

To Live Deliberately

A sermon Rev. Roberta Finkelstein ©

Sunday January 14, 2018

Is there a Unitarian Universalist canon? If there were, the essay that these words come from would surely be included. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Now I must admit that I've never been all that enamored of the 19th century Transcendentalists, at least not to the extent that many of my colleagues seem to be. I am not a serious student of that history. I do know that Thoreau went off to Walden Pond and stayed for two years, trying to achieve a degree of internal philosophical consistency most of us only dream about. After two years, Thoreau returned to society. Abolitionism was becoming an urgent issue; the Fugitive Slave Act would soon put even the residents of free states in an untenable moral position.

And so, in the years after returning from the woods, Thoreau threw himself into the abolition movement. He refused to pay the poll tax that would help finance a war that would bring Texas into the Union as a slave state. While he was jailed for that offense Thoreau wrote *Civil Disobedience*. If it were up to me that is the book that would be in the UU canon! We should not sanctify Thoreau for going off into the woods, but for coming back into the world when his moral voice was needed. You know how I know all of this? Because I was at General Assembly in 2005 in Fort Worth Texas and I got to hear a fine sermon entitled "Out from Walden" by the Rev. Dr. Patrick O'Neill, who was at the time the minister of this congregation.

In that sermon Patrick made the case for the tremendous importance of *Civil Disobedience*. He reminded us of the moral imperative of liberal religion to be engaged with the world with all its messiness and suffering and pain. And he reminded us that the movement between Walden and the world is not unlike the movement many of us make between reflection and praxis. Indeed, the only way to be a consistent activist is to have a spiritual discipline that grounds you and nurtures and sustains you.

Patrick wrote, “(Thoreau’s) spirituality, nurtured in periods of pensive solitude and in his daily ramblings in the countryside, and which he recorded in a voluminous daily journal over the years, was eventually formative of Henry’s fierce moral conscience, a conscience always unafraid to speak truth to power; to take a stand for principle; to name the evils that afflicted his day. What a powerful icon he remains, what a shining example for what we in the Free Church might aspire to in our own time!”

Martin Luther King is said to have kept a copy of *Civil Disobedience* with him wherever he travelled. He memorized passages while in jail. "I read Thoreau's words," he said, "to center my spirit and to re-find my purpose, and then my courage is restored and my vision is again made clear."

This month as we ask ourselves what it means to be people of intention, it behooves us to remember that those two icons of intentionality – Thoreau and King – struggled fiercely to ensure that their words and deeds reflected their core beliefs. For Thoreau and King, living deliberately meant taking risks. Both were jailed for their principled actions. King eventually gave his life. Most of us don’t expect to ever do either of those things – go to jail or die for our beliefs. But we do understand the risk that goes hand in hand with living in such a way that our words and our actions reflect our values. Because speaking truth to power makes power

angry. Those with a vested interest in the status quo will fight fiercely to maintain it.

We saw that in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's. It wasn't just the white hooded Klansmen that practiced horrible violence to protect the culture of white supremacy. It was also the duly sworn uniformed police officers of towns and cities and states too numerous to mention. And we are seeing it again today. When the civil rights movement of the 21st century had the temerity to say, "Black Lives Matter" the forces of opposition came out with a fury. In Charlottesville they didn't even bother to put on their white robes. And young, unarmed black men continue to die at the hands of police officers and vigilantes. Can anybody argue, after reading the news of the past few days, that it was forces dedicated to the preservation of white supremacy culture that put our current President in the White House? Vulgarity doesn't matter. Ignorance doesn't matter. Laziness doesn't matter. What matters is a commitment to protecting the status quo of white, straight, patriarchal culture. Things were changing in the direction of diversity and radical equality. A revolution was underway. And now the backlash.

When Martin Luther King spoke to our General Assembly he pleaded with us not to sleep through the revolution. In 2005 Patrick O'Neill spoke the same urgent warning. Don't be lulled into withdrawal from the world, no matter how romantic that cabin in Walden may seem. Stay engaged. Continue to ask yourself, "Do my words match my values? Do my actions match my values?"

It's trite, I know. But I'm still going to ask you this: "If Unitarian Universalism were against the law, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Think about that for a moment. Or to put it another way, "Have you lived our life in such a way that the Westboro Baptist Church would picket your funeral?" I can only hope!

Those are questions for us as individuals, and as a community of faith, and as a religious movement. We have been challenged, over the past few years, to recognize the ugly and painful truth that we are not immune to the ill effects of a pervasive white supremacy culture. We have been presented with incontrovertible evidence that patriarchy is alive and well not just in the entertainment industry but in our churches as well. Racism, sexism, ableism. Ableism is the assumption that there is a norm established by people with certain kinds of bodies and minds, and that everybody who varies from that norm is in some way a lesser human.

