

ON WHAT DO WE STAND...AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?
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LAKEHEAD UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP

I recently heard a story about a woman who was driving while stressed out, as some of us often are...in this case, late for work, talking on her cell phone and trying to organize her many to-do lists all at the same time. The driver in front of her stopped for a yellow light, causing her to miss a chance to sneak through the intersection, and she began screaming in frustration, honking her horn, and making angry gestures of an unseemly nature.

As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked into the face of a very serious police officer. He ordered her to exit the car with her hands up, and took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed, and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, she was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects. "I'm very sorry for the mistake," he said. "You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn and flipping off the guy in front of you. I noticed the 'Practice Random Acts of Kindness' bumper sticker and the 'Hate is not a family value' bumper sticker ...and I assumed you had stolen the car!"

I chose to tell this joke for a couple of reasons...Perhaps most importantly, it brings home the disconnect between what we say we believe and how we act. Why else would there be so many adages like: Practice what you preach. Actions speak louder than words. Do as I say, not as I do. Or Paul's words in Romans 7:15..."I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate." Apparently, this disconnect is an age-old human condition, one that we all share.

We could just accept said condition as inevitable and immutable, and simply say, as we so often do, "Ah, well, it's the thought that counts." Now I'm

sure you have been, as I have been, on the short end, the receiving end, of that comment... when an obligation was overlooked, a birthday missed, a good intention ignored... and I can't say that the sentiment is really very comforting. "Ah well, it's the thought that counts." Never mind that I was left to carry the ball on a project, never mind that I only have one birthday each year and that I remembered your birthday, never mind that I am again disappointed in your behaviour. Whatever.

Whatever. Has this been as prevalent among youth here in Canada as it's been in the states? Whatever. Now that I say that, I am cognizant of the potentially destructive impact of that sentiment. Its implication is that indeed, it doesn't matter what we think, what we believe, and how we act. Nothing really matters. Whatever. Suddenly I see the potential repercussions of a "whatever" culture...and like Andrew's angry words in the children's story, it spills out, snowballing from one thing to another, contaminating everything it touches. If nothing matters, nothing has meaning...well then, what's the point? Well, case in point, like a decision not to decide is a decision, to believe that nothing really matters is a belief that does really matter!

Last Sunday, I asked for a bit of help with this sermon. I asked for your response to the question...why are values/principles/ethics important? I had thirteen thought-provoking responses...thank you...one of which dealt directly with this kind of chain progression, or the interconnectedness of our thoughts and deeds, saying that values, ethics and principles do quite literally structure our lives, because thoughts precede actions, and if those thoughts are wholesome, they can shape our actions and lives in positive ways.¹

Yes, they can shape our actions. Certainly, the thought, the value, the ethic, the principle is important, as it (usually) precedes action, but the thought cannot be the only thing that counts. This brings to mind one theological

¹ David Belrose

position of our Unitarian and Universalist forebearers, who could not accept the orthodox stance, that God alone grants salvation and that it is through faith (or thoughts, or beliefs) that one is saved. For our heretical ancestors, God did not stand in power and judgment, but rather was a co-creative and loving force, who empowered people to act in ways that would bring about a just and compassionate society.² They insisted that faith alone does not ensure salvation. They did not think that thoughts, in and of themselves, could change the world. It is not only the thought that counts. Action, compassionate and just behaviour, integrity within our precious moral agency...these, ultimately, are what makes a difference in the world. If our actions don't back up our beliefs, then what we believe becomes empty, a joke really.

You know, bumper stickers are very common in the US, but not so much here. When I arrived in Thunder Bay, I had a car that sported several bumper stickers, political ones, and many of you commented on them. Perhaps they made a larger statement here because they stood out. But having a bumper sticker, like making a statement about what one believes, is certainly no guarantee that the driver lives those beliefs. Likewise, making a statement of belief, in creed, in vow, or in bumper sticker, is not enough. And in turn, just because the one who displays the bumper stickers doesn't behave according to them in the moment, doesn't mean she doesn't hold values. But I have to wonder how her actions might have been different if they had rung true to her beliefs. And perhaps more importantly, what greater impact those values would have on the world had her actions supported them.

Now, I have to tell you that I changed the opening joke. I believe I would have told it at my peril if I had told it in its original version, which used another set of bumper stickers, making another faith tradition the brunt of its humour.

² Bruce T. Marshall, *A Holy Curiosity: Stories of a Liberal Religious Faith*, p. 64-65.

Perhaps it would have been funnier that way. We do seem to get some twisted (and I do think it's twisted) satisfaction in laughing at the vapidness of another's values, but hear this...for all our high-faluting, great-sounding, liberal principles, we are not exempt. We don't always live our principles either

This whole question of values is being held up by the work of the Way Forward Task Force, who have arrived at the foundational premise that everything that this congregation does should be informed by and conform to our shared values. If you read the communiqué from this task force in the September newsletter, you know that they have focused, in the first five months of their work, on exploring and defining what LUF's values are. Today after the service that committee will be presenting some of their discoveries so far and asking for your feedback. It is their firm belief, and mine, that understanding our grounding and our roots, and acting in accordance with our principles, should provide the basis for any decisions that are to be made. (And looking into the future, note that on October 14, from 1-4pm, we will have a workshop on spiritually-based decision making to further this understanding.)

