identity.

In terms of identity, one must remember that in the United States Unitarian was an epithet fastened to liberal Christians in congregational churches.² An important part of our identity is our inclusiveness. Channing said, "We must shun the spirit of sectarianism as from hell. We must shudder at the thought of shutting up God in any denomination... We must look with undiminished joy on goodness, though it shine forth from the most adverse sect." The present identity is one that grew over time through our inclusive character and merged identity with Universalism.

It is doubtful that any philosophy or philosophical theology would satisfy Buch's desire for a distinct identity. Through the ages, philosophy and theology grew from their antecedents. Alfred North Whitehead once observed, "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." When St. Thomas created his *Summa*, he combined biblical tradition with the long dead Aristotle. Aristotle never envisioned that his work would become an integral part of a Trinitarian theology.

The Unitarian "philosopher theologians" that Buch holds up in the manner of Weberian ideal types, William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and James Martineau were not *sui generis* in the sense advocated in the article. Behind Channing lay the English and Scottish Common Sense philosophers. Adam Ferguson, Francis Hutcheson, and Richard Price helped make up his later views. Channing said that Price gave him his "doctrine of ideas." Of the three Channing never completed his philosophical work on human nature. Behind Parker and Martineau lay the German philosophers. Parker was influenced by Schliermacher's acceptance of higher criticism and faith as well as ideas of historical development found in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Barthold Georg Niebuhr. There are similarities between Martineau's philosophy and the American transcendentalists in its Kantianism and Idealism. While these three thinkers used philosophical ideas in their own way, there are no virgin births in this subject. One could easily demonstrate the precursors of the process and pragmatist thinkers who are integral to the Unitarian Universalist tradition as well.

Alfred North Whitehead said, "If I were to choose among present day Christians, I would prefer the Unitarians, but I wish they had more influence." He also said, "Unitarians...come the nearest to having found a way to adapt the Christian ideas to the world we live in now—and with the Unitarians I group those other religious people who are so nearly like them, the Congregationalists." Whitehead spoke at King's Chapel in Boston. His *Religion in the Making* was a series of Four Lectures given there in February 1926. While Whitehead is in the process tradition, his collaborator on *Principia Mathematica*, Bertrand Russell went in another direction and contributed to analytic philosophy. Russell, who was reared as a Unitarian by his grandmother and uncle, later described himself as a Rationalist was involved with British humanist organizations and wrote the humanist classic, "A Free Man's Worship." 15

Charles Hartshorne, who was Whitehead's teaching assistant, ¹⁶ is the only philosopher to my knowledge who developed his theory with Socinian ideas. ¹⁷ In 1928, he married his wife, a Universalist, at St. Paul's Universalist, Chicago, Illinois. He taught at Meadville and the University of Chicago from 1947-1955. Hartshorne supported and attended UU congregations in Atlanta and Austin and frequently spoke to UU congregations, although he said that he hesitated to call himself Unitarian since he related positively to a variety of religious expressions including non-Christian religions. ¹⁸ In this, he is in the company of Kenneth Patton and many others. He is important to our story and identity although I have no intention of defending his attempt to revive the ontological argument.

Dewey, usually classified as a Pragmatist, is sometimes included with the Process philosophers. ¹⁹ He was born the year (1859) that Charles Darwin published *Origin of Species*, and Darwin's thought was to play an important part in his philosophy. John Dewey's father was a bookish Yankee grocer. Dewey's mother, Lucina Rich, came from a Universalist family. They were more successful than the Dewey family. Her brothers graduated from college and her grandfather was a congressman. Her father was a judge. Unlike the other family members, however, she joined the Congregationalist church. ²⁰ Dewey and his brothers spent summer vacations on the grandfather's farm and much time with his mother's Universalist relatives. ²¹ Dewey grew up in the First Congregational Church in Burlington. After he arrived in Ann Arbor to teach, he became a member of the First Congregational Church. He also taught a class in church history in 1887-1888 and attended the congregation's business meetings. His experience with religion had not been entirely happy, and it had burdened him with an overly strict conscience. Later, he was never entirely comfortable with institutional religion. ²² Dewey resigned his membership in the Ann Arbor Church in 1898 after he moved to Chicago.

