



# *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age—Alone and Together*

A Study Guide

Patricia Bowen

This four-session program for individuals and groups explores  
*Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age* by Jack Mendelsohn

UNITARIAN

UNIVERSALIST

ASSOCIATION

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Curriculum Production Assistant: Wendy K. Bivens

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This study guide was originally developed for members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, an organization that serves Unitarian Universalists unaffiliated with any settled congregation and serves small groups of Unitarian Universalists meeting regularly for worship and discussion.

If you are reading *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age* on your own, this study guide can help you to deepen your experience with the reflections of Jack Mendelsohn. Sharing the book and your responses to it with someone else can add the stimulation of dialogue to personal reflection. However, you may find the simple discipline of reading and writing suggested by this study guide to be an enriching experience itself.

The main text of this study guide is designed for an individual to follow as a self-study while reading Mendelsohn's book. Suggested group activities to accompany the individual reflections are contained in the narrower column on each page.

If you are reading *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age* as a group, you'll find guidelines here for four sessions, each one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours long, that explore the book through a combination of individual responses and group interaction. As a rule, this study guide suggests more than enough activities to fill the time allowed for each session. Leaders may choose among the suggestions in planning sessions appropriate for their groups. Some of the individual reflections might be assigned as "homework" for work between sessions.

A workable group size may number as few as four or as many as a dozen participants. For groups of ten or more, co-leaders are recommended. Co-leaders should plan each session together, deciding how to best share the leadership tasks. If more than twelve people are interested in joining, it would be wise to start a second group to allow each participant adequate time for self-expression.

Whether you are working by yourself or with a group, you will need a copy of *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*, and a notebook for your own reflections and responses to the suggestions in this guide. Groups will also need a chalkboard or newsprint for some sessions. It is important that each participant have a copy of this study guide.

For each session in this study guide, you are encouraged to read the corresponding pages in *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*. Each session considers designated chapters in the book.

Jack's book leads readers to examine their own religious life and to reflect on religion and the world in our liberal context. As D.H. Lawrence wrote to The Reverend Robert Reid, "One's religion is never complete and final, it seems, but must always be undergoing modification."

—Patricia Bowen



In the Preface to *Being Liberal In An Illiberal Age*, the author proposes a possible creed for liberals —

YOU COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS  
AND YOU CARRY ON.

Does such a statement speak to you?

List what you consider to be your blessings.

Reflect on some difficult situations you have had to face.

What enabled you to get through these?

What ultimately keeps you keeping on?

We are all involved in a journey, pilgrimage, spiritual quest, all our lives. We are constantly seeking meaning out of how we are in the world, of how the world is, and we as liberals seek and find that meaning without the usual trappings the other more conventional religions offer.

Our faith is one we must develop ourselves, for ourselves. We alone decide what it is that we can affirm.

What can you affirm?

Can you make your own personal statement of affirmation — counting your blessings?

Beginning with your lists of blessings, can you rephrase them into a statement of affirmation?

Remember Jack's reminder that in any affirmation, you have also to affirm the reality of those things you do not consider blessings.

Take some time to compose your own affirmation, your faith statement, explicating what you count as blessings, and those other realities you affirm.

Write this statement and save it to refer to in the future.

*If we view liberalism as, in D. H. Lawrence's words, "an uprooted tree, with its roots in the air," nothing less than strenuous affirmation will supplant it.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 7

On pages 7–17, the author offers some convictions by which he lives. There are four of them. After reading what he writes about these, can you list four convictions (as opposed to opinions) of your own, those values by which **you** live **your** faith?

How would you differentiate between a conviction and an opinion? Can you make lists side by side:

CONVICTIONS

OPINIONS

Preface and Chapters 1–3,  
pp. 1–36.

In dyads, share your list of blessings, as a way of introducing yourselves to one another; share a difficult situation in your life and what got you through it.

In the larger group, share your lists of blessings and what ultimately keeps you keeping on.

Share your affirmation in the group, perhaps by reading them in a circle, or by writing them on a wall where others can read them quietly.

