

**Association Sunday: Keeping the Center and Reaching Out  
with "Morality, Compassion, Decency, Wisdom, and So Forth"**

A poem by ee cummings:

let it go - the  
smashed word broken  
open vow or  
the oath cracked length  
wise - let it go it  
was sworn to  
go

let them go - the  
truthful liars and  
the false fair friends  
and the boths and  
neithers - you must let them go they  
were born  
to go

let all go - the  
big small middling  
tall bigger really  
the biggest and all  
things - let all go  
dear

so comes love

~ e. e. cummings ~

## I. Our Fondest Wish and our Ideals

Some days I don't find it easy to feel hopeful about the cause of justice. Sometimes it feels like the opposite of justice to live in a nation with the world's highest percentage of people in jail; it feels like the opposite when I see the number of people in poverty and ignorance. And it feels like the opposite of justice to see that the ones who should be in jail. . . seldom go. Sometimes it feels like the grand prophecies of justice rolling down like waters, of swords beaten into plowshares, or the Promised Land that Martin Luther King saw are mere chimeras—wish fulfillment for those with over-developed empathy and over-heated imaginations. Some days I really wish that I could be a realist. On those days I ask myself if “justice” is just an abstraction that no judge and no jury—and no society—has any intention of living up to. After all—let's get real—those Hebrew prophets were foretelling floods of justice and lions lying down with lambs exactly because those things did not happen in the societies in which the prophets lived. Sure, righting wrongs with an overwhelming show of moral and ethical power is a compelling image. But can it EVER happen?

I have those sorts of days. Then I remind myself that these are precisely the types of questions that create fear and despair, and therefore these are exactly the questions religions have developed to answer.

And I remind myself that ee cummings has it right:

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## II The Reality: Naming It

A recent article in Newsweek magazine entitled "Is Your Baby Racist?" discusses new research into how children develop racist attitudes. The article and the research focus on racism, but the findings can be applied to any difference. The research shows that children are very aware of difference. Now, my immediate response is, "Well. . .duh!" Human beings are tribal animals. In order to survive, humans developed strong taboos and a strong propensity toward group solidarity. Of course we see difference. (I'll come back to that point.)

But the research goes on to indicate that this innate propensity toward seeing difference does not necessarily lead to a value bias. And this is where the research gets interesting.

The researchers put kids in red or blue tee shirts. When that fact went unremarked by teachers, the kids began to develop a bias toward people who had the same color of tee shirt they were wearing. They attributed positive characteristics to kids in their color of tee shirt and negative to those wearing the other color. BUT when the teachers NAMED the difference and began talking about it, the bias went away.

No, no one will miss the fact that another person is young or old, of a different body style, in a wheelchair or not, has a different color of skin, is wearing a different style of clothing, or if two women or two men are holding hands. We notice difference. We're human. We can't help it. What we CAN help is how we deal with the difference. What value we put on the difference. We can name it; talk about it; and realize that our own cultural location is not the only center of truth and light in the human family. We are capable of that choice.

We can,

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My theory is—and I didn't come up with the theory certainly—my theory is that the religious impulse is evolving toward an all inclusive vision of what the Dalai Lama calls “morality, compassion, decency, wisdom, and so forth.” The theory goes that sometime back there, in what is known as the Axial Age, people began to suspect that there was some obligation to treat people outside their own tribes with decency. And here I will come back to that point about evolution and tribalism. When we argue that something is part of our psyches based on survival on the savanna or in the forest or on the steppes, we must remember that ALL those places are now our home. Just as our fight –or-flight response can save our lives or kill us with stress, so our tribalism can do what it does to us today—from gangs to segregated neighborhoods to laws concerning who can marry whom—or we can realize that the old stuff. . . is old stuff. And that old stuff needs to be trashed or recycled. With that realization, we can embrace a religious impulse that began sometime around 500 BCE of love and compassion and inclusiveness rather than of morality and punishment and separatism. If there's anything we can learn from looking at human religions, it is that we human beings can be the Wrath of God. . .or the Love of God. We can be the fists of God or the open arms of God. We have the choice and we abrogate our moral responsibilities when we make the wrong choice. We can hate and accentuate difference, or we can be con-viv-ial: Con, with, viv, life, ial, in a manner. We can hug our old prejudices or we can embrace the diversity of life. And the complexity of life. This is the moral and ethical choice of every human. The fact of our existence requires us to choose.

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### III Focusing on our Ideals

We learn this by focusing on the core values of our religious tradition, because, as I have argued, religion is about dealing with the horrors we see around, is about healing body and soul (or if the word "soul" bothers you, body and limbic system).

If you live in a tribe whose language is disappearing, no matter the health of your body, your soul is in pain.

