

The Ethics of Uncontrolled Stops

By

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When I first moved to Spokane eleven years ago, I encountered something I'd never experienced: neighborhood intersections without any stop signs. I had no idea how I was expected to navigate them and, after a few angry birds and loud honks from other drivers, I began asking around to find out. Someone explained the driver coming from the right has the right-of-way and the driver on the left must yield. That seemed simple enough and I instantly appreciated the financial wisdom of this system. Even if it costs just a few hundred dollars to install one stop sign—accounting for manufacturing, materials, and labor—given that there has to be thousands of intersections in Spokane, this must save taxpayers hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars.

Cost effective as this is, however, I still wondered how I could be certain a driver coming unseen from my left will really stop even if I do have the right of way, especially in a quiet neighborhood where there's seldom much traffic. So, in my head, I translated "uncontrolled stop" to mean "yield," which means be prepared to stop if necessary. Now, no matter who is supposed to have the right-of-way, I consider it my responsibility to maintain a speed at which I can safely come to a stop no matter which direction another vehicle is coming from.

I soon found that by giving me the responsibility to determine when it's safe to proceed, rather than relying on the city to indicate when I must stop and go, I have become a safer driver in general. Now I find myself looking to make sure other drivers are slowing or stopping before I move on, even when there are stop signs and traffic lights. This is especially necessary since some drivers have become so accustomed to uncontrolled stops that they don't fully stop even where they are controlled with signs. And why should they? As our uncontrolled intersections have proven, we're all capable of determining when and how fast we should move through them without having it spelled out for us on every corner and every turn.

I don't mean there shouldn't be traffic rules, stops, or lights at the intersections of busy main arterials, as we have. Obviously, some areas need stronger controls than others, but when they aren't necessary, let us figure it out for ourselves. By doing so, as in my case, many of us become safer and more responsible drivers, even when there are signs and lights giving us the go ahead. Now, thanks to these uncontrolled intersections, I drive as if there is at least a yield sign at every intersection, knowing that it is ultimately my own responsibility to consider my safety and the safety of others before moving forward.

Until moving to Spokane, I had been conditioned to let the authorities do my thinking for me, at least when it comes to driving. Before then, I wasn't looking for other vehicles as much as I was watching for signs and lights. I still obey them when I see them but spotting them is no longer my first instinct while driving.

Then again, driving, in general, doesn't usually require a lot of thought. Once we get the hang of it, driving become automatic, freeing us to think about other things while we're doing so, or to converse with our passengers, or to have a hands-free phone call, or to listen to a book or music. Driving is so habitual that we sometimes end up mistakenly taking a routine exit because we weren't thinking about our actual destination. This is how human behavior works. It eventually becomes habituated so that we don't have to think about it. Learning a new skill takes a lot of initial concentration but thinking also consumes most our energy. Learning skills well enough so that we eventually don't have to think about them is too our caloric advantage, whether learning a particular dance, memorizing a poem, playing an instrument, learning a new job, or, in this case, driving a car. Because of this, we can often go about routine tasks thinking about anything but the task at hand.

We choose to learn some of our habits, and some are imposed upon us. We learn most of them through positive or negative reinforcement. If we want to learn to play the guitar, for example, our learning is positively reinforced when we make progress, or successfully learn a favorite song. An example of negative reinforcement, on the other hand, would be a child who learns to play the piano only because her parents threaten to punish her if she doesn't practice enough. Although traffic signs and lights protect us from accidents they are negatively reinforced with fines and tickets if they are violated.

Uncontrolled intersections, by contrast, are not positively or negatively reinforced. Nor can they ever be safely navigated by habit. Each time we pass through such an intersection we have to remain alert, thinking about what we're doing, actively looking to determine what's happening around us, adjusting our own speed accordingly, without a clear line at which we must stop before proceeding forward. There are still legal speed limits and rights-of-way that we're expected to obey, but much is left up to us.

All of this often leaves me thinking about how much more of our everyday behavior has been socially conditioned through positive and negative reinforcement, yet that we engage in without much thought. And how often, as a society, are we quick to solve every problem with a new decree, or ordinance, or regulation, or law. I'm not saying we shouldn't have some of these restrictions. In many cases, I'm glad we do. But the instinct to make new rules in the immediate wake of every problem seems a bit more controlling and authoritarian than we should expect in a free society. Not every task requires a hammer.

In our local community, for example, our City Council recently passed an ordinance meant to restrict our water use, which is apparently very high compared to other cities. The ordinance has been vetoed by the Mayor, who doesn't think there should be any consequences for violating it, which would mean it's not an ordinance at all. And her veto will likely be overturned by the Council.

