

Freedom Not to Care?

Guns, Idols, and Freedom from Consequences

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

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Rev. Paul Beckel

Sacred stuff resides in that wooden stock and blue steel when ordinary hands can possess such an extraordinary instrument that gives the most common man the most uncommon of freedoms that symbolize the full measure of human dignity and liberty.

Charlton Heston, as NRA President in 1998

Seven Things that Could Destroy Us

- *Wealth Without Work*
- *Pleasure Without Conscience*
- *Knowledge Without Character*
- *Business Without Ethics*
- *Science Without Humanity*
- *Religion Without Sacrifice*
- *Politics Without Principle*

Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

GATHERING SONG

I Wish I Knew How #151

WELCOME

Everything seemed a little bit off to me this week. I'm not sure what it was. Jet lag, perhaps from the daylight savings time shift, and the loss of some afternoon sun. Election hangover, compounded by the ambiguity of recounts still unfinished.

But it is good to be together.

Ten years ago this summer, the Tennessee Valley UU Congregation in Knoxville was attacked by an individual who spoke of his desire to kill liberals, killing two people and wounding seven others. We light the chalice today and repeat our covenant in memory of these people and in re-commitment to the spirit of love. [light]

NEW MEMBER WELCOMING CEREMONY

PHOENIX ENSEMBLE

Donde Hay

READING

by Rev Lynn Ungar

George Zimmerman was acquitted of murdering Trayvon Martin. Apparently he was allowed to "stand his ground" against a young man whom he deemed dangerous by virtue of the fact that the boy was African American and wearing a hoodie. Trayvon, it seems, was not allowed to stand his ground against the man who was stalking him, first by car and then on foot, because, you know, white people aren't dangerous. Until they kill you.

What I want to know now is what I'm supposed to tell my daughter, an African-American teenager. Maybe, since she's a girl, she won't be seen as quite so threatening by white strangers on the street. Maybe, when she starts driving, she won't be pulled over by the cops for "driving while black"—at least not as often as if she were a boy. (Lord, here I was just worried about when my teen starts driving because, you know, Teens. Driving.) Maybe she will just be followed in stores when she goes shopping. Maybe men will just make assumptions about the sexual availability of my beautiful girl.

But I have to explain it to her. I have to explain why George Zimmerman literally got away with murder, and why so many people seem to think that's OK. I have to explain how Trayvon was armed with a sidewalk—a sidewalk!—which somehow made his young black presence more of a threat than a white man with a gun. I have to explain, because she's being raised by white parents, and as a child she has been protected from much of the bitter truth of racism in this country. Because we knew to teach our little girl about the civil rights movement and the heroes who fought racism so that she could live in a better world. But we couldn't stand telling a 5-year-old, a 6-year-old, a 7-year-old what is obviously the case, that those heroes were only able to take us a few steps down the road, and we have so much further, so much further, to go.

She's a teenager now, tall and strong, who carries herself with a dancer's confidence and grace. And now I'm going to have to explain to her that while she will need to stand her ground with boys who want more from her than she wants to give, and she will need to stand her ground against peers who want to offer her alcohol or drugs, and she should stand her ground against anyone who wants to convince her that their warped world-view is true, *that she cannot afford to stand her ground* if she is unjustly accused by the police or anyone else in authority. She cannot even afford to stand her ground against some self-appointed vigilante who decides to appoint himself in charge of where she is, or is-not, allowed to walk....

She cannot afford to stand her ground. And so I am going to have to. I, and all my other white, middle-aged friends and family who are entitled to walk down a street anywhere we like, we are going to have to stand her ground. We are going to have to tell the truth about racism, about guns, about where the danger in our society really lurks. And maybe, when I know that thousands and thousands of middle-aged white people are standing her ground, standing Trayvon's ground, then having this conversation with her will not completely break my heart.