On what do we stand? This is a value-laden question. Exploring this question has been chosen as a theme for Sunday services for this year. Of course, not every Sunday will focus on this theme, but we will return, again and again, to the exploration of the values and principles that make us who we are, that direct our behaviour, and which possibly give us our 'unique' identity. We will pay some special attention to how to actually live these values. In a couple of weeks, I will look at how we got here - what has happened historically to bring us to these values - and in future services, I plan for us to look at several key values in depth.

On what do we stand? is not a particularly UU notion. We live in a completely different paradigm than those who claim to be standing on the rock,

or on the solid ground of truth. I am slightly flummoxed by the need to claim a place to stand because I appreciate the Buddhist principle of impermanence. Which is to say, we can't count on anything firm, that impermanence is the essence of everything. Buddhism would have us stop struggling against the ever-changing nature of things and in that way, to come into harmony with reality. But I don't think such harmony with impermanence is the same thing as saying "Whatever." Understanding the true nature of things as impermanent takes a great deal of mindfulness, of awareness, of curiosity, and of true appreciation for the ongoing creativity of the universe. As was mentioned in the RE workshop yesterday, holding onto one's beliefs in the context of openness, requires one to believe something that may change tomorrow.³

And somehow, in this, is one of the great challenges of Unitarian Universalism. We are here because we respond to that call toward curiosity and openness. We are here because we are unwilling to accept unchanging, dogmatic beliefs. We are here because we believe that our actions, in this world, have great meaning, especially in that they give value to the only life that we have. Accepting that things are going to change, perhaps even our core principles, takes a great deal of courage and an even greater degree of tensile strength. I believe that our commitment to ongoing exploration makes our beliefs even more dear, because we have chosen to hold firmly to something for a time, while knowing that one day we may have to let it go.

You know, another thing I appreciate about the opening joke is the presence of a values police! Could a person really be arrested for not living their values? What if we could be pulled over and booked for not operating in accordance with our principles? I'm afraid that our jails would be overflowing, and must admit that sometimes I'd be one of the inmates. But, this is not our

³ Trudi Jones

way. We believe in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, allowing each person to form their own beliefs and to be responsible for their own thoughts and deeds. For me then, that police work is one role of a religious community...to hold each other accountable, to remind each other of what we say we stand for, to inspire one another to act with integrity, and to be that encouragement toward individual, and collective, spiritual and moral growth.

There's been a lot of discussion, within this congregation and in the wider movement, about our statement of principles (if you ever need to refresh your memory on them, they're printed on one of the first pages of the hymnal.) Are they complete? Do they really represent who we are? Are they distinctive? Do they have any power? Are they meaningful?

I had something of a personal breakthrough about our principles when working on this sermon. I guess I've always thought they were called "principles" in the sense of basic assumptions, or beliefs. But I see now that they can be seen as principles in the sense of "standards of behaviour." In this light, they claim that Unitarian Universalism is a principled faith, that we are people of principled action...that we have principles, ground rules if you will, from which we operate.

The thirteen responses I received to my question last Sunday seemed to carry some common assumptions, which include: 1) that values, ethics and principles are directly related to our actions, 2) that they exist in service of the common good rather than for individual gain, and 3) that they must be fully integrated into one's lifestyle. Assuming those things, and looking at it from the reverse side, if we don't know what we stand upon, if we are not a principled people, then we cannot count on our actions having positive effect, we will be self-serving only, and we cannot claim lives of integrity. I don't know about you, but I want my life to have more meaning than that.

In 1921, Lewis B. Fisher, Universalist minister and Dean of Ryder Divinity School, then connected with University of Chicago Divinity School, wrote:

“Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move. Or we are asked to state our position. Again we can only answer that we are on the march.

We do not stand still, nor do we defend any immovable positions, theologically speaking. We grow and we march, as all living things forever must do. The main questions with Universalists are not where we stand but which way we are moving, not what positions we defend but which way we are marching. Our main interest is to perceive what is true progress, and to keep our movements in line with that....”⁴

Sounds to me like LB Fisher had some Buddhist tendencies! And, if we agree with him, then what we stand upon is not a set of beliefs, but on our ability to move, to see what needs to be done, and to take principled action. That is, action that is informed and inspired by our values. It matters what we stand on, because we stand on the belief that what we do matters, that our behaviour influences the direction of the world. We can claim to value kindness, but until we practice it constantly rather than randomly, that kindness can't get much of a foothold. We can slap a bumper sticker on the back of our car, and proclaim our position to the world, but ultimately, if we're going to get anywhere, we've got to get in the car and drive!

We're going to sing in a moment a song that I have known since I was a child living in South Dakota. I have a memory from that time of walking through a cow pasture, and noticing a lone tree standing by a tiny creek, and bursting into song, this song, albeit with different verses. Perhaps as a movement of movers, it is counter-intuitive to think of our beliefs as an

⁴ Ernest Cassara, *Universalism in America*, pp. 253-4

immovable tree, and yet, as Sophia Fahs Lyons wrote, our beliefs are like a pliable tree, ever growing in the upward thrust of life. May it be so.