I am, of course, an environmentalist, am gravely concerned about global warming and other environmental issues, and I think there should be a lot more laws and regulations passed to

address this existential crisis. But I'm also aware that in this case most of us only learned about our city's extreme overuse of water at the same time talk of this new ordinance was introduced. And I wonder what might have happened if our city leaders would have first addressed the matter with a public awareness campaign so that we might voluntarily begin reducing our use of this precious resource? What if, before laying down the law, we first appealed to the goodness and maturity in each other by simply providing us the information we need to act responsibly? Would our water usage rates go down just as well or even better?

The difference is that when mandated by an ordinance, curtailing water overuse is the responsibility of the authorities. We just need to watch out for where they've placed the stop signs. But if armed with information and ideas about what we ourselves can do to help solve this problem, we become those most responsible for protecting this vital resource. Instead of just going about our lives letting public officials do our thinking for us, we act like stakeholders who must take responsibility for the consequences of our own actions, just as we must at uncontrolled stops.

The real question before us, then, is theoretical: are people so selfish and base that their behaviors must be strictly controlled by society, or are they fundamentally social beings who, when given the freedom and encouragement to make their own choices, will consider the welfare of others as much as their own? Theologically speaking, we must ask, are we born in the image and likeness of God or are we born in sin? Is human nature fundamentally good or evil? These aren't simple questions to answer because people encounter different obstacles in their process of maturation, causing some to never fully unfold as human beings. Some of them never grow beyond their most base desires and anxieties, which causes them to remain authoritarian thinkers who have an urge to control everything and everyone around them. We all know the type.

But others of us do unfold and achieve our fuller potential so that we develop care and respect for others, while feeling less need to control everything around us. So, the even more fundamental question is, which of these states is the most common? Is humanity comprised mostly of people controlled by base and selfish desires? Or do most of us mature into responsible and compassionate adults? Is humanity trustworthy? Or must it be conditioned and controlled?

This is an age-old question. But our Liberal Religion is founded upon the idea that humanity is basically good, that most of us can be trusted to do the right thing, and that we should, therefore, fashion societies with guaranteed individual freedoms. This is uniquely so of American Unitarianism, in particular. It was born in argument against the "New Birth" movement during the, so-called, Great Awakening of the 18th century, based upon the idea that all humans are born in a natural state of depravity because of original sin and must, therefore, be born again. But this idea was challenged by the Congregational minister Charles Chauncey, who argued, instead, that human beings are born "with the capacity for

both sin and righteousness.”¹ Even if we’re not always good, there is goodness within us, which was a radically heretical idea at the time, especially after centuries of the Doctrine of Original Sin. The potential for good in human beings was unthinkable.

This idea was initially called, “Arminianism,” after an anti-Calvinist doctrine that emerged in 16th century Europe, but it later became known as *Unitarianism*. A hundred years after Chauncey’s congregational church, Boston’s First Church, officially became a Unitarian church, this belief in human goodness, and conversely, the disbelief in human depravity, was expressed by the Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes who believed religion should concentrate on human welfare and agency, not upon “the supernatural and the miraculous.”²

Later, in the early 1900s, one of Holmes younger associates, the Universalist minister Clarence Skinner wrote a Declaration of Social Principles and Social Program, adopted by the Universalist General Convention in 1917, that explicitly rejected the idea of “inherent depravity,” claiming instead, “that mankind is led into sin by evil surroundings, by the evils of unjust social and economic systems.”³ In his book *Liberalism Faces the Future*, Skinner said the starting point of liberalism must be a sense that, “at the core of human nature is something good and sound... [an] inherent moral capacity to choose the right...”⁴

Alas, Unitarianism is anomalous. Most in our Western culture still hold a negative view of human nature, which is rooted in the Doctrine of Original Sin that was formalized by the Church hundreds of years ago. Even among secularists, the term “human nature” remains almost synonymous with selfishness and debauchery, not altruism and love. And it is this negative view of humanity that leads the authorities to think they have to establish rules for every little matter, because they don’t trust their citizens to do the right thing and work problems out for themselves. “Thus, civilization has to be defended against the individual,” Sigmund Freud said, “and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed to that task.”⁵

It’s almost always society against the individual because society cannot trust individuals to always put its priorities ahead of their own. Or sometimes they worry they will do the right thing, meaning the humane thing, the altruistic thing, the compassionate thing, even if it means violating their laws. The more untrusting a government is, the more depraved it considers its citizenry, then the more punitive and authoritarian it becomes.

