

“Reconciliation: Choosing a Redemptive Path”

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The worship theme here at FUS for the month of December has been “redemption”. Early in the month, Michael Schuler presented the question, “Is war ever redemptive?” and last week-end he spoke to the topic “Religion- It’s All About Redemption” in which he laid out for us the ways in which the world religions approach the idea of redemption.

He closed with these words:

“As Unitarian Universalists we enjoy the privilege of pondering these various proposals and comparing them to our own experience. Which diagnosis of the human condition makes the most sense? Where are the roots of my own discomfort? What answer would serve to settle my soul and provide a “peace that passes understanding?” Love? Insight? Surrender? Adventure? Everlasting life? That is the riddle of redemption – one that, for better or worse, each of us is obliged to solve for ourselves. “

The reality of our obligation to solve such riddles for ourselves is at the heart of the Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism. There is no single source of wisdom that will set us all free from discomfort and bring us peace. Good to be reminded.

Actually, of course, the real solution for Unitarian Universalists is ongoing. Revelation is continuous. The main difference between Unitarian Universalism and other religious traditions might be that many of us do not rely upon an external source of authority but are in an ongoing process of trying to make sense of our own experience in terms of the consequences of our attitudes and actions.

Take away the fear of retribution, the promise of reward, the inevitability of fate, the pervasiveness of grace, the possibility of divine intervention, the infallibility of God’s will, the power of prayer and what’s left?

These are the aspects of redemption through faith in God or religious law which, for better and for worse, were established to fill in all the gaps and take away both ambiguity and actual volition in the face of human foibles.

“Religion,” said Michael Schuler “addresses deeper, more persistent and intractable human troubles. Economies rebound, oppressors are overthrown and social safety nets repaired, but the basic existential situation in which humans find themselves doesn’t change. Sin, ignorance, self-centeredness, fear, suffering and death remain firmly and stubbornly in place. Helping human beings come to terms with these disturbing and disabling realities has been the historic task of religion.

If our ordinary, everyday life experience proved satisfactory and if it reliably generated positive feelings of fulfillment and well-being, there would be no need for redemption. Human beings seek insight, solace and reassurance because something feels out of joint. We are not all that comfortable with life as it is. This is the predicament religion tries to address. Life is precious, but so often it also proves to be unpleasant. What needs to happen to 'make things right?'

What indeed?

Well, our Unitarian Universalist statement of principles which is printed on the back of your order of service implies, at least, that intentional living according to guiding principles is its own path to redemption. These principles provide a practical approach to the mechanics of redemption, a means by which it might be achieved or at least glimpsed in this life.

Some do not even consider Unitarian Universalism to be a religion but a tradition of community support, intellectual exploration and spiritual practice which challenges individuals to live those universal values put forth in all religions which, if practiced without the heavy overlay of doctrine, can provide a compelling path to redemption. After all, as the Dalai Lama himself points out, "Every religion emphasizes human improvement, love, respect for others, sharing other people's suffering. On these lines every religion had more or less the same viewpoint and the same goal."

This implies redemption through trust in the power of human action, goodness and love and attention to the consequences of our action in the face of the unity of all being. This humanistic view places human beings squarely in charge of creating the conditions for peace on earth. Like the Taoist version of redemption mentioned in last week's reflections our Principles urge us to "live in a fashion that harmonizes rather than clashes with the first principles of the universe. To be yielding, supple, flexible, humble rather than obstinate, aggressive, demanding and arrogant" as prescribed by such ancient sages such as Lao Tse.

When I, in my riddle solving mode, take such a challenge really seriously, I am sometimes envious of those who opt for a more doctrinal approach which would place responsibility for my unhelpful action in the context of a depraved nature - "the devil made me do it" - with redemption through some act of repentance that comes from God.

