



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**"Arendt, Beauvoir, Rand, Weil:
The Power of Philosophy in Troubled Times"**

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

March 3, 2024

frederickuu.org

"I don't believe in hope, and I don't believe in hopelessness. I believe in compassion and pragmatism, in doing what is right for its own sake." - Sarah Kendzior

In the early twentieth century, a tradition began of celebrating March 8th as International Women's Day — an annual invitation to celebrate women's contributions to events in history and contemporary society. In the early 1980s, this tradition expanded within the U.S. to Women's History Week, and a few years later, to all of March as [Women's History Month](#).

One of my core convictions is that *the stories we tell matter*. Too often, history has been told primarily in ways that were biased toward *male* perspectives and experiences. As the saying goes, "If you don't have a seat at the table, you might be on the menu."

Women's History Month is an annual reminder about the importance of regularly cutting against the grain of systemic sexism. Focusing on stories from our past that center on the perspectives and experiences of women can inspire us to co-create a better, more equitable future.

At the beginning of this year's Women's History Month, I suspect that, like me, many of you are beginning to feel the political caldron of this election year heating up. Although you will never hear us either endorse or oppose candidates for public office,

in the words of our #UUtheVote organizers, we are called to be “**powerful and prophetic without being partisan**” ([UUtheVote](#)). That includes helping with get-out-the-vote campaigns, advocating around key issues related to our UU values, and speaking out against actions that violate our values — including threats to our democracy itself.

So in preparation for this Women’s History Month, I chose a book about the insights of brilliant and powerful women who lived through times similar to our own, times in which freedom and democracy were under threat.

The book is titled *The Visionaries: Arendt, Beauvoir, Rand, Weil, and the Power of Philosophy in Dark Times* by the philosopher Wolfram Eilenberger. Philosophy literally means the *love of wisdom*, and this book weaves together the lives and insights of these women over a fateful decade from 1933 to 1943, as rising tides of authoritarianism threatened Europe and increasingly, the world.

His previous book was *Time of the Magicians: Wittgenstein, Benjamin, Cassirer, Heidegger, and the Decade That Reinvented Philosophy*. After writing about four white dudes, I’m guessing he rightly thought it was time to diversify. I’m glad he did because this sermon wouldn’t exist otherwise.

However, if one or more of these four women particularly intrigues you, I wouldn’t necessarily recommend this book. Instead, consider starting with a biography about any one of them, exploring a whole life (not just a decade) — or by reading one of the major books they wrote. Personally, I’d say start with one of the definitive biographies of Arendt or Beauvoir: *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, or *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life* by Kate Kirkpatrick. Or, if you have more time to *listen* than read, check out the [Reading Hannah Arendt](#) podcast.

Today, we’ll start out with Hannah Arendt (1906 - 1975), a Jew born in Germany who became one of the most influential political theorists of the 20th century. Then we’ll move to Simone de Beauvoir (1908 – 1986), a French existentialist philosopher who had a significant influence on feminist theory. Next, we’ll focus on Ayn Rand (1905 – 1982), a Russian-born American philosopher known for promoting her philosophical ideas through her novels. And finally, we’ll touch on Simone Weil (1909 – 1943), a French philosopher, mystic, and political activist. The overall focus of my sermon will

be on the specific tools and insights these women utilized that might be most relevant to us as we navigate our own troubling times.

I realize there is a risk in trying to weave insights from the lives of *four* women instead of concentrating on one. But part of the point is that no one person is going to save us, then or now. The challenge for each of us is to discern how we, individually and collectively, are called to act in such a time as this.

To set the stage, I want to invite you to hear a poem titled “Today” by my colleague, The Rev. Lynn Ungar, a poem which speaks to the fierce urgency of our current political moment. It’s from her collection titled *The Brittle Beauty of It All*.

You are not wrong to be furious.
You are not wrong to be scared.
You are not wrong to wonder what
 we do today and tomorrow and tomorrow.
You are not wrong to notice
 the brilliance of the sky.
You are not wrong to think
 of your daughter.
You are not wrong to imagine
 people you will never know.
You are not wrong to think
 This doesn't really affect me
 and to know it really does.
You are not wrong to look for
 pictures of puppies or kittens
 or flowers or trees.
You are not wrong to try to massage
 the ache out of your own heart.
You are not wrong to yell
 or cry or scream or hide
 under the covers in your bed.
You are not wrong to turn

to your neighbor and say
What do we do now?

To begin discerning our response to that question — *What do we do now* in such a time as this? — let's turn to the first of our figures: Hannah Arendt. Being born Jewish in 1906 in Germany put her on a collision course with the Third Reich. Arendt was twenty-seven years old in 1944 when Hitler came to power, and the Gestapo briefly imprisoned her for the so-called crime of researching antisemitism.

