

A CLEAR CONSCIENCE?

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham (Unitarian Universalist)

During the Jewish High Holidays, Sunday, October 2, 2011

The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Responsive Reading 635

A New Heart

Chaim Stern

Who can say: I have purified my heart, and I am free from sin?

There are none on earth so righteous that they never sin.

Cast away all the evil you have done, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.

A new heart I will give you, a new spirit put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart that feels.

For thus says the Eternal God: I, myself, will search for my sheep, and seek them out.

As a shepherd seeks them out when any of the flock go astray, so will I seek out my sheep.

I will put my spirit within you, and teach you to live by my laws.

For I desire love and not sacrifices, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Reading

In Praise of Self-Deprecation

Wisława Szymborska

The buzzard never says it is to blame.

The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.

When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.

If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn't understand remorse.

Lions and lice don't waver in their course.

Why should they, when they know they're right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they're light.

On this third planet from the sun

among the signs of bestiality

a clear conscience is Number One.

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My dear friend and colleague Carl Scovel long served a congregation of old Brahmin Unitarians, at Boston's King's Chapel, where Christian's wife is now the Assistant Minister. Carl tells the story of being called to the deathbed of an elderly parishioner, a businessman who had certainly been a success, at least in the way the world measures such things. He'd bought low, sold high and made millions and along the way alienated some embittered partners, wives, and even some of his own children. Carl knew this; so when he arrived at the deathbed and the dying man sent everyone else out of the room, he fully expected to hear something like a deathbed confession. But instead, the short conversation ended with the man saying, "So . . . at my memorial service, be sure you tell all of them that I had no regrets."

The poet's lines come to mind: "On this third planet from the sun/ among the signs of bestiality/ a clear conscience is Number One." Wislawa Szymborska was a Polish girl of sixteen when the Nazis overran her country, and began the mass murder of Jews and others, but as she grew older her conscience troubled her about what she did *not* do, first to resist the Germans, then Russians. Mind you, she wasn't herself a piranha, or a jackal, or a lion. But that didn't mean she felt her hands were clean.

"The dilemma of the humanist, standing at Dachau before the crematories," wrote Jacob Trapp, a mentor both to me and to Ed Lane, "is to have to say in his heart: 'This was done by members of the human race, and therefore what they did here I did too, or was capable of doing.' The true person of transcendent faith in our time is someone who, without wishing to do so, still looked into the abyss of evils being perpetrated, concentration camps to My Lai to the present and saw there what Blake called the 'the human image' – both divine and like the tiger. Only the clear-eyed are humbler and safer persons than those who turn away or shut their eyes to what is being done even now, or who claim, "Me? My hands are clean? I have nothing to do with THAT!" Even though we acknowledge that we belong to an interdependent web of all existence, of which we individuals are simply a part.

This is a form of turning, of what Jewish tradition calls *teshuvah*, toward the crimes and problems of one's own society, with open eyes, that is not an easy turning. Especially on the part of those of us who pay good money to be passive bystanders, assuring ourselves that we ourselves are not direct perpetrators. But then I think of the witnesses to violent crime in the inner city who, worried about reaction from gangs, say to the police, "I didn't see anything." Wondering how different those of us out in the affluent suburbs really are on this score.

Last Sunday afternoon, leading a memorial service here for our beloved member Bill Ganick, I recounted how he grew up as the youngest of six children in a poor Russian Jewish family in East Boston. In one recollection of his childhood, he wrote "Going to *schul* on [Shabbat] – incense – dark – wonderful." But he also told me more than once that on Yom Kippur, when the liturgy called for the congregation to confess, collectively, to having murdered, raped, stolen, and committed many other sins, all young Bill could think was, "I didn't do any of those things!"

I'm sure he didn't. God and the Jewish people also know how accusations of collective guilt are deeply problematic. Ultimately, in the Book of Life, each of us truly should be judged by our own deeds and misdeeds, our own sins of commission and omission, and not by anyone else's -- and yet, are we not also our brother's and sister's keepers? Responsible also in some part for what all of us collectively do or leave undone? This is a major issue in our society today.

The word *conscience* has come to mean something very inward, individual, and deeply personal. Yet when you try to pick the word apart these are its roots: *con*, together; *scientia*, knowing. Conscience is a matter of knowing what is right and wrong together. And something is lost if we fail to see this dimension of how conscience is formed, felt, and sustained among us. Example:

The State of Georgia executed a black man named Troy Davis. Many said, "I'm ashamed in conscience to be a citizen of a country killing a man whose innocence might yet have been proven." Seven out of nine witnesses against Davids had recanted. One of the remaining two was an alternative suspect. Thousands of people asked for clemency. The Georiga clemency board itself split, 3 to 2, yet succumbed to political pressure, it would seem. Protesters were saying, "While I don't know everything, what I do know makes me feel like part of a collective crime."

Conscience is why we need “whistle-blower” laws. Lack of conscience is what corrupts society. Yet surveys indicate a growing tendency among Americans and other people of privilege to have conscience go no deeper than how I feel just now. It doesn’t make me feel bad. I won’t let it.

A leading ethicist calls this “emotivism.” One reason it’s harder now to secure moral agreement. Folks in the audience at a presidential debate cheer the idea of a person without health insurance being allowed to die; and boo a question from a member of the military who says he is gay.

