

Finding Our Way Through the Fog

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Most of us would probably agree that the bible is a mixed bag, containing as it does passages that are sublime and many that are profoundly disturbing. I do occasionally refer to biblical text in my sermons – after all, if you had to study Jewish and Christian scripture all through theology school wouldn't you want to show off your knowledge on occasion? In fact,, I've forgotten much of what I learned, but some things stick with you - like the Exodus story, which I find to be both a cautionary tale and a compelling myth.

On the cautionary side there's this: Many bible scholars will attest that this ancient account of the Hebrews escaping from the cruelties of bondage in Egypt is not literally true (there are probably some grains of truth). Most disturbingly it culminates in divinely ordained genocide - when the Hebrews get to the promised land they follow God's command to slaughter the non-Hebrew inhabitants so they can have it all for themselves. Their land of "milk and honey" is blood drenched soil – a somber reminder of how religion is too often hijacked by zealots who leave compassion behind.

But keep in mind that in these earliest stages of the bible, God is still in his primitive tribal stage of development in a polytheistic

context, yet the biblical God evolves spiritually – or rather, human conceptions of the divine evolved. Later we see the God of the Hebrew prophets calling for social justice for all people, especially the marginalized. Yet the seed of this God of love and justice is deeply implanted in the ancient Exodus account.

This points us to the compelling aspects of the exodus story. It served as an empowering narrative during the civil rights era when Martin Luther King, Jr. used it to inspire African Americans to continue the arduous journey out of slavery toward freedom and justice. Likewise, the exodus story is remembered during Seder dinners (I've attended many) where we acknowledge that all of us are on a long, trans-generational pilgrimage out of many forms of bondage that afflict humankind and that we are slowly headed toward a promised land where there is "justice, equity and compassion for all," as we say in our UU purposes and principles. In that vein I regard this story as a myth.

Myths can serve as maps on our journeys of growth. The religious scholar Joseph Campbell aptly noted that "myth is a fact of the mind, made manifest in a fiction of matter." Which is to say that myths are not literally true. Rather, they embody perennial spiritual and psychological truths. Indeed, the Exodus story reveals some truths for Unitarian Universalists today, right now, where we are, which is a bit

lost in the wilderness with different ones of us having different ideas about where we are now and how we get to the promised land.

This is a predictable development foretold by the Exodus story. Take a look at the maps of the terrain the Hebrews had to cover in going from Egypt to the Promised land. Even on foot, even with the aged and infirm in tow, even in ancient times when they didn't have GPS, this journey should have taken, at most, a few months. Yet the scripture says this journey took them forty years of wandering around in the wilderness. Forty years! Some might be tempted to say that this was because they were being led by a man, Moses, who didn't want to ask for directions. Yet the truth lies deeper than that. The Hebrews left the land of Egypt as slaves. It's hard to let go of the mindset of being a slave overnight – and people are enslaved to many, many things. There are many forms of collective and individual bondage, as both ancient wisdom traditions and modern sources attest.

In the Buddhist tradition they name the three inner conditions that afflict all our individual minds that lead to attachment, another name for bondage –they call them “the three poisons”: greed, hatred and delusion. Martin Luther King, Jr. named the three evils that hold society in bondage: racism (or any delusory “ism” that strips anyone of their full dignity and humanity) poverty (which is a consequence of human greed) and militarism (which is a collective form of hatred.)

Isn't that interesting – this parallel between King's three social evils and Buddhism's three poisons?

The point here is that some form of bondage is our common plight – both individually and collectively. We are not as free as we are called to be. Furthermore, as many have pointed out, with systems of oppression, both the oppressed and the oppressor are actually enslaved and dehumanized, albeit in different ways. The Hebrews and Pharaoh were both enslaved to play roles that dehumanized them.

So the journey toward freedom in the promised land is not just for some, it's for everyone.

The ancient Hebrews needed time to whack off the psychological shackles of bondage before they could experience themselves as a free people. That takes a long time and that's why the Hebrews had to wander so long in the wilderness. This same challenge is perennially true. In theology school I studied with a brilliant, kind and wonderful man, a psychologist of religion, Dr. James Fowler, (he's renown his "Stages of Faith Development" theory). Dr. Fowler noted that the spiritual journey is not a straight shot across the landscape of life – it's not like Euclidian geometry – a straight line between two points. Rather, it circles around like a slowly winding staircase in which upward ascent is painfully slow. There's a lot of circling back to familiar terrain, over and over again, but each time you circle around you gain a tad

more wisdom and experience and so you are uplifted a bit and begin to gain a loftier, more holistic view that helps you begin to see where the promised lies.

Fowler noted that as you make this journey of spiritual, intellectual, psychological development – you reach a stage where you begin to realize that you have your own inner wisdom, your own moral compass. You begin to realize that you are not called to blindly follow whoever is the leader, those external authoritative voices who purport to have all the answers. You discover your own power to discern the truth and you begin to find your own voice. You can still listen to the leaders of the pilgrimage – and they may be a wise leaders, but if you come to the personal conviction that they are taking you in the wrong direction you begin to feel empowered to challenge them, as well you should, for no leader is infallible.

