

Moral Values – Bridging the Gap

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Once again, I'm here to promote a bit of revolution. It's true, I'm a bit of a rabble-rouser – always stirring up the waters, saying drastic things like: “Are we ready to really try Love and Acceptance yet?” As you all know, I'm a true believer in radical Love and radical Acceptance as ways to save this world.

Being a rebel of sorts, I'm in good company in our movement. It is said that when transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, was in the Concord jail for civil disobedience, Ralph Waldo Emerson arrived one day to pay a visit. Looking at Thoreau in his cell, Emerson exclaimed: “Why David, what are you doing in there.” Thoreau responded: “Henry, what are *you* doing out there?”

I open this morning with the words of another radical, 19th century Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing. *He* was on to something revolutionary, for which he paid a price. For, during his lifetime, Channing was denied access to his pulpit, and shunned by many. Today his words are a beacon of light, of wisdom, and of the hope.

Of our faith, he wrote:

I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith. Which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come; which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.

I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society; and which does not cower to human opinions.

I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen, delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering. Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind.

I call that mind free which has cast out all fear but that of wrongdoing: which is calm in the midst of tumults and possesses itself though all else be lost.

Our second reading expresses radical hospitality, it is “The Guesthouse” by Jelal-uddin Rumi

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Friends, in this community which is our nation, there has been great discord and much talk about “Moral Values,” and what that means and to whom. Referring to last November’s election, Newt Gingrich said: “It’s Michael Moore vs. Mel Gibson.” Well, not exactly, but sometimes it almost felt that way.

This morning we will explore what a Faithful Conversation about Moral Values might look like.

For some time now, UUA President, Rev. Bill Sinkford, has been calling for our movement to develop and use a Language of Reverence. We might do well to begin at the beginning, with a language of values. In defining who

we are as a people of faith, moral values shape our character and identify our core.

In a sense, our Moral Values are our home base, our spiritual home. For it is within these values that we build our lives, it is where we live and move and have our being. Home is important to us.

In preparing to move to South County, I engaged a Real Estate agent to help me find a house to buy. I was a naïve buyer. Evidently, there's this new practice of "bidding" up the price on homes, and this is what happened. On several occasions I found a house that I liked, and when I told the agent that I would like to make an offer, I was told that there was already an outstanding offer that had not been accepted, and I could outbid that offer and buy the house. Translation: Somebody else has already fallen in love with this house and is planning and dreaming of a future here, but you Betty, can shatter those dreams in a New York second, all you have to do is out bid them on the price. I don't think so, that just wasn't my plan in buying a home. I explained to the Real Estate people that I just wasn't going to do that, they didn't get it. Finally I explained, "Look" I said, "the house does not exist that I will want enough to bump another buyer out of a home, it just doesn't exist." The Home is where we live and move and have our being. It is a sacred space, not to be dishonored.

In the Orient it is the custom to remove one's shoes before entering the home. While this practice developed mostly as a means of promoting cleanliness, I always think of it as a way to honor the Home, and to set a kind of boundary between the ways of the world and the ways of the home. It somehow makes me want to bow with respect when I enter a home and remove my shoes. It is, I think, an honorable tradition

The Home then would be the place where we develop moral values and prepare to invite others into Faithful Conversation about such matters.

Last December, our congregation prepared a Study Action Issue for consideration within the UUA. It sought to pioneer such Faithful Conversations by asking the question:

"What can Unitarian Universalists do to sponsor respectful civil discourse among people of faith to define "moral values" and how these values should influence public policy to achieve peace tolerance and social justice?"

It went on to say:

“UU’s need not allow ‘moral values’ to be a term co-opted by the religious right. Rather, we seek to use this opportunity to encourage and sponsor *interfaith* gatherings that can define “moral values” as beliefs and actions that promote peace and justice. [Thus] we may spiritually transform this time of great moral division into a positive opportunity to witness – to shape and to define what moral values are and should be – in our society. “

We noted that “UUA president, William Sinkford, addressed the issue of moral values at a November 9th press conference, [where he stated] “Moral values are not just particular opinions on “hot button” topics in a divisive election year. Moral values grow out of our calling as religious people to work to create the “Beloved Community....Moral values [he said] work to instruct us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and always to ask the question: ‘Who is my neighbor?’ They are fundamentally inclusive rather than exclusive, and they call on generosity of spirit rather than mean spiritedness.”