In the winter of 1932-3²³ Dewey was among the signers of the "Humanist Manifesto."²⁴ There were ten Unitarian ministers who signed, a Reform Rabbi, an Ethical Culturist, ²⁵ and one Universalist. ²⁶ The philosopher was a member of the advisory board of the First Humanist Society of New York. Charles Francis Potter, who was a biblical expert for Clarence Darrow in the 1925 Scopes evolution trial, founded it. Potter served both Unitarian and Universalist churches and once taught comparative religion at Antioch College. ²⁷ Dewey sent some of his children to the Ethical Culture Society School when he was teaching at Columbia. ²⁸ When Dewey remarried at the age of 87, Jerome Nathanson, an ethical culture Leader, conducted the service. Dewey married Roberta Grant, a forty two year old widow with whom he had long been acquainted. ²⁹ When Dewey died in 1952 at 92 his widow chose to hold the service at the

Community Church of New York although Columbia University was prepared for a large service. Dewey thought that the congregation's religion was close to the one he had expressed in his *A Common Faith*. The minister Donald Harrington, led the service before some five hundred friends, relatives, and dignitaries. He included the final paragraph of Dewey's *A Common Faith* in the readings and described the philosopher as "one of the intellectual and moral giants." Max Otto, philosophy professor emeritus, University of Wisconsin, and an old Humanist friend gave a eulogy. Otto was a member of the First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin. Otto compared Dewey's philosophy with a mountain climber whose ascent goes on from peak to peak. The service ended with the hymn "These Things Shall Be."

Dewey's personal Unitarian Universalist connections were significant. Unlike some of the other leading philosophers, his philosophical development had significant connections with Transcendentalism. Dewey's earliest philosophical essays one about materialism and a second about Spinoza's pantheism connected him with W.T. Harris, a St. Louis Hegelian and editor of *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. Harris directed transcendentalist Bronson Alcott's Concord Summer School of Philosophy. ³³ The publication of Dewey's essays by Harris was a vital part of his decision to enter graduate school at Johns Hopkins in 1882. ³⁴ Alcott had founded the famous Concord School a mere three years earlier. ³⁵

In philosophy at Johns Hopkins Dewey worked with Charles Sanders Peirce, a mathematician, physicist, and the founder of pragmatism. ³⁶ Pragmatism measures the truth and meaning of an idea by its consequences. ³⁷ William James, who regularly attended daily chapel at Harvard in its Unitarian years, ³⁸ described pragmatism by saying that words have "cash-value." Peirce had first used the word that is later so often associated with Dewey at the Metaphysical club in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1872. Its members included Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., a Unitarian and later a Supreme Court justice, and Francis Ellingwood Abbott, a Unitarian minister, and Unitarian historian John Fiske. ⁴⁰ Peirce had no patience for abstruse theological speculations. He was trying to develop a religious philosophy based on the evolutionary benevolence that he believed was compatible with the major religions. ⁴¹ Louis Menand's *Metaphysical Club: a Story of Ideas in America* is a recent book that puts Dewey in the world of Holmes and Pierce. ⁴²

Another professor of John Dewey was Sylvester Morris, a former Congregationalist 43 turned Episcopalian who taught at Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott's school of philosophy in Concord, Massachusetts. Hegel's philosophy appealed to Dewey as a philosophical way of establishing the organic unity he had found in T.H. Huxley's physiology. 44 G. Stanley Hall at Johns Hopkins was also important to Dewey in exposing him to functional psychology and evolutionary thought. 45 He was also a member of the Metaphysical Club. 46 Just before Dewey wrote his PhD. dissertation in 1884, he said that his views were similar to Transcendentalism. 47 His thesis was on the 18th century philosopher Kant. It dealt with psychology and was to be about the idea of reason.

Dewey took his PhD at Johns Hopkins and moved to the University of Michigan where the former president of the University of Vermont was now president. While teaching at Michigan, he attended another philosophical school, Thomas Davidson's Summer School of the

Cultured Sciences in the Adirondack's. Davidson taught at the Concord School founded by Alcott and his own school was based on it.⁴⁹

Dewey's greatest work is considered to be his 1925 *Experience and Nature*. ⁵⁰ He was a philosopher of process, ⁵¹ however, Dewey did not think progress was automatic. ⁵² He believed that the mind and body work together. ⁵³ Feeling and sympathy were important to the development of morality as well as imagination. ⁵⁴ We have to be able to put ourselves in another's place.

