When My Rock Is Not Your Rock

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING #1

The following readings are from the book, *Walking Together*, by historian Conrad Wright.

Published in 1989, this book is a compilation of addresses and sermons "concerned in various ways with the church as a social institution. . . ." *The first selection responds to concern about the lack of institutional growth in the mid-1800's.*

"What caused the slump? [Some] believed that it was the spread of Parkerism in the denomination. Central to Theodore Parker's religious thought was the concept of Absolute Religion, which he declared to be dependent on 'no Church and no Scripture,' but on 'the nature of man – in facts of consciousness within me, and facts of observation in the human world without.' . . . It was the spread of doubt as to whether institutional religion itself is worthwhile. ... For both [Ralph Waldo] Emerson and Parker . . . a true community is not painfully constructed by people who have struggled to learn how to live together, but is made up of atomic and unrelated individuals who vibrate in harmony, not with each other, but in common with some realm of Absolute Truth out of time and space."
(essay: *Unitarian Universalist Denominational Structure, pp. 86-87)*

The second selection introduces us to the flip side of the individualist coin, referencing institutional changes in the late 19th century.

"The most important of the Unitarian leaders who spoke out against the individualism of the radical wing of the denomination was Henry H. Bellows . . . a churchman, an institutionalist, convinced that for religion to be effective, the work of the Church as an institution is essential. ... What Bellows did was to engineer for the first time a denominational structure related directly to the churches, as the American Unitarian Association had never been . . . .

Bellows was "... a man whose organizing genius had given to Unitarianism the institutional form and structure that had saved it from dissolution. 'He was our Bishop, our Metropolitan,' [a colleague wrote,] occupying an office not formally recognized in the denomination, but exercising its functions 'by universal consent of the brethren.' (p. 124)

. . . the introduction of a principle of centralized bureaucracy into a denomination with a very parochial congregational tradition inevitably made for tension, which continues to this day." (p. 89)

Not surprisingly, "Today, whether we read him or not, we still invoke the shade of Emerson; but who remembers Bellows? Channing, Emerson, and Parker – the inevitable Unitarian Trinity – are familiar names to all of us; we even reprint selections from their writings in paperback using the title: *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism.* But where is the paperback of complementary selections from Emerson **and Bellows**, to remind us that we have known in our midst these two contrasting types of greatness? How does it happen that of these two men, both regarded as eminent by their own contemporaries, one is remembered, while the other is forgotten?" (*The Mirror of History, p. 125)*

READING #2

"Our righteous minds [by which the author means minds that attend to justice, morality, and fair play] made it possible for human beings – but no other animals – to produce large cooperative groups, tribes, and nations without the glue of kindship. But at the same time, our righteous minds guarantee that our cooperative groups will always be cursed by moralistic strife. Some degree of conflict among groups may even be necessary for the health and development of any society. …

"I'm going to make the case that morality is the extraordinary human capacity that made civilization possible. I don't mean to imply that cooking, mothering, war, and salt were not also necessary, but ... I hope to [give] you a new way to think about two of the most important, vexing, and divisive topics in human life: politics and religion. Etiquette books tell us not to discuss these topics in polite company, but I say go ahead. Politics and religion are both expressions of our underlying moral psychology, and an understanding of that psychology can help to bring people together."

— Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*

SERMON When My Rock Is Not Your Rock

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

A little more than 30 years ago, my good friend married. And I was excited for her, except that I harbored a concern. She is a very politically progressive thinker, and her fiancé was not. There are many differences I imagined couples might learn to manage, extreme political differences NOT being one of them. But then, I hadn't been married very long at that point, so what did I know?

Still, I had trouble imagining that something that feels like such a fundamental distinction – not the Democratic/Republican thing, necessarily, so much as what I felt it represented: what I perceived as the forward-looking, open-to-change mindset vs. the conserve-the-present, stability-oriented establishment perspective. I couldn't imagine common ground, or a sufficient basis for trust that would endure the challenges of married life. In effect, it felt to me as though her rock was not his rock, and how would that work?

They're still married. What was I missing?

Well, maybe they're smarter than I was, for starters. Clearly, other things have been sufficiently bonding over these many decades!

AND, maybe there are more ways to understand our differences, which often translates to political distinctions, though not always; maybe there are more ways than I had appreciated at the time.

Without revealing any particular secrets, are there any among us who are partnered with someone profoundly different in this way? Kudos to you!

