

“Growing a Soul”

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Reading:

From “With Purpose and Principle”

The essay on our Fifth principle: *We affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.*

By Earl K. Holt III

What is unique and precious to Unitarian Universalism is that we affirm no external authority in our religious lives, not of church or creed or Bible, but hold as authoritative only the internal voice of conscience that speaks in each and every human soul.

And as we grow in knowledge and experience, we come to new and different religious understandings. Our religious lives are works in progress. This is obviously true individually, but it is also true of our religious tradition as a whole.

So we are organized both as a church and as an association, as a democracy, because a democracy too is a work in progress. It changes according to the changes desired and expressed by its constituency. Conscience and democracy work together, though sometimes uncertainly, and always imperfectly.

...It is the elevation of individual conscience to the primary category of religious authority that has been the uniquely distinguishing characteristic of liberal religious theology from Channing’s time to our own.

The purpose of life from this perspective is the opportunity it presents to grow a soul, to gradually unfold the moral and religious forces within us, employing all the resources at our disposal. We believe that the individual conscience is the only legitimate source of religious authority and that the purpose of the church is to grow and nurture individual conscience. There are no limits to the growth of this moral and religious force within us, if we will nourish it faithfully.

Sermon

I recently read two novels about Afghanistan under the Taliban: “The Kite Runner” and “The Swallows of Kabul”. There was one particular passage that struck me in “The Swallows of Kabul”. It was a scene where a mullah is preaching to a crowd of men. His message in this section was about America. It went like this:

“The west has perished; it no longer exists. It proposed a model to fools, and that model has failed. What is that model? Exactly what kind of emancipation does it offer? What does it consider modern? The amoral societies it has set up, where profit takes precedence over all else? Where scruples, piety, and charity count for nothing? Where values are exclusively financial? Where the rich become tyrants and the wage earners slaves? Where business takes the place of the family, isolates the individual, subjugates him, then dismisses him without further ado?”

What struck me about this passage was that I agreed with much of it. I thought it spoke some truths about our society. But as always context is everything. Even for truth. Let me give you some here.

The main character in this chapter is not the mullah. It is a man who has been dragged in off the street, as has most of the congregation, by the Taliban to hear the mullah. No choice about whether to go in. His wife was forced to remain outside in her blue burkah with the net over her eyes, waiting for hours in the heat. The husband had caught the attention of the Taliban and been forced inside because he and his wife had been laughing together on the street. They were both beaten for laughing. But if it hadn't been that it would have been something else, says another character in the book. They needed no real excuse to exercise their power.

The mullah, though he may have some truth, was also saying things like this: “Henceforth there is no doubt. The Word of righteousness resounds in the four corners of the earth. The Muslim peoples are gathering their forces, and gathering their most deeply held convictions. Soon there will be but one language on earth, but one law, one sole command.”

Novels, so much better than most nonfiction take us right into the complexity and difficulty of being a human. If it is a good novel, no one is merely one or two dimensional. The mullah is not depicted as being at all conflicted, and perhaps he is not. Most of the other characters, and the

country as a whole, are conflicted. Yet their fears, and their passions, are swept up in the hypnotic passionate quality of his voice which manipulates the truth and sweeps people off their feet and out of their senses.

It seemed it wasn't so much the message itself, though he knew how to target that, but his ability to unite a crowd, make them take leave of their senses. And people who are hungry and desperate probably need that release more than most of us.

And I have to ask, do leaders like that have a conscience?

Conscience is defined as *a knowledge or feeling of right and wrong. Conscience is a power, or a faculty of the person that decides whether an action is right or wrong, with a compulsion to do right.*

...compulsion toward the right.

It seems some people in this world, are quite sure they are right. This fictitious mullah is certainly compulsive about advocating what he thinks is right. So is he listening out of his conscience when he advocates violence? When he preaches an "us versus them" philosophy?

When our president does the same is he acting out of his conscience? Does he really believe he has the truth and is doing the right?

We think of the conscience as sort of our native goodness, or the touchstone we return to, the place where we know what it means to be a good human, connected with others. I've always thought that if I consult my conscience, really listen to it, that I'll do what is right. That humans somehow know intuitively what is right.