(This would be a good time for the group to take a break.)

Share your convictions in the larger group, differentiating between convictions and opinions with two lists.

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List these certainties as a group.

Under these four headings, list what sustains, directs, chastens, validates the journeys of those in the group. Discuss the differences in these four qualities.

In triads, share where your security lies.

In triads, share those things you are happy/satisfied with in your life as statements of your faith and any things that you aren't. In the larger group, discuss how you might change those you aren't satisfied with.

In the group, list the qualities of such a person to create a profile of "the UU who is one and doesn't know it."

Is there anything you can say you are certain about?

What sustains, directs, chastens, validates your journey?

How do these differ?

sustaining

directing

chastening

validating

Where do you find the solid ground beneath your feet? Where is security?

*Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit. No love can be bound by oath or covenant to secure it against a higher love. No truth so sublime but it may be trivial tomorrow in the light of new thoughts. People wish to be settled; only in so far as they are unsettled is there any hope.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson  
Mendelsohn, p. 16

Reflect on Emerson's statement in the context of your own life's experience.

Just as Emerson noted that we never rise so high as when we know not whither we are going, Buckminster Fuller confessed that he often found out where he should be going by starting out for someplace else.

Are there times in your life when this has been true?

This first chapter pushes the reader to examine her/his own religion, especially the living of it day-to-day.

Are you happy/satisfied with the statement of faith your life makes?

If you are, what are those things that make that so for you?

If you aren't, what would you change about it?

*The greatest and most emboldening of blessings is the will to care enough about the times in which we live to know where and to what moral ends we want to put our efforts on the line.*

—Mendelsohn, p.17

Can you create a profile of "the UU who is one and doesn't know it"?

Describe the type of person this would be.

How can you spot one across a crowded room?

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All of us can usually identify turning points in our lives, those moments that remain with us, that change us. Some of these have been wounds we have suffered, wounds from which we determined to have Camus's "love of life in spite of life."

Think about some of those turning points, wounds in your own life.

How do you know what you know **spiritually**?

Have you had what you would term **religious** experiences?

Trace your religious journey through its institutional forms and through your personal experience. This could be done in the context of a lifeline. You might add your turning points to it to see if these coincide with important points in your religious journey, perhaps a time when changes were made.

When was the first time you thought of a concept of God?

Theodore Parker determined to preach nothing as religious which you had not experienced inwardly, and made your own, knowing it by heart.

If you made this same determination, what, then, would you preach?

What men and women that you have known have evoked in you an "interior quality"?

Who/what "ministers" to you — rehabilitates you inwardly?

In what ways do you witness?

Does your religion inspire you to change anything?

If so, what are the conditions it inspires you to change?

Salvation is a word that most Unitarian Universalists have some difficulty using. The author offers his own definition of salvation which is not "an otherworldly journey, flown on wings of dogma."

*It is ethical striving and moral growth, respect for the personalities and experiences of others; faith in human dignity and potentiality; aversion to sanctimony and bigotry; reverence for the gift of life; confidence in a true harmony of mind and spirit, of nature and human nature; faith in the ability to give and receive love; and a quest for broad encompassing religious expression—spiritual yet practical, personal and communal.*

—Mendelsohn, p.35

He explains this is what we mean when we say we believe in salvation by character and suggests that it would be more accurate to say that we believe salvation **is** character.

If you are comfortable doing so, in dyads share a turning point, wound in your life, a religious experience.

Share in the larger group any insights you gain from tracing your religious journey.

In the larger group, share God concepts various individuals in the group have had. These can be **non-verbal** representations.

Share in groups of four a person who has evoked an "interior quality" in you, or what ministers to you inwardly.

In the larger group, list ways in which members of the group witness and some of the conditions members of the group are trying to change.

In the group, share what members mean by salvation.

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*We do not mean that character saves us from the flames of hell or takes us to the bliss of heaven. We do not profess to know, as a community of faith, the precise dimensions of immortality. But we are sure of this: The inner life, shaped by the power of high and sane ideals, brings to human souls the finest, most enduring satisfactions and makes of our humanity a source of strength, even in utmost tribulation. This is what we mean by salvation.*

—Mendelsohn, p.35

How would you define salvation or is it a term without meaning for you?