Because if we fast-forward to 2019, we are ever more aware of our divisions these days, progressives from conservatives; and, it feels more critical than ever to figure out how we might be missing an opportunity to understand each other better, lest there be – as it feels right now – no room for trust whatsoever, not to mention no room for love.

Remember the suggestion that we love our neighbor as ourselves? I don't think it meant just the neighbor whose political persuasions we agree with ... although that does tend to define neighborhoods.

I heard someone mention yesterday that there are many members of their family with whom they simply do not speak as a result of political differences. I'm certain this person is not alone – and it just feels like too big a loss.

It's clearly not an entirely new division, this conservative/liberal thing, nor one exclusive to politics. As our own tradition makes clear, the tension between freedom of individual expression and the need for institutional stability – that, all by itself, is not unfamiliar to us, nor has it finished being a bone of contention. It's familiar, even among we ostensibly like-minded folks!

No doubt, you'll remember the event several weeks ago in D.C., when the young man from the Catholic school faced off, if you will, with the Omaha elder. I noticed a comment from a colleague about the two groups—the youth and the native peoples, including the two individuals—having different "moral intuitions." That was her description of what was going on, if not what produced the event to begin with. Different moral intuitions. It caught my attention, especially as I had been writing, at that time, about moral imagination relative to Parker's claim about the arc of the universe and its bending.

"Maybe Parker's best gift to us," I wrote, "is not his insistence that the arc is bending, but the moral imagination to encourage us towards that end. The trajectory of the arc ... [may be] more a function of **moral engagement as a starting point** than where we eventually put our hands to service."

I continue to believe that is accurate; but I'm guessing that in my mind, at the time, a sense of morality was a particular construct that we would need to agree on in order to understand each other, i.e., a kind of universal moral basis for right and wrong. It's not an uncommon assumption, I think. And, it's why I was concerned about my friend's choice of partners. I imagined that, among other things, they didn't see right and wrong the same way.

And then I saw this comment about moral intuitions and their variability that got me wondering. I followed the thread forward to the work of social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who with a small group of colleagues has been studying and observing what they are calling the Moral Foundation Theory. You know, a foundation, as in "what we stand on." Until fairly recently, in academia, moral psychology was assessed in the realm of developmental psychology. It had to do with your age and stage of development. Haidt offers a different approach.

"If you think that moral reasoning is something we do to figure out the truth, you'll be constantly frustrated by how foolish, biased, and illogical people become when they disagree with you. But if you think about moral reasoning as a skill we humans evolved to further our social agendas—to justify our own actions and to defend the teams we belong to—then things will make a lot more sense."

He talks about our acquiring morals the way we acquire language—that we learn how to speak in particular environments, for example, and similarly we create virtues and narratives and institutions that reflect the moral priorities of those environments. Our moral communities consist of collective views of right and wrong, some of which may overlap across communities, but likely not all.

This gets a little heady but it's wicked interesting AND especially relevant, so bear with me.

The basic premise of moral foundation theory is that our morals are developed over time based on reactions to six different areas. So, imagine the rock, the foundation, on which our morals are based – but instead of two rocks, think of only one big rock that looks a little like a bar chart. It's big and flat, and it has a Y-axis! Across the bottom of our rock are six labels going across the X-access. The first is harm/care – the place where kindness, gentleness, and nurturance reside. The second is fairness and cheating – where the ideas of justice and rights exist. Moving across the axis is loyalty/betrayal – the place of tribalism, patriotism, group-thinking. Number four is authority/subversion – respect for traditions, and deference to legitimate authority. We're almost there – number five, sanctity/degradation – relating to notions of noble living and virtue by control of the body. Lastly, liberty/oppression – home to resentment of dominating forces.

Haidt's premise is that liberal thinkers heavily weight the first two bars and the last one relative to the others, because they value care for each other way up here: actively pursuing the rights of others – women, children, any beings marginalized by society. They're not so worried about group-think (patriotism); they're not especially interested in tradition or authority figures (here's where the individualism comes in); and they don't want anybody telling them what noble living relative to their bodies is all about. And lastly, in general, liberal thinkers attend to the idea of dominating forces. (Two strong bars over here, one on the end.)

By contrast, he suggests, conservative thinkers score relatively evenly across the areas. They do care about harm, and they're invested in the idea of fairness, however it's perceived; they prioritize loyalty to institutions much more highly than to individuality, and are more respectful of traditions and authority, especially as it pertains to the structures critical to community life (i.e., they value what makes the whole stronger than the individual differences within it); they have a strong sense of valuing virtues as defined by body behaviors; and they generally agree with the idea of liberty.

