

The Transient and the Permanent

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Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship

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PART 1

Is there anything that can be commonly understood to be true?

Is religious freedom beneficial to society?

Do we have a fundamental right to privacy?

Does freedom of speech have any meaning in the digital age?

Does the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” protect those who are most vulnerable from those with disproportionate power?

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All my life I have assumed that there are some understandings, some values, some principles so cherished by our society that they will never change.

But these five, lately, have me floundering.

Number 1) Is there anything that can be commonly understood to be true? I’ve spoken before about how late 20th century liberalism sowed the seeds for the demise of truth which now plagues us. We were the ones who insisted so fervently that we must always take into account the perspective from which truth is expressed and perceived ... and that each perspective, and each expression, has its own legitimacy. And now somehow this has been corrupted to its logical extreme: that facts don’t matter, truth isn’t truth, and science is a liberal conspiracy.

This past Friday, *The Bellingham Herald* reported in very small article on page four about plans to close the office of the science advisor to the Environmental Protection Agency -- one of several recent steps intended to diminish the role of science in policy making.

Number 2) Is religious freedom beneficial to society? I always thought so. But I also thought that this principle was about you and I having a right to make our own private moral judgments, perform our own private religious practices ... *and* to prevent the state both from mandating religious doctrine or practice... or favoring, in any way, those with or without particular religious affiliations or beliefs.

But somehow religious freedom, today, has come to mean the right for any one of us to deny public accommodations to anyone else who we consider to be breaking the law of our own personal gods.

Number 3) Do we have a fundamental right to privacy? It's hard for me to understand what privacy can even mean when it seems quite likely that everything I've ever said, or done, or thought, or seen is already stored in a giant database — for better or for worse.

I saw my family doctor this week. She said she would give me a referral to a specialist — someone with whom I had never been in contact. A few minutes later I called the specialist's office for an appointment. Before I even gave my name, I was asked, "Is this about your left foot?"

Number 4) Does freedom of speech mean anything anymore? Well, we've come a long way. American governments for the most part do not shut down political, religious, or artistic expression, no matter how offensive in content, as long as it's not creating imminent harm. We operate today under the assumption, expressed in a 1927 US Supreme Court ruling, that the remedy to noxious speech is more speech.

But somehow I'm losing confidence that another 40 million internet comments and tweetbots will lead us into a fair and balanced and civil dialogue.

The theory, and I think at one point this was a pretty good theory: Let people lie, let people express nonsensical and morally reprehensible ideas, ugliness and bigotry. Because repressing free expression is more harmful than any such ideas, and if we allow open public deliberation, the power of reason will prevail.

This is actually a pretty old idea. John Milton was not the first to suggest it in 1644. Turn with me now to responsive reading #671 and let's see what he said then. Please read with me:

Our faith and knowledge thrive by exercise, as well as our limbs and complexion.

If the waters of truth flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition.

The light which we have gained was given us not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge.

Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions.

Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.

And though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously to misdoubt her strength.

For who knows not that truth is strong, next to the Almighty, she needs no policies, no stratagems, to make her victorious.

Let her and falsehood grapple, whoever knew truth put to worse in a free and open encounter.

“Whoever knew truth put to the worse in a free and open encounter?” Truth will always prevail in the end! The thing is, I’m not going to be here that long.

And another thing: our principle of freedom of expression is one thing when we’re insisting that government entities not suppress free expression. But today the majority of what we think of as free expression is funneled through a monopolistic capitalistic global non-governmental filter of unaccountable social media.

Number 5) Does the principle of “innocent until proven guilty” protect those who are most vulnerable from those with disproportionate power?

I don’t know if this has ever been the case, but it’s what I believed for most of my life. The state has disproportionate power. So it would be all too easy for despotic governments to lock people up based on groundless accusations. Therefore we need to protect the accused.

But what does this principle do for the most vulnerable when the most powerful hide behind it, untouchable? Could it disproportionately benefit defendants with bottomless pockets of attorney’s fees? What does the principle offer to black men killed by white police officers? How has it played out for the thousands of boys and girls sexually abused by priests? How does the principle of innocent until proven guilty apply to unmentionable crimes committed against victims whose voices routinely go unheeded, whose agony is routinely ignored?

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Now you could argue that just because certain principles are misinterpreted and abused – that doesn’t mean that they are no longer valid principles. This response applies, I think to the question of Religious Freedom. The principle of religious freedom has lately been misinterpreted and abused. But it’s still a solid principle, and will, in the long run, be one that we will be glad to defend.

You also might argue that, just because people say or believe a thing ... that doesn’t change reality. Like disbelieving in science doesn’t make science less valid. On one level this is true. But at some point, when a critical mass of society collectively agree on something, regardless of how nonsensical it is, it takes on a certain reality of its own. Without a commonly held method for determining what is and is not true, we’re going to struggle to attain peace and prosperity.

