READING: Mark Twain wrote a piece in 1905 (when he was 69) called “The War Prayer,” so scathing of war and religion that he would not allow its publication until after his death. In it a minister has just delivered a long prayer to a crowd of families and new soldiers about to march off to battle, a prayer for glorious victory and a heroes’ return. But a stranger enters, wearing a white robe, and tells the congregation he has been sent from God to say He has heard their prayer and is willing to grant it—but only after the messenger explains what it really means. Twain has the stranger to say:

“God’s servant and yours has prayed his prayer. Has he paused and taken thought? Is it one prayer? No, it is two—one uttered, the other not. Both have reached the ear of Him Who heareth all supplications, the spoken and the unspoken. Ponder this—keep it in mind. If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! Lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time. If you pray for the blessing of rain upon your crop which needs it, by that act are possibly praying for a curse upon some neighbor’s crop which may not need rain and can be injured by it.

“You have heard your servant’s prayer—the uttered part of it. I am commissioned of God to put into words the other part of it—that part which the pastor—and also you in your hearts—fervently prayed silently. And ignorantly and unthinkingly? God grant that it was so! You heard these words: ‘Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!’ That is sufficient. The whole of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory—must follow it, cannot help but follow it. Upon the listening spirit of God-the-Father fell also the unspoken part of the prayer. He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!

‘O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle—be Thou near them! With them—in spirit—we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dear; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their little children to wander unfriended the
wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it—for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps; water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

...... ‘Ye have prayed it; if ye still desire it, speak! The messenger of the Most High waits.’ It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.

SERMON

Whether Mark Twain was exposing the sham and ignorance of patriotism, as he was in his ‘War Prayer,’ or the evil of war, or engaged in fighting superstition, greed, racism, religious extremism—all the vices of the ‘damned human race’ as he called them—his writing is as current today and will be tomorrow as it was then. There is no evil or stupidity in existence today that he did not write and speak out about. Oh, how the nation could use him today! We have today, thank destiny or happenstance, many acolytes who share Twain’s defense of human rights and liberties, but no one as powerfully effective for social good as he was. Why? Because they lack the twin weapons of Twain’s popular humor and reputation. And I should add, “genius,” for he was that too. He had an incomparable combination of wit, memory, and courage. As a boy growing up in Hannibal, Missouri, he was an instant learner, a comedian, precocious observer, adventurer. His formal schooling was ended at 11 years of age when, to help support his family, he went to work at odd jobs and, at 12, as a printer’s apprentice. At age 16 he had his first writing published in several small newspapers. At age 17 he left home to work in print shops in St. Louis, Keokuk, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and New York, all the while educating himself at public libraries. His letters to his mother at that young age show a writing ability that probably exceeds 90 percent of college graduates today—certainly exceeding my own. He was simply a master of the English language.