This seems waaay more appealing than needing to carefully consider the consequences of my own actions, accept responsibility and actually take further action that may or may not result in the immediate making things right. What a pain to consider that I have inherent worth and dignity, that I as a Unitarian Universalist have some obligation to try for justice equity and compassion in human relations; that the free and responsible search for truth and meaning is just that, a search and not a destination that will appear with all the edges clear and everything in place.

I believe that this Unitarian Universalism thing, whether a religion or a tradition or a philosophy takes redemption very seriously.

My own evolving solution to the riddle of redemption rests squarely in the challenging, complicated enterprise of applying our Unitarian Universalist Principles to reconciliation in human relationship.

One of the great gifts of late middle age is that I have now had lots and lots opportunities to be redeemed through reconciliation in my personal and professional life. Here are a few things I observe.

1. In the face of “sin, ignorance, self-centeredness, fear, suffering and death” it is easier to be reconciled with reasonable people who are mutually interested in the value of continuing relationship. But we need again and again to be creating opportunities for reconciliation where the odds for “success” are at best, poor.
2. It is easier to achieve reconciliation when one or more of the parties involved is more invested in the relationship than in the particular outcome. But the effort is always as important as the outcome.
3. The right thing is often harder than we think and more often is more than we want to take on.
4. Great gains come only from great risk.
5. Reconciliation is often not immediate. It takes time for the heart to catch up to the head.
6. True reconciliation becomes redemptive when it extends over time.

A true story:

Once upon a time there was a mother of three, ages eight, ten and eleven. Divorced painfully but “amicably” some six years from the children’s father with whom she had a strong and supportive parental coalition. Enter new wife, some ten years younger than the old wife and with no previous marriage or parenting experience.

Together the three decided in a businesslike manner that the children should spend one year together with their father and new step mother before they were invited to participate in the decision about where they were to live, with one or the other parent who lived a hundred miles apart. The negotiations were civil, though the completely engaged and eager new step mother was clearly leery about the old wife who maintained that regardless of the number and marital status of parents involved, this was going to be for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, ‘til death do us part for everyone and it would be best to make the most of it.

And making the best of it, proceeded reasonably well until the middle of their eight year old’s intramural basketball season. The mother was in town on a game day. The whole family showed up for the game after which it was agreed that the mother would go for pizza with the basketball boy. Sometime during the dinner, the boy produced a flat brown paper bag. When queried about the contents, the boy confessed that it was his team photos

and indeed inside the bag there were two photos of the team, and two portraits of the boy in his uniform poised, no doubt for a free throw, and one “mom’s button”. There it was, the three inch disc with the portrait to be sported by all the moms hovering on the sidelines waiting to claim with pride some play or another and point to the star on her jacket.

There was an awkward moment and the boy pushed the button toward his mother and said, “Here, mom. This is the “mom’s button”, but don’t tell Becky. I know she really wants it.”

He knew who his mother was and he knew that there was something about this exchange that was not right. They both knew, and yet in that moment all of the dreams of being in an “intact family” bore down on them both and the mother picked up the button and pinned it to her coat. They didn’t talk much after that. When they arrived at the place that was the boy’s home now, the mother carefully removed the button from her coat and went inside. The plan was that she would drop off the boy and return in a couple of hours to pick up the other children for a visit.

Within ear shot of the departing mom, the stepmother caught the boy in the dining room “Did you get the pictures?” The excitement in her voice was palpable. The rustling of paper and then, “Where’s the mom’s button?”

“I gave it to Mom,” he said.

Two broken hearted women heading in opposite directions. One sobbing, no doubt, in her bedroom; one sobbing in the car.

In such moments, the need for redemption looms large. The challenge of justice, equity and compassion is not an ideal on a list of principles. The risk is immense; the stakes are high; the emotional load is almost too heavy to bear.

“I’m his mother,” cries the woman in the car. “Didn’t I give him birth? Who does she think she is?”

Who indeed?