MEDITATION

"We who believe in freedom cannot rest. We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes." These are the prophetic words of Ella Baker, an African-American human rights activist from the 1930 until she died in the 1980s. She worked behind-the-scenes and alongside some of the great leaders of her century, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Thurgood Marshall, and Martin Luther King, Jr. She also mentored many emerging activists such as Diane Nash, Stokely Carmichael, and Rosa Parks. The line we are about to sing together is part of a quote of hers from 1964, later made into a song by Sweet Honey in the Rock. Sing with me: *We who believe in Freedom cannot Rest // We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.*

- Even if I don't fully understand it, I believe in freedom. I want to believe in freedom. There's something about it, still, that eludes me, but who doesn't long for freedom? (sung response)

- Even when our lives have been limited by hardship, our own choices, bad luck, or the laws of nature, still we struggle against these limits. We struggle for freedom. (sung response)
- Our brother Frederick Douglass taught us to push back against oppression. He said this struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without demand." (sung response)
- Brother Desmond Tutu taught us that liberation is costly. The responsibilities of freedom are sometimes hard to bear. And the fruits of the struggle may not come to us in this generation. (sung response)
- Sister Ella Baker taught us the heartbreaking truth: Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important ... as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons ... we who believe in freedom cannot rest. (sung response)

MESSAGE

I'd like to talk about guns today, and a little bit about race. But most of all this is about honesty, what I've always understood to be a key conservative value.

This is about *acknowledging reality*, and the harm, not philosophical, not even simply "moral" in the sense that there might be harm to one's own soul, but harm — deadly harm — inflicted upon others, out of lack of concern, out of forcefully defending one's freedom not to care.

Steven Colbert was featured this week on "Faith in Focus," an interview with a Jesuit Priest about his ongoing commitment to Catholicism and its ideals. Colbert is sincere about his faith, highly articulate, and *not* funny. In the interview he describes what he finds terrifying about our current national mindset, calling it a "*heresy against reality*," based in "*indifference to the truth*."

I am speaking about American Idols: idolatry, which is the worship of false gods, most tangibly represented by guns. But I believe that guns are a symbol for something *more* deadly, if you can imagine that. They symbolize, and defend with frightening zealotry, the rejection of the interdependent web of all humanity.

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You can tell that the reading I shared a minute ago, by Lynn Ungar, was written a few years ago, because it called on middle-aged white people to stand their ground against injustice presented in the guise of freedom. And action by middle aged white people is still a good idea ... but we're also being shown that schoolchildren, crossing racial boundaries, have found the courage to stand their ground against insanely easy access to assault weapons.

Jane and I were at the Whatcom Dispute Resolution Center annual awards dinner this past Friday night. I held back tears a number of times on hearing of the moral courage, tenacity, and creativity of those who received awards for peacemaking in our community — for caring locally. One award went to two teenagers, one Caucasian, one Punjabi, who organized the young people's march against gun violence this past February. When asked what motivated them in this work, the Punjabi teen spoke about having been on her way to the Sikh Temple near Milwaukee, on a Sunday morning six years ago, when a gunman opened fire and killed six human beings.

In both that shooting at a house of worship, and the one last month at the Jewish Synagogue in Pittsburgh, where eleven were killed — *in both cases* armed officers were shot as well.

So I feel discouraged about what can realistically be done in terms to decisively prevent gun violence here at BUF. I am heartened, though, that a large crew of volunteers got together this week to have a serious conversation about the alternatives, and our limits.

Today I don't know what we can call progress in this regard. Month after month we mourn the victims of additional mass shootings, some targeted at socially marginalized people, some seemingly random. And, at the same time, we can celebrate the State referendum passed this month to establish some modest reform.

At the same time we can watch gun sales spike every time there is another well-publicized shooting. And we can celebrate the recent ban on posting blueprints online for 3D printable plastic firearms.

Another positive step reported this morning: The King County Board of Health has passed regulation requiring signs to be posted at gun stores and firing ranges. The signs must read, "WARNING: the presence of a firearm in the home significantly increases the risk of suicide, homicide, death during domestic violence disputes and unintentional deaths to children...." Unfortunately, they don't yet have sufficient budget to enforce this measure.

