

The Power to Be
Kay Fisher – Sunday July 24, 2005

We are focusing this summer on our seven principles, those principles that guide our search for truth, but do not dictate. Bob Gordon spoke on the “inherent worth and dignity of every person”; Steve Abbott on “justice, equity and compassion in human relations”; Jim Bailey on “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations”; and last week, Laura Landy on “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”.

Today I am going to speak about the fifth principle, “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

Conscience is probably not the difficult concept here. We’re each aware of that inner voice that tell us “this is wrong” or “this is right”. I have a vivid memory of my conscience prompting me into action. When I was 13, Grandma Jo, my father’s mother died. This stirred up my emotions and I felt compelled to confess to my parents that I had been taking coins from their dresser top. Confession was good for this soul, because my allowance was raised immediately!

In this past Friday’s “Overboard” cartoon, Raymond, the humanized dog returns a wallet which he had stolen so that he could be hired as a private detective. But his conscience said “You march right over and give it back or I will pound you”.

In the movie “Cinderella Man”, the main character, James Braddock, played by Russell Crowe, is forced to go on government sponsored relief during the great depression. Sometime later he makes a successful comeback in the boxing arena and feels compelled to return the \$300 and some dollars

which he had received from the government. His inner voice directed him to action.

Norbert Capek, minister of the largest Unitarian Congregation in the world before World War II, in the 1920's, designed a ceremony of flowers to include everyone in the congregation, Protestant, Catholic, Jew, or agnostic. Rev. Capek publicly opposed the Nazis---and died at Dachau. Every spring this church recognizes his standing up for his right by continuing this flower communion and to remind us that our inner voices do not always lead us to happy, or comfortable endings.

That inner voice, Hermann Hesse calls promptings. He said "I wanted to try to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why is that so difficult?"

Why is that so difficult? This principle, the RIGHT of conscience and the role of the democratic process, answers that question.

This right is not earned; it is inherent to every person. When this right is realized, then one has the power to be that self which is true.

Conscience, though not earned, is learned. The bringing up of a conscience does indeed take a village; parents, extended family, schools, church, media and government---these institutions not only permit, but encourage the development of the inner voice. The atmosphere seems to reek with unlimited choices.

Do we want plastic or paper? Low Carb or Fat-free diet? War now, War maybe, War never? Judge John Roberts or---whoever?

Our parents are strongly influential in shaping our inner voices that lead to the stands we take on such issues.

My mother's message was clear, but non-verbal (lip pursing); my father's was a verbal "Let me make a suggestion". I have a thirteen year old grandson who recently did something he knew to be wrong. And like each one of us has done at one time or another, he tried to fabricate. His mother said in not uncertain terms, "Now, only the truth will do." This parenting helps to develop the inner voice. Don't you wonder what coin dealer, Robert Noe's ---whether he is guilty or not of the charges of taking from the injured to line his own pocket or not,--- inner voice is telling him.

Parents are not alone in conscience building. Our schools must take part. In the recent debate between creative design and evolution, it is not only discussions in the home that influence, but also what the school system does with the question. Is the question answered unilaterally by the School Board? By the administration? By the text book companies?

School libraries have been targets for those who would choose to eliminate certain books for what, to them, are compelling reasons. Last week, an Ohio school board voted to include students in choosing the books to be included in the high school reading list. The adults in that system have faith that the students can be trusted. That is intentional conscience building. Not only will these students be involved in decision-making; but also dealing with human dilemmas presented in literature. As we heard the words of William Ellery Channing, "It is a strengthening of the power of thought; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own."

The media available to us does give us many choices. One can listen to Rush Limbaugh or Air America at publicly scheduled

time. Many newspapers try to print both sides of an issue. New York Times columnist, Thomas Friedman, recently began an editorial with “It is hard not to notice two contrasting stories that have run side by side. He continued with an example from Newsweek, which in one issue, presented both sides of the desecration of the Quoran, whereas in newspapers of some other countries only one side was presented, which resulted in riots.

The development of the conscience is one part of the answer “Why is living in accord with the promptings of the true self so difficult?”

Without government we have all these consciences running amok, shouting or whining, “my dogma, my dogma”, or, to quote a bumper sticker, “my dogma is bigger than your dogma.”

And thus we come to the democratic process. Democracy, as Winston Churchill noted, is the worst form of government---except for all the others. We, not one of us, can be free if we enslave others to our dogmas. As Abraham Lincoln said, “Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves. Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people: Is there any better or equal hope in the world?”

Our voting system, messy as it may be, still empowers us to live, not by the will of the majority, but with protection for the minority, as Jose discovered in our children’s story today. It is the intent, that all should have a voice. I found Olympia Brown’s words in today’s reading a bit over-exalted until I gave more thought to what it would be like to be denied a voice for so long for so many.

Our jury system is a microcosm of the democratic process. Those of you who have served on a jury know how important the process is. Last spring I was selected to serve on a jury. One of the first things you have to do when you are in the jury pool is fill out a questionnaire. One of the questions is “What religion are you?” I wrote Unitarian-Universalist. (The blank wasn’t long enough.) During the selection process the defense attorney asked me whether I considered myself religious. I replied, “Probably not. I would consider myself spiritual”---to which he said, with surprise, I thought, “Me, too!” To his next question “What do you think of the Good Samaritan?” I replied, “Hmm! Very complicated.” What was powerful to me was that I could speak publicly from my true self---and reflected on those questions the attorneys asked me to my for days. Twelve of us were selected from varying backgrounds, beliefs, experiences and intelligence levels and so became a team. An exceptional team for the job we thought. The judge instructed us not to vote immediately, but to hear from one another first. We listened to one another; we questioned each other. We treated each other respectfully as we labored through 15 charges so we could answer Guilty or Not Guilty with one voice. No loud voice bullied; no hierarchy dominated. True, we clearly knew the task before us; most distractions were removed, so it wasn’t as messy as some decisions made from the blended consciences of a group. We felt our decision was solid because it came from our work together.

The role of a church is a powerful force, either giving the right to one’s voice or dictating the truth. The Unitarian-Universalist Church is committed to the democratic process in its organization and the support it gives those who are seeking truth.

When Unitarians and Universalist consolidated in 1961, both groups implicitly showed commitment to democratic principals

and individual liberty of conscience. With the merger, these principals became explicit. Both of these religions were born in this country as we were struggling with enlightened ideas. Benjamin Rush, Universalist and signer of the Declaration of Independence and Joseph Priestly, the scientist and Unitarian preacher strongly influenced Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Our church believes in the necessity of the Democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny; elections are open to all members. We trust ourselves to govern ourselves, to listen to one another, and not to just support, but to encourage the development of a true self.

Our curriculum for young children at this church is intentionally designed to do just that. For example, our first graders study the web of life---the compost pile, the insects that turn soil, the seeds that grow, and their own place within that process. These studies culminate in the coming of age service--a two tissue service, as those of you have attended know. Our 14-15 year olds stand before 400 to 500 hundred of us to say "At this time, here is what I believe". Each statement is different. From one we hear "I believe that Jesus Christ is my savior" and from another "I'm not sure there is a God". These brave, wise teens are publicly affirmed by their parents and receive the support and encouragement of us all. We know their search for truth has just begun, that the search for the true self continues and is ongoing in each one of us.

With the love and influence of parents, schools, media, government and our church, we are blessed.

We have the right to our consciences---the right to think for ourselves--- the power to be our true selves. Through the democratic process we acknowledge that others have this same right--- to listen to their consciences and act according to their dictates, so long as those actions allow me that same right , ---

and thus we have the power to become.

So be it.