How about the mother who takes her son to practices and attends all the games? Who washes his uniforms and when asked by other parents what brings her out on a night like this says with pride, “The little blond kid over there. I’m with him.”

“But I want to be that mother”, cries the mother. “I deserve this button!

And yet somehow, from some deep place inside of her? From some overarching sense of trust in the universe and a respect for the long view? She drives around the block six times, runs the errands needed to fill the space until the time of her expected return, composes her face and reenters the place that is her son’s home carrying the button. The boy meets her at the door.

“Honey,” she says extending the button, “we both know that I am your mom and nothing will ever change that. But right now, while you are living with Dad and Becky, she is really doing the mom job in her own very special way. One of those ways is that she is helping you to play basketball. She is taking you and picking you up and washing your uniform and watching your games with the other moms and so I think this button really belongs to her.”

Relief on the face of the child whose moral development encompassed the sense that this was indeed the right thing but was far from entertaining the mechanics of redemption on his own.

There was no immediate response by the newly acknowledged mom – not for many years.

But the mother had rounded a bend on the high road that opened her heart and helped her to move in time toward a fully reconciled relationship that has provided their children with far more than their full share of parenting in all of the very best ways.

About ten years later the older woman received a letter from the younger.

“We live in a culture in which many think that we should be enemies. I am so grateful that you refused to accept that. Life is too short and our children are too important to subject to anything less than models of adults who can find ways to allow them to feel loved in all ways possible. Thank you for all of the ways you helped that to happen. Thank-you especially for the mom’s button.”

This is, of course, only a tiny excerpt of a much larger story that now spans over two decades. But tiny moments, the kind that present themselves in countless even less dramatic ways every day contains the essence of redemptive reconciliation. It illustrates my observations:

In the face of “sin, ignorance, self-centeredness, fear, suffering and death” it is easier to be reconciled with reasonable people who are mutually interested in the value of continuing relationship. But we need again and again to be creating opportunities for reconciliation where the odds for “success” are at best, poor. It is easier to achieve reconciliation when one or more of the parties involved is more invested in the relationship than in the particular outcome. But the effort is always as important as the outcome. The right thing is often harder than we think and more often is more than we want to take on. Great gains come only from great risk. Reconciliation is often not immediate. It takes time for the heart to catch up to the head. True reconciliation becomes redemptive when it extends over time.

This is the season when stories of reconciliation and redemption abound.

Like the stories of Scrooge in the Christmas Carol and George Bailey in “A Wonderful Life” the longer view of human relationship supersedes the immediacy of disappointment and greed, self-centeredness and fear. But even these seem to require the intervention of angels and ghosts.

Is that what it takes to believe that we and others are capable of stepping off the path of least resistance and placing ourselves squarely on the high road where there are no guarantees of safety? A ghost or an angel? Or is it possible to build with practice over time a sustaining trust in the power of human compassion and forgiveness and love?

Last Sunday Michael shared a reading by Phillip Simmons about how winter sledding is enhanced by the risk factor. Simmons says “the essence of good sledding was fear and that is precisely what made it memorable and profoundly meaningful. That’s what made it redemptive. Fear is one of life’s great enemies, a powerful psychological hindrance to freedom and peace of mind. Any activity that provides the opportunity to face and overcome our deepest fears – including the fear of annihilation – has the potential to lift us to a new level of being.”

I personally am willing to entertain the possibility of some higher creative force in the Universe. But I also think I contribute more wholesomely to this earthly enterprise when I think it’s all up to us. – not me, mind you. Us. All of us risking rejection, facing our fears, practicing our principles in the face of a culture that seems to want to turn every difference into something irreconcilable.

Michael said last week that if our ordinary, everyday life experience proved satisfactory and if it reliably generated positive feelings of fulfillment and well-being, there would be no need for redemption. What if it is experience of reconciliation itself that makes our every day experience satisfactory? What if one solution to the riddle is that we carry with us the seeds of our own redemption?

Seems a possibility worth considering.