Russell Baker wrote that “There is in every sentence written by Twain a fresh feeling of intimacy that can only come from his language....He has an easy, comfortable, private, almost erotic relationship with the English language, not as it is written by Americans, but as it is spoken by them...”
Twain lived enough lives in his 74-plus years to equal ten ordinary ones. He came in in 1835 with Halley’s Comet and went out, providentially, with the comet on its next return in April, 1910. This morning I want to concentrate on his writing so here is just a patchwork glimpse of his life: becomes an envied pilot of steamships on the Mississippi at 23; loses that profession at 25 when the Civil War stops all traffic on the river; moves to Nevada in search of silver; becomes a reporter for newspapers in Virginia City and San Francisco—reports on the Nevada and California legislatures; at 30 sails to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) as a travel reporter; begins a fabulous career as a humorous speaker upon return to San Francisco; sails to the Holy Land, Europe and Mediterranean as a reporter and uses his experience to write his first great work, a travel book called “Innocents Abroad;” writes next a charming book based on his time in Nevada called “Roughing It;” throughout his life writes prolifically, creating hundreds of short stories, letters, essays and books; marries a wealthy heiress at 34 and is gifted with a three-story home with all furnishings and three servants by his father-in-law; becomes magnificently rich by the age of 50 and writes that “..everything I touch turns to gold”; becomes the most famous person on the planet; spends more than half his adult life in Europe where he is lionized even more than in the states; saves General Grant from dying penniless and leaving his family in dire straits by encouraging the writing of his autobiography and publishing his book, making the ex-president’s family four hundred thousand dollars (which would be more than four million today); by the time he is 58 loses all his money and goes deeply in debt through incredibly inept investments to satisfy his growing lust for riches; meets with many of the most famous figures in history and writes about them—just some of these are Winston Churchill (whom he despised), G. B. Shaw, H.G. Wells, Helen Keller (to whom he gave considerable support), Presidents Grant, McKinley, Grover Cleveland, Theodore Roosevelt (whom he called “blustering, warmongering, and imperialistic), Woodrow Wilson (before he became President), Kaiser Wilhelm, Emperor Franz Joseph I, Charles Darwin (who said he often read himself to sleep with Mark Twain), Robert Louis Stevenson, Sigmund Freud, Booker T. Washington, Henry James, Lewis Carroll, Robert Browning, and many others; in 1907 receives the highest honor of a degree from Oxford University; is of course brilliant; has a hell of a temper; is often irate and depressed; is adored by his three daughters but because of his sudden outbursts they will always go to him in twos or threes, never alone, for fear of him; feels acutely responsible for the deaths of his son at 19 months and for two of his three daughters and his wife because of his mistakes and bad judgment in life; is the life of every party and discussion; is invited to be the principal speaker at almost every prominent event in the country—and loves it; and has an undying, never-diminishing love of his wife Livy to the end of his life.
George Bernard Shaw referred to Twain as America’s Voltaire; Ernest Hemingway said that American literature started with Mark Twain, that his book “Huckleberry Finn” was “the best book we’ve ever had. There was nothing before. There’s been nothing as good since.” Well, that is a most inadequate picture of Mark Twain but some knowledge of his life, as little as this provides, may help in appreciating his writing and the power of it.

The name Mark Twain almost automatically associates one’s memory with Huckleberry Finn, usually considered his masterpiece. Twain grew up with slave children, his father at one time owned a slave and his uncle owned several. He wrote later in life that he and everyone he knew growing up thought slavery was a completely natural state of life. He was soon to realize the infamy of it and his loathing expressed itself volubly in this book and all others. Twain ever so discreetly weaves the evil and inhumanity of slavery within an enchanting story of escape, danger, comedy, and vivid descriptions of river life. I can imagine that he had a greater influence on opening minds to a more human consideration of slavery than any other single effort. I’m sure you are familiar with the basic plot, that Huckleberry is running away from an abusive and drunken father; Jim, the slave, is escaping to avoid being sold down south away from his wife and children, and together they join in rafting the Mississippi to freedom. It was the first major novel ever to tell its complete story in authentic vernacular. It has been banned over the years because of its course language and more so because of the use of the appellation “nigger” throughout the book. I’m sure Twain was very much aware of the consequences of this use but, courageous or audacious as he was both, Twain realized the literary necessity of realism.

The boy and the slave have high adventures along the way and gradually Huckleberry begins to realize the humanness of Jim and the value of his friendship. Twain’s description of the evolving conversations between the two, from Huck’s superior attitude and beginning efforts to “teach” Jim, reach the point when Jim finally voices disagreement with some of the lessons. Then Huck takes refuge in the white man’s superiority by thinking to himself, “I see it weren’t no use wastin’ words–you can’t learn a nigger to argue. So I quit.” Later on Huck has the intelligence to admit, “Well, he was right; he was most always right; he had an uncommon level head for a nigger.” Huckleberry begins to worry over the fact that he is committing the serious crime of abetting the escape of a slave. He thinks, “The more I studied about this the more my conscience went to grinding me, and the more wicked and low-down and ornery I got to feeling. And at last it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain
hand of providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was
being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old
woman’s nigger that hadn’t ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there’s
One that’s always on the lookout, and ain’t a-going to allow no such miserable doings
to go only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared.”
Huck continues to suffer his conscience, finally breaks down and writes a note to
Jim’s owner revealing his whereabouts. He then thinks, “I felt good and all washed
clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray
now. But I didn’t do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—
thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and
going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river;
and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes
moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and
laughing. But some how I couldn’t seem to strike no places to harden me against
him, but only the other kind.....and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the
(bad) men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best
friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he’s got now; and then I
happened to look around and see the (note). It was a close place. I took it up, and
held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two
things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says
to myself: ‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell—and tore it up.’ “