Sociologist James Davison Hunter, in a book called *The Death of Character* says people today, even those who claim to be conservative, are less likely to feel embedded in a moral landscape beyond themselves. This is new. As conservative columnist David Brooks writes, “In most times and places, the group was seen to be the essential moral unit. A shared religion defined rules and practices. Cultures structured people’s imaginations and . . . moral discipline. But now more people are led to assume that the free-floating individual is the essential moral unit. Morality was once revealed, inherited and shared, but now it’s thought to be something that emerges in the privacy of your own heart.”

But what if conscience, to be deep and authentic, needs to reflect **both** inner and shared values? Brooks sees young adults in our culture as drowning in a sea moral relativism. I do not. I know far too many young vegetarians and vegans, for example, who know how enmeshed we are in an interdependent web of life on this planet. Many who grew up in privilege and now want to serve others. Many who know that so-called “traditional values” were often themselves unjust to women, to minorities, and to same-sex couples, and who follow the example of Rabbi Jesus, among others, in challenging mere tradition when it clashes with a core value, **compassion**.

I think of the young adults now playing “Occupy Wall Street,” chanting, “You got bailed out! We got sold out!” Many of them can’t find work worthy of their gifts and passions. Yet when many of them declare that they have given up on voting, and on democracy itself, because big money now so clearly buys and sells our politicians, I have to shake my head. Because it is not

good to give up on the long-term, messy, but non-violent project called democracy just because it has become tainted, as if that were new.

Recently Gwen and I saw the Huntington Theater's revival of Leonard Bernstein's 1956 musical, *Candide* -- about a young adult being exposed to the evils, corruptions and miseries of the world, and trying to figure out how to retain or restore an innocent conscience. It's based on a late 18th century parable by Voltaire, the irony of which too many people misinterpret. Its conclusion that all we can do is each cultivate our own garden is not meant to be taken literally. Cultivation requires plowing into the fields of experience the *you-know-what* that happens. It requires cultivating, in the sphere of action and interaction, a deeper recognition of the interdependence we have with family, community, nation, all humankind, and with the environment itself.

It can be fine to be vegan, to keep kosher, to protest. But it shouldn't be used to say "I have clean hands." Unless it contributes to cultivating a common quest for deeper compassion, democracy, human rights, and shared values, you need to get your hands dirty again. The whole of earth was given as a garden, as one of our hymns puts it. Seekers of peace and justice need dirty hands.

One reason I love the Jewish tradition is that it has a balanced understanding of human nature. There's nothing like the orthodox Christian doctrine of original sin, saying that we human beings are inherently depraved and in need of a savior. But neither is there the kind of Enlightenment or Romantic individualism and naivete that can replace it in our culture, that *Candide* parodies.

The rabbis were wise when they taught that there is both an inclination toward the good in our human nature, and an inclination in the other direction. And that there are none on earth so righteous that they never sin or cause pain to others. After all, our lives are so intertwined and interdependent that even with our technological inventiveness, or our own investment dollars, we can cost someone else a job or harm the environment, we need to take some mitigating action.

At UUSC, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee --the human rights arm of our religious community, where I'm on the board, I heard just yesterday and the day before moving reports on our work to support people seeking fair trade and a living wage, the human right to water, human

dignity in the wake of natural disasters, and civil liberties within more democratic governance. Expect to hear more. But now, during these Days of Awe, I hope you will join me in just beginning an examination of conscience at two levels: first, interpersonal. I'm aware, as you probably are, of individuals I have hurt, disappointed, or offended. In accordance with ancient wisdom, I've been reaching out to those who are on my conscience, offering no excuses, just my sorrow, and asking for forgiveness. Secondly, I have been asking myself how I can be more effective in my work for social justice and peace. Not necessarily more pure, just more effective.

This year I have been asked to deliver a series of endowed lectures, the Minns Lectures, that are given every year by a Unitarian Universalist minister. They will constitute a meditation on how we as religious liberals might renew the spiritual strength of our family of faith by a deeper meditation on the ancient words of the prophet Micah: *What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justice, to love mercy (compassion), and to walk humbly with your God?*" The first of these, "To Be an Effective, Justice-Seeking People," will be given on the afternoon of November 5 in downtown Boston – at King's Chapel – with responses from two outstanding younger ministers.

Some people think an examination of conscience should result in feeling worthless, powerless. There is even an old joke about a rabbi on Yom Kippur abasing himself before God and saying, "I am nothing, I am nothing!" Then the cantor joins in, chanting, "I am nothing, I am nothing!" All this leads the *shamas*, the custodian or janitor of the synagogue, to come forward, exclaiming "I am nothing!" As the cantor sniffs to the rabbi, "Hm! Now look who says that he's nothing!"

But here is the point: Each of us is somebody. And that is the point these Jewish holidays, and its mythical Book of Life, in which each of our stories are written, In the ancient ritual of Tashlich, often observed on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, the sins of the previous year are cast upon scraps of bread and set afloat down a flowing stream. This is to symbolize what Micah a chapter after his most famous verse, writes: "*The Eternal will take us back in love, cover our iniquities, and carry all our sins into the depths of the sea.*" [Micah 7:19]

May our collective conscience also tell us this: Each person on this planet is a child of God, called to treat others as sisters and brothers, members of one human family. Each a somebody.

Meanwhile the river of time flows on. May we cast our failings upon it as we build together on its banks the land we were meant to build: where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace, like an ever-flowing stream. So may it yet be. Amen, and amen.

*Hymn 1007

There's a River Flowin' in My Soul

Sanders/Smith

Benediction 686