

Standing Up (or Sitting Down) for Your Values

The impetus for this sermon came from a member who requested a sermon about the dichotomy between pragmatism and staying true to one's values. They posed this dilemma: "Take someone who is a pacifist living in Ukraine. This person believes that using violence to settle disputes is abhorrent, so they go to Poland to stay true to deeply held values. 'Is it OK for my brothers and cousins to fight the Russians for my freedom?'" Of course, such a person may incur the disdain of others, but they might support Ukraine from abroad as a medic, physical therapist, or computer guru. They won't get combat medals, but they might perform essential services. I will today expand on the question to consider how we stay true to our values as we face dilemmas in our lives.

Since violent social change would be contrary to our guiding principles of the search for truth and meaning and destructive of the interdependent web of all beings, a devotion to nonviolent change is how Unitarian Universalists support our values. We have a long tradition of writing letters, attending strikes, demonstrations, and vigils, and meeting to understand subcultures different from our own. But despite avowed nonviolence, there may be violent reactions. When Martin Luther King, Jr., asked Unitarian Universalists for help with the Selma, AL protests, over 500 Unitarian Universalists responded. The Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. James Reeb, and UU layperson, Ms. Viola Liuzzo, were both killed there, and President Lyndon Johnson referenced Reeb's martyrdom four days later when he introduced the Voting Rights Act to a joint session of Congress. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered Reeb's eulogy: "His death was a result of a sensitive religious spirit. His crime was that he dared to live his faith; he placed himself alongside the disinherited black brethren of this community." ("A Witness to the Truth," UU World, May/June 2001, pg. 21)

Gandhi called his method of social change "Truth force," because he presented the truth of injustice to someone he considered unfair--with a loving attitude. His goal was reaching the hearts of those opposing him and appealing to their moral conscience. He intended it to be a disciplined, nonviolent presentation of the truth that all humans are created equal and

deserve respect. Gandhi thought the ultimate benefit from nonviolent “truth force” is that over-reactions of violent rebellion and the often-oppressive backlash can largely be avoided. People’s hearts can often be changed with nonviolence.

Obama put a quote in his Oval Office rug from Martin Luther King, Jr., who several times quoted Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” (1853) A turn toward justice is not automatic as a response to nonviolent dialogue, and the particular people who perpetrate unjust actions now may not change in the near future, but their children or grandchildren might apply their independent moral training in fairness and be persuaded toward equity. Nonviolent truth force alerts people that they must think twice before participating in violent, prejudicial behavior because in this modern era of television and cell phone videos millions of far-flung onlookers will express their anguished disapproval of injustice.

Nonviolent truth force has changed its focus as the media has expanded. Demonstrations, sit-ins, and marches are not simply between opposing parties but play to a wide media audience. When the Civil Rights movement exposed racial injustice for the whole world to witness on TV, it had an effect on international relations. America lost prestige with people all over the world and our competition with Communism suffered. People in Maine, Wisconsin, and Wyoming could no longer rest on their ignorance as an excuse for not confronting racism. Here’s this from Ryan Holiday:

“Often injustice lies in what you aren’t doing, not only in what you are doing.’--Marcus Aurelius, MEDITATIONS, 9.5 “History abounds with evidence that humanity is capable of doing evil, actively and passively. In some of our most shameful moments—from slavery to the Holocaust to segregation to the murder of Kitty Genovese--guilt wasn’t limited to perpetrators but to ordinary citizens who, for a multitude of reasons, declined to get involved. “It’s that old line: all evil needs to prevail is for good men to do nothing. It’s not enough to just NOT do evil. You must also be a force for good in the world, as best you can. (Ryan Holiday, THE DAILY STOIC, pg. 223)

“Getting involved” and “a force for good in the world” are usually thought of narrowly as actions like demonstrations or sit-ins. But Gandhi and King emphasized developing discipline beforehand, in one’s day-to-day lifestyle, as a nonviolent truth force struggle. Preparation, through practice, is necessary in order that fear of violence and angry reactions do not distract us from the goal of social change. Our own angry reactions and impulsive responses could, otherwise, blow back on the goal of nonviolent change.