Dewey attempted a definition of religion in his 1929 *Quest for Certainty*. There he said, religion should be "devoted to inspiration and cultivation of the sense of ideal possibilities." After his 1930 retirement from Columbia, he wrote in *A Common Faith* that the word God could be used to mean the union between the ideal and the actual. This book was a reply to Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr had returned to the language of sin in the name of realism and Biblical faith. Dewey's God definition caused some controversy when many major publications reviewed his book. He continued to think of himself as a Humanist or Naturalist who had suggested a definition. His views stood the test of the deaths of two children Gordon and John. His religious ideas contributed to Unitarian Universalism through the work of Charles Hartshorne and Henry Nelson Weiman.

At the risk of appearing Hegelian, another significant contributor to process theology was Henry Nelson Weiman who owed much to pragmatism. ⁶³ The University of Chicago invited him to join the Divinity School faculty, because he could explain Whitehead's thought. ⁶⁴ Weiman also had a significant connection with Unitarian Universalists. The American Unitarian Association gave him ministerial fellowship in 1949. ⁶⁵ Beacon Press printed two of the professor's works, *The Directive in History* and *Religious Inquiry*. He published in the denominational journals, and was active in the 50's and 60's in the Fellowship in Carbondale, Ill. A speaker for the Layman's League, he taught at Starr King in 1960, and received the Award for Distinguished Service to the Cause of Liberal Religion posthumously in 1975. ⁶⁶

If Buch can consider Channing who never finished his magnum opus paradigmatic, there is no reason why James Luther Adams cannot be included in our pantheon of Unitarian Universalist philosopher theologians. We turn to Channing's sermons for his views rather than to any finished philosophy. The late Harvard professor George H. Williams recognized James Luther Adams as one of the greatest contributors to North American Unitarian Universalism. ⁶⁷ Technically, of course, Adams was a social ethicist. A good selection of his work pertaining to Buch's question is available in *The Essential James Luther Adams* edited by George Kimmich Beach and published in 1998 by Skinner House. If one understands one key element in Tillich's thought, one can readily understand his appeal for Adams and other Unitarian Universalist Christians. Jesus for Tillich is entirely human. ⁶⁸ John R. Wilcox's *Taking Time Seriously: James Luther Adams* ⁶⁹ is one attempt to understand Adams systematically.

Some may lament that there are no longer giants on the earth and that all others today are merely epigoni. However, Buch seems to have missed the work of a number of authors who may yet be the greats of our day. There is the late Ralph Wendell Burhoe, Templeton Prize winner, and *Zygon* founder who wrote about the relationship of theology and science.⁷⁰ Among

contemporary contributions to an understanding of Unitarian Universalist identity are: John F. Hayward's *Existentialism and Religious Liberalism*, ⁷¹ Gene Reeves, former Meadville Lombard Dean, who was among the editors of *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ⁷² John Ruskin Clark's *The Great Living System*, ⁷³ Robert Tapp's *Religion Among the Unitarian Universalists: Converts in the Stepfather's House*, ⁷⁴ a sociological contribution to understanding our identity; and J. Ronald Engel, important in terms of ecological concern and social activism, and author of *Sacred Sands*. ⁷⁵ A Scottish Unitarian, Timothy Sprigge, Emeritus Professor of Logic and Metaphysics, Edinburgh, has written *A Vindication of Absolute Idealism*. ⁷⁶

These Unitarian Universalist contributors to contemporary theology have not been limited by gender or ethnicity. Buch noted the contributions of Thandeka, Meadville Lombard's associate professor of theology and culture, ⁷⁷ and Rebecca Ann Parker, president of Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry, Berkley, California, but he omitted Parker's coauthor Rita Nakashima Brock, first Asian woman to earn a PhD. in theology, and who is now a Starr King trustee. ⁷⁸ However, he found them insufficiently systematic. Parker will be the scholar in residence at the October Collegium meeting in California this coming October where she may be expected to deal with the relationship between her ideas and Unitarian Universalism. Barbara Booth Keiller organized the Process Theology Network, an affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which has sponsored General Assembly events. It has connected Process Theology to the Unitarian Universalist tradition.

