

Please join me in consideration of the following hypothesis:

Enlightened persons have an obligation
to act for change.

What is enlightenment? Enlightenment, an action word, has a literal meaning: To lighten the load. You arrive bearing more, you leave bearing less. Enlightenment is that transforming moment when one discards a burden, and then moves on.

Think of the mountain Sherpa, the mighty porters of the Himalaya mountain range. The Sherpa climb steep mountains with huge, heavy packs lashed to their backs. Wouldn't it be easier going if the load was lighter?

Suppose you are the Sherpa, and you are tired of carrying a very heavy pack. Perhaps you might discard the second cooking pot and only keep one. Perhaps you might leave the folding metal cot behind, keeping only an insulated sleeping pad. Perhaