

Principles and Politics

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev Paul Beckel

September 6, 2020

Gathering Music *What's Up / Strength Courage and Wisdom*

[All of today's videos can be found by searching YouTube]

Welcome

That was 4 Non Blondes, and India Arie, speaking to us of anguished confusion ... *and resilience, and the hope* that arises when, together, we recognize our individual and our collective strength, courage, and wisdom.

Folks are still joining us this morning, so while everyone gets settled, I encourage you to take a look around our virtual sanctuary, enjoy seeing familiar faces, and new faces. And go grab a candle because we'll be lighting those together in just a minute.

First a prelude, a song I chose because it speaks to me powerfully under a wide variety of conditions. It's the theme from *The Cider House Rules* soundtrack, and, just like the story, it conveys complex emotions all at the same time: warmth *and* heaviness, sweet nostalgia *and* bitter poignancy.

Maybe I resonate with this song for the same reason I resonate with Unitarian Universalism—neither triumphalist (as religion can too often be) nor depressing (as religion can too often be), and, at our best, not a bland amalgam, but capable simultaneously of holding the full range of our experiences of life: Fury and contentment, anxiety and sadness and whimsy and pride and desire and discipline and boredom and defensiveness, and generosity.

In the second century BCE a playwright named Terence (just that one name) (heralded by Maya Angelou as the first poet of the African diaspora) ... Terence wrote: "Nothing human is alien to me." This is the spirit of Unitarian Universalism. And though that's a bit too much to pack into one song, allow it, now, to open the door to whatever calls you this morning.

Prelude "Main Titles" from *The Cider House Rules*

Singing Together *Mother earth, Beloved Garden #1067*

Chalice

Bringing fire to this chalice reunites us. Whether virtually, or in person, this symbol reminds us of *the strong foundation* of our principles, *the open, overflowing bowl* of community, and the *dancing creative spark* of transcendence.

Covenant

Love is the spirit of this fellowship, and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

Eracism

Barbara Gilday

Introduction

The theme for today's service came to me around the time of the Republican and Democratic conventions. The excitement and the terror, and the longing for less polarization. I was thinking about the Unitarian Universalist principles that draw us together and how tens—maybe hundreds—of millions of Americans, Democrats and Republicans alike speak in affirmation of many of the same values that our principles represent: such as peace, liberty, and justice for all. Of course, there are dramatic differences among us about what these words mean.

I was inspired last Sunday when several members of our congregation shared their personal "Credos." I've been thinking about how our individual experiences—and our interpretations of these experiences—shape how we *understand ourselves* and *how we live our lives*. Our day to day choices, and our priorities. So, it can be valuable from time to time to reflect upon the sources and meanings of our individual principles and attempt to put them in our own words.

Meditation

Let's begin with a moment to clear our minds.... Get into a position where you can breathe easily and deeply.

The word credo, at its root, is not a noun, not a list, it is a verb that can be translated "I trust" or "I give my heart." What is it that you give your heart to?

And why is that?

Is what you give your heart to determined by your past experiences? Your experiences with the world, with God, with people? Is what you give your heart to based on what has happened, or is it aspirational, taking shape from your vision of what this world could be? Taking shape from your vision of *who you* desire to be, in time, within this larger web?

To what do you give your hands?

Are there parallels in your answers to these two questions? To what do you give your heart? To what do you give your hands? Are there discrepancies?

It's not time now to feel guilty for our failures, neither is it time to feel smug. Let's take this moment not to judge but simply to observe. To what do you give your heart? To what do you give your hands? What do you see when you set your observations side by side?

Quiet...Bell

What is Real?

I'd like to speak about four types of principles today: What is real? How do I know? and What is Good? "What is Good" I'll break down into Social Ethics and Personal Ethics. Take all of this in, over the next half hour, and you'll be set for life. Or maybe not.