But how do we know what is right? And even more difficult, how do we know what is right within someone else's words, or their passions? How do we know whether to join a group of any kind? Because how do we know we're not being led down the wrong path? How do we know we're not getting swept up in someone else's idea of what is right? What if it is not ultimately right?

Sometimes I wonder if a compulsion to DO right doesn't hold within it the seed of its opposite. Or is it that the desire to DO the right thing sometimes gets confused with having to BE right. In other words, hold

power of some sort. And when that happens in a big way, with someone who is in power and has power over others, well then it is often destructive.

The fifth principle in UUism, reflects our historical distrust of any such external power or authority. And in some ways I think the principle reflects a distrust of any form of passionate religion. For a group to get passionate they have to agree about something. And while we can agree about certain political issues rather passionately, when it comes to spirituality we rarely agree.

Can you imagine a congregation of UU's going along with any religious zealot? Someone would be bound to raise their hand and say: wait a minute Mr. or mullah, or Ms. minister. Just how DO you define God, or evil? What do you mean henceforth there is no doubt!

And you know what, reading books on Afghanistan, and reading the news, and seeing it through the lens of my own reading of our fifth principle this week, I thought: I am so glad we are distrustful. In other words, no one can tell me what to think or believe. I will check everything out against my own inner compass. I think this is a gift of our free religion which we have to hold on to.

I can understand how that right of individual conscience could feel threatened whenever our denomination seems to be heading toward anything resembling a certainty. Whether that be the existence of God or anything else. Yet, as some of you are no doubt aware, in the past few months as I've been preaching on the principles I have been promoting something spiritual, which I think underlies our principles. I've tried to "unpack" them a bit. I've tried to ask, what is the spiritual energy in them? Where are the spiritual beliefs of our tradition contained within these principles?

In my sermon on the first principle I suggested that if we believe there is an inherent, inbuilt, indwelling, worth in each person, in other words a power of good in humans then maybe there is an underlying, common power at work in the world that we can tap into. And, I said in my last sermon, if we are not to be just isolated individuals then maybe we can agree to put the power of love to work for us. And I reminded us that this was a power, that of transforming love, which until relatively recently was the common, central, guiding force and source in our religious tradition.

I can imagine that to some of you my promoting this understanding of our tradition, reclaiming its former core, might sound as if I would like to take away the right of your own conscience to decide what is core for you. And I can get pretty passionate about this stuff and that can be even scarier. The path I am choosing to take as your minister is actually one of, I hope, balance. I would like us always to question, but also to be able to actively choose for the good. I think the right of conscience is about making choices for the good. Almost by definition.

And, I don't know how to choose for the good, if I don't have faith in the good as something real and tangible. This is of course not easy. Because it all becomes quite circular. What is the good? What is right?

This is where the **context** of our principles comes into play. The context for what we hold to be truth. All of these principles are meant to be looked at within our congregations. Our principles are not saying that we're isolated individuals sitting on our islands with our arms folded saying: you can't teach me anything, my individual conscience knows it all.

My "right" to *follow* my own conscience is assured and so is yours. But that does not mean what my conscience tells me is always right.

There is nothing pure about any of us. Nothing pure about my conscience or yours. Conscience to work at its full capacity, I believe, needs to hear and learn from others. Needs to be tested in community. Needs to be open to growth and transformation. And this always does involve risk. Religion involves risk. Being in community, coming out of our shells involves risk. It takes faith in something larger than ourselves, even if it is simply the faith that there is more truth out there somewhere than any one of us possesses.

Saying that the individual conscience is my "ultimate authority" in religion doesn't mean I can't learn anything from you. It most definitely doesn't mean I'm never wrong. It does mean that I will consult my own inner barometers when you tell me what you think. It also means you should test yours when I tell you what I believe.

Neither does having my own conscience as my ultimate authority mean that I can't choose to believe in a greater or higher or inner, outer, Spirit or power speaking to my individual conscience. But it does mean that

I will test everything I think is coming to me from some deeper, or inner, or higher or wider source against my own experience. And against the experience and wisdom of others.

Having my own conscience as my ultimate authority in religion also doesn't mean I can't look for wisdom in the Bible or other texts which religions of the world hold sacred.

