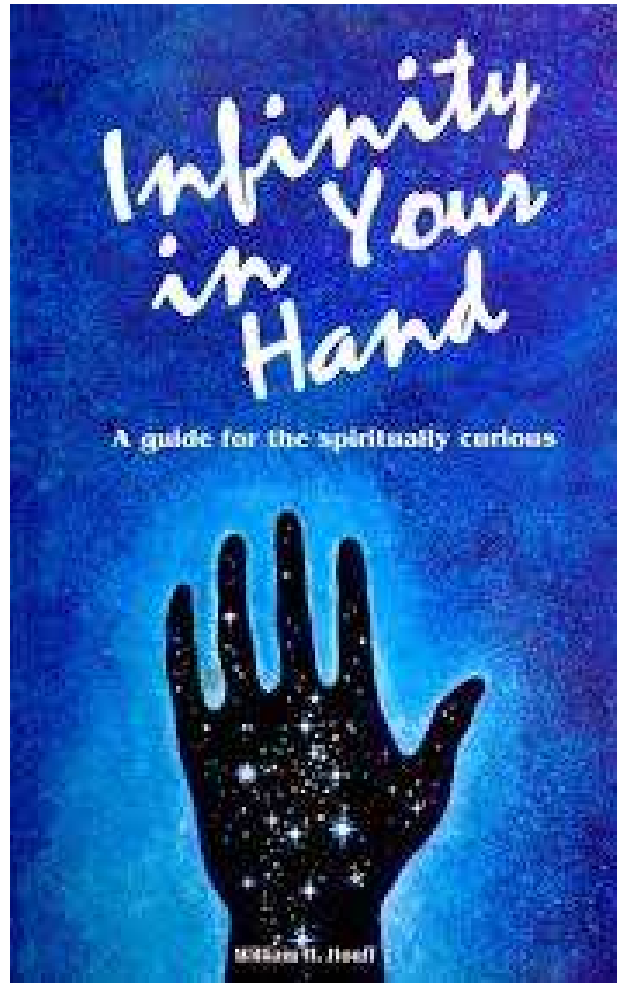


WILLIAM H. HOUFF

A Tribute to a Guiding Light to UU Mystics and to the Spokane Community



After ten years as a research chemist, Bill Houff became a Unitarian Universalist minister; he has served seven liberal churches in the United States and Canada over the past three decades. He is a social activist, meditation teacher, outdoorsman, photographer, and carpenter. And he believes that spiritual growth is our primary life task.

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“The Mystical Power of We” according to modern UU Mystic, Rev. Dr. William “Bill” Houff. Following excerpt from his book, **Infinity in Your Hand**, Chapter 11, “Self Discovery,” pp. 126-127

In dedication and honor of his service as UU Minister at the UU Church of Spokane, Washington from 1973 to 1988.

“As we are able to discover our own True Self, we become more able to recognize the True Self in others. This realization occurred to me upon one of my many rereadings of *I and Thou*, Martin Buber’s marvelous little classic which sets forth his basic thesis, “All real living is meeting.”

The great Hebrew theologian’s fundamental insight was that humans have two quite different ways of meeting the universe. They can do so objectively, by holding themselves apart from whatever they are meeting. Or they can do it subjectively, by seeing themselves as part of whatever they are meeting. The first relationship Buber called “I-It,” the second “I-Thou.”

In an “I-It” relationship, the “I” is interested in the other only from the standpoint of reaction or exploitation. This is what we’re doing when we consider a tree as lumber or firewood, or a cow as meat or a source of milk, or a human being as an employee, a student, or a sex object.

In an “I=Thou” relationship, the I is intimately interdependent with the other. This is what is going on when we get swept up with a sunset as a religious experience, or feel a deep kinship with an animal, or love another human being unconditionally.

Buber was not so naïve as to think that it is possible to live constantly in terms of the I-Thou. He knew that the conditions of finite existence require us to regard the rest of the world, including other people, objectively. But he was utterly certain that those who never get past the I-It orientation are spiritually dysfunctional. While I-It describes our everyday mode of doing business, I-Thou describes a spiritual encounter.

Buber tells of an I-Thou encounter with a fellow creature: He was stroking the head of a dapple gray horse. As he did so he experienced a strong feeling of kinship with the animal. Buber sensed that the horse shared the feeling as well. For a timeless moment man and horse were one.

Then, abruptly, Buber became aware of his hand upon the horse’s head. He sensed the special connection and, in his mind’s eye, stepped back to observe it. At that instant the spell was broken. I-Thou shifted back to I-It. The horse, too, recognized the shift as it lifted its head away from Buber’s hand.

What I conceive to be going on in an I-Thou encounter is that the Divine essence within both beings meets and greets itself. Two manifestations of Thou (Good, Brahm, Cosmic Consciousness) come together. In the much more common I-It, however, the presence of the Divine is unrecognized and ignored. A meeting of “its” has occurred.

We have all had that special kind of “knowing” that comes quite unbidden upon those rare occasions when our eyes happen to simply meet the eyes of another person. This happens only, I’m sure, when there is no agenda, beyond the acceptance and acknowledgement of the other.

From Chapter 15, “The Spiritual Basis for Social Action,” pp. 169-170.

There is a false doctrine abroad in the religious realm, one that has been outstanding for a very long time and which has caused much mischief. This false doctrine is the widely held notion that *political activism and mysticism—social change and spirituality—have little in common and are even perhaps antagonistic.*

I challenge that notion. In the strongest terms possible I will assert that social activism and mysticism are inextricable interwoven and that where they are not, the results are flawed and crippled.

Let us make no mistake about it—spiritual concern must include concern for the world. But then, just as there is the danger that a timid church will fall into irrelevance or worse when it ignores the social and political plights of the people, so there is the complementary peril for religious institutions that focus their full attention on “this world” to the neglect of the spiritual or mystical realm.

Many contemporary persons don't understand what mysticism is. ... in truth, the authentic mystic is the most practical of persons, the most rigorous of realists. Indeed the traditional prayer of the mystic is “Lead me from the unreal to the real.”

It's just that the mystic recognizes and honors the fact that reality as we perceive it is always partial. As one who has been a scientist, I know that this consideration applies even to science, which is nearly as dependent upon myths and models as theology is. The truth is ever beyond what we think it to be.

In Memory of The Rev. Dr. William “Bill” Houff, see
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<https://uurmapa.org/the-rev-dr-william-bill-houff/>

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