At a Process Theology Network event at the 2002 General Assembly in Quebec Kimmich George Beach presented "Adams [sic] 'Covenant of Being' and Hartshorne's 'Divine Relativity". A panel including Rev. Ms. Joy Atkinson, Rev. Mr. Kimmich George Beach, Dr. Barbara Booth Keiller, and Rev. Ms. Margaret Keip presented a workshop "Applying Ideas from Process Theology/ Thought in Our Lives." Surely, this workshop fits Buch's desire to present theology in persuasive way to the public. Drew University professor, Catherine Keller, whose new book is *Face of the Deep: a Theology of Becoming*, will be the network's speaker at the Boston General Assembly in 2003. Her two previous books *From a Broken Web: Separation*, *Sexism, and Self*, 1986, and *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 1996, were both published by Beacon Press. ⁷⁹

In conclusion, philosophy is an unfolding tradition rather than a closed canon. Western philosophy is in Alfred North Whitehead's phrase, "a series of Footnotes to Plato." Even those greats such as Channing, Parker, and Martineau had antecedents shared by other traditions. Pragmatism contributed to process philosophy and had significant roots in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Indeed, William James, who contributed Buch's second epigraph, attended Harvard chapel regularly. There are connections to Unitarian Universalism in process philosophy at its inception with Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Hartshorne was indebted to Socinian thought. The unifying idea of process, the Category of the Ultimate, ⁸⁰ makes this philosophy particularly consonant with Unitarian Universalism. The Process Philosophy Network has sought to make it applicable. There are, however, several philosophies in contention in the pluralistic Unitarian Universalist Association and multiple interpretations of our tradition. Our belief in freedom inspires us to seek our own interpretations and promote variety. We need not limit ourselves to western philosophy. Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese entertained eastern ways of thought in their monumental *Philosophers Speak of God*. ⁸¹ Although process

philosophy, pragmatism, existentialism and the philosophy of science may be major themes, with the poet Milton we want "... the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all other liberties."82

¹ Mt. 5:15 RSV.

² Conrad Wright, The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), ix.

³ Charles Lyttle, *The Liberal Gospel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1925), 101.

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead Adventures of Ideas (NY: The Macmillan Co., 1933), 37.

⁵William L. Reese "St Thomas Aquinas" in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (NJ: Humanities Press, 1980),

⁶ Reese, "Aristotle," *Dictionary*, 28f.

⁷ Jack Mendelsohn, Channing: The Reluctant Radical (Boston: Little and Brown, 1971), 32-33.

⁹ John Edward Dirks, The Critical Theology of Theodore Parker, Columbia Studies in American Culture, no. 19 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948; Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1970), 130-131. ¹⁰ Reese, "James Martineau," in *Dictionary*, 334-335.

¹¹"Whitehead on Unitarians," *The Unitarian Universalist Christian*, 30, no. 4 (Winter 1975-76), 55.

¹² Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, Inc., 1954; New York: New American Library: Mentor Book, 1954), 286.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, preface to *Religion in the Making* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926; Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, Meridian Books, A Living Age Book, 1969), "Preface."

¹⁵Wesley V. Hromatko, "The Russell Family," in *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography* http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/russellfamily.html 10/14/02.

¹⁶ John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 167.

17 Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neo-Classical Metaphysics*, (LaSalle, Ill: Open

Court, 1962), 42, 148, 155. See also Donald Wayne Venney, "Charles Hartshorne" in Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/srticles/charleshartshorne.html 9/28/02. 18 Ibid.

¹⁹ Cobb and Griffin, *Introductory*, 7.

²⁰ Jane M. Dewey, "The Biography of John Dewey," *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1971), 6.

²¹ Jane Dewey, "Biography," 7.

²² Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (N.Y. and Oxford, UK: Columbia University Press, 1991), 353.

²³ Roy W. Sellars, et al. "The Humanist Manifesto" in The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion, ed. David B. Parke (Boston, MA: Starr King Press, 1957), 138. ²⁴ Parke, "Manifesto," 142.

²⁵ Rockefeller, 45-1.

²⁶ Parke, *Epic*, 142.

²⁷ Paul A. Carter, "Charles Francis Potter" in Dictionary of American Biography, ed. John A. Garraty, Supplement Seven, 1961-1965 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 624. ²⁸ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 276.

²⁹ Dewey, "Biography", 313.

³⁰George Dykhuizen, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press,

³¹ Mary Jane Hamilton, *The Meeting House: Heritage and Vision* (Madison, Wis.: Friends of the Meeting House, 1991), 14.