The disciplines necessary for “truth force” struggles are multi-level, and start with study and discussion, lead to service to others, and culminate in quiet determination.

What I mean by study and discussion was outlined previously by John Scheuneman when he spoke during the summer, quoting: “In a large Web survey, Jonathan Haidt found that [political] liberals put a lopsided moral weight on harm and fairness while playing down group loyalty, authority, and purity. Conservatives instead place a moderately high weight on all five.” (Steven Pinker, “The Moral Instinct,” New York Times Magazine, January 13, 2008)

Of course, that liberalism describes UU’s well. Since 90% of us are come-outers from another religion or way of thinking about ethics, clearly we have downgraded group loyalty—as it was taught to us. Once that group loyalty is broken in favor of a more sophisticated ethical stance, there is no going back. Our bond is not to this group per se, but to central unifying principles informing good ethics. Adherence to Authority likewise goes down because we freely question our own previous assumptions. We don’t necessarily reject everything the group we were born into approved of, but we evaluate it reasonably for ourselves. Purity gets downgraded because purity (as defined by disregarded authorities) may have unfairly penalized people for having natural desires and behaviors. I was at a street fair recently when two business owners manning a marketing booth asked me what happened that a church in town had dissolved. I said that they stopped getting new people, in part because they disapproved of same-sex orientations, and anyone may be or can identify someone in their friend

network, family, or workplace who is gay or lesbian. People who recognized this were put off from attending that church. They both nodded in recognition.

Further, Jonathan Haidt was being politically partisan when he used the term “lopsided,” instead of the more neutrally descriptive “emphasized” or “focused.” Truth force is about calling all concerned parties to dialogue about disagreements. Once there is a reasonable dialogue, anyone involved might change their views, might acquire more empathy for others, and might move toward change. We do not challenge oppressive forces because we are different, but because our principles are calling authorities to account for their racist, sexist, or exploitative policies. Prove us wrong, and we will change.

The basic truth force discipline that we can do right here is to meet to study ethical issues on Sunday and in adult religious education classes. I heard you; I have taken it to heart that you want to discuss ethics and I am studying how to do that effectively. I was initially discouraged, because the Unitarian Universalist Association bookstore and Amazon were unhelpful, but Jane Lawrence and the Rev. David Bryce helped me locate some curriculum resources. Study and discussion were necessary in the years preceding Rosa Parks sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She didn't just take it into her head to sit in the “Whites Only” section one day; years of planning went into the boycott and preparing a substitute transportation system, built on years of workshops, discussion, and practice before initiating action.

Some disciplined truth force is personal service. Daily practice of ethical service provides the underlying discipline necessary for quiet determination under extreme stress. One of my clients unexpectedly, catastrophically became the custodial grandmother for a new-born at the age of 52. She went shopping at a baby supply store and told the clerk what she needed in a baby stroller and how her daughter's intellectual, emotional, and financial limits resulted in her daughter's baby needing another caretaker. The clerk--of a different race, gender, age, and subculture--not only found enough discounts and coupons to lower the

price to less than a third of list, he put the stroller together for her. That's service based on empathy and adherence to an ethic that goes beyond the profit motive. We all need to practice the discipline in daily life of seeing what others need in order to thrive.

Other truth force action is social. "Dan Barker initiated the Home Gardening Project in 1984 and has since built, free of charge, more than fourteen hundred raised-bed vegetable gardens for the aged, the disabled, single mothers, and caring institutions." He began a foundation to help others start garden projects, an "effort predicated on the notion that we're all in this together, that nothing gets done unless you do it, that impoverishment is nonselective, and need universal." (Dan Barker, "Payday," THE SUN, March 1999, pg. 25) This form of truth ripples out through society because it not only provides food, it witnesses to people caring for others. We can continue to support demonstrations for equality as we demonstrate equality among ourselves. Our acceptance, more than tolerance, will welcome all who find no home elsewhere.

