

**UUMA/CSW Worship Service
General Assembly, St Louis, Missouri
Friday, June 23, 2006**

“Moral, Schmoral”

by Reverend Rod Richards

Background: This sermon won the 2006 UUMA/CSW SAI Sermon Contest. The winner of this contest is awarded a cash prize and has the opportunity to deliver his or her sermon at General Assembly. Accordingly, Rod Richards delivered his sermon at General Assembly on Friday, June 23, 2006.

Readings

#1 From *Sweet Dreams in America: Making Ethics and Spirituality Work* by Sharon Welch:

Imagine that we realize that moral choices are those in which one has to choose between principles. Furthermore, it is often impossible to predict if one's actions will do more harm than good or if the actions will be successful. Faced with these ambiguities, we might give up on moral reflection altogether: acting boldly, but without the pretense of being moral, without any attempt to think through actions and their impact on others. Action then becomes sheer impulse, whim, the arbitrary exercise of creativity and power.

Imagine another alternative. We can take ambiguity seriously, making a best choice, and then being willing to accept the consequences of that choice. Basically, we become ready to clean up after ourselves, to reevaluate actions, all with the style of humor and openness to failure. The key here is not being paralyzed by either moral failure or by political actions that are ineffective. We can accept that we can only do our best, with a style of not expecting perfection or saintliness from ourselves and others. It is then easier to act in ambiguous situations, not being defeated or paralyzed by the mere fact of ambiguity.

#2 From *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* by Mark Johnson:

[Many people] agree that living morally is principally a matter of *moral insight* into the ultimate moral rules, combined with *strength of will* to 'do the right thing' [based on] those rules.

The crucial thing that is missing in this widely held conception of morality is any recognition of the fundamental role of imagination in our moral reasoning. We human beings are imaginative creatures, from our most mundane, automatic acts of perception all the way up to our most abstract conceptualization and reasoning. Consequently...our moral reasoning is...basically an imaginative activity, because it...requires imagination to discern what is morally relevant in situations, to understand empathetically how others experience things, and to envision the full range of possibilities open to us in a particular case.

How might the moral and ethical grounding of Unitarian Universalism be given greater voice in the public square?

This is not a new question, but it has been posed explicitly as a Study/Action Issue for Unitarian Universalist congregations over the next couple of years.

It is a *big* question, not likely to be resolved within a sermon (though I still have a little time). Not likely to be resolved within a year or two years or three years...frankly, not likely to be resolved at all in the sense of reaching a final, once-and-for-all-times-and-all-communities conclusion.

But that does not lessen its importance as a question. In fact, its importance lies in the fact that it is a recurring question, one that we will keep with us as we move into the future; one that will echo throughout committee and Board and congregational meetings; one that will pulse beneath the Sunday Services and the religious education classes and continue the beat through coffee hour and communal lunches and circle suppers; one that will resonate not only when you're here, with each other, but one you will hear even as you leave this place, infusing the routines of your daily life with a new rhythm, providing a familiar if challenging context in which to meet unforeseen circumstances.

But, if I am advocating that we keep this question close beside us, as a religious community and as individuals out in the world, it seems important to try to examine what it's really asking...

First of all, it assumes things that we would do well to clarify. Primarily, it assumes that, as Unitarian Universalists, we *have* a moral and ethical grounding.

Now you may laugh, but there are many folks who would question whether we *have* a moral and ethical grounding. Many other religious folks, after all, can *point* to their moral and ethical grounding in the substance of whatever scripture they happen to hold sacred, whether it be the Vedas, the Sutras, the Torah, the Koran, the New Testament... We, as a community, seem to have given up that privilege as we open our arms to receive all the varied spiritual perspectives that find a home in our congregations. This sometimes leads us to detour around any discussion of morality and ethics and go straight to the "issues." We feel that the very term *morality* has been hijacked and we have decided to steer clear. (Thus my Scrooge-like title: moral, schmoral!)

We may, however, especially in terms of morality, and drawing from our Universalist tradition that notes the truths that shine at the heart of differing traditions and the great similarities in their teachings... we *may*, if we had limber-enough fingers, be able to point to *all* of those Scriptures as our moral and ethical grounding.

Granted, that may only confuse the issue, and send the conversation off on a tangent regarding the relative merit of each religious path... A fine discussion, perhaps, but not the issue.

So let me throw out this suggestion for our moral and ethical grounding: *love*.

And if you find that a little too warm and fuzzy, let me suggest that this is precisely the same moral and ethical grounding that you will find in every one of the Scriptures that others will present to you.

Because, listen, I think we often end our discussions too early. We feel the need, and hate the responsibility, of explaining Unitarian Universalism, but we take others' answers at face value, never probing into what *it means* to them. "I'm Methodist," someone says, or "I'm Jewish," "I'm Catholic," "I'm LDS," "I'm Muslim," and we think we know what that means... Do we?