After being released, she escaped to France, only to soon witness Nazi Germany occupy that country too. This defeat was particularly horrifying to Arendt because France was the birthplace in 1789 of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, a foundational human rights document (109).

In 1941 Arendt fled again, this time to the United States, where a decade later she became a U.S. citizen and published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. That book was translated into many languages and launched her career as one of the most influential political theorists of the twentieth century (337).

I'll have to limit myself to just one quote from that book. As you hear it, keep in mind that famous passage from the beginning of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed...with certain unalienable Rights....[and] — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the *consent of the governed*.” In marked contrast, witnessing the totalitarian political movements of World War II, Arendt named this harsh truth: **“the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them”** (108).

Here's another way of making that same point: Thomas Jefferson was correct that human rights are *inalienable*, but Arendt is challenging us to notice that our rights are *not* inevitable. When we say that human rights are *inalienable*, we mean that there's nothing anyone can do to make human rights *alien* (or separate) from you. By definition of this ideal, there's nothing you did to deserve human rights and there's nothing you

can do to lose human rights. As our UU First Principle says, we *believe* in “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Period.

Human rights are often declared to be the *birthright* of each of us and every other human being, but totalitarian movements — and the failure of democracies to live up to their highest ideals — remind us all that universal respect for human rights is only an aspiration. Nevertheless, that respect is the first tool these four visionary women invite us to put in our own toolboxes for resistance and resilience. Since we can never take the reality of human rights for granted, it is incumbent upon us to support and defend leaders and institutions that the inalienability of human rights.

There’s one more related point that is essential to bring up about Arendt. Her other most famous book was published in 1963, titled *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (338). Witnessing the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organizers of the Holocaust, Arendt was shocked that, rather than seeing some unusually inhuman monster, Eichmann presented as, in her words, “terribly and terrifyingly normal.” She coined the term “the banality of evil” to refer to the ways we humans get caught up in conforming to terrible trends in groups or in society.

Metaphorically, we might think of the difference between *bad apples* — individuals drawn to committing evil deeds regardless of circumstances — and *bad barrels* — cruel societies and systems that rot and corrupt people, which create the *circumstances* in which terrible evil is done. That’s the second tool these visionary women invite us to put in our toolboxes: the banality (the “ordinariness”) of evil. Instead of merely scapegoating “bad apples,” we need to build better societal “barrels” that help us all co-create increasingly humane, equitable, and compassionate societies.

Let’s shift now to our second focal figure: Simone de Beauvoir. As an existentialist philosopher, she was passionately committed to exploring the questions that emerge from the sheer fact of our human existence. None of us asked to be here, to be alive, to be conscious in this particular historical moment. But here we are; so, what ought we — or *might* we — do (4)?

If I had to limit myself to one tool from her worldview to add to our own toolboxes for resistance and resilience, it would be *the freedom to choose*. But don’t get de Beauvoir wrong: she was not speaking about a freedom to choose anything.

Existentialism is clear that we are all limited in our choices by the specific historical context into which we are born. But within those circumstances, we often have a surprising amount of choice in any present moment.

She and her longtime partner, the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, pushed the envelope of what was possible and permissible on many different levels. I'll give you *two* specific examples. First, *politically speaking*, her book about women's oppression, *The Second Sex*, published in 1949 quite ahead of its time, was a significant inspiration for second wave feminism (336). A second influence, based in personal example, was that she and Sartre were openly polyamorous long before that was a thing: "They promised each other unconditional intellectual fidelity and honesty with an openness to other attractions. They would be absolutely necessary to each other, but also at times to others" (5).

She viewed totalitarianism generally and the occupation of Vichy France in particular as the opposite of the freedom, choice, and everything else she had committed her life to. But she refused to be held back by threats from Hitler, whom she called a "petit-bourgeois fascist" (9). Politically and personally, she kept pushing into the possibilities, freedoms, and choices available to her.

Our third focal figure is Ayn Rand. In some ways, she may feel like a surprising person to include in this study since her books have often been co-opted by *conservative* politicians actively working against attempts at decreasing wealth inequality. And certainly, class resentment is one of the main factors that create the conditions that would-be autocrats exploit (335-336).

Indeed, there's an old joke about Rand's work that:

There are two novels that can change a bookish fourteen-year old's life: *The Lord of the Rings* and *Atlas Shrugged*. One is a childish fantasy that often engenders a lifelong obsession with its unbelievable heroes, leading to an emotionally [and] socially stunted adulthood, unable to deal with the real world. The other, of course, involves orcs.

Now, I will confess, I was a bookish fourteen-year-old, who did tear through both *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* back in the day. But I can see now, in ways I couldn't then, the limitations of Rand's philosophy.

That being said, it's important to reckon with the fact that her books — particularly her two novels *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* — have sold more than 29 million copies. There is something about them that has resonated with many people.