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A few years ago, on a lovely Saturday morning in Central Wisconsin, I joined a group in the park for a "March for the Poor."

And about a hundred yards away I saw another group gathering, a march for suicide prevention. And completing the triangle, one hundred yards the *other* way, folks were streaming in and out of a gun show. This is all true. And in each crowd I saw friends and allies. For real; this is not just rhetorical BS about "friends and allies."

I grew up shooting guns. I had a great time shooting in my brief stint in the military. And I love The Mythbusters (if you are unfamiliar, this is a TV show with a couple of adults who don't want to grow up so they're constantly doing experiments with guns and explosives). I totally get it about juvenile glee around firepower.

But I also believe guns have been elevated to the status of divine savior: God himself now incarnate in the material world, the one through whom we call out to the Father god, King of the dominion of selfdom.

I expect that many of you will disagree with this diagnosis of our collective spiritual illness. What I'd like to ask of you, though, instead of just agreeing or disagreeing, instead of sealing off all of your intelligence and all of your heart and imagination into a little box on one end of a spectrum marked agree, or the other end of the spectrum marked disagree, I ask instead that you consider the hopes and the fears that accompany our varied and complex opinions about guns, and our varied and complex understandings of freedom. And I ask you to consider all of this alongside the *risks* involved when we put limits on ourselves ... and when we don't.

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There are tens of millions of gun owners in the U.S. and I can live with that. So far. I am not worried about most of them. Let's assume that *most* gun owners are bright, alert, model citizens.

This still leaves far too many with good intentions and insufficient competence.

Add in the angry and the mad, the self-righteous and the desperate, and I think we have enough reason to want to protect ourselves from their potentially serious mistakes.

Let's take for example State Senator Jeremy Hutchinson of Arkansas, who in the wake of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, put forward a proposal to allow teachers and other school staff to carry firearms. OK, I'm willing to listen to the pros and the cons. But this is the same guy who — *in a safety demonstration*, acting out how school personnel should respond to an active shooter — he shot a teacher!

Or consider the private security guard in another school who left his gun in the kids' bathroom!

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Gun violence is not some deep mystery that no one can quite piece together. The pattern is clear and well established. If today is an average day in America, then 45 people will be shot by accident. And if today is an average day, another 32 of our neighbors will be murdered with guns. 140 will be treated for a gun assault in an emergency room. And if today is an average day, 51 Americans will kill themselves with a gun.

All these typical days add up to over 30,000 gun deaths in the US every year. 30,000 deaths a year adding up to more deaths than in all of the wars we've fought in our history, combined.

To suggest that we just don't know what's behind all of this is one element of the idolatry canard: "It's all so complicated ... far beyond the realm of where mere humans should intervene."

Of course it's also true that guns have been used successfully in self-defense. And yet, guns at home are 22 times more likely to be used to kill or injure in an accident, murder, or suicide than to be used in self-defense. Twenty two times as likely.

I cannot convey with emotion in my voice, and I cannot convey with big numbers, what a tragedy this is. And I don't have to. Most Americans take it seriously. Nine out of ten already agree that we should have universal background checks on firearms purchases. Three out of four NRA members agree to this!

Still, under current law, 40% of gun sales (sales online and at gun shows) are not subject to background checks.

Still, even this modest inconvenience to gun ownership is a long way from becoming law. I believe this is so because of a virulent misunderstanding of freedom that has all of us -- all of us -- tempted by the fruit of freedom from consequences.

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The phrase "freedom from consequences" occurred to me when I was thinking about Gandhi's list of social ills. Or I don't know really what he called them. I've seen them labeled as sins or political attitudes or social conditions that can destroy us. Whatever, Gandhi was wise in pointing out that Wealth isn't inherently bad, but wealth Without Work is in the long run going to have a corrupting influence on both the individual and society. Pleasure is not bad, but my pleasure without

Conscience could very likely become another person's suffering. And so on: Knowledge Without Character; Business Without Ethics; Science Without Humanity; Religion Without Sacrifice; Politics Without Principle.