Share how members of the group would define sin.

How would you define sin, or is it also a term without meaning for you?

Discuss evil in the group.

Do you believe in evil?

The author believes that corporate religion—the church—has no higher object than helping us to get from Sunday to Monday, taking our Sunday professions into our Monday behavior.

Share in the group ways this religion helps you all week.

How does this religion help you get from Sunday to Monday?

In what ways does it get you from Monday to Sunday?

This brings us back to the suggested creedal statement with which we began:

In the group, share a blessing this religion brings to your life as a closing activity for this first session. One way to do this would be to share as a candle is passed around a circle.

**YOU COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS  
AND YOU CARRY ON.**

Have you thought of more ways in which that happens for you and ways in which this religion helps or hinders that happening?

*...when we talk of salvation, we talk of making religion a sustained and sustaining force in our daily lives. We do not say that religion has nothing to do with the afterlife, but we do say that it has everything to do with this life.*

WHAT DO YOU SAY AFTER YOU SAY,  
“I’M A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST”?

Chapters 4–6, pp. 37–86

*Unitarian Universalists are people who cannot leave their religious beliefs in the care of ‘experts.’ For us, the most vital faith about the human possibility is this: We must be free to grow in spirit. There is no area of life in which it is more important for us to be free than in the realm of spirit.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 39

How do you answer that question,  
“What is a Unitarian Universalist?”

Share answers to this question in triads.

There are “good” and “bad” aspects of our liberal religion:

Freedom — when does it become irresponsibility?

Reason — does it deny the irrational/intangible/ spiritual?

*Freedom is not aimless wandering with no duties attached. The freedom we hold so dear is the freedom of our faculties to act in behalf of what challenges and transforms our lives, our passage from birth to death. For us, this freedom to grow, to act, and to redeem is not based on external authority. It is established in our inward parts. No priest or pastor dictates. No Holy Writ dictates. No creed dictates what must be believed.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 39

In the larger group, list the “good” and “bad” aspects of our liberal religion.

We are an anti-authoritarian group of people for the most part, and we do not as a religious group accept the “usual authorities.”

In the larger group, make a list of your “authorities.”

This creates problems for some of us. As one young person in a church I served said,

“You have given me a religion with no answers, and for that I thank you.”

We aren’t always grateful for this freedom, however, for it imposes a responsibility upon us that we feel; it requires that we find our own authority for our actions.

What is **your** “authority?”

What is hardest for you about being a UU?

When have you felt that Unitarian Universalism was not adequate to your needs?

List any shortcomings members of the group have found in this liberal religion and discuss these.

*Actually, we have to make the best judgements we can about what is right, and then we have to bet on it by trying to make ourselves act on it, without being sure about it.*

—Arnold Toynbee  
Mendelsohn, p. 37

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As he shares his reality about who and how we are, the author explains ours is very definitely a different kind of church, which requires a different kind of definition.

*Our churches reach out to all who catch a vision of filling the empty places in their lives by placing principles of freedom, responsibility, reason, and tolerance above uniform theological doctrines. Our churches are free associations of those who fashion their own personal theologies, unconstrained by institutional dogmas or ecclesiastical authorities. Our covenant is to strive together by every honest means to discover and nurture the highest forms of life that creative experience can devise. Religion for us is no insulated segment of life. It is our entire being in search of meaning.*

*We are respectful of the history out of which we have come and through which we have endured for more than four hundred years. But we are bound by no historic model. We continue to evolve by the light of our growing understanding of ourselves and our world. We feel obliged by the very urgency of religion to seek and experiment with more effective forms of energetic and adequate methods of public witness, and with more moving and sustaining sources of comfort and courage in the high adventure of living our lives in examined, loving, and transforming ways.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 45

Share what is important from our UU history to the individuals in the group.

Does our theological history matter to you?

Does it impinge upon our religion today?

