

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Moral Compasses for Liberal Travelers

The Reverend Victoria Safford

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
328 MAPLE STREET MAHTOMEDI, MINNESOTA 55115
651/ 426-2369 safford@whitebearunitarian.org

Reading

The Man of Tao by Chuang Tzu *from 275 BCE in China*
translated by Thomas Merton; adapted)

The man in whom Tao
 acts without impediment
 Harms no other being
 by his actions
 Yet he does not know himself
 to be “kind,” to be “gentle.”

The woman in whom Tao
 acts without impediment
 does not bother with her own interests
 and does not despise others who do.
 She does not struggle to make money
 and does not make a virtue of poverty.

The man of Tao goes his way
 without relying on others
 and does not pride himself
 on walking alone.
 While he does not follow the crowd
 he won't complain of those who do.

Rank and reward make no appeal to her.
 Disgrace and shame do not deter her.
 She is not always looking
 for “right” and “wrong,”
 not always deciding “Yes” or “No.”

The ancients said therefore:
The man of Tao
Remains unknown
Perfect virtue produces nothing
‘No-self’
Is ‘True-self.’
And the greatest man
Is Nobody.”

Moral Compasses for Liberal Travelers

A few weeks ago Ross, Hope and I traveled to a funeral for a beloved family member, one of several I've attended lately or taken part in for men of a certain age, fathers and grandfathers in their mid- to late-80's. These were men who were mostly surprised, I think, late in life, to find themselves and their peers labeled "the greatest generation." This isn't what they called themselves. At these celebrations of their lives, I've been hearing stories about modest men, humble men – Bob, Arnold, Norm, and others some of you have lost this summer, and women also, mothers and grandmothers: ordinary, upright, decent people, anonymous beyond a certain circle, people whose lives, compared to our complicated crazy lives, look so simple in the grainy photo albums, in their World War II uniforms, their baseball caps, their floured aprons, but maybe things weren't so simple at the time. They lived, as human beings always do, in complicated history. At the funeral for Ross' Uncle Bob, we heard stories about a dashing young Navy hero in the South Pacific (things he himself had never shared out loud) - but mostly we heard and told ordinary stories about a regular guy, a pretty good guy, good husband, good father, who showed his love by showing up. He showed up to work as a foreman (at two jobs, often, when times were tough), he showed up to all his kids' ball games, showed up at the police station when the kids grew big and got in trouble, showed up at the neighbors' house when they needed help, showed up to vote at every small and large election, showed up at other people's funerals to pay his own humble and sincere respects. Small things. He was an honest man, fair, fair-minded, generous. At the service I saw his children in their middle age, and their children, busy and young, who in turn were holding school-age children in their laps – Bob's great-grandchildren. That scene makes you wonder, "What is the golden thread through all these generations binding us together? What story are we telling here for all of us to hold and live by, what myth are we living out (in the best sense of that word)? What are these little kids learning here about what it means to be a person, a good person?" His body, with the folded flag and flowers, was over in the casket (intriguing to the children), but his living legacy, his moral legacy, was in us, and among us in the room, and therefore still has agency and potency in the wider world, still lives. Such men are not Mahatma Gandhi, or Jesus Christ, or Martin Luther King, or Father Teresa. Bob was not religious, but he was virtuous - just a good guy.

From the Taoist tradition in China, five hundred years before Jesus, and written down some centuries later:

*The man in whom Tao
acts without impediment*

[Tao, which is balance, which is graceful equanimity, which is the golden mean, which is wisdom...]

*The man in whom Tao
acts without impediment
Harms no other being
by his actions
Yet he does not know himself*

to be “kind,” to be “gentle.”

*The woman in whom Tao
acts without impediment
does not bother with her own interests
and does not despise others who do.
She does not struggle to make money
and does not make a virtue of poverty.*

*The man of Tao...
does not follow the crowd
yet he won't complain of those who do.*

*Rank and reward make no appeal to her.
Disgrace and shame do not deter her.
She is not always looking
for “right” and “wrong,”
not always deciding “Yes” or “No.”*

Not heroic, not saintly, not overly anxious about absolute right and ironclad wrong, not at all judgmental, nor interested in the judgments of others nor their praise – the text describes a simple, humble person who is good for the sake of being good, who is what one writer called therefore “good for nothing,” seeking no reward in heaven or on earth, and who has no fear of hell; a person who wears virtue with nonchalant ease, like their most comfortable clothes, worn soft and familiar with constant use. I know people like that; many of them are sitting in this room, looking pretty normal, but sometimes when I’m speaking with you, or thinking afterwards about a conversation or an interaction I’ve witnessed in a committee or at dinner, or when I’ve seen you with your children, or with other people’s children, I feel, truly, as if I am in the presence of greatness, a student among mentors, people who are truly *good for nothing*, who sound no trumpets, who do not know themselves to be unusually kind or gentle or brave, and yet who are, who struggle daily with moral dilemmas and ethical issues. (*Which way should I go, when two roads diverge in a yellow wood? How much should I care, how much can I afford to care, without giving my own life away? How much can I afford not to care, without giving my own soul away? Where should I stand? When to forgive? How can I find sufficient courage, courage to act and courage to ask for help? How can I ever bounce back, change course, when my choosing maybe has been wrong?*) How do you get like that, concerned with such questions, and how do you *stay* like that, centered in a certain ethical intention, a way of life, a way of being, particularly if the moral teaching of your childhood, or the religious context that it came from, may no longer be the context that you claim? How do you teach it to your children, give them a moral compass, and where did you get yours?

