Unreasonable People

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I was recently reminded of these words of George Bernard Shaw:

"The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man."

The reasonable person adapts herself to the world. She sees the world as comprised of conditions which she must accept and acclimate herself to in order to survive, be happy, and achieve modest success. The unreasonable person has a restless inner vision or conviction about how things ought to be, and finds the current conditions unacceptable and intolerable. That person persists in trying to change outward conditions in order to move them closer to her vision. Therefore, all human progress depends upon the unreasonable person.

In spite of our embrace of the faculty of reason in Unitarian Universalism, our religious tradition was built and lived out in its highest expression by unreasonable people. Unitarian and Universalist history swells with the impassioned voices—or more likely the diatribes—of unreasonable people who refused to accept conditions as they were, insisted that they should be changed, and, more importantly, insisted that they could be changed.

The hallmark of the unreasonable person is the unwillingness to give up on something.

I love this Shaw quote because it celebrates and redeems so many people in our lives whom we all know and love (or know and hate, as the case may be):

The person who only wants to talk about the one thing he or she really cares about—to the point where no one wants to get into conversation with them because all roads lead inevitably to their favorite subject, which they will monologue about until kingdom come or until you somehow manage to extricate yourself from the conversation. Couldn't they develop some other interests?

Or the zealot or purist or holier-than-thou type—the person who is so extreme and uncompromising about their particular moral cause that you feel guilty around them for never doing enough or caring enough.

Or the stubborn person who insists on pursuing a particular grand course of action, in spite of a host of sensible, well-reasoned, legitimate arguments pointing out their folly of their plan.

Or the eccentric genius, the brilliantly creative person who is socially abrasive and impossible to work with.

Or the person who's just plain stubborn and difficult, minus the redeeming qualities.

They may drive us crazy, but perhaps, by refusing to accommodate social norms and niceties, these folks are actually helping to shake things up a bit so that something new becomes possible.

The fact is that being a saint doesn't mean being a nice person. A saint may be tirelessly motivated by radical compassion for human kind, while being impatient and cantankerous in their daily interactions with others. It is a lonely and difficult life, perhaps even a tragic life—that of the saint or prophet or champion of a high cause.

You heard the names of a few such folks from Unitarian Universalist history in the reading earlier. I want now to briefly lift of up the lives of two individuals who exemplify that unreasonable character which goads the world toward new horizons.

Unitarianism and Universalism did not become self-defined religious movements until the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Universalists formally organized in 1793, the Unitarians in 1825. But the theological views that finally came to be established in these denominations had begun to emerge decades, if not centuries, before those dates.

One of the early champions of a form of Unitarianism was Michael Servetus, who was born sometime around 1510 and was executed for his heresy in 1553. Servetus was what could be called a Renaissance man—a brilliant scholar, physician, theologian, and astrologer. But his unreasonable personality is revealed by the fact that he exhausted, goaded, and ultimately infuriated people with his bullheaded pursuit of theological dispute.

Servetus was of the first generation of non-clerics to be able to read the Bible firsthand, since the invention of the printing press had suddenly made its mass distribution possible. Delving into the direct study of the Bible, he was shocked to discover only thin and questionable evidence of the doctrine of the Trinity in its pages. Thus began his personal crusade to enlighten the rest of the Christian world about their errors in thinking—a crusade which turned him into a hunted fugitive, moving from city to city under a false name while he continued to foment his radical views.

The drama of Servetus's story intensified in his relationship with John Calvin. At the age of 36, he entered into a fateful secret correspondence with his old acquaintance. By this time, Calvin had become the most prestigious figure in the Reform branch of Protestantism.

Previously, Calvin's theology had included little mention of the Trinitarian nature of the godhead until another reformer accused him of being an Arian—the old term for Unitarian. Stung and embarrassed by this serious accusation, Calvin became hyper-vigilant, determined to deal severely with any deviations in this area of orthodoxy.

Servetus, surely aware of this embarrassing episode in Calvin's past, began taunting him with letters, promoting his shockingly unorthodox theology and criticizing the doctrine of the Trinity. Calvin replied with letters of increasing impatience and severity. Servetus sent Calvin a manuscript of his yet unpublished *Restitutio (The Restitution of Christianity)*. Calvin responded by sending a copy of the *Institutio (Institutions of the Christian Religion)*. Servetus returned it with abusive notes written in the margins. When Servetus finally published the *Restitutio* in early 1553 he sent an advance copy directly to the church authorities in Geneva, including in the text 30 ofs lete ters

Over the next many years, Dix first worked tirelessly in Massachusetts, then in many other states. Her pattern in each state was the same. She would travel extensively, visiting as many institutions as possible to collect data, and then prepare a proposal bearing her carefully documented findings. This she would deliver to a friendly and well-known political figure, pleading for funding for better accommodations for the mentally ill.

She was often successful. Hospital after hospital was erected, along with additions and improvements made to existing facilities. Taking into account the latest in architectural design, she insisted on therapeutic settings for those whose mental illness could potentially be cured or eased. For those regarded as incurable, she created a standard for humane and comfortable environments.

When she was thwarted in her efforts in the U.S., she traveled to Europe and initiated the same process of advocacy in 14 different countries.

Dix was ultimately overwhelmed by the problems of poverty and urban squalor that were increasing in the United States throughout the 19th century. In her last years she was exhausted and depressed, feeling, believe it or not, that she had made little impact. Yet here is the key:

When Dix first entered that cold, hellish asylum at the age of 39, she encountered a social practice that—grotesque as it may seem to us—was simply accepted in her day without critique. Utter disregard for the dignity of this hidden population was typical and unquestioned in her society. In other words, it was considered reasonable.

Yet when she entered the scene, she looked in horror and said: *This should not be, this must not be allowed to continue.* She took an aggressively contrary position to the rest of society, and by doing so, began to awaken the world to new level of responsibility and compassion. She could not have done that by being reasonable.

And so we are indebted, in our lives, and in our religious freedom, to those who pushed and argued and protested and educated and maddeningly goaded the world toward its better self. The flaming chalice we light each Sunday is, among other things, a remembrance of those souls who burned, both spiritually and literally, for greater truth and righteousness. May we who gather in these peaceful pews be worthy of their light by being at least a little more unreasonable toward the things in our world that still need changing.