³² Dykhuizen, *Life*, 321,

³³ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 70.

³⁴ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 71.

³⁵ Elizabeth Flower & Murray G. Murphey, A History of Philosophy in America (NY: G. Putnam's Sons, 1977), 2,

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<sup>36</sup>Rockefeller, Faith, 76.
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- 43 Rockefeller, *Faith*, 77.
- 44 Rockefeller, Faith, 78.
- ⁴⁵ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 90.
- ⁴⁶ Flower & Murphey, *Philosophy*, 2, 507.
- ⁴⁷ Dykhuizen, *Life*, 38.
- ⁴⁸ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 130.
- ⁴⁹ Flower & Murphey, *Philosophy*, 2, 464.
- ⁵⁰ George Dykhuizen and Clarence H. Faust, "John Dewey: Career at Columbia University," in *Encyclopaedia* Britannica CD 2000.
- ⁵¹ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 382.
- ⁵² Rockefeller, Faith, 307.
- ⁵³ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 389.
- ⁵⁴ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 314-315.
- ⁵⁵ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 467.
- ⁵⁶ Dykhuizen and Faust, "John Dewey: Career," in *Britannica*.
- ⁵⁷ Reese, "Dewey," 128.
- ⁵⁸ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 466.
- ⁵⁹ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 523.
- ⁶⁰ Rockefeller, *Faith*, 526.
- ⁶¹ Dykhuizen, *Life*, 115; 272.
- ⁶² Rockefeller, *Faith*, 26.
- ⁶³ John Buehrens, foreword to At Home in Creativity by Bruce Southworth (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1995), viii; 29. ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p 20-21.
- ⁶⁷ Herbert F. Vetter, Jr. "Introduction: JLA 75," The Unitarian Universalist Christian, 32, nos. 1-2.
- (Spring/Summer 1977), 6 ⁶⁸ Langdon Gilkey, "The New Being and Christology" in *The Thought of Paul Tillich*, ed. James Luther Adams *et* al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers: An American Academy of Arts and Sciences Book, 1985), 319.
- ⁶⁹John R. Wilcox, *Taking Time Seriously: James Luther Adams* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America,
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- ⁷⁴ Robert Tapp, Religion among the Unitarian Universalists: Converts in the Stepfather's House (New York and London: Seminar Press, 1973).

 75 J. Ronald Engel, Sacred Sands: The Struggle for Community in the Indiana Dunes (Middletown, Conn.
- Wesleyan University Press, 1983).

³⁷ Reese, "Pragmatism," *Dictionary*, 453.

³⁸ Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, briefer version (New York: George Braziller, Publisher, 1954), 269. Mrs. William James held pew # 261 of the First Parish, Cambridge, Mass. See "Annual Report," First Parish Cambridge, 1897-1898.

³⁹John Macquarrie, "Pragmatism" in 20th Century Religious Thought: The Frontiers of Philosophy and Theology, 1900-1970 (London, UK: SCM Press Ltd., 1971), 177

⁴⁰Liva Baker, Justice from Beacon Hill: The Life and Times of Oliver Wendell Holmes (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 61,77, 222,280,619,643. See also George Willis Cooke, *Unitarianism in America* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1902), 200, 424, and Flower and Murphey, *Philosophy*, 2, 507-8.

⁴¹ Macquarie, "Pragmatism," 20th Century, 176.

⁴²Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: a Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Fararr, Strauss, and Giroux. 2001).

⁷⁶ Andrew Hill, "Unitarian philosophers and William James," <u>uuhs-chat@uua.org</u>, October 1, 2002 5:57 p.m..

^{77 &}quot;Thandeka," Meadville Lombard Faculty," http://www.meadville.edu/faculty.html, 1/20/02.
78 Christopher L. Walton, "Two Feminist Theologians Say Suffering Redeems Nothing" UU World 16, no. 2 (March/April, 2002), 21. (March/April, 2002),

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⁸¹ Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), xi-xii.

⁸²John Milton, "Freedom" in Singing the Living Tradition, ed. Mark L. Belletini, et al. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 671. The arrangement of Milton's Areopogitica was first published in We Speak of Life. After the poet's death it was discovered that his De Doctrina Christiana was opposed to the Trinity. See Arthur Foote, II, et al., Hymns for the Celebration of Life (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 467.