I mentioned John Haynes Holmes, for example. Holmes is the man credited with introducing Gandhi to the western world and making it aware of his struggle in India. Holmes became a Unitarian minister in New York City in 1907 and went on to become an advocate of the Social Gospel movement, a recipient of the Gandhi Peace Award, an original founder of the NAACP and the ACLU, serving as the latter’s very first Chairman, and a leader of the Pro-Palestinian Federation. As a pacifist, Holmes openly spoke against the U.S. involvement in World War I, which was considered a violation of the 1917 Espionage Act.

When Holmes presented his opinion during a Unitarian Conference, the former U.S. President Howard Taft, himself a Unitarian, was present and became furious leading him to make a motion to adopt a resolution stating Unitarians are:

"Resolved, that it is the sense of this Unitarian Conference that this war must be carried to a successful issue to stamp out militarism in the world; that we, as the Unitarian body, approve of the measures of President Wilson and Congress to carry on this war, restrictive as they may be..."

The motion was passed by a vote of 236 to 9. Over the next few months, the American Unitarian Association (AUA) refused to assist any congregations whose ministers didn't support the war and John Haynes Holmes resigned from the Association in protest.

This is an example of both a government and a religious association passing rules to curtail the freedoms, especially free expression, to serve their own interests. Not all laws or rules are so rigidly authoritarian. Many of them, as I said, are necessary and reasonable. But, in an Enlightened society, rules about what we must think or say are never reasonable or just.

Being free to think and speak for ourselves is far more important than the freedom to pass through uncontrolled intersections, but the principle is the same. We don't need the State or any other authorities putting up signs telling us what to believe. Those that post doctrines and decrees on every corner, warning us to stop thinking for ourselves, can lead to habitual beliefs that become as automatic to us as driving a car. As Freud also said, "It is in keeping with the course of human development that external coercion gradually becomes internalized."⁶

Everyone knows I'm far from a fan of the Unitarian Universalist Association's leadership these days, precisely because they have increasingly moved away from our democratic principles and are now punishing those who don't see things exactly their way. So, I wasn't surprised when I learned registrants for this year's annual General Assembly were asked to indicate what color sticker they want on their name badge—green, yellow, or red—to indicate their comfort level being in proximity to others. These are literally the colors at a stoplight and indicate the same things; red, stop and don't come any closer; yellow, come closer, but no touching; green, come on, let's shake hands or hug. I understand the sentiments here, especially in light of the pandemic, but isn't this something we should be able to work out for ourselves? Can't we be trusted to be adult enough to handle our own social interactions without being treated like kindergartners?

Perhaps I shouldn't say "adult enough," because our kids also need to learn how to work many issues out for themselves in order to become functional adults. We don't see the parents of young goats interfere when their kids are butting heads or running up steep cliffsides because learning to butt heads and run up cliffsides is crucial to mature goat behavior. Lion cubs and bear cubs wrestle, and claw, and bite each other in order to learn

how to survive as healthy adults. The same is true for young humans. As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt says, “Unsupervised free play is nature’s way of teaching young mammals the skills they’ll need as adults, which for humans include the ability to cooperate, make and enforce rules, compromise, adjudicate conflicts, and accept defeat.”⁷

This is why I’m incredibly pleased and excited that our outstanding Religious Education Specialist, Stephanie Gronholz is introducing this Free Play philosophy to our congregation this Summer. I was delighted by the children’s story she told a few weeks ago when she asked her stuffed rabbit, Bun Bun to try working out its issues with the other kids on its own, and to ask an adult for help only if necessary. Stephanie is the one who introduced me to Jonathan Haidt’s Free Play movement, and I’ve quickly become a big fan. “Childhood has become more tightly circumscribed in recent generations,” he says. “With less opportunity for free, unstructured play; less unsupervised time outside; more time online.”⁸ This he believes, coupled with social media, are impeding their healthy development and may be what’s leading to increased rates of anxiety and depression among young people. Haidt says, “As these conditions have risen and as the lessons on nuanced social behavior learned through free play have been delayed, tolerance for diverse viewpoints and the ability to work out disputes have diminished among many young people.”⁹

This disturbing trend should be of special concern for liberal institutions, including our liberal religion, which have been most impacted by this illiberal and intolerant mindset. It’s bad enough having helicopter parents; we don’t need helicopter conference planners to post signs telling us when it’s safe to approach our peers, let alone entire helicopter societies making rules to guide us at every turn. As our own uncontrolled intersections prove right here in Spokane, we become more capable, responsible, and safer when we are allowed to determine our own course.

¹ Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 11.

² Ibid., p. 137.

³ Ibid., p. 140.

⁴ Ibid., p. 141.

⁵ Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989) p. 7.

⁶ Ibid., p.7f.

⁷ Haidt, Jonathan, “After Babel: How Social Media Dissolved the Mortar of Society and Made America Stupid,” *Atlantic*, May 2022, p. 65.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.