Still, some of the principles that I worry about today are going to be ok once people pull their heads out of the sand.

But alas, some principles — that I once thought of as so fundamental — might have come into being at a time when social and technological realities *were so unlike the social and technological reality in which we now live* — that they no longer apply in the particular forms that we've long assumed. I think the concepts of privacy, and freedom of speech, vital as they are, are going to be subject to ongoing reinterpretation for the rest of my lifetime.

I do not say this with any joy. But while I understand that some principles are worth dying for, still, clinging to *transient forms* of these principles can only lead us to despair.

Among the congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, there are certain principles that we covenant to affirm and promote. Let me be clear: this is not a religious creed. Being a Unitarian Universalist is not a matter of individually asserting any particular beliefs, values, or principles. What we call the UU principles today are those that our *congregations* have pledged to affirm and promote as member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association. You are welcome here regardless of your interpretation of these principles and even if you emphatically reject some or all of them. As long as your behavior does not interfere with the freedom and wellbeing of others.

Further, these principles were not handed down, eons ago, from the heavens on golden tablets. Their precise wording was hashed out among thousands of imperfect human beings, each with personal idiomatic preferences shaped within their own subculture's subculture. The current version was established in 1985. And though there have been many conversations about updating these words — within our democratic organization, and in the context of some inevitable nostalgia, that's going to be a fraught process.

So the words as we have them are transient expressions. Are they, though, expressions of something deeper, something eternal? It would be irresponsible not to periodically ask these questions.

MEDITATION / SILENCE

PART 2

Caiaphas: tell the rabble to be quiet, we anticipate a riot. This common crowd is much too loud. Tell the mobs who sing your song that they are fools and they are wrong. They are a curse. They should disperse.

[choir members erupt from their seats for a quick: "Hosanna hey-zanna, zanna zanna ho, zanna hey zanna ho zahh nahh. Hey JC, JC, you're alright by me, zanna ho-oh zanna hey superstar!" ... and return to their seats]

Jesus: why waste your breath, moaning at the crowds? Nothing can be done to stop the shouting! If every tongue were still the noise would still continue. The rocks and stones themselves would start to sing!

Hosanna hey-zanna, zanna zanna ho, zanna hey zanna ho zahn nahh. Hey JC, JC, won't you die for me, zanna ho-oh zanna hey superstar!

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One of my heroes, an insightful and (at least in legend) an honorable human being, reminded us that there is a song, a beauty, a truth, a joy, a love that cannot be expressed, cannot be suppressed, may never be understood, *and yet exists* within and beyond us. If every tongue were still, the rocks and stones themselves would sing hosanna.

One version of his life that speaks to me, a version which has risen out of my era, in my language, presents *two competing messages*, both uttered by Jesus.

Message number one: sing with me, mourn with me, investigate with me, share with me the ineffable spirit within and beyond us, which joins all who have come before and all who are yet to come: animal, vegetable, and mineral, in memory, process, consequence, and hope.

Message number two, (and both of these messages appear in both the ancient christian texts, and also within the parable of Jesus Christ Superstar) ... message number two: on the heels of Hosanna, not long after he has told Caiaphas that there is no way to suppress the energies of the crowd ...

Jesus himself exhorts the crowd to settle down. Stop it with your ridiculous misguided enthusiasm. You are calling me the chosen one. You are elevating me to your savior. Some of you think I will lead political revolution. Some of you think that I can channel the divine in a way that no one else ever has or ever will. You deceive yourselves. Please do not stoke my ego. Please do not let me succumb to your fantasy.

You look to a future of eternal glory. So you need me to be a god. You refuse to accept and dwell in today. You have no faith where faith should be: in this moment. In the transient. Not to hold it in place, but to love it in its passing. And to leave eternity to its own trajectory.

No, listen: to conquer death you only have to die ... not to die a physical death
But to die again and again with the world as it passes ... the world that will not hold still despite our clinging....

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A defining moment in Unitarian history came in 1841, when the Rev. Theodore Parker preached on *The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity*. Had Parker been preaching to his own

congregation, his opinions on the subject may not have been given much notice. But he spoke this time at a more public event, an ordination attended by many Boston clergy, including Methodist, Congregational, and Baptist ministers who, scandalized by Parker's message, took the opportunity to press his Unitarian colleagues: 'Will this kind of infidelity be tolerated among you? – will you not do something to censure this blasphemer?'

To some degree what Parker said that day was not so far off the mainstream for the Unitarianism of his day. He affirmed his faith in the religion of Jesus Christ. He swore with deep personal conviction that no one before or since Christ had ever so well personified the divine love of the Father. Parker re-affirmed his conviction in the mystical beauty and the ethical profundity of the Bible.

So what did he say to upset anybody? And how could this have set the course for the *pluralistic* movement that we know as Unitarian Universalism today?