Is the way we got this way important to the way we are, or is most of it “dead” history?

What is its impact on **your** Unitarian Universalism, if any?

Do you relate more to Unitarianism or to Universalism, or feel comfortable with the consolidated faith?

In the group, list what from our UU history is present today.

As you read this fifth chapter and learn about our history, what do you find we have brought into the present from that past?

One of the most crucial issues for our faith is the Christian controversy — are we or aren't we? The questions the author asks on page 76 are the important ones:

Discuss these three questions in triads.

*What is a Unitarian Universalist's approach to the world's vast pattern of religions?*

*Has liberal religion grown beyond its Judeo-Christian cradle and become something more universal?*

*Or is it a unique expression of a Christianity that views*

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*without prejudice or missionary yearnings the spiritual traditions of others?*

Being part of a faith that seeks unity in diversity, that points with pride to its pluralism, does not make it easy for the individual involved — enriching, but not easy. I don't think we can ignore this issue of Christianity; rather, I am convinced that we must place ourselves somewhere in the Christian context, even if it is outside. We and our faith **did** grow out of the Judeo-Christian culture and tradition and we and it are part of that culture and tradition even as Unitarian Universalists.

As Jack says, however, “for most of us, it has grown to be more.” One hopes it has grown to be more than an eclectic mess with no real meaning for anyone in an attempt to be all things to everyone.

What more has it grown to be for you?

Can you place your Unitarian Universalism within the Judeo-Christian context, even doing that visually perhaps, as a group of Universalists once did by setting the cross off-center within the circle of Universalism, from which came our present symbol of the off-center chalice with the circles of Unitarian Universalism.

If you were asked to create a symbol for our religion, would the present one suffice, or would you create another symbol?

*Our liberal faith is far from fully stretched to meet the spiritual needs of a new age. But we are beckoned to transform our faith. . . . In a time as dangerous to the human future as ours, the character of our liberal religious movement dare not stop short of the universal claims upon it.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 85

What do you feel are the spiritual needs of a new age?

What are the universal claims laid upon our liberal faith?

How **does** our liberal faith or how **might** it meet these claims?

Half a century ago, a hope was expressed for our liberal religion in regard to its future. How do you feel about this statement after 50 years? Has it come to pass?

*What is needed is an association of free churches that will stand and fight for the central philosophy and values of liberal religion. . . . These churches . . . will be thoroughly emancipated from the sectarian spirit, from the tendency to set themselves up as small, select, superior groups of men and women to whom by some mysterious dispensation an exclusive gift of truth has been granted. They will cultivate an intensive sense of fellowship within their own ranks,*

Where do members of the group place themselves with reference to Christianity?

Illustrate this in some way—graph, chart, line, circles—individually. Share individual responses and mark them on a continuum to illustrate the group profile.

Invite members of the group to share their symbols for our liberal religion.

Discuss these two questions in groups of four.

In the larger group share the list of needs and claims and list ways in which our liberal religion might meet those needs.

In the larger group, discuss how individuals feel about this statement and ways in which it has and has not come to pass in half a century.

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*but they will be keenly aware of the world-wide aspects of their liberal faith, recognizing the kinship of liberals across all barriers of race, nationality, or traditional religious background.*

—Commission on Appraisal of the  
American Unitarian Association, 1936;  
Mendelsohn, p. 85

In concluding this second session, share individual wishes for our religion and simple statements of ways in which the wisher might make the wish come true—as a candle is passed around the circle. “I wish . . .” “and I can help make that happen by. . . .”

What would be one wish you might make for our religion?

How might **you** make this wish come true?

## THE WHO, WHAT, AND WHERE OF GOD

is probably one of the areas of the most diversity among us. Most would admit that we have a “God problem” in our midst, collectively, if not individually.

As the author explains,

*Religion strives for an overall account of the sum of things. It has an interest in totality, and God is the symbol most commonly used to express this cosmic perspective.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 89

A cosmic perspective sounds somewhat daunting.