What is the nature of reality? I'm grateful that Unitarian Universalism does not attempt to answer this question. Or, at least, we do not attempt to come up with a uniform answer for all of us to set beside our shared *ethical* principles. It would not be fruitful to do so. From the beginnings of our movement there was among us a determination to be inclusive—probably derived from our Christian roots and the emphasis that Jesus placed on inclusivity. Over time we also came to appreciate the value of diverse theological and cultural perspectives, and we found it impractical, counterproductive, hypocritical, and disheartening to divide ourselves against one another simply because of beliefs about the nature of G/god, and the nature of reality. We do not need uniform answers to such questions in order to have transcendent spiritual experiences, separately or together. We can meditate together, sing together, grieve together, and live lives of reverence without needing to agree on what God is or *if* God is.

Still, I think it can be relevant to us as individuals to reflect from time to time on our personal understanding of reality. I'm not going to say that our understanding of reality is the *foundation* of our ethical principles, but it certainly contributes to our understanding of the purpose of our lives. Because we're part of the interdependent web of all existence. And so everything we do is in hope-for—and in response-to—this interdependent web of all existence.

Now I've pretty much run out of time to tell you everything I believe about the interdependent web of all existence. Except this: "A body at rest will remain at rest, and a body in motion will remain in motion unless acted upon by an external force." That one principle of physical reality accounts for a great deal of my personal philosophy.

Rather than thinking of God as perfect, unchanging, and timeless, I understand the universe to be a free floating, constantly evolving, collection of physical and biological forces acting upon one another. Thus: constancy, and change. At some point these complex interactions formed matter into consciousness, and then free will came into existence as its own force of nature. From this evolved experience and memory and hope and creativity and our recognition of ourselves and one another. And, from this, culture accumulates and evolves as well.

All too briefly I'll mention that the powers of entropy and randomness also belong in this equation, as I believe that there are multiple factors that contribute to biological and cultural variation. But I'll conclude this section with why I think this matters ... probably not to you, but to me. (I'm not sharing this to suggest that any of this is correct, but rather to encourage you to explore for yourself.) Why it matters to me is that it shapes *my spiritual response* to my reality.

Inertia, or continuity, or equilibrium (these are all expressions of the original principle I mentioned: bodies at rest will remain at rest and bodies in motion will remain in motion unless acted upon by another force). Inertia/continuity ... and by "equilibrium" I mean that even when things shift there is a tendency for them to shift back ... these universal tendencies are real and

their power stretches beyond what I can even comprehend. The spiritual response to this that I aspire-to is to seek serenity so that I may accept the things that I cannot change. And to find that serenity, at least from time to time, in my recognition that I cannot—and therefore *do not have to*—put an end to global suffering and ignorance. And a I seek to accept the reality that *even when I am able to make something better*, it's often going to revert back to the way it was.

To put this in political terms, I quote Frederick Douglass: “Power concedes nothing without demand.” Which means, then, that *I am* called to change the things I can.

And one final spiritual response to this reality: it calls me to step back from the abstract theorizing ... to simply bow in reverence to that which is beyond comprehension.

This is a John Lennon song covered by Elliott Smith:

Video *Because*

How do I Know?

How do I know? By what authority do I say that this, or that, is true?

You might not be surprised, considering what I've said so far today, that I am a big fan of the scientific method. Which is subject to error, *and*, in practice, frequently corrupted by self-interest, *and* very much limited in scope—such that scientific theory will often shift suddenly when sufficient anomalous data accumulate to undermine generally accepted truths.

The scientific method also has nothing to say about is and isn't ethical. Still, I believe that my response to the question, “How do I know what is true?” profoundly affects my view of “What is Real”, and my passion for “What is Good.”