Finally, truth force implies that we must recognize the inclusiveness of a nonviolent struggle for cultural change. I know people who actively engage other cultures, whether it is an Episcopal priest who raised funds to rebuild a mosque in Afghanistan that American forces had bombed or the priest who attends a weekly drumming circle in Harlem or the Pleasantville Clergy Association that includes Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Unitarian Universalist voices. People of all cultures have the possibility of stepping aside from oppressive authority (as they know it) in order to assert the universal right to equality.

As we invest in truth force, we will continue our studies and discussion, our service to others, and our reaching out to cultures we would otherwise know superficially. Our ethics tend to center about caring that others should not be harmed more than caring about authority, group loyalty, or politics. Our ethics-- like those of a hypothetical Ukrainian who refuses to shoot people for their nation--see each individual as responsible for making a difficult choice to respect the interdependent web of all life. I was once asked by a scholarly journal to review a book that studied the

Israeli soldiers who refused to fight in Israel's war in Lebanon. The author found that "the refusers' action symbolizes a strong rejection of a traditional and historically respected norm of collective struggles for survival, combined with a readiness for self-sacrifice for principles of justice." (Ruth Linn, Not Shooting and Not Crying, pg. 129) Unitarian Universalism is not for everyone because not everyone wants to give up an easy moral certainty to anxiously question comfortable assumptions. Truth force is a demanding, sometimes dangerous, and exciting alternative to oppression. Truth force is a complicated weighing of options for peace. Let us continue.

The consequences of committing to violent revolution are well-known in the case of failure to prevail but perhaps less understood are the consequences of succeeding at violent revolution. Repeatedly, parallel events to the successful French Revolution have played out in various countries, as rivals killed or exiled each other and the chaos was later resolved by a dictator. The Cuban Revolution is but one of many examples, as Castro consolidated his power with prisons and firing squads.

Gandhi called it "Truth force," to convey that this is a cooperative method of seeking understanding for each other in a conflict. Truth force was shadowed by violence in Gandhi's time because there were several violent anticolonial forces attacking the English forces in India, and the English apparently decided they would rather deal with Gandhi than with violent revolutionaries. A wise move. The allegation of implicit violence was leveled at Gandhi and King by those in power, who may have been projecting their anxiety on others. Another example: Two years ago, a racist "promposal" went viral in Pleasantville. The high school principal presented his response—three high school lectures on diversity and inclusion—at a Pleasantville Clergy Association breakfast. I attempted to engage the principal by pointing out that lecturing late adolescents was ineffectual; the research seems to support a view that different groups working and playing together become more mutually tolerant. I then added that I had a young woman living with me who is a Guatemalan immigrant and I asked if the high school had a program for people whose native language was not English. He adamantly answered, "No." The background here is that there is a history of racist and anti-Semitic incidents in

Pleasantville. I tried to engage the principal in a discussion of how racism and antisemitism can best be lessened and added Blanca's education as an afterthought. I could tell from his facial expression that he was unhappy, but it was only two years later, when our lawyer was pressuring the high school in court for remedial compensation, that he read my demeanor as "I was about to jump over the table" at him. He denied that I had mentioned my daughter from Guatemala, but he later testified that he had asked his staff if anyone had called to register a Hispanic student.

In the last week before my graduation from college, gunfire occasionally echoed in the hills on our rural campus. Members of Students for a Democratic Society, SDS, were firing in target practice for "the Revolution." I was acquainted with many of them, friendly if not friends. A week or two after graduation, I read a New York Times article describing how the ROTC building on the University of Pennsylvania had been blown up, without injury to people or loss of life, and three of my former classmates were "persons of interest." I knew that two of them had come from very comfortable upper-middle class homes and one was the son of a prominent physician. This kind of background had spawned leaders of rebellions in the past such as Lenin, Castro, Che Guevara, Mao Tse Tung, Ho Chi Minh, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, etc. Such people had time to study and discuss important issues. They developed their politics through study and debate in protected environments. Fifteen years later, I ran into one of those "persons of interest" at an alumni gathering and learned that he had gone underground for a number of years and then became a kindergarten teacher in Brooklyn. The uncomfortable consequences he suffered by going underground were comparatively light compared to the many revolutionaries imprisoned or killed throughout history.