If you live in a group that has traditionally lived by fishing and the fishing is disappearing, no matter the health of your body, your soul is in pain.

When you cannot legally marry the person you love, no matter how healthy your body is, your soul is in pain.

If human religions are slowly evolving toward a universalized vision of human compassion, in which loving our neighbor is about loving everyone, everywhere, then Unitarian Universalism is at the forefront of that evolution, exactly because we are not hide-bound in creed and scriptural prescription. That is the core of what we claim in our religious tradition. That is our center.

Allow me to go a step further. The hate-mongering, the talk show pundits, the elected officials who violate basic decorum, the preachers damning GLBT folks to hell—these are confused, soul-sick people. No matter the health of their bodies. Paranoia and narcissism have overwhelmed them. All they see is difference and all that is different they have named “bad.” It is a failure of “morality, compassion, decency, wisdom, and so forth.” We do well to look for the source of this soul-illness, for the source of the pain rather than merely condemning it as different. It is our obligation to help heal. That is the core of our religious tradition.

Our religious obligation to stamp out neo-racism is just as compelling as was our spiritual obligation to march in Selma, Alabama. Our religious obligation to work for marriage equality is just as compelling as was our work for gender equality. Our obligation to HEAL a soul-sick society is as real now as was our moral obligation to abolish slavery or capital punishment. It is our religious obligation to help people find a higher spiritual calling than bombing abortion clinics or murdering transgender people in the street.

There’s a lot of talk about what Unitarian Universalists believe and don’t believe and on and on and on. I believe we DO have a core value, a non-negotiable value system, and that is the covenantal agreements we make concerning how we will treat each other. That goes all the way back to the Mayflower Compact, and before that, the British Puritan understanding that people matter more than institutions. We agree to respect the INHERENT worth and dignity of every person. It’s not “proven” worth or “demonstrated” worth but INHERENT worth. Which is rather of a different thing. It gets at what the Dalai Lama calls “morality, compassion, decency, wisdom, and so forth.” This is the center that we reach out from.

When Theodore Parker began to preach, in the 1840s, that his Christianity required him to resist slavery, he was preaching against the prevailing orthodoxy, which preached that the Bible condoned slavery. That is our tradition: a willingness to think outside the box in order to see the moral and ethical questions with more clarity and new eyes.

When Margaret Sanger began talking about reproductive choice, the only place in the United States she could do that without fear of arrest was in the Unitarian pulpit. . .because our forebears were willing to look at morality with new eyes.

We agree together to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That often means breaking tradition; means flying in the face of social norms; means ignoring folk psychology and bad science and easy, old answers. It means not consulting old texts written in other times and circumstances, means not immediately consulting Dead White Guys every time a new idea comes along. It means that most frightening of things: thinking outside of our prejudices. Ignoring our gut reactions.

It means seeking justice for all people, no more questions asked.

Respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person is a very difficult commitment. It is a commitment to "morality, compassion, decency, wisdom, and so forth."

#### IV What You Can Do Today

In the Time for all Ages this morning, you perhaps noticed that I read the book King and King without comment afterward—I didn't ask the kids what they thought about the story, or if they found it in any way odd. I just read it. As a very nice story. My deep hope for those children is that they will grow up in a society in which the story of two young men falling in love and living happily ever after will be in no way worthy of comment besides "what a nice story." None of us here this morning grew up in that society. We don't live in that society now. But, we can.

My wish for those children is that they will live in a world in which, however they choose to define their gender, they can walk down the street as safely as anyone else.

My wish for those children is that, whatever gender they choose to identify with, they can get the job they are qualified for and keep it, and get paid according to their ability.

My wish for those children is that they can marry whoever they love—no questions asked. My wish for those children is that “coming out” will be no big deal.

And perhaps those children, the children of this congregation, will indeed achieve all or most of those goals, but my fervent wish is that all children, everywhere, be born with inherent worth and dignity. That is the very real spiritual work of “morality, compassion, decency, wisdom, and so forth.”

Yes, religion and theology and the history of Universalism and Unitarianism are all abstract subjects at one level. And we can certainly keep them in that closet. But all of that comes down to today and how we act in the world. . . today. It all comes down to “morality, compassion, decency, wisdom, and so forth.”

Today, you can celebrate National Coming out Day by signing a petition, getting more information, and committing yourself to working for the cause of marriage equality. I don't see this as a political issue. This is a moral issue. This is an issue of the separation of church and state. This is an issue on which we can reach down to our core values and out to diversity and difference. On National Coming Out Day, I ask that you come out on the side of love and commit yourself to justice and equality. It's hard work, but it's what we do.

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So may it be.