That is why UU musicians Jason Shelton, the author of one of the best known of UU anthems, announced recently that he was changing the title and lyrics of his beloved song. (A song which, by the way, would definitely be in the UU musical canon if we had one.) Look in your teal hymnals at #1014. Now I am going to ask you to do exactly what Jason does every time he talks about this hymn in a different congregation. Take a pen or pencil and cross out the words “standing on the side of” and write in “Answering the call of.” For far too many people with mobility challenges, standing on the side of love felt painfully exclusionary. Yes, they understood the metaphor. But ‘just a metaphor’ can still be hurtful and express a cultural bias. Good guys always wear white; bad guys wear black. Just a metaphor? Times change. We become more aware of the unconscious biases that we incorporate into our language and our actions. And if we are truly committed to not sleeping through the revolution then we adapt and change, as Jason Shelton did and as we will do when we sing this hymn at the end of the service.

That brings me to an adaptation closer to home. If we, as a congregation, truly want our actions to express our values, then we need to have a serious conversation about our front doors. The front doors, the first introduction to Unitarian Universalism in general and the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington in

particular. There you will find artistically rendered homages to two historical figures: William Ellery Channing and Thomas Jefferson. When the sculpted doors were commissioned, we understood Thomas Jefferson differently than we do today. But today I have to ask, “What are we doing with an unrepentant slave holder carved into our front door?”

For years we Unitarian Universalists made the claim that the great Thomas Jefferson was one of us. He was not, ever, a Unitarian or a Universalist. He made a few references to Unitarianism that we grasped onto. One of them was that he would be content to be a “Unitarian by myself.” In other words, he ascribed to some Unitarian beliefs but had no interest in being part of or supporting or sustaining the institution that was the Unitarian church.

There was, however, an institution that he remained loyal to his entire life and that was the peculiar institution known as chattel slavery. An article in *Smithsonian Magazine*, written by Henry Wiencek in 2012, says this about Jefferson’s relationship to slavery. “The critical turning point in Jefferson’s thinking may well have come in 1792. As Jefferson was counting up the agricultural profits and losses of his plantation in a letter to President Washington that year, it occurred to him that there was a phenomenon he had perceived at Monticello but never actually measured. He proceeded to calculate it in a barely legible, scribbled note in the middle of a page, enclosed in brackets. What Jefferson set out clearly for the first time was that he was making a 4 percent profit every year on the birth of black children. The enslaved were yielding him a bonanza, a perpetual human dividend at compound interest. His plantation was producing inexhaustible human assets. The percentage was predictable. The irony is that Jefferson sent his 4 percent formula to George Washington, who freed his

slaves, precisely because slavery had made human beings into money, like “Cattle in the market,” and this disgusted him.”

And then there is Sally Hemmings. Jefferson’s mistress? Mistress is the wrong word. He may or may not have loved her. But he did own her. All her life. Jefferson freed only two slaves during his life time, and five more in his will. None of them were named Sally Hemmings. She was not his mistress; she was his sex slave. As we well know, when there is a power imbalance in a relationship, genuine consent is not possible. Thomas Jefferson owned many hundreds of human beings, of which Sally Hemmings was one. He was her master, not her lover. I cannot imagine a circumstance under which she could possibly have said, “Not tonight, Tom, I have a headache.”

After Jefferson’s death Sally was spared by Jefferson’s legitimate daughter from being sold off like many of the other slaves at Monticello. A kindness. She left the estate with several of her children having served her time. The four children Jefferson fathered with Sally who lived into adulthood also ended up free after his death. Two were freed in his will, the other two left Monticello ‘without pursuit’. It took hundreds of years, and the invention of DNA testing, for historians and Jefferson’s white descendants to finally admit that this whole sordid chapter had happened.

So, I ask again, what is Thomas Jefferson doing on our front door. Rendered fully clothed in all his finery, hovering over a half-naked ‘savage’? Take a close look at your front door and then tell me this is the best we have to offer today.

What does it mean to be a people of intention? It means to ask, over and over again, whether our words and actions are reflective of our inner values. It means to make accommodations to an ever-evolving consciousness about privilege

and history. It means learning the sometimes-unwelcome lessons that come from analyzing the impact of our words and actions versus our original intent. It means rewriting beloved songs and renaming an organization even though you have to buy new yellow t-shirts. Yes, we are no longer part of an organization called Standing on the Side of Love. It is now simply called “The Side of Love.”

And it means giving serious thought to a new front door. What should be on the front doors if not Thomas Jefferson? That will be up to you to decide. But I have a suggestion. How about glass? How about if we say, “Welcome. We’d like to show you what we most value in our religious lives. It is these people you see inside the doors. This beautiful cacophony of male or female or a little bit of each. Old or young or a little bit of each. Black or white or red or brown or a little bit of each. Please join us. But hurry; there is a revolution going on and we need to be a part of it.”