If they point to their Scriptures as the basis of their morality, say, "Yes, but what is the moral and ethical grounding you find there?" And if they start reciting a selective list of rules and commandments, say, "Yes, but what is the moral and ethical grounding for those rules?" And if they say that it is obedience to God, ask them why they obey God. And if they say it is because they love God, tell them that Muhammad said, "Do not despise the world, for the world too is God,"¹ tell them he said, "Wherever you turn is God's face,"² remind them that Jesus summed up all of the Law with "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength [and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself,"

¹ As quoted in *The Enlightened Mind*, edited by Stephen Mitchell, HarperCollins Publishers, 1991, pg. 46

² Ibid

(Mark 12:30-31)³ remind them that John writes in a letter, “Let us love one another, because love is from God...if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us,” (I John 4:7a, 12b) remind them that Micah, answering the question, “What does God require of us?” replied, “To do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8b). Love seems to be at the heart of it all.

Still, the other stumbling block with this seemingly all-too-easy-answer is that, now, we have to somehow define “love.” This is a sizable obstacle, one that almost had me sending this sermon off in a different direction. So imagine how pleased I was when, browsing at the library, I ran across a book entitled, *Pathways to Peace: Forty Steps to a Less Violent America* by Victor La Cerva, MD with an unassuming one-page foreword by Ashley Montagu in which he writes,

...let me describe what love is. Love is the communication, through demonstrative acts, of your profound involvement in the welfare of others, such that you give them all the encouragements, supports, sustenance, and stimulation they require for their unique development and fulfillment. It lets them know that they are precious to you; that you will always be standing by; that you will never commit the supreme treason of letting them down when they are in need of you; and that you will help them become all that is good and loving.

That will do for me.

So the question is: how might *love* be given greater voice in the public square?

You see, we don't have to spend a lot of time worrying about what our moral and ethical grounding should be. We don't have to feel sheepish about not having a single text or creed to which we can point for our answers. We don't have to hang our heads because others have a codified answer which they can recite because, when all is said and done, if you sweep aside the legalism and the cultural trappings, if you admit that the expression of love must be interpreted and re-interpreted throughout history, their answer is our answer. They may frame it differently. They may see immorality as disobedience to the rules that God has laid out for them. We, generally speaking, see immorality as idolatry: misplaced priorities. Worshipping something in the place of God or Truth or the Eternal. Answering to something in place of love. Being directed in our actions by something other than enlightened compassion for ourselves and others. Putting something at the heart of our lives where only that which surpasses all *somethings* should be. But, however we frame it, love is the ground we share, at the heart of religious traditions across the world.

Wise people have known this for centuries, and they have told us as best they could, in as many ways as they could. I want you to continue your discussion with people of varying traditions, not to incite religious arguments, not to win points for our UU home team, not to prove that you're right and they're wrong, but to show you that, finally, we are all in the same boat. It is, at once, far simpler and far more complicated than you have possibly imagined. The simple part is defining our moral and ethical grounding. The complicated part is implementation. That is where we must be creative. That is where our imagination is as useful a tool as our will. This boat we find ourselves in, after all, is riding the harsh waves of reality.

The morning I began this sermon, there was a hot news story about former Education Secretary William Bennett having said something scandalous on his radio show. “This is great!” I thought, “Here I am writing a sermon on morality, and ‘Mr. Book of Virtues’, Mr. Sanctimonious, Mr. Holier-Than-Thou is being publicly humiliated for saying something immoral and offensive.” I was practically rubbing my hands together in evil glee. (I didn't know people actually did that until I caught myself in the act...)

As it turns out, the story was not *quite* as scandalous as I had first imagined. What Bennet said was stupid and offensive, make no mistake: (“But I do know that it's true that if you wanted to reduce crime, you could, if that were your sole purpose, you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go

³ Biblical quotations taken from The HarperCollins Study Bible, New Revised Standard Version, 1989

down.")⁴ But within the context of responding to a caller who blamed abortion for there not being enough money in the Social Security fund, Bennett was purportedly trying to point out the absurdity of using abortion in an argument about present circumstances. Let's call it nuanced stupidity.

What was more interesting (and troubling!) to me was my reaction. I was so *disappointed* that this story wasn't *worse than it was*. I was so *disappointed* that Bennett hadn't actually suggested that black babies be aborted in order to lower the crime rate. I was so *disappointed* because I wished for him a greater public humiliation that something even worse would bring. You see, he represents to me that attitude that manages to find fault with everyone else and, when caught himself, shrugs a "nobody's perfect" shrug, strikes a false "we're all sinners" pose, and manages to stay wrapped in a self-righteous untouchability...so I wanted to see him suffer for that. I didn't wish for his enlightenment; nor his repentance...I was out for revenge.