Reflect on what your cosmic perspective might be, jotting down some words or phrases for now, rather than attempting to compose a succinct statement. (We’ll come back to this!)

The author admits, “Asking ultimate questions may be impractical, but one of reason’s compulsions is asking.”

What, for you, are ultimate questions?

Assuming that the issue of God is somewhere on that list, begin by tracing your God concepts. Earlier you were asked to remember your first God concept (page 7 of this guide).

How would you complete the sentence that begins “God is ...” today?

God is an ever-changing concept for most of us. Some say that many have given up on the word; I think it continues to nag at more of us than would admit to it.

The author describes humans as “the ineffable theologians” who plunge themselves into contradictions. We are all theologians; deep in some part of us we wonder about the nature of God, humans, and the cosmos, and we act out of those wonderings in the world in which we live.

How do your actions in world reflect your God concept?

*It is wise to rephrase the problem. How can we, on one hand, resolve to be accountable to ourselves and to others for our own actions, develop and use our own powers, and mind that each person take responsibility in the long run for the development of her or his own life and, on the other hand, acknowledge that we exist in a world of “givens” that are much weightier than we are no matter how faithfully we apply ourselves to high moral tasks?*

—Mendelsohn, p. 97

On pages 90–93, the author traces for us our theological past, and concludes that these theological issues are “real, pertinent, and

Chapters 7–8, pp. 87–127

In the group, make a list of ultimate questions.

Get out the list of early God concepts the group made in an earlier session, and add to it; then share in the group how each person would complete the sentence, “God is ...” now.

Discuss in groups of four how each person’s God concept affects how they act in the world.

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searching,” even though we may be inclined to agree with Julius Penrose in James Cozzen’s novel, *By Love Possessed*, that theology is “the homage . . . nonsense pays to sense.”

*In what ways, then, do we characteristically look for solutions to the problem of God? There are three main lines of direction: God and the human search for self; God and idealized reality; God and the search for meaning and purpose.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 94

Take a quick poll within the group; how many theists, humanists, both, or other?

On pages 98–109, the author outlines some of the varieties of theological reflections about God, including the feminist view. As you read through these, which one(s) do you identify most with?

List these in two (or more) columns, listing those who are more than one in all columns that apply.

Would you categorize yourself as humanist or theist or both, or as something else entirely?

Then divide into groups of 3 or 4 with a **mix** in each group as an opportunity for each person to explain why they categorize themselves as they do.

Think about your reasons for your categorization of yourself.

Can the larger group agree on a definition of theism, humanism?

How would you define theism, humanism?

*...we are supposed to be a community of open-minded seekers, all of us blessed with independence of mind and spirit, free to arrive at honest convictions without prejudice to our good standing, and deserving respect for the integrity of our motives. These are our distinguishing characteristics, and not whether we choose to call ourselves theists, humanists, or something else.*

*It may be that I cherish my Unitarian Universalist affiliation most of all because every congregation I have served harbors a mixture of theists and humanists, Christians and non-Christians. They are, in my opinion, exceedingly good for one another.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 109

Put each person’s faith stance up for others to read during a break.

Look back on what you jotted down earlier as the beginnings of a cosmic perspective. Add to that your theological reflections as you have read this chapter as an attempt to write **where you stand** theologically, after reading what Jack Mendelsohn has shared on pages 110–112 in “Here I Stand.”

After adults sort themselves out theologically, the task before them is the religious education of their children. One of the important aspects of liberal religious education is its commitment to allowing children to “name their own knowing.”

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Just as there are theological issues that can become problems for adults in a religion that allows, even welcomes and encourages, diversity, the Bible can become a problem in religious education. As the author points out, we cannot ignore the Bible, for it is a major source of our ideas, habits, and attitudes.

*From it have come many of our laws, social institutions, morals, and folkways—good and bad. It is a factor in our lives to be dealt with sensibly, feelingly, and intelligently.*  
—Mendelsohn, p. 114

How do you **feel** about the Bible?

Do you know much about it?

Many UUs fear the Bible, especially using it in our religious education, while others want it to be a significant part of what we teach our children.