The derogation ‘nigger’ is used unsparingly by Twain in this book. I don’t think
it was fortuitous, rather I think he used it purposely. It not only was a word used in
everyday language throughout the country and therefore true to life, but I think it was
used freely to bludgeon the reader with it, to irritate to the point it could not be
ignored, to make the reader realize how ugly it was and how unfitting it was for the
kind of man Jim was.

But “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” was by no means the only great book
of Twain’s. Before I leave it I will add that it has sold over ten million copies, perhaps
another million or two by this time.

Mark Twain had many weaknesses. Throughout his writing he excoriated the
greed, irresponsibility and avarice of the Tweeds, Carnegies, Goulds, Vanderbilts,
Rockefellers and all who were slave to the passion for money, yet for much of his life
he was as guilty of this obsession as any. His best friend, William Dean Howells, said
of him, “Money was his dream and he wanted more and more of it to fill out the
It was this passion that reduced him from fabulous riches in just eight or ten years to poverty and tremendous debt. Twain had lost more than $800,000 on an investment in building a typesetting machine, $100,000 in a publishing venture, $60,000 of his wife’s remaining fortune and more. Instead of taking the usual route of declaring bankruptcy, Twain elected to pay off the debts by taking his wife and daughter Clara on a grueling 13-month speaking tour of the world to earn enough money to repay every one of his 96 creditors—and he did. During this time his favorite daughter Suzy who had remained in Hartford died of meningitis. It is this death that many critics claimed was the beginning of a significant change in Twain’s writing. His later autobiography and other writings have been criticized as full of torment, tragedy and sorrow about the damned human race, proving that he had lost his balance and his great talent. Bernard DeVoto, one of his first biographers, laid the foundation perpetuated by several others that Twain’s later writing was inferior and that little attention of it was warranted. Among that later writing were “Pudd’nhead Wilson,” “A Connecticut Yankee In King Arthur’s Court” and a multitude of satirical short stories and essays that dealt with the absurdities of the Bible, the incalculable harm of Christianity, and the ownership of government by callous business interests.

Titles of some those essays are the now famous “Letters From the Earth,” (written by Satan back to Saints Michael and Gabriel in heaven), “Etiquette for the After Life,” separate “Diaries” of Methuselah, Adam, Eve, and Shem, “The United States of Lyncherdom.” Another essay, ‘The Damned Human Race’ is striking for its range of knowledge in geology, astronomy and biology. Darwinism was at the center of this work, and pulpit religion was the target. “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” a muckraking pamphlet masterpiece, produced a torrent of shock and criticism of the American Board of Foreign Missions because of its revelations of the horrendous crimes of reparations and killing demanded by the missionaries following an international army’s taking of Peking, China. It went on to describe England’s manufacture of the Boer War in order to steal its diamond mines and black slave labor, Russia’s pillaging of Japan and of Manchuria, and the U.S. imperialistic conquest of Cuba and the Philippines with its annihilation of Filipinos and description of the sadism and brutality of Generals Funston, MacArthur and Leonard Wood. It is in Twain’s essay, “King Leopold’s Soliloquy,” you will learn of that Belgian fiend’s incomprehensible killing of more than ten million Congolese over a 20 year period of Twain’s life. Several biographers have stated that Twain’s inimitable satirical writing
of these horrors had more to do with the eventual routing of Leopold from the Belgian Congo than any actions of governments or reporters.

When Twain died he left a mountain of writing, some of which he had marked to be published only long after his death, a great deal of unfinished material and much he had not felt worthy of publication. Over the years since his death many writers and publishers have selected different pieces, compiled them, added their own commentary and criticism, and published them. There have been so many of them that classification and arrangement of the originals have become very confusing.