Susan Neiman, a philosopher, brought out a book last year called *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists*. She talks about the difference between virtues like obedience and virtues like compassion, the difference between living a life on guard against committing sins and bad deeds, versus a life ever seeking to do good deeds, the difference between an emphasis on individual rectitude and an emphasis on social welfare, or the welfare of the planet. She

observes that in our time, recent time, words like *virtue* and *conscience* and *honor*, and their opposites, like *vice* and *sin*, *negligence*, have fallen out of style, except among social conservatives and rabid voices on the religious right. “Western secular culture,” she says, “has no clear place for moral language [anymore], and its use makes many profoundly uncomfortable.” I’d say this is true for liberal religious culture also, and she says that this should worry us, because even without a current common language, we are, or we hope to be, or we at least have the potential to be, moral beings, “with moral needs that are not necessarily based in religion or any form of divine command: the need to express reverence and to express outrage, the need to reject euphemism and cant and call things by their proper names, the need to see our own lives as stories with meaning, a crucial source of dignity; the need, when righteous people suffer and wicked people flourish, to ask why.” Another writer, Martha Fay, wrote a beautiful book some years ago called *Do Children Need Religion?* (She wrote it for parents and others raising new generations of ethical agents, on purpose.) She wrote, “It is perhaps the most commonly expressed wish of parents – rivaled only by the wish that they be happy in life – that their children be good.” But what do we mean, she wondered?

When we say “good,” do we mean compliance or deep conviction, niceness or backbone? Do we mean manners or decency, respectability or human regard, traditional piety or a tradition of tolerance? Do we mean teenagers who will hold their sexual impulses in check or teenagers who will take care not to become pregnant? We live in a society that is said to have “lost its moral bearings,” but in fact it is a society that rests lopsidedly on a number of rival moral bedrocks, a society in which well-meaning people fervently disagree about what is moral, what is virtuous... What any of us means by good is necessarily a mixture of abstract ethical ideals (the golden rule in its simplest form), of economic and class-influenced values, of cultural attitudes and religious beliefs, whether intact or attenuated and vestigial. “Moral relativism” is not some option chosen on achieving one’s majority – it is the observable state of things.

How could it be otherwise, in a pluralist society?

From time to time we offer a class here for adults called “Building Your Own Theology.” One of the assignments in it is to write your own commandments, not a categorical imperative that must apply to everybody everywhere always, but your own rules of your own road. You can look backward over years of decisions and choices you’ve made and deduce from those what things really matter to you, what is unacceptable to you, what is required, what you regret. You may discern there what you believe and believe in. You can look forward, and make a list of aspirations that may or may not reflect what’s been happening so far. We work from the original Ten, trying to cast them in new light. “Thou shalt make no graven images,” we agree, is about worshipping only those things which are worthy, so maybe not money, maybe not prestige, maybe not clocks, careers and calendars. “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy,” we decided, is about balance, about rest, and about noticing, regularly, and awe. It’s about taking time, every week, every day, to “choose something like a star,” in the words of the poet, sung by the choir, something to “stay your mind on,” mindfully. Those are beautiful lines from Robert Frost:

*It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed*

*To carry praise or blame too far,
We may chose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.*

The Sabbath is not about coming to church (though there's nothing wrong with that); it's about remembering what you love, and within what larger love you're held. You can write ten commandments, or eleven, or two. You can be mindful of the way that Moses paid attention in his list, both to our accountability to God and the accounts we keep with one another, or you can ignore all that. One year the class came up with a combined total of 38, including these:

*Do no harm.
Appreciate and be thankful.
Cherish all forms of life, including your own.
Seek always the greatest good, recognizing that it may not be your own.
Honor your father and mother, and your children.
Hurt not the earth.
Be compassionate.
Be kind.
Be honest.
Practice gratitude.
Practice forgiveness.
Never sacrifice yourself or your resources needlessly.
Do not kill. (Adultery is not such a good idea either.)*

One of my favorites was "Stand where we can see you," which I think meant, "Live a public life, an open life, so that you can be known and loved, challenged and held. Stand where we can see you, so that you won't be alone, won't imagine that you don't need others, won't forget that they need you. Stand where we can see you."