The author outlines some facts about the Bible on pages 116–118. Does this inform you and allay some of your fears, if you have them, about using the Bible in our religious education?

Do you agree with the author’s premise that our children deserve, at the very least, to have their curiosity stimulated about the (Biblical) legends, myths, stories, teachings, and symbols that pervade our culture?

What is your opinion of the suggestions the author makes for introducing the Biblical stories at various age levels to children and young people?

What beside the Bible would you want our children to have included in their religious education?

Our children cannot escape encountering traditional and orthodox religious beliefs as they interact with their peers.

How might we prepare our children for these encounters?

Do you want your children to grow up to become Unitarian Universalists?

Looking at your own faith stance (p. 14), could you, from that, formulate a philosophy of religious education?

*The great end in religious instruction, whether in the Sunday School or family, is, not to stamp our minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; not to form an outward regularity, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought; not to bind them*

Share in triads feelings about the Bible and be sure to include fears about it. Then share these in the larger group.

Respond to these three questions in the larger group.

List ways in which we can prepare our children for encounters with non-liberals.

Share how members of the group feel about whether or not their children become UUs.

Share in the larger group each person’s formulation of a philosophy of religious education.

Can the group reach a consensus and come up with one philosophy statement from those that have been shared?

It is allowed to conclude that Channing’s statement cannot be improved upon!

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*by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may, in the course of Providence, be offered to their decision; not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules which rest on no foundation but our own word and will, but to awaken the consciousness, the moral discernment, so that they may discern and approve for themselves what is everlastingly right and good.*

—William Ellery Channing  
Mendelsohn, p. 124

*For most Unitarian Universalists, religion means little if it does not include enlightened conscience in action.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 129

Earlier the statement of faith one’s life makes was considered. How we are in the world, the actions we take to change it, arise out of our religion. It is the “why” of our doing.

The author suggests that by our involvement in social action, using the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee as an example, that we feel that we are demonstrating to ourselves that religion is far more than a Sunday morning gesture to God. He makes the claim that we create by our own actions and inactions the world in which we live, and suffer or rejoice.

*Religion may be a matter of prayer, but prayer without responsible action is a mockery.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 133

Does your religion, this religion, require you to act to change the world?

*What can a mere handful do in a world like ours? On many issues we can’t even agree among ourselves. How can we expect to do more than learn to live with all the grace and resignation we can muster?*

—Mendelsohn, p. 134

On page 138, the author lists three assertions of religion’s responsibility to social action, of the empowering of people to act in the world that religion accomplishes. How do you respond to these assertions?

How does the UUA support you in your own social concerns? How might it do this better?

How do you feel about the stance the UUA takes in the area of social action?

The author reminds us that we have to incarnate love within our skins. He suggests that we do some solid thinking about our uniqueness as aloneness.

*It is as persons, within our self-contained skins, that we experience the ultimate sense of uniqueness and the ultimate anguish of aloneness. The marks of our selfness are unequivocally stamped upon our behavior, whether we are assembled in community or off on a stroll alone.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 148

What does this mean to/for you?

Recognition of our human limitations is a religious recognition.

Chapters 9–10, pp. 129–168

Look back on the list of conditions members of the group are trying to change (p. 7 of this guide).

Discuss among members of the group the author’s attitude toward social action.

Do all members of the group agree with the author on the subject of social action?

What can a mere handful accomplish?

In the larger group, list ways in which the UUA does and does not aid individuals in their own social action and discuss ways in which it succeeds and fails as an institution in this area.

In dyads, share your response to Jack’s comments about our aloneness.

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In groups of four, share your own definitions/explanations of your courage to be, to continue keeping on.

(If the group decides to read Job and *J.B.*, a discussion of these would be appropriate.)

Out of this recognition comes our courage to be, to continue to be and become.

How would you define/explain your courage to be, to continue, in the fact of your own human limitations, that element of tragedy that ultimately touches every life?

