

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**“On Being Good Without a Higher Authority”**  
 Rev. Sam Trumbore March 20, 2011

## Spoken Meditation

Today, let our thoughts, prayers and good wishes  
     move half way around the world to the people of Japan.  
 To those shivering in makeshift camps  
     sifting through the debris  
         for the shards of their shattered lives  
         wiped away by a wall of sea water.  
 To those grieving lost family members and friends  
     lost sources of livelihood and sustenance and  
     lost accumulated wealth and comfort.  
 To those stricken with terror,  
     re-traumatized with each aftershock and  
     frightened by each fire and release of radioactive steam  
         at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant.  
 May the world rally to their aid  
     as they begin to pick up the pieces.  
 May efforts to stabilize the Fukushima Daiichi plant be successful.  
 May each community rally for mutual support  
     as they begin to rebuild their lives,  
     and make peace with their losses.

## Reading

Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles. ) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do

they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.' You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. He said to them, "Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) And he said, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

## Sermon

Did you read about those 50 workers that stayed behind at the damaged nuclear power plant in Japan this week? The [New York Times article](#) I read Wednesday dramatized their heroism:

A small crew of technicians, braving radiation and fire, became the only people remaining at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station on Tuesday — and perhaps Japan's last chance of preventing a broader nuclear catastrophe.

They crawl through labyrinths of equipment in utter darkness pierced only by their flashlights, listening for periodic explosions as hydrogen gas escaping from crippled reactors ignites on contact with air.

They breathe through uncomfortable respirators or carry heavy oxygen tanks on their backs. They wear white, full-body jumpsuits with snug-fitting hoods that provide scant protection from the invisible radiation sleeting through their bodies.

They are the faceless 50, the unnamed operators who stayed behind...to prevent full meltdowns that could throw thousands of tons of radioactive dust high into the air and imperil millions of their compatriots.

Along with, say, a firefighter braving flames to rescue a crying baby and the story of [Dorwan Stoddard](#) saving his wife with his body as a shield from Jared Lee Loughner's hail of bullets, these acts of bravery define the good.

Yet how does doing the good relate to authority?

This came up in the Fukushima Daiichi example due to the uncertainty about how workers were selected to stay. Did they volunteer – clearly more heroic – or were they assigned to stay, maybe because of their technical skills or lower radiation dosage? What if no worker had wanted to stay because of the danger – what role would authority play in compelling them to serve the social good?

Particularly in times of crisis, any group needs people to follow the social good and prioritize it over their personal good. For any society to survive and thrive, it needs to motivate its members to prioritize the good of the whole rather than the good of the individual. If patriotism doesn't move the heart, then authority will step in with the use of force.

How does this fit with a religious tradition like ours that values individualism? Will Unitarian Universalists be good without the compulsion of a higher authority?

Even though we sound pretty optimistic about human nature valuing the inherent worth and dignity of each person, in practice, people quite often ignore it and violate it. Whether its a husband beating his wife, someone encroaching on his neighbor's property, or the strong preying on the weak, many people don't operate out of this principle. I hope I don't have to say any more than this: sometimes people behave badly and we need authorities to deal with those situations. With [the drunken melee](#) of U. Albany students last Saturday morning in the Pine Hills neighborhood, I rest my case.

Much of the time, in this country, authority supports the good. Criminals are caught, tried and punished. Regulations protect our food, air and water and promote our health and well being. Take regulations promoting the vaccination of children. I've been thinking about vaccinations lately. The one I really appreciate is the tetanus vaccine. This nasty germ is all around us. If it gets into our bloodstream, it is highly [likely to kill us](#). Compelling parents to get this vaccination is a very good thing for our children, who don't have the power to choose to protect themselves.

Another great law for our own good is wearing seat belts. Wearing seat belts, and now having air bags in cars, save many lives and prevent more serious injury. Hands free cell phone devices may not be quite as beneficial however, though, I have to say, I use them pretty heavily.

Sadly, we all know, authority does not always serve the good. Good as regulations can be to protect public health and wellness, they can also be harmful and overly restrictive. I met a handsome young salesman seated next to me on a cross country flight selling a new brand of

beef jerky flavored with guarana called [Perky Jerky](#). [Guarana](#) is a Brazilian climbing plant with fruit that contains twice as much caffeine as coffee beans. Regulations prevent them from putting “contains caffeine” on the package. If you are caffeine sensitive, didn't know what guarana is and try this product, you'd have a problem.

And of course authority can go really wrong. Remember Abu Ghraib, My Lai, Rwanda, Bosnia and the Holocaust. Remember African slavery and Jim Crow and worldwide genocides against Native peoples. Corruption in government is more the norm than the exception around the world. More often than not, the use of authority brings oppression rather than liberation, abuse rather than justice.