Alas, there are too many religious traditions that discourage the pilgrim from going this far on the journey toward freedom. They don't want you to trust in yourself – they want you to trust them, the authorities and their “infallible” teachings because you, poor misguided soul, can't be trusted to think and feel and formulate your own views. It takes guts and gumption to free yourself so that you are no longer enslaved to external authority. You have learned to trust your own conscience and exercise your own power to choose your life's direction.

Dr. Fowler (an ordained Methodist minister) knew that I was a Unitarian Universalist when I studied with him and he noted that the UU tradition was rather unique in that it encouraged and affirmed such individual development because we recognize how essential it is in democratic congregations and society that there to be those who actually exercise freedom of thought and conscience. Without that freedom democracy is vulnerable to demagogues and perversely morphs into forms of populisms that oppress minority voices.

Fowler described this development as transitioning from having an outer to an inner “locus of authority.” It is especially important, when we affirm this freedom that we insure that it applies not just to us, especially any of us who might be socially privileged, but to everyone. It’s essential that all voices are heard, because democracy requires our collective wisdom. Democracy, most especially in religious community, must allow for honest, compassionate, empathetic heartfelt dialogue. We can’t have such dialogue if we condemn and censure one another for sharing our honest views.

Alas, neither Dr. Fowler nor I foresaw what was to come. Today there are strong voices within our own movement saying that the journey to the promised land is now at a stage where such freedom to question authority, such individualism, no longer serves us because it’s slowing us down and we must march straight ahead together under

ideological banners that eschew diversity of thought and opinion. We hear talk from UU leaders that we must overcome a “trinity of errors – individualism, exceptionalism and mistrust of authority” which have kept us from fulfilling our potential. This view does not strike me as an evolution of our tradition but rather a devolution, a turning back from the path religious freedom. I never thought I’d cop to being a Trinitarian from a Unitarian pulpit, but I say these represents a trinity of assets, not errors and I embrace them.

This call to regard individualism as problematic and to trust more in authority will indeed help us to move faster and it will take us some place, but it won’t be a true land of freedom. Good family therapists regularly see why this can’t work: members of dysfunctional families are undifferentiated – they are enmeshed in unhealthy systems in which each member unwittingly plays a role in perpetuating the dysfunctional dynamics because they have not yet individuated. That is, are they are not able to freely express themselves in the dysfunctional system - they have not yet become their own person. Being able to individuate and differentiate yourself from unhealthy systems is a path to realization. It’s a long, hard journey for many of us. One of the primary reasons to cherish Unitarian Universalism is that it has, at least until recently, supported us on this journey. This freedom

to differentiate from unhealthy familial and societal systems has given voice and power to those who were formerly voiceless and powerless.

Separating yourself from dysfunctional systems that dehumanize us and finding the courage to challenge them is hard psychological, spiritual, political work. Those who dissent in dysfunctional systems – who are gadflies - are usually not treated well. The harsher the response to their acts of differentiation and dissent, the more dysfunctional the system. I happen to know a brave minister who has spoken honestly and sad to say, he (and I might add, some of the members of the congregation he serves) have been the object of such abuse and censure as to shock the conscience. He is a brave soul and truly a great minister in a great congregation which has had a vital history of supporting independent voices that have shaped our larger movement to the good. In fundamentalist religions those who do not embrace “the one true faith” are declared heretics. Alas, we’ve reached the point in our movement wherein those who do not embrace the one true opinion are condemned and censured.

I’m told that the first minister of this congregation in Spokane back in the 19th century came here with a bounty on his head for expressing his abolitionist views in the South, so this is kind of a tradition here – your minister being in hot water for sharing his honest, heartfelt views. He speaks as a strong individual voice of conscience

who cares so much about all of us getting to the promised land of beloved community that he has dared to challenge those who are leading us in the wrong direction. I admire him tremendously and I'm grateful to him for loving our tradition so much that he is willing to face condemnation and censure.

Yet the question naturally arises: how can we get to the promised land when everyone is doing their own individualistic thing? This is virtually the same question I get several times a year when Christian evangelical students – usually 30 or so – come to my congregation to interview me and learn about Unitarian Universalism. (This is part of an interfaith dialogue project I am part of in Salem, OR). These students look to the bible as their infallible source of authority, whereas I tell them that I cherish parts of the bible and not others and that I must discern which passages to heed, that for me the litmus test is whether a passage serves the cause of compassion, justice, love. They are never satisfied with that answer because they have been taught that we are fallen, sinful beings and we cannot trust ourselves - we need some trustworthy external authority (the bible) to show us the way.

Of course I know that when I look within I see how the three poisons - greed, hatred and delusion - have afflicted my heart and my mind and the minds of others, and I can see how the three evils named by Dr. King create hells here on earth. And I have further seen that

those who most zealously dedicate themselves to ridding us of evil, purifying religious movements and society, paradoxically cause more harm than good. I have seen how all of this holds us in bondage.

