

“The Rite of Conscience”

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What a mixed bag is the stuff of conscience. I'm guessing that most of us grew up being told to listen to our conscience. What was it? Some little voice in the attic of our minds? God perhaps speaking in our hearts when we were tempted to do something we knew we shouldn't or to not do something we knew we should? How did we know the difference between right and wrong? What is right? What is wrong? Is it always point-blank clear?

Love seemed to be engraved in every expression of what was good. Love this; love that. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. And for some, “Love the Lord Thy God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind.” Well, of course, that's what we're supposed to do. It's not always so easy when we're caught in what can feel like an impossible choice between loyalty to someone we care about, no particular loyalty to someone we barely know, and harsh words on the part of the former. As we heard in the conversation with our youngsters this morning, this is no easy choice.

Where does conscience kick in and when? Is it always reliable? Can we bend our conscience to serve our immediate needs for friendship, or maybe even for basic safety? If we act out of conscience, can we assume that we act out of compassion?

In one of many encounters with people who challenged him, Jesus responded to a questioner steeped in the law. We read in the Gospel According to Luke:

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” **26** He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” **27** And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” **28** And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

29 But he, desiring to justify himself, [surprise surprise] said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” **30** Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. **34** He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. **35** And the next day he took out two denarii[c] and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ **36** Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” **37** He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Uh-oh! Not so easy. This oft-told tale is oft watered down to a story of a guy who was walking along a road and spotted someone who had obviously been badly hurt. He stopped, picked him up, took him to an inn, made sure that he was taken care of, paid the bill, and went on his merry way.

Let's back up. This is not a story about ethical pabulum.

The road to Jericho was known in Jesus' day as "the Way of Blood." In the speech he gave the day before he was murdered, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described this road and speculated on the choices presented in the parable:

"I remember when Mrs. King and I were first in Jerusalem. We rented a car and drove from Jerusalem down to Jericho. And as soon as we got on that road I said to my wife, 'I can see why Jesus used this as the setting for his parable.' It's a winding, meandering road. It's really conducive for ambushing. ... In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the 'Bloody Pass.' ... It's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking, and he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked, the first question that the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'"

But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

Let's take it a few steps further. Jesus directed this story to an audience of Jews. He too was Jewish. The "hero" of the story was a Samaritan. That's just about as extreme as saying today that the person who showed compassion was a member of Al Qaeda—or maybe even the Tea Party! Jews and Samaritans were archenemies. The Samaritans had desecrated the Jewish Temple at Passover. Where does that leave us with the notion of conscience being clear-cut? Where does that leave us with either-or morality?

Recall the wisdom of bell hooks describing "the challenge to move past dualism, the binary *either/or* thinking that dominator culture socializes everyone to see as normal." Recall the wisdom of Joanna Macy's observation that "the line between good and evil runs through the landscape of every human heart."

In the social witness process of our larger Unitarian Universalist Association, or UUA, we're invited as congregations to agree every other year on a Congregational Study/Action Issue. Proposals are submitted by congregations; one is adopted at the annual General Assembly of congregations. Over a three to four-year period, the adopted issue is studied and acted on by hundreds of our congregations. It commonly morphs into a Statement of Conscience, amended and adopted by delegates at General Assembly. Our UUA's Commission on Social Witness oversees this process. For eight years I served on this Commission; for two of these years I chaired it. It wasn't an easy task.

The most contentious issue that we addressed during my tenure was peacemaking. Congregations across our UU world wrestled with what was essentially an either-or question that drove the process:

“Should the Unitarian Universalist Association reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?”

In other words, should our Association lend a stamp of conscience to rejecting violence no matter what the circumstances?

Battles of conscience ensued, for the question was posed to elicit a yes or no response. In consultation with Unitarian Universalist scholars and activists on this matter we digested the spectrum of commentary and crafted a Statement of Conscience that moved through a gauntlet of amendment makers at General Assembly until a final Statement of Conscience was adopted.