These books, and actually more importantly the commentaries on these books, the oral arguments and discussions and legends and traditions around them, are like a group conversation about the most important questions in life. Like: what is good and what is bad? And how can I do right as much of the time as possible? People disagree about what these books mean, and they should. And we should welcome the conversation because that means a kind of group conscience process is at work.

But there are touchstones in these books and teachings. I, personally, will also test every new idea and direction against religious teachings that have endured for thousands of years. And yet have never been perfectly adhered to. Or even held to very well by religious groups or individuals of any stripe, like: "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Or teachings like: thou shalt not kill. How much more basic can you get than the commandments? All of the big three religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, hold to those same Ten Commandments. And yet each has in their turn, from the oldest now to the youngest, Islam, broken that particular one (thou shalt not kill) in service of their own group's growth.

Humans through their religions have created very simple yet profound blueprints for how to keep the peace, to stay the course. I don't think we need any new truths actually. I think we just need to learn how to try out the ones we have. As Camus once said about Christianity (and I paraphrase): It is an amazing idea that has never been tried.

I suspect if I knew more about Islam I could say the same. It no doubt has some amazing ideas that have never been tried.

The right of conscience, does mean that we always test what we hear, and read and think, against some light inside. That inner BS detector. Because we know how humans are, prone to sways of passion, to the desire

for power and control. But here is another catch. We're one of those humans. So there's an inherent difficulty in relying on our BS detector. All of us have experiences which shape us and sometimes even distort our perceptions. So sometimes that inner mirror gets cloudy and confused. Which is why we need a group to be a part of where we can listen to other voices and be heard by others.

The idea that the individual mind is somehow sacrosanct and pure is absurd and I hope that isn't an idea floating behind our fifth principle. How else but by being open to seeing how we are limited in our perceptions, do clean out that inner testing ground?

When I was young I thought I had an infallible BS Detector. I would take in anything anyone said to me and bring it into some kind of inner sanctum and test it against this whole structure I had build inside. I got so quick at that I didn't even have to really think about it too much. It became almost instinctive. But there came a time in my life when that structure fell apart. I don't remember exactly when or why. I think there were probably a series of epiphanies. I think it took some pretty serious wake up calls, people calling me on my own stuff and my own behavior. Being humbled.

And somewhere along the way, after that, it dawned on me, that this inner structure I was always testing everybody against, was in fact simply my world view. And as my world view expanded, I realized it would always be limited by my experience. So it was not some ultimate test of truth.

I think I am not the only one who mistakes this personal world view for some kind of inner place of truth, for some kind of pure place of conscience. We each have a world view. We all establish a structure of beliefs and opinions about everything and all new information is tested against them. It is easy to see how that happens with, say, a fundamentalist. More difficult to see how we liberals do it. But we do.

Our personal world view is not the same thing as the conscience. It is simply the view from my particular "social location" and from my personal experience. It is how I make sense of the world and the constant influx of new information and new experiences. It is how I feel strong and secure and unthreatened. It is how I know who I am in society and in community. The conscience is something deeper than my personal world view. Maybe it is the deep impulse toward compassion. I am not sure.

I think we are born with that ability, that impulse to connect and be compassionate. Unless of course one is a sociopath. But I suppose that ability, that little light inside has to be cultivated. Because there is also this very human tendency to take sides, to make life a battle. To not connect in love and compassion, but instead to only love those we agree with and despise all the rest.

Even something as seemingly minor as gossip can be that tendency to make of life a war. Our conscience pricks us when we gossip. I really shouldn't tell you this we say...then we say it anyway.

How do we keep our conscience polished like a clear mirror? How do we know that the inner place we go to hasn't become clouded somehow through fear or past experiences? Or by comfort, by strong opinions, by habits like gossip, by complacency, or arrogance?

In liberal religion we are as prone as any other people to be swept off our feet by love, by ideas, by music, some of us even by God. And we are right to be suspicious. In the end it is our individual conscience which claims authority to test and decide on truth. So keeping it clear and open is one of our spiritual tasks.

I think our creative tension, our spiritual growth, and our potential power as a liberal religious group, lies in learning to let ourselves build a very real daily and growing faith in that mysterious transforming love and urge to goodness that dwells within us and at the same time to balance it with a caution of any authority, human or divine.

Again, maybe the best method of polishing that mirror is life in community which risks faith yet welcomes doubts and questions.