So by what authority do I say that this, or that, is true? One of the most significant influences that led Unitarianism and Universalism to evolve out of the Christian tradition was the question of authority. In the 16th century, Protestantism emerged in what became known as the Reformation: a rebellion against the Catholic Church—which claimed to be the *sole* authority in defining and governing Christianity. To sum up the next 200 years in two sentences, the Protestants said: “Hey Pope, your institution is not God, it's run by men, so you can't be the boss of us. We're turning to the true authority, the Word of God, the Bible.” “And besides,” they might add, “those men you got running the show? It's not just that they are limited by virtue of being human, it's that these particular men are corrupt, hypocritical, and serving their own self-interests. Christianity can be a marvellous source for good, so we're going to reform and preserve it and, while remembering that the Bible is still in charge, and with damnation, and burning at the stake in reserve, we're going to find some *better* men to translate and interpret the Bible, so we can tell the riffraff God's *honest* Truth.”

We have much to be grateful for that Martin Luther and so many others spoke truth to power in this way and genuinely made Christianity less authoritarian. But in subsequent centuries scholars started translating the hell out of the Bible—to the point where Unitarians and Universalists and

other religious liberals began to recognize that the Bible wasn't God either, but a book of wisdom and wonder and history and horror assembled by fallible men.

To sum up, then, the next 300 years in a single sentence, the movement that eventually became known as the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations said, "There's no use trying to come up with a theological creed, but we can agree that there *are* multiple sources of authority that guide us; let's do some brainstorming and then vote on it."

So today we say that "The living tradition we share draws from many sources," including: personal direct experiences of transcending mystery; the words and deeds of wise and courageous women and men; spiritual insights from religious traditions around the world; Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; and the guidance of reason and science, which warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

So, science, yes, but not by itself. And none of these other sources of inspiration is the ultimate authority either. So how does that work? Doesn't *something* have to be the ultimate authority? The Buddha said, "hold to the truth *within yourself* as the only light." And that's printed in our gray hymnal *twice*, both in the form of a song and a responsive reading. So is *that* authoritative? Everyone *is their own expert* in all things ... so we can cry "fake news" whenever someone with experience and training says something that offends us?

It's become a popular sentiment: go with your gut; follow your heart; trust your intuition; if it feels good do it. But I don't think the Buddha intended to be so simplistic. He certainly didn't teach that a person could have full knowledge about anything. Certainty, he'd say, is an illusion, and often a dangerous illusion. So to be a lamp unto ourselves, I think, means to cultivate self-awareness. Because by looking within ourselves we're going to find at least some hints about how the lenses of our perception influence what we think we know.

So become a good friend to Doubt. The Christian mystics say this too: the closest you'll ever get to knowing God is through the process of asking, "is God [this]?" and then answering: NO. Is God [that]? NO. Is he a he? NO. And keep going like that forever.

The scientific process does not say "no" to everything. But it is very cautious about saying "yes." It teaches us that we must be skeptical when what we discover turns out to be exactly what *we wanted* to discover ... and what appears to be true just happens to serve our personal interests.

I wanted to share a song with you between each section today, but I couldn't think of any songs that celebrate the scientific method. On the contrary, it seems like most songs that mention knowing are about being passionate and decisive rather than reasonable, cautious, and humble.

One exception is Whitney Houston's *How will I Know?* in which the chorus responds: "*Don't trust your feelings ... Love can be deceiving.*" So I wove that one into a little medley that celebrates doubt. Let's call it the "Know? No" compilation. It concludes with a short scene from Hamilton (and here we'll be transitioning into the next section of today's sermon: ethics). It's a

scene in which he KNOWS that he should say NO to his passion. But he's not paying attention to his head, *nor* to his heart, but to another bit of anatomy with a mind of its own.

Video Know-No Compilation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7tppv1jDpo>

Social ethics

When I was a kid I heard quite a bit about sin. I never had the nerve to ask, "Well, who says?" because I knew that then I would become subject to the authority of a piece of oak baseboard about 2 feet long and 3 inches wide. "The stick" could be a persuasive authority. But it was confusing because there were other authorities with other sticks. For instance, regarding sin, in addition to the ten commandments, there were other things that would give us black marks on our souls. But who got to decide? I went to a Catholic school and learned that the Church has still more rules of its own. Yet there were gobs of rules stated unequivocally in the Old Testament that we didn't follow. Like sacrificing bulls and how to treat our slaves. And then there were the laws enforced by police and by the courts. But there were things that were illegal that weren't sinful, and things that were sinful that weren't illegal. Plus there were self-contradictory rules that parents seemed to come up with out of nowhere.