Let's pause and think back for a minute to the readings about Parker and Emerson versus Bellows, the institutionalist. Our dreamers are holding up the flag of individualism, but would we even be here if Bellows had not solidified the structures of our tradition?

Haidt's work is not intended to judge the results of moral choices, only to observe them as a way of understanding how we are separate; not that either side is inherently more or less moral than the other; only that we prioritize different aspects of the moral foundations we all share.

The problem arises when our righteousness – the very thing he credits with making it possible for us to cohere – becomes self-righteousness, where-in we insist on the correctness of "our" priorities. The very thing that binds us can become what divides us, as we become blinded by our respective sacred cows. We forget that in order to understand others, let alone change them, we must understand ourselves, and who we are. Our ability to stay connected to the "truth" is dependent on our willingness to remember that everyone has a reason for what they're doing, which requires what Haidt calls a moral humility. Our self-righteousness gets in the way.

Truth and good policy only emerge, he suggests, from the contest of ideas, when we challenge each other's biases; but, when we no longer make room for that in our discourse, and in our interactions, the system that assures balance is broken.

When we assign evil to one side or the other, then our common rock can no longer contain us. We're here, and they're there, and the 'tween shall not meet.

He quotes the 8th century wisdom of Seng-ts'an: "The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose; do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear. Make a hairbreadth difference, and Heaven and Earth are set apart; If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between 'for' and 'against' is the mind's worst disease."

Haidt is careful to clarify that he does not believe we should live our lives this way. "In fact," he says, "I believe that a world without moralism, gossip and judgment would quickly decay into chaos. But if we want to understand ourselves, our divisions, our limits, and our potentials, we need to step back ... and analyze the game we're playing."

I think we can easily imagine "for" and "against" in the 21st century. It looks like Facebook telling you what you want to hear and see. It looks like Google confirming your every bias. It looks like Fox News and MSNBC.

It looks like politicians saying "compromise" is failure.

It looks like the image of a young man, a boy really, standing face-to-face with a native elder – not in common cause but in defiance.

It looks like a government shutdown.

It looks like declining church participation because it's easier not to worry about the welfare of others, or to commit the time to creating and sustaining community. (You are the exception, by the way, and I am grateful for you!)

I wish I had the panacea for this dilemma. We're pretty far gone down the judgment trail. Our lives have become what Haidt calls "lifestyle enclaves." He goes so far as to suggest that we are living in "consensual hallucinations." What an awesome term – what we might imagine as our "bubbles." Consensual hallucinations, and all of us far from the truth, perhaps.

He does offer some correction. It's not entirely hopeless, and it may not surprise you that it has to do with moral humility. It is imperative that we stop demonizing each other, to stop pointing at "them" and calling them evil. There's a difference between disagreement and vilifying.

I will point out that the subtitle of Haidt's book*, The Righteous Mind*, mentions "when **good** people are divided by religion and politics." I'm not sure where that leaves bad people – but yes, that's another sermon.

Let's stick with our opportunity here.

I think one of the particular challenges that we as Unitarian Universalists continue to face is the historical one presented earlier – our focus on individuality that can blind us to the benefits of a focus on the need for group cohesion. I wonder if it's hard to hear that it's not about us but what we can be, together, on behalf of a better world; and then what we can offer to the world as a resource on humility.

Tolstoy is said to have quipped: Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks about changing himself.

It's hard work, this moral humility – this opening the door to the possibility of common moral grounding. But isn't that where we'd rather be? In a world where we actually try to listen to each other, and to offer each other our imperfect humility even as we share our perspectives?

So here are two challenges for you this week. Well, maybe three.

The first is to think about someone you may disagree with, and find a time to have a conversation that might help you better understand the ground they're walking on. How is their very foundational understanding of the world and its needs contributing to your differences?

If you're a little fuzzy on your own grounding, check out yourmorals.org. According to the site, you can learn about your own morality, ethics, and values while also contributing to scientific research!

Lastly, and this will apply to some of you far more than others since many of you are already doing this, but think about the institution that is this church – how it serves you as a spiritual seeker, and as importantly, how it serves others – and imagine how you might be a part of that. I am not a rampant institutionalist but I do believe in the value of faith community, of all of us having a little faith in each other.

I hope we can be a part of a movement that encourages us all to stand on the same rock again, even in our differences.

So may it be.

Hymn 323 Break Not the Circle of Unending Love