Friends, as a people of faith, we are called to seek respectful interfaith dialogue on the issue of moral values. And here’s the radical part –we are called to a radical inclusiveness –as Rumi says, “[To]Welcome and entertain them all, [to]invite them in.” We are asked to open wide the door to our spiritual home, to welcome the stranger, to listen and learn. We are asked to be willing to see things differently.

We are asked to follow Channing’s call to a faith “which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come; which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.”

And so, my friends, I believe it is *essential* that we open our minds and try to understand the meaning of “moral values” to religious conservatives;

I believe it is essential that we open our hearts to the possibility of understanding a radically different point of view;

And I believe it is essential that we extend our hands, reaching out to those whose moral values appear to have so little to do with ours.

We are being asked to enter into *Inter-Faithful Conversation* about Moral Values. It is a stretch, I know- *and* my friends,remember it is *equally* a stretch for them.

As religious liberals, we pride ourselves on our open-mindedness. Yet, last fall, New York Times op-ed columnist David Brooks wrote, "...[J]ust listen to some coastal and university town liberals talk[that would be us] about how conformist and intolerant people in Red America are. It makes you wonder: Why is it that people who are completely closed-minded talk endlessly about how open-minded they are?"

This is meant to give us pause. A closed mind, like a closed heart becomes calcified, hardened, immovable and cold – closed forever to the sunlight of the spirit, to "receiv[ing] new truth as an angel from heaven."

My colleague, Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie, reminds us that, "As we think together about our moral values, [we would do well to] commit to being as concerned about fundamentalism in ourselves as we are of fundamentalism in others.

Do we dare to open our minds, to risk learning from another's point of view? In his book, *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote:

"Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language."

We can get a head start with the insights of

Steve Waldman, Journalist of Beliefnet who cataloged five truths about liberals and conservatives that each side doesn't understand about each other

Truth about Liberals	Truth about Conservatives
#1: They're just as moral as conservatives.	They're just as smart as liberals.
#2: Most are religious.	They don't want a religious dictatorship.
#3: They believe history is on the side of tolerance.	The pro-life position is born of compassion.
#4: Most support separation of church and state to <i>protect</i> religion.	They feel under assault.
#5: Family values are revered.	They believe American culture has become an insult to God.

My friends, that time is now – does it hurt enough yet? I think so. In this community which is our nation, our collective hearts are bleeding, longing for common ground, for understanding.

It is M Scott Peck who wrote:

“The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.”

In our spiritual home, may the door be a gateway to greater understanding.

May we invite all in. May we learn to speak one another’s languages.

Rev. Crawford Harvie suggests that for us, that may mean learning to speak some Bible talk, recognizing that it is our language too. Listen:

“Love one another.” [John 13:34]

This means providing housing for the homeless, now!

“...[R]esist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.” [Matthew 5:39]

This means speaking out for peace on earth, now!

“For I was hungered, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in; naked, and ye clothed me; I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me.... Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.” [Matthew 25: 55-60]

This means universal health care, now!

“[i]t is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” [Mark 10:25]

This means stop economic injustice,now!

“Bessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” [Matthew 5:9]

This means stop the war, yesterday!

My friends in faith, may we open wide the doors to our spiritual Guesthouse. May we welcome all, becoming students of many tongues. May we truly open our hearts and our minds and our very beings to the power of radical love and acceptance, and may these be the truest hallmarks of our liberal religious moral values..

May we truly know that many Americans who are on the Christian Right *do* join with us in a deep and abiding quest for a world grounded in love. May we be *leaders* in opening our minds and hearts, may we help to create some movement towards understanding.

As a people of faith, we are called to revere our shared humanity— **For, we uphold a faith which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come; which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.**

The time is now –May it be so.