Yet look deeper into the human heart – deeper than the sin and evil and delusion. Look as deep as you can and I believe you will see the great goodness in yourself and others. I trust in that goodness. This has been a hallmark of our free faith – that we trust in the deep down goodness of the human heart and the innate wisdom of our minds.

This is the Unitarian Universalist way. We are grounded in the conviction that each of us can be trusted to exercise freedom of conscience and expression with one another. To strip away this freedom is to strip away our individual moral and ethical agency. If you strip this away, we cease to be the unique free faith tradition we have been since our forbears had the courage and the gumption to swim against the prevailing theological currents of their time and say, in effect, “our reason, our consciences, our loving hearts, do not lead us to believe what you insist we must believe. Call us heretics, gadflies, misrepresent and falsely frame our views, but we must be true to our consciences and convictions.” We are especially called to listen, with great empathy, to those voices that have been historically marginalized, but we must preserve the right to honestly respond and engage in

dialogue. Without that we cannot be in true covenantal relationship. To stay in covenant and to maintain democratic governance - we must be able to have honest, heartfelt conversations with one another. Censure and condemnation precludes that from happening. As a friend noted: In order to heal, we need empathy and in order to grow we need honesty.

Yet the question remains hanging: where does that lead us? Do we finally just follow our own lights, our own bliss and go our individual ways? Consider again the Exodus story. After a time the Hebrews were feeling very lost out there in wilderness and fell to bickering and quarreling amongst themselves about where to go. Yet then, miraculously, a pillar of light – the light of God - appeared in the darkness to guide them through their night of discord to the Promised Land.

All well and good for the ancient Hebrews. Wouldn't it be great if WE Unitarian Universalists had a pillar of light to guide us through the fog during this time when discord divides us?

Long ago in our history, a great soul, the abolitionist and social prophet, the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who was reviled and rejected by most Unitarian clergy in his own day for exercising his freedom of conscience, preached a sermon: "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," (He was preaching as a Unitarian Christian,

so I invite you to translate his title into “the transient and permanent in Unitarian Universalism”). There Parker noted that “what is of absolute value never changes. We may cling around it and grow to it forever.”

You can boil Theodore Parker’s sermon about what is permanent in our religious tradition down to a single word: Love. Or as Martin Luther King, Jr. would have called it – Agape Love – a universal love for all of life, a love that even transcends our dislikes and disagreements with others. Agape love is more than a belief – it is a practice and an actual state of human consciousness. The Buddhist tradition calls this boundless compassion. The Christian tradition says that this “Love is patient, (this) love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

This is a love that shines so bright that it cuts through all fog and unites all who see it. It is a pillar of light that helps us clearly recognize our interdependence.

This kind of love, said Parker “ allows perfect freedom. It does not demand that all (people) think alike, but to think uprightly, and get as near as possible at truth; that not all (people) live alike, but live holy, and get as near possible to a life perfectly divine.”

Allow me to embroider upon this a bit. Recently, I returned from my first extended sabbatical in my twenty seven year ministry in Salem. This gave me a precious opportunity to think and feel deeply. And I often thought of a song we always sing at the end of our minister's retreats. It ends with the words "trusting in the love that's shared. It's never failed us yet."

I've sung that song so many times over the years - it sounds so deep in my heart - there it resonates and rings everlastingly true. So true. I have seen that there is such a need for trusting in a love that is shared in our mistrusting, hurting, broken world where I see and hear things things every day that break my heart. Thus I hear and heed the call for me to walk the path of love, of boundless compassion for one and all without exception.

One humbling lesson I've learned over the years of my ministry is that I don't have control over other people – what others think and feel and do. Whenever I have tried to exercise such control, it never works out, for I have overstepped my bounds. Yet one great lesson I have learned is that I do have, or have responsibility for having, control over myself. My daily meditation practice helps me recognize this and it shows me that when I am being truest to myself I am naturally being true to others as well. When I center myself I discover that my true self is found in loving others – all others. I discover again and again that

the way to the Promised Land is to fulfill the promise of love in the present moment, however I can, with everyone – most especially those who have been despised and rejected in our cruel world. I see that I am called to uphold my end of life's great bargain by being loving and trustworthy, even if that leads me to some frightening and challenging places – to death row in Oregon State Prison, to the front lines of conflict with Immigration and Customs Enforcement police and even to the front lines of the conflict in which we Unitarian Universalists now find ourselves embroiled.

Love makes great demands and the pilgrimage – our individual journeys to enlightenment and our collective journey toward equity and justice - is long and hard. It's not a straight shot – you don't get there overnight.

Yet, my faith in that love, that boundless compassion leads me on. In my mind's eye I can envision that promised land where all have learned to trust in the love that is shared, even as we now stumble through the wilderness of conflict and confusion. This I do know – if we build houses of love people will come. All people's hearts yearn to find love and when you build a house of love, the people will come. We all need to feel loved and we all need to love. And so all of us, are on this winding, trans-generational journey to that promised land - that place

greed and hatred and poverty and racism and militarism. How sweet that will be.

May it be so!