Keep in mind that Rand was born in Russia. And in the context of a totalitarian regime such as Stalin's Soviet Union, Rand's novels are powerful assertions of individual *freedom* (181, 255). And they remain valuable on that level.

In ways that Rand did not appreciate, however, there is all the difference in the world between totalitarian top-down state socialism and the freely-chosen democratic socialism of, say, Bernie Sanders (46).

So, to add another tool to our toolbox, Rand underscores the importance of defending the *freedom* for individuals to choose for themselves. Our UU Fifth Principle calls this conviction, "The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large."

Our fourth focal figure is Simone Weil. She's probably the least well-known of the four, but the philosopher Albert Camus (1913 - 1960) called her "*the only great mind of our time*" (339). That's quite the compliment! The tool she adds to our toolbox is *solidarity*. All of these women are brilliant thinkers, but more so even than the other four, Weil was willing to go much further into the trenches alongside historically-oppressed contemporary groups. I'll give you three significant examples.

First, although she was intellectually and spiritually drawn to pacifism, she was willing to personally take up arms in certain circumstances because she became convinced, in her words, that in the case of the Nazis, "sadly, to my acute pain, it is impossible to prevent them from doing harm without killing a certain number of them" (10-11).

Second, rather than merely advocating for labor justice, she took a job for a significant period of time in a Paris metal factory to better understand firsthand the oppression of the working class (93). She found the work incredibly difficult but persisted because of her commitment to solidarity with laborers.

Third, near the end of her life, when she was hospitalized for illness, she refused treatment not typically shared by the less-privileged other patients out of her sense of solidarity with them (329).

There is so much more to say about Weil, but I hope I have given you a sense of her remarkable life and her challenge to us to be in *solidarity* with those whose causes we share. As the saying goes, from the indigenous rights movement, “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Now, as important as these four women are for inspiring resistance and resilience in our own time, I would be remiss if our focus today was only on the past — without looking to parallels in the present. To me, the first name that springs to mind is the scholar and journalist Sarah Kendzior (1978 -), whose doctoral dissertation focused on “how dissidents from former Soviet Union totalitarian states used the internet to challenge an authoritarian government in a climate of surveillance and distrust” (Wikipedia). In recent years, she has turned her focus to the rising of authoritarian threats here in the U.S.

Kendzior is the author of three books:

- From her perspective as a longtime resident of St. Louis, Missouri, her 2018 book, *The View from Flyover Country* traces “how the breakdown of institutions and social trust set the stage for American autocracy.”
- In 2020 she published *Hiding in Plain Sight*, which details what she bluntly calls “a transnational crime syndicate masquerading as a government.”
- In 2022, she published her most recent book, *They Knew: How a Culture of Conspiracy Keeps America Complacent* (10).

She also regularly publishes online on Substack.

I don’t necessarily agree with everything she writes, but I appreciate her fierce commitment to truth-telling and her direct, no-holds-barred style. In her words, which feel highly relevant in light of the historical records we have been reflecting on this morning, are we “supposed to treat the worst people in the world as good faith actors, in defiance of logic or compassion or history, and deny the obviously grim conclusions” (122)?

So, as we strap in to make it through another election year, let us keep our tools for resistance and resilience close at hand: the importance of taking action and the vitality of choice, freedom, and solidarity.

If you are feeling anxious and worried, that's a very understandable feeling. If that's the case, I encourage you to experiment with signing-up for either UUtheVote or a similar campaign of your choice. UU the Vote is about non-partisan organizing to counter voter suppression, expand democracy, and maximize voter turnout.

In both my experience and the experience of many people I have talked to, one of the best ways to channel worry and anxiety is taking actions for electoral justice. When I send postcards, make phone calls, send texts, etc., I find that my electoral anxieties *lessen*, because I know that I have taken action within my sphere of influence to fight the good fight and make good trouble. So if you are interested, google "UU the Vote" and sign up to receive email updates about how you can get involved. Our 2024 campaign launches on March 14.

For now, I'll give the final words to Dr. Sarah Kendzior from an article she published at a fateful time in mid-November 2016:

Write down what you value; what standards you hold for yourself and for others. Write about your dreams for the future and your hopes for your children..... You still have your freedom, so use it....

Do not accept brutality and cruelty as normal even if it is sanctioned. Protect the vulnerable and encourage the afraid. If you are brave, stand up for others. If you cannot be brave — and it is often hard to be brave — *be kind*. But most of all, never lose sight of who you are and what you value.

If you find yourself doing something that feels questionable or wrong a few months or years from now, [*she's alluding to Arendt's banality*] find [those words] you wrote on who you are [what you value] and read it. Ask if that version of yourself would have done the same thing. And if the answer is no? Don't do it.." (The Correspondent)

Non-compliance with evil can be a big first step toward reversing the course toward authoritarianism and resetting our trajectory back toward freedom, democracy, and human rights. I'm grateful to be in this struggle with all of you.