On top of that we were told to pay attention to our conscience, which actually felt like a pretty good guide. Except, in the realm of sex, what my conscience told me was very different from all of these other so-called authorities.

Social ethics is about what is good not just in terms of our own behavior, but in what is good for society as a whole, and how we might get there. Here, as with the questions of, "What is Real?" And "How do I know what is True?" I could go off in too many directions, and our time is short. So in regard to social ethics, I'll mention just one question that I struggle with mightily: why don't we see more progress? Why is it that individuals act with courage, and cultures come up with some pretty successful norms, and there are alternative economic and legal systems that are shown to expand peace, liberty, and justice for all ... but progress is intermittent, and every generation seems to have to do it all over again. Actually, I was ok with that 40 years ago when I thought that *my generation* was going to take care of things once and for all. What I didn't realize then was that a generation only lasts a couple of decades, and that if I was fortunate enough to live so long, I would have to live through cycles of social advance and retreat, again and again and again.

I think this ties back to what I understand about the nature of reality: things tend to stay as they are, and when they get knocked off course, the law of equilibrium tends to bring them back to how they were. Biologically, I believe this is a function of our multipart brain, with different parts triggered by different circumstances. We wouldn't last long as individuals or society if we didn't retain that ancient remnant of what you might call our reptilian brain. Fear, defensiveness, reactivity. These things have served our ancestors well for billions of years. And these tendencies toward fight, flight, or freeze are very useful under many circumstances still today. But these tendencies can also draw us away from the parts of our brain that developed later, the parts that provide us with emotional connection, and reason, and the capacity to consider what is the best course of action given the circumstances. All four of these aspects of our biological reality are

essential and inescapable. And just as our consciousness adapts to circumstances by cycling through different parts of our brain, our social history will progress and retreat as well.

A healthy spiritual response to this reality, I believe, is to be, while I am here ... to be the change I wish to see in the world. Know my limits, but use my power. The following song resonates with me because it reminds me that my identity, and my power, are not limited by what appears to be my biological independence.

This recording of hymn #317 was made by Glen Thomas Rideout, Director of Worship & Music at First UU Congregation in Ann Arbor, Michigan. *We are not our Own.*

Individual Ethics

I believe I am called to humility, to accept what I cannot change, and to find the courage to change the things I can. I say this again in regard to personal ethics because, although I know I am a part of the interdependent web of all creation, and I know that I can be strengthened by community, there is still a *me* for whom I am responsible. The appropriate spiritual response to this reality, I believe, is to not give up: to act with love even when history tells me that I can't win. That good intentions are essential, but they are not sufficient. And that just as definitive as the matrix of behavior shaped by our brains, there is an equally powerful matrix of spirit: mindfulness that leads to us gratitude ... which leads us to joy ... which leads us to generosity ... which leads us to hope.

And now, reminded again of the limits of time—still another dimension of reality we have to adapt to—I'm going to jump ahead to our opportunity to support the work of this congregation. During the following song I encourage you to take a moment to write a check, go to buf.org, or use the Give+ app to donate on your phone. *Plant more than you Harvest*: this song is written and performed by Jim Scott, who plays around the country including several times at BUF.

Closing Words

There is a time in life for everything under the heavens. But it is not time *now* to feel guilty; nor is a time to feel smug. Please take some time later today, and later this week, not to judge, but simply to observe: To what do you give your heart? To what do you give your hands?

Circle Round

Produced by Foothills Unitarian Church in Ft Collins, CO

Postlude

Closer to Fine, by Indigo Girls

Coffee Hour