

Self Vs. Others: What Reminds UU's of Our Moral Compass

Message by Doug Cartwright, June 30, 2019

Today begins our summer series of messages relating to what guides our moral compass as Unitarian Universalists. We, as you know, embrace no dogma, require no recitation of beliefs, no adherence to a rigid set of rules that ensure our entrance to an after-life where we can be assured of comfort and the rewards of a life lived faithfully.

Indeed our beliefs are fluid and not faith-oriented, a fact that has given rise to many of the jokes used at our expense, most notably by Lake Woebegone host Garrison Keillor. But our beliefs are grounded in our confidence in our moral compass of standing on the side of love, defending it with justice, compassion, and reaffirming its transformational power.

We subscribe to those prophets and thinkers who have attempted to guide us throughout the years, but the basis of what guides us is also vibrantly alive in our hearts and shouldn't need the reminders of our prophets or role-models. We are inherently human; we fight with the same demons as everyone else: selfishness, greed, cruelty, alienation, hatred; but we are reminded everyday of what is essentially the right thing to do.

How?

Well, there are reminders everywhere in inspirational songs, some of which we have heard or will hear today in the service, with poems, writings, letters, speeches, factual stories, and anecdotes that inspire us. Unfortunately, actions and deeds abound all around us to appall us in their **lack** of inspiration and sensitivity. In fact, our current administration is constantly stretching the limits of what is unacceptable morally, setting new boundaries for unethical behavior.

But let's concentrate on the positive. For a moment, think to yourself whom you admire or even revere for his or her adherence to walking the walk or talking the talk. There's a famous story about Henry David Thoreau spending a night in jail in protest over being required to pay taxes in support of a morally corrupt government. When his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, came to bail him out, Emerson asked him what he was doing IN there. Thoreau's response was "What are YOU doing OUT there?" Being morally true to your beliefs is not always comfortable or convenient.

A favorite lesson of American presidential history was one that I learned from a college assignment to rank every president from Washington to Kennedy (Obviously, there were fewer to rank then) as rating a failing, poor, average, near great, or great status and add a statement of what earned our rating. My rating of Chester Arthur was average, and most of the class ranked him

the same or even in the poor category. The professor also ranked the presidents and compared notes with our own. He ranked Arthur as near great. He explained that when President Garfield was assassinated, his vice president took office. Chester Arthur had been selected as a ticket balancer whose prior service as a successful, but unrecognized lawyer in New York promised to bring a lot of votes from that state. Mr. Arthur also had been a tool of the Stalwarts, the corrupt political machine headed by Roscoe Conkling, who ran everything in New York, including the graft-lucrative New York Port Authority, which Arthur had run during the Grant administration. Looking forward to controlling the new president, Conkling licked his chops at the prospects. Arthur, using his prior knowledge of how the corruption operated, proceeded to defy expectations, and truly “Drained the Swamp,” establishing merit-based appointments of officials and eliminating the spoils system. Arthur also was

responsible (during his New York service) for fighting for and passing a law in New York which guaranteed that slaves being transported through New York back to slavery, were automatically declared free when discovered. Arthur also won several civil rights cases in New York, one of which was a successful defense of a young black woman who was denied a seat on a New York street car, notably eighty years before the name of Rosa Parks swept into the public's attention. Of course, such moral clarity couldn't go unpunished; Arthur, a four-year effective president, lost his party's nomination for re-election; and his party lost the White House in the national election which followed.

Another example of moral fortitude was Senator Edmund Ross's refusal to kow-tow to his party's insistence on securing his vote to impeach Andrew Johnson, who angered party leaders after he defied them by refusing their demands to retain a Secre-

tary of War whom Abraham Lincoln had named to the post and was resisting Johnson's authority. Ross, realizing this was a party fight, not a malfeasance of duty on Johnson's part, faced death threats, and doomed his political future when he cast his vote to acquit, an episode chronicled in John F. Kennedy's "Profiles in Courage." Unfortunately such examples of moral fortitude are increasingly rare in this political climate. I doubt that future historians are taking notes for their own stories of "Profiles in Courage" from the Trump era.