My other favorite:

Bah, bah, bah, bah. Someone had brought their baby to the sessions one year, and this was her contribution to our work. She always said the same thing. Someone else said, "I don't mean to speak for baby Astrid, but I think what she may be trying to say is *Be joyful. Bring laughter.*
Notice wild beauty. Give thanks.

What made this list, and other lists in other years, deep and not shallow, demanding and not simple, sacred and not something else, not merely platitudes for the refrigerator door, were the sources of these hand-hewn Unitarian commandments. *Where did you get these? From what Sinai did you bring them down?* Some people said that they did base them on the scriptural commandments, or on the teaching of Jesus, things learned long ago in Sunday School, and carried forward when much else fell away. Some said they came from their parents, their grandparents, directly in words or by watching as children, overhearing, witnessing how the grownups spoke with each other, full of love or full of meanness, how they spent their time and money and attention, whether they seemed to live fearfully or bravely. Some said that during a difficult time in their lives, or after a painful decision, they'd sat quietly, deliberately, in prayer or meditation, sometimes with another person, usually alone, and over time the answer came, the

meaning came, the lesson, and over more time it became a rule, though it hadn't been before. *From now on, I will be a person who speaks kindly of others or does not speak at all, who does not gossip, does not "bear false witness," who speaks the truth in love.* The points of the moral compass were not God-given from the get-go, but carefully calibrated by experience. Some said their commandments came from reason, from principles like "the greater good," or pragmatism, or holding something like "freedom" as the greatest human value. Almost everyone spoke about compassion, but not theoretical, based on kindness or unkindness they had known or seen. Often people said, "I don't know where this comes from; it just feels right to me," which is how many philosophers and ethicists now and some psychologists believe most people make their choices: we do what feels right (not what feels good, but right) in the moment, and then go back and tell the story, and make meaning out of that, and make corrections maybe.

Paul Woodruff, a philosopher, writes about virtue, and "virtue ethics." He says,

...feelings affect our lives more deeply than beliefs do. You may learn rules intellectually, and therefore you may learn or forget them very quickly. But virtues are habits of feeling and these are much harder to learn or to forget. Moral rules and laws [from the outside] may set standards for doing right, but there is nothing about a rule that makes you feel like following it. In fact, there is something about many rules that makes most people feel like breaking them. A good person is one who feels like doing right. Virtues grow in us through being used, and they are used mainly by people living or working together. [They are much more about community than about formal religion.]

His book is called *Reverence*, which he defines as "the well-developed capacity to have feelings of awe, respect and shame when these are the right feelings to have." This is what lay underneath the brainstorm of commandments. Woodruff says reverence is "a deep understanding of human limitations, the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control – God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all." Respecting everything that's worthy of respect.

Reverence, which leads to respect, which leads to right (right action, right choosing, right relationship) grows in community. The beauty of the commandment exercise was that it was a two-part invention: the participants scaled their own personal mountaintops but they had to bring the stone tablets back down to our little circle, and we held them, debated them, questioned them, refined them, and ultimately owned them all together. This is the work of families and nations; you can't be a person, or a moral person by yourself. You have to stand where we can see you. It's the point of congregations, this calibration of the compass in community.

We walk together with the dead and with the living, so great a cloud of witnesses and teachers. It's not the hand of god that stays our hand when we would do the wrong thing, and then suddenly think twice – it's all their faces, the ones we know so well. It's not the wrath of God that terrifies us into doing something right, something good, something kind and brave – it's the face of God on the faces of those we love, and faces of those we don't even know, human faces which we will never see.

Our moral compasses do not come to us in a package, ready made with clear instructions, eternal and immutable. An aptitude is set in us because we're human beings, an ethical aptitude, but the instrument itself arrives in pieces, over many years, through many stories many heroes and heroines, very great and very small.

People often ask, once you tell them you're a Unitarian Universalist, "How do you people tell right from wrong? What calls you to do good, beyond the requirements of basic decency? What keeps you from greed and sloth and licentiousness and all the other attractive sins?" (Usually this question is asked by your seatmate on an airplane, or in an elevator or a waiting room, and the place goes absolutely silent. The answer is not simple, but that doesn't mean you haven't got one. You've been that question your whole life.

QUESTION

What is one rule you try to live by, one thing you hope they're teaching right now in those religious education classes?

Bedtime Prayer for Unitarian Children

The sun has gone down and the friendly dark has come.

It is time to sleep.

Let me think over all I have done:

good deeds to do again, bad deeds to forego and forgive.

Now I shall sleep and grow while I sleep

And tomorrow shall be my new day.

Notes:

- *The phrase "good for nothing" comes from the Rev. Richard Gilbert.*
- *Choral pieces mentioned here: "The Road Not Taken" and "Choose Something Like A Star," two settings of poems by Robert Frost composed by Randall Thompson.*