To thoroughly appreciate all of Twain’s many attacks on our country’s imperialism it helps considerably to have read Howard Zinn’s “The People’s History of the U. S.” Both writers are incredibly attuned to the country’s history of imperialism and share the same fury and outrage at its calumny.

Twain was aware that big business runs government, that wars provide the greatest ill-gotten profits, and that the hypocritical cries of “universal peace” and “patriotism” are the means to its ends. How current, how identical to our time more than 100 years later are these words of Twain, “The gospel of peace is always making a deal of noise, always rejoicing in its progress but always neglecting to furnish statistics. There are no peaceful nations now. All Christendom is a soldier-camp. The poor have been taxed in some nations to the starvation point to support the giant armaments which Christian governments have built up, each to protect itself from the rest of the...brotherhood, and incidentally to snatch any scrap of real estate left exposed by a weaker owner.”

I can’t help but feel I have failed to do the justice to Mark Twain that he deserves. In fact, it may be impossible to do that in 20 or so minutes. Maxwell Geismar, one of the many biographers of Twain, describes his work so much better than I. He wrote, “In the last half of his life, indeed, Sam Clemens produced some of his best writing—much of it newly released to the public eye.....he was a writer who carried his Edenic vision of life to the very end; and it was precisely that vision, embedded in his deepest spirit, untouchable, incorruptible, which created his whole remarkable description of our human pilgrimage undertaken amidst so much laughter and so many tears.” I would leave you with this recommendation: that you read one of the greatest books in literature, “The Autobiography of Mark Twain.”
He begins his great autobiography with these important words, “I shall keep in mind the fact that I am speaking from the grave. I am literally speaking from the grave, because I shall be dead when the book issues from the press. I speak from the grave rather than with my living tongue for a good reason: I can speak thence freely. When a man is writing a book dealing with the privacies of his life—a book which is to be read while he is still alive—he shrinks from speaking his whole frank mind; all his attempts to do it fail; he recognizes that he is trying to do a thing which is wholly impossible to a human being.”

As one last encouragement to read this book, I want to read an example of Twain’s fabulous memory and art, this of the summers he spent at his uncle’s farm in early childhood:

“...I have spent some part of every year at the farm until I was twelve or thirteen years old. The life which I led there with my cousins was full of charm, and so is the memory of it yet. I can call back the solemn twilight and mystery of the deep woods, the earthy smells, the faint odors of the wild flowers, the sheen of rain-washed foliage, the rattling clatter of drops when the wind shook the trees, the far-off hammering of woodpeckers and the muffled drumming of wood pheasants in the remoteness of the forest, the snapshot glimpses of disturbed wild creatures scurrying through the grass—I can call it all back and make it as real as it ever was, and as blessed. I can call back the prairie, and its loneliness and peace, and a vast hawk hanging motionless in the sky, with his wings spread wide and the blue of the vault showing through the fringe of their end feathers. I can see the woods in their autumn dress, the oaks purple, the hickories washed with gold, the maples and the sumachs luminous with crimson fires, and I can hear the rustle made by the fallen leaves as we plowed through them. I can see the blue clusters of wild grapes hanging among the foliage of the saplings, and I remember the taste of them and the smell. I know how the wild blackberries looked, and how they tasted, and the same with the pawpaws, the hazelnuts, and the persimmons; and I can feel the thumping rain upon my head of hickory nuts and walnuts when we were out in the frosty dawn to scramble for them with the pigs, and the gusts of wind loosed them and sent them down.”

I’ll stop here. There are two or three more pages of remembrances like this of the most beautiful and poetic language art I have ever read. Finally, I hope there is no question of why one should make a sermon of Mark Twain. For me he is as representative of Unitarianism-Universalism as anyone in its history. He never
mentioned either of them to my knowledge but there have been many other outstanding men and women in history who were in concert with UUism but were not officially affiliated with it, whose compassion and understanding led them to make this world a better place. Certainly Twain was one of those. His legacy is a magnificent gift to humankind, his damned...and loved...human race.