Looking at these I started to doodle other phrases that came to mind. Including freedom without facts, freedom from natural laws, and freedom from consequences. I'm not sure why all of mine involved freedom. Perhaps I'm obsessed with freedom because I'm an American, or a Unitarian. Both the American and Unitarian traditions hold the rhetoric of freedom deep within our roots. So much so that I believe it's a virtue we Unitarians have often taken too far, perverting the true meaning of freedom into hollow individualism. This is not inevitable, but it harkens back to our founding texts like Emerson's "Self-Reliance," and could, if we weren't paying attention, be misconstrued within the song we sing at the end of every service here at BUF, "circle round for freedom."

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I understand the allure of guns. There is a natural desire to feel powerful and secure in a world that *seems* threatening or maybe has already *proven* itself to be dangerous in your own experience.

It is not wrong to want to feel powerful rather than insecure. It is not idolatry to value or revere things of beauty or great utility. It is not idolatry to revere heroes or ideals or principles. It is incredibly dangerous, however, to revere anything to the extent that we cannot or will not recognize its limits ... so that we are unwilling to balance its value against other values ... such that we are blind to its shadow side or our own shadow side that our idols might bring forth.

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I studied Spanish decades ago (I've forgotten most of it). Back then I was a happy go lucky teenager and was really drawn to the phrase "*no me importa*." I liked saying that. It's not important to me, I have no preference, whatever you choose is fine, I will be happy, whatever.

But as I found myself saying this more and more, *no me importa*, it started to sink in that I was saying, I don't care. Well, that *can* be a good attitude when understood as, "I'm fine, really, I can go with whatever."

But still, I found myself uneasy the more I said it. *No me importa*.

My happy go lucky attitude has shifted based upon exposure to loss, fear, anxiety, and pain. Isn't it possible that my unconscious attachment to *no me importa* has also shifted?

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This is how I will strive to return, as I may need to return again and again as my resolution is assaulted by fear.

After we printed the order of service, Melanie came up with another suggestion for our offertory music today. So she will play the hymn tune, "When I can read my Title clear," the traditional lyric of which conveys a vigorous confidence that an *un-ambivalent* Faith might provide.

Unambivalent faith. Regardless of context. Referring to today's theme, Melanie suggested that this might reflect the ethic of single-minded allegiance to the Will of God. Not a bad idea, perhaps, if somehow one could distinguish the will of god from the will to power.

Such a single-minded focus is reflected again in conservative columnist David Brooks' column this morning in which he writes, "They replace the idea of excellence with the idea of 'patriotism.' Loyalty to the tribe is more important than professional competence. In fact, a person's very lack of creativity and talent becomes proof of his continued reliability to the cause...."

That sounds, to me, all too much like an unreflective allegiance to whatever one wants to embrace as the Will of God.

A less dogmatic approach, Melanie suggested, would be that of "What would Jesus do?" which again I can respect to the extent that Jesus is not understood simply as the guy who taught us to deny the things of this world while clawing one's own way into heaven.

In terms of freedom, though, I invite you this week to think about the nature of freedom of conscience. The freedom of conscience, in my view, being inextricably linked to the wisdom and the experience of the ancestors for which we can be eternally grateful. The wisdom of the ancestors, hard-won through earthly experience, and a deeply abiding commitment to care for the generations to come. Amen.

SOCIAL and ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE COLLECTION

Mary Loquvam for York Community Farm

SENDING SONG *I Know I Can* #1015

BENEDICTION

Go out now into this complicated interdependent world with gratitude, determination, and serenity in your hearts. Bring to those you love, and bring to those who scare you, not hell, but hope — bolstered by the strength of this community, which abides in love for all people, for all time.

CIRCLE 'ROUND