Am I the only one? Are there public figures that you have little voodoo dolls of at home? Do you play vengeful scenarios in your head for those who seem to be intent on fighting against your most cherished ideals?

I think this brings us back to an important piece about our moral and ethical grounding, one which those wise people who teach love often remind us of. For love *to be our moral and ethical grounding*, we must work toward embodying it. Gandhi said, "We must *be* the change we wish to see in the world."⁵ And love of your family is fine (God knows, many families are starved for love), and love of your friends is fine (there are so many in this world who are dying for lack of friendship), but if you're talking about change-the-world, rock-the-boat kind of love, then, as Jesus pointed out, "You must love your enemies."

Not so warm and fuzzy anymore, is it? Radical. Difficult. Unattainable, it seems.

Loving my enemy is a concept I can barely grasp. It is, it *feels* like it is, against human nature. I agree with George Orwell who, in his essay on Gandhi, says, "To an ordinary human being, love means nothing if it does not mean loving some people more than others."⁶

And yet, if this is to be the grounding for our morality (and wiser people than me, people whom I trust, have said that it is), it must somehow be attainable, right? Practical. It is no use having an ideal that we have no clear way of moving toward.

The prophets tell me that I *can* love my enemy, and the truth is that, while I have no one whom I could clearly *call* a true enemy, yet I find hatred, as if for an enemy, within me. So I can start here. I can start with those people whom I *perceive* as enemies, I can start by wishing them well. I don't have to relinquish my struggle against what I perceive as hypocrisy, injustice, and oppression. I don't have to stop speaking out clearly on what I perceive as the idolatry of economics that puts Wall Street numbers above individual human lives and masquerades as realism. I don't have to support this country's slide into a twisted theocracy, the bastardization of Jesus' teachings as promoted by the Religious Right, or the increasing limitations on our civil rights. But I also don't have to *hate* the individuals who are involved. I can *practice* wishing them well. I can practice *being* the change I wish to see.

Acting out of love should not mean that we are any less determined in what we strive toward. It should increase, not lessen, our courage. *Because* we love the world and the people and creatures and life of every kind that lives upon it, we cannot help but be bold. We need to challenge, forthrightly, the laws and commandments of any faith (be it sacred or secular, religious or political or economic) that work to demean and devalue the lives of the most vulnerable. We need to work to interpret, as best we can, the most effective ways,

⁴ <http://racerelements.about.com/b/a/207228.htm>

⁵ http://quotations.about.com/cs/gandhiquotes/tp/10_gandhi_quote.htm

⁶ <http://www.k-1.com/Orwell/site/work/essays/ghandi.html>

and to create ways where none exist, of making love heard in the public square. We need to confront a morality that is fruitlessly tied to the strictures of particular communities of centuries gone by, that lends itself to selective interpretation by religious leaders while they purport to accept it in its entirety, that claims to arise from the will of God or Gods yet has no trace of love and compassion in its expression. We must dare to proclaim, as a hymn in our new hymnal supplement states, that we are standing on the side of love, and then we must do everything in our power to live that out. We go forth in hopes of victories but mindful of the fact that living in this way is its own reward. We must move with the confidence of our own convictions, the awareness that we will make mistakes, the willingness to listen to others, and the commitment to, in Sharon Welch's words, clean up after ourselves. This is our strength. We are not afraid of correction, new insight, better ways... We know that Gandhi spoke truly when he said, "Truth never damages a cause that is just."⁷ That, to me, is part of walking humbly with the Eternal.

Though I have barely scratched its surface, I am glad about the timing of this Study/Action issue, because I think that it is time that we engage with this question *explicitly*. Though it has lived with us as an undercurrent, it is too easily taken for granted. *It is a most important mission we are on*, and we should not kid ourselves about that. Rather, we should prepare ourselves accordingly. We need to proceed with humility, but we should not use humility as a mask to hide our faith. We should keep a sense of humor, but we need not seek to trivialize our journey with jokes. Above all, we should find a way to move forward with determination and with reverence for the work which has been entrusted to us.

I leave you with these words from Annie Dillard, in an essay entitled, "Notes for Young Writers." I think it has a broader meaning for all of us:

*A great physicist taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He published many important books and papers. Often he had an idea in the middle of the night. He rose from his bed, took a shower, washed his hair, and shaved. He dressed completely, in a clean shirt, in polished shoes, a jacket and tie. Then he sat at his desk, and wrote down his idea. A friend of mine asked him why he put himself through all that rigamarole. "Why," he said, surprised at the question, "in honor of physics!"*⁸

So may we do our best work, night or day, in honor of love!

⁷ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/mohandasga109080.html>

⁸ Guttkind, Lee, ed., *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*, W.W. Norton & Co., 2004