Parker stated that there is something of Infinite value in Christianity, and that is the-Truth-of-God that has persisted through the centuries...the Truth that glimmers through layers and layers of human corruption, misunderstanding, and abuse.

And yet how absurd it is, he says, that when someone questions the faith in *any* way, seeking clarification, or attempting to get back to the original religion of Jesus, that the Christian defenses rear up as if God himself were under attack. As if the fortress of Christendom might crumble. As if Eternal truth could be vulnerable.

But the Eternal truth is not vulnerable, Parker said. The truth which lies behind everything we think we know about Religion will always Be, and we can do nothing to alter it. The Truth is permanent.

But religious *doctrines* — human attempts to frame the truth — these are transient. People are burned for heresy in one age for affirming what was thought of as essential in another age. The doctrinal differences between one Christian sect and another are greater than the differences between Christ and Mohammed. And the more doctrines change the more the orthodox insist that they do not change. And so it goes and always will.

In addition to doctrine, Parker continues, True Religion is clouded by layers and layers of transient ecclesiastical *forms*. Rituals, prayers, robes, symbols, architecture... Many which are very beautiful and meaningful. But still, forms of worship are transient. They are constantly changing and adapting... the forms of Christianity have picked up pagan influences when that has been advantageous — and hey, whatever works.

But if doctrine and forms of religious practice are transient, how might one get to the permanent? How might one see through to the pure light of truth? The conventional Christian answer would be: 'Through the authority of Christ and the Bible.' But Parker dissented.

Parker saw Christ as “the organ through which the Infinite spoke.” Pretty reverent by today’s standards. But he objected to the conservative Christian view, which was that the Truth of Christianity was established through Christ’s personal authority. This is nonsense, he said. Just as the axioms of geometry are not based on the personal authority of Euclid, the eternal truths of Religion pre-existed Christ. And they would be just as true if Christ had never walked the earth.

Put another way: the conventional view was that what Christ taught was true because CHRIST taught it. Parker turned this on its head and said: Christ has authority because he spoke the Truth, his words did not become truth because HE uttered them.

In regard to scripture, Parker took a similar approach. He was merciless in his critique of biblical literalism. He fumed that on the authority of scripture, and under threat of both civil ostracism and eternal damnation, people were taught to believe in “Impossible legends, [and] conflicting assertions, to take fiction for fact; [to mistake someone’s] dream for a miraculous revelation from God.”

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For Unitarians, it’s been downhill ever since. Countless forms of religious devotion have come and gone. Rituals, symbols, and texts have been adapted from *non-christian* sources worldwide. And traditional language — and even the notion of there even being a God has been cast aside, by many, as mere forms rather than the essence of religion.

In the 175 years since this landmark sermon, the idea of an Absolute Truth has largely fallen aside. Even Science has been humbled by uncertainty, and religion too has been transformed — within the liberal sects of every major tradition — in that even god is understood to be evolving as creation unfolds.

Still, we appreciate Parker for leading our movement in the direction of universalizing Unitarianism by setting up Christianity as just one of many manifestations of the holy.

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Still, it may be a struggle to *accept* that ours is an incomplete understanding of the Truth... that my personal point of view is relative, that even Unitarian Universalism is just one religion among many, that we are not the “Best” religion. Even though we admit all religions are inadequate, we may be tempted to think that ours is the most enlightened inadequate.

Still we honor Jelaladin Rumi’s words which have been passed down from the 13th century: “There are countless ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” We know that even though Rumi and his words will someday be forgotten, this insight will arise again and again: Our capacity to change — while retaining the continuity of our principles — is profound. If we can do it.

Our capacity to utilize the transient to connect to the permanent...

the struggle to live according to these principles is a permanent part of life, and cannot be set aside with a one-time affirmation of faith.

We gather to be with one another in the face of change. There is no question about whether we will change. The question is whether we can make changes thoughtfully, collaboratively, and in ways that are consistent with our principles... thereby leading to freshness and vitality. Or, will we pretend that the world is unchanging, and thereby will we be caught off guard, and react defensively, with discouragement and desperation?

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There is something underlying that endures. Something that liberal and conservative human beings share. Something that fear and lust for power, xenophobia, nationalism, obscures.

Yes, there are perspectives and biases and limits to our individual understandings, which is why we need music and poetry and myth and Saturday Night Live. Which by the way, last night's brilliant rendition of the Kavanaugh hearing is your scriptural assignment for this Sabbath day.

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I'll conclude with the words of Reverend Mark Belletini:

Ah it's true
When our ancestors spoke of heaven
They were speaking of this moment.
When they went on about nirvana
They imagined a time like this.
When they sang of paradise,
It was this morning that they imagined.
A time when all the mysteries of life and death
Are blended in a community of praise,
When the bones of ancient lovers
Are given flesh again in our own bodies
Teachers long ago speaking of love and truth
Once more in lives so ordinary they are
Extraordinary