One of the people whom I have always admired is Eleanor Roosevelt. The stories of episodes in her life in which she defied the attitude to get along by going along are legendary.

When in 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow Marian Anderson to sing at Constitution Hall (a venue for which they controlled the scheduling and use), Eleanor resigned her membership and arranged for Ms. Anderson to

sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, giving a chance for an outdoor concert heard by over 75,000. Eleanor also defied her husband in his decision to intern Japanese Americans, but she also was FDR's closest advisor and influenced many of his decisions to do the right thing for the country. She in many ways was FDR's de facto moral compass. And when she left Washington after the death of her husband, she was named to be a delegate to the newly formed United Nations and took a vital role in composing its formation and laying the ground rules for the treatment of all peoples from all nations with a common respect for human dignity. What had been seen by the other delegates as an honorary appointment was not apparent to Eleanor who rolled up her sleeves and got to work writing the charter for the new United Nations.

Of course other examples abound of famous men and women, poets, writers, politicians, diplomats, military persons - peo-

ple of many races and sexual identifications - and any number of you could provide accounts of moral fortitude expressed by them. I think of the congregation of the black church in Charleston, South Carolina, who recently lost nine of its members of a Wednesday Bible Study group to fanatical white supremacist, Dylan Roof, who, in response to an invitation to join the group in prayer, started shooting, not stopping until he killed the pastor and eight of his flock. Or the Amish school shooting in Pennsylvania in 2006, in which a shooter lined up children and shot them. Both of these groups recognized the sickness of their assailant, and both offered the killers forgiveness and understanding, eschewing the natural responses of hatred and a thirst for vengeance. These are not famous people, but people who are trying to live a moral existence based on the tenets of love and a tenacious adherence to resisting evil by meeting it with justice, compassion, and love.

No doubt, by now you've thought of someone you admire or quietly celebrate for his or her convictions to live by a moral compass. Perhaps it is Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mother Teresa, Albert Schweitzer, or perhaps a relative or friend who embodies or has embodied a life well-lived.

By all accounts, it is easier to think of people who DON'T jump instantly to mind, because their lives are centered around self, the "classic narcissist" of a current TV commercial. Let's not go there. Instead let us celebrate the morally strong and celebrate likewise the single-mindedness it takes to resist finger pointing and fault finding. Let us exalt the words and deeds of our personal heroes who live by the Unitarian Universalist credo of standing on the side of love.

With this I close. There is a group at Shell Point who discuss issues that are currently in the news. It's called "Inquiring Minds," and Diane and I have occasionally attended when our schedules allow. The group last month discussed David Brooks' new book, "The Second Mountain," in which the author hypothesizes that people begin their lives ready to climb two mountains, the first is a mountain marked by self-interest, centering on personal goals relating to job success, becoming financially secure, marrying and starting a family, possessing nice things, etc. Then, seeking something more satisfying, the personal is replaced by a quest to climb the mountain of a moral life, replacing an emphasis on self with an emphasis on others, an emphasis that brings with it moral satisfaction on a deeper level.

We were a bit put off by the simplicity of his premise. The assumption is that we start off selfish, but finding that path a bit unfulfilling; we seek something more deeply satisfying.

Why not seek fulfillment by pursuing a job path that is morally uplifting from the start? We know as teachers, we didn't start a career in education with a goal of getting rich. In fact, teachers, firefighters, clergy, policemen, nurses, social workers, and any number of well-educated but underpaid professionals know that their chosen professions will be filled with economic sacrifices. But the assumption that everyone goes through life awaiting an Aqua-Velva moment in which there's the sudden realization that there's more to life than just getting through it intact, seems to us demeaning. Perhaps the Unitarian Universalist in us is saying, "Forget about the First Mountain. Start out by conquering the second, and maybe you'll find that they are one and the same."

May it be so.