Perhaps this would be a good time to read/re-read the Book of Job in the Old Testament and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.* The author states that the lesson of Job and *J.B.* is that the only justice we will find is that which is fashioned by the human spirit . . . the only love we will know is that which we exchange with one another. He concludes, "We are not called upon to justify the ways of God; we are always called upon to justify our own ways."

*The universe gives life—the precious gift of life—and the human response is love: love of God, love of the universe, for making life possible, and love of all those who share the gift. This kind of love is the seat of justice. It is wholly that of humans to give or withhold.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 154

*In Job and J.B. I find stirring parables of what my religion means to my courage to be. I do not love life because God will take care of me. My reason tells me that the universe is not organized to look after my personal welfare. The universe has given me life. By placing that life in a body separate from all other bodies, the universe has also granted me an unassailable core of inner being that is mine and mine alone to cultivate and deepen. No priest or revelation can mediate between my solitariness and life as a whole. I love life because, although it leaves me in an ultimate sense alone, it brings me into communion with everyone else's aloneness. In solitariness I sense how intimately I am linked to all those from whom I am separated. My religion is the finding of self and others. It is not only my courage to be myself, in all my stark individuality and aloneness, but also my basic source of power to live serviceably with others.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 155

*What happens to this life I prize so highly when, in me, it dies? What befalls this core of inner being that is mine and mine alone when death overtakes my body? Is death the end, or is it a beginning?*

—Mendelsohn, p. 155

On pages 155-159 the author shares his reflections and views on death and immortality.

*For those of us who can no longer live under the spell of traditional beliefs in resurrection and personal afterlives, the*

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*larger message of immortality need not be lost. Fundamentally, it is a message of renewed, redeemed, ongoing life and of the wonder that our thoughts and deeds are our real immortality.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 159

Can you write a brief statement of your own view of death and immortality?

Another of those problem areas, like God and the Bible, is Jesus. As the author asks, “How do we know who Jesus is or was?”

What do you **know** about Jesus?

What do you **think** about Jesus?

What do you **feel** about Jesus?

The author offers some help with sorting ourselves out on the subject of Jesus (pp. 160–165). After reading these pages, do you have anything more to add about Jesus to your knowledge, thoughts and feelings about him?

*To me, the important thing about Jesus is not that he was **just** human, but that the human race is capable of producing him. And not him alone, but others like him. And not only in ancient times, but now.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 165

The author states that prayer is both a problem and a challenge to religious liberals.

Do you pray?

What is/is not prayer for you?

*Prayer is an effort to reach deep and to reach out and to **become** what we would like to be, and need to be, and ought to be. Proper prayer is not a petition to escape realities. It is an effort to face up to realities, to understand them, to deal with them. It is an expression of the desire to grow in spiritual stature, in courage, in strength, and in faith. The purpose of prayer is to transform those doing the praying, to lift them out of fear and selfishness into serenity, patience, determination, belonging.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 166

Reflect on the ancient suggestion that prayer is a means of releasing needed hidden energies in us.

What about other forms of activity that accomplish this same end?

*Prayer based on self-examination, on an honest ordering of our minds, and on the ability to wait in expectation and*

In whatever way is most comfortable, members of the group are encouraged to share their own views on death and immortality.

In the group, share each person’s ideas about Jesus.

Can the group come to any agreement about Jesus?

How many in the group pray?

Discuss what prayer is/is not for members of the group.

Discuss in the group other activities they find helpful to achieve the same ends as prayer.

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*appreciation of untapped and unrevealed spiritual resources,  
is, to me, prayer at its best.*

—Mendelsohn, p. 168

Is not life our prayer lived out?

What would be your prayer for yourself?

*Prayer doesn't change things, but it changes people and  
people change things. Let us pray.*

—Lon Ray Call  
Mendelsohn, p. 168



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**About the Author**

Patricia Bowen is a retired minister who has served congregations in Nevada, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. She is also author of another adult study guide, *Story Circles: Personal Theology in Process*, and editor of the UUA internship manual *Internship: A Mutual Challenge*.

Unitarian Universalist Association  
25 Beacon Street  
Boston, Massachusetts 02108-2800