In the opening words, it reads:

“...we commit ourselves to a radically inclusive and transformative approach to peace.”

And later into the narrative:

“For Unitarian Universalists, the exercise of individual conscience is holy work. Conscientious discernment leads us to engage in the creation of peace in different ways. We affirm a range of individual choices...”

What those choices are, I won't detail. Core to the reality of conscience that I wrestle with this morning is the struggle to diffuse the framing of ethical and moral choices in terms of “either-or,” because it diminishes the right of conscience. On any issue, on any matter, and for any election, your conscience and her conscience and his conscience and my conscience will vary.

The power of the story of what happened on that perilous road to Jericho lies in an upsetting of assumptions about what was the right thing to do and what could be expected from whom. The “good guys” walked on by, and the “bad guy” stopped in what we can all agree was an act of compassion, an act of conscience. Who knew?

My question for all of us is this: Why would we need to advance the right of conscience if conscience were uniform from person to person?

On the other hand, some would ask, “Why bother?” in the election that has already begun in this nation. On Election Day itself, hundreds of thousands will find it close to impossible to get to the polls, given the devastation wreaked by Hurricane Sandy. Some states are establishing alternative routes to exercising the right to vote. Some states are making it even more difficult to exercise that right.

How to wrestle with and resolve this decidedly non-democratic state of affairs. I return to the morning of April 27, 1994. I had picked up *The New York Times* and was struck immediately and indelibly by the image on the front page. There was a line stretching far into

the horizon of women and men who had not voted in their lifetimes. This was their chance to exercise their right of conscience. It was hard-won. They would stand hours, days if need be, to vote. In the words of *Times* journalist Francis X. Clines:

“Throng of elderly and infirm voters came forward in the predawn Tuesday to sweep aside three centuries of white racist rule and euphorically open the first fully democratic elections in South Africa.

Three out of four were newly enfranchised black voters, the vanguard of the nation's long-oppressed black majority, who patiently crowded polling booths and celebrated the power of the ballot in their ascension from the hard subjugation of apartheid.

Despite measures taken to intimidate, including a bomb blast and insufficient ballots,

“The new political majority's determination was signaled across the nation by the sight of the old and the sick arriving with wheelchair, crutch and cane, and in the arms of loved ones, too, to cast the first ballots in three days of voting.”

The right of conscience had become a veritable rite—R-I-T-E—of conscience.
[Distribute photos]

So much was at stake.

So much is at stake as we go to the polls on Tuesday, if we haven't done so already, and exercise our right of our conscience.

Just because we are Unitarian Universalists, we can't assume that our conscience is collective, communal, and uniform; but the right of conscience in our faith and in this nation calls us to practice it. How can we possibly ingest the image of that long line of black South Africans exercising their hard-won right without exercising our own?

As of last night, CNN reported that

“...in Connecticut... between 90 and 95 polling locations were still without power, according to Secretary of State Denise Merrill.”

As for the hard-hit Long Island,

“...William Biamonte, Democratic Commissioner for the [Nassau] county board of elections...is concerned power will not be back up at polling sites in Nassau County.”

Nassau County is home to 900,000 voters! Biamonte is hopeful and pulling out all the stops to ensure that folks do get to the polls.

“Come hell or high water, and we got both of them,” [he proclaimed], “people will be voting on Tuesday. It's gonna happen, it's a question of how much of an inconvenience it will be.”

Return to those long winding lines in the South African sun in April 1994:

“They stood in the sun or hobbled slowly forward in long lines that snaked down urban streets and around shantytown hovels.”

Whence come our conscience and our will to act on it? A cultivation of compassionate behavior undertaken by parents and teachers from the time we are young children helps, but there are no guarantees. What form our conscience takes is some mysterious mélange of nature and nurture. And who knows, as we set forth on the road to the polls, the course of our thoughts, the unexpected happenings en route, and our willingness to stop, called by an inner tug of compassion, then to move on and cast our vote mindful that that “the line between good and evil runs through the landscape of every human heart.”

Amen.

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