Given the imperfection of human authority in the best of cases, most religions appeal to a higher source of authority. God, tradition and scripture provide the larger framework for human authority. Some American Christians believe our governmental authority and our legal system should follow Jewish and Christian revelation. This would be really good for pigs, shrimp and hat makers but not so good for a woman's reproductive rights, Lesbians and gays and religious pluralism.

Jesus was a troublemaker in this regard. He regularly disputed the religious practices and traditions of his day he found oppressive. The reading from Mark this morning illustrates how Jesus did this. The Pharisees notice Jesus doesn't follow a rule. They point it out to Jesus. Jesus throws it back in their face by quoting a scripture to refute them. Then he steps beyond the tradition with a new understanding. It isn't what goes into your mouth that defiles you, what comes out of it does.

We might think the disciples dense when they question him about this later. It seems obvious to us today. But Jesus was rocking their world. What differentiated Jews from other religions, part of the core of their identity, was *how* they ate and *what* they ate. To say eating pork didn't defile you, well that was a shocker! Obedience to the authority of tradition mattered. Jesus said it didn't. Obedience to tradition made you good. Jesus said your intentions for your actions made you good. And the only person who knew your intentions was you. Jesus preached relying on an internalized authority to be good rather than unthinking obedience to outer authority. In a world where everything that isn't forbidden is permitted, this was a revolutionary idea.

A Jew eating pork was as radical then as voluntarily paying more taxes might be today. As April 15<sup>th</sup> approaches, I've been thinking, how many of us are willing to apply Jesus' revolutionary idea to doing our taxes? In this time when our state and federal government must cut vital programs, we, the tax payer, could be voluntarily giving more to help fund these programs. That would be putting the social good above our personal good. But how

many of us will be looking for every last exemption, deduction, and credit we can get this year? The taxes we avoid paying will not go to supporting schools, roads, fire and police services, help for the poor, the elderly, the widows and orphans? What if we voluntarily pay more taxes than our tax preparer says we can get away with?

Jesus still challenges us today to develop an inner authority to guide us toward the good. Remember, Jesus was a Jew, he never repudiated his heritage, his tradition or his faith. Matthew quotes him as saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus fulfills the law of his day by advocating developing inner authority.

Being a non-creedal congregation with no tests of belief or faith, we do not bind ourselves to Jesus or to Moses. We are free to develop or not develop inner authority as we see fit. However, we would be wise to remember the first part of Jesus' statement, "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets."

If we choose to develop inner authority, we would be wise to pay heed to the the law and the prophets ... of all the world's religious traditions. The wisdom of the ages are literally and metaphorically encoded in these texts, teachings and traditions. They provide the ground, the platform for developing our sense of inner authority.

Drawing from multiple religious traditions can help us filter out the historically and culturally bound ethnocentric biases. Those biases have no place in the evolving pluralistic global community with Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus living and worshiping side by side. That evolving community requires tolerance and encourages broader acceptance.

And our developing inner authority needs more than the world's scriptures, it also needs the results of science. Particularly it needs them where the texts and traditions are silent or contradictory. Our contemporary evolving understanding of gender and sexuality finds little scriptural guidance. Nor is there authoritative Biblical guidance about harvesting eggs for infertility treatments, what week a pregnancy can be terminated, and when to turn off the respirator and bring a life to an end. We need to supplement what religion can offer us.

A century of psychological study and research and contemporary brain imaging techniques reveal how much of our brains are not under conscious control. Any process of developing an inner sense of authority must go beyond the rational mind and appreciate the influence on us of the emotional mind. Our emotional response to a situation carries valuable information that informs our inner authority as much as our rational assessment does, sometimes more-so. Awareness and healing of our emotional selves grows our capacity for empathetic

connection. Our capacity for empathy often opens the way for us to choose the good response.

I recognize those of us who have internalized authority by their expression of outer moral authority. They have a conscience, a sense of purpose and a will toward the good. They have purified their hearts, tamed their egos, and strongly connected to the Spirit of Life that transcends them as well as dwells within them. They are found in all authentic religious traditions as well as in secular society. No human boundary or identity limits them. They live to love and serve.

And, in what can seem fantastic or magical, a crisis can call us to the good, to a higher purpose.

I suspect many of those 50 workers at the Fukushima Daiichi plant rose to the moment, transcended their self-concerns and put it all on the line, striving to prevent a nuclear catastrophe. I salute them and their willingness to do the good as a way of serving a higher authority.

What is that higher authority?

Today it must become the good of life on this fragile, blue-green planet, the only home for life we know of, so far, the only home we will know for generations to come.

## **Benediction**

So, yes, we are right to question authority. Albert Einstein said, "Unthinking respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth." Stanley Milgram also wisely observed, "The disappearance of a sense of responsibility is the most far-reaching consequence of submission to authority."

And authority has its place too, particularly as a counterweight to individual delusion and antisocial thinking and behavior. I'll have more to say about that next week.

In the meantime, let us appreciate the importance of serving a higher authority for the good of society. And let us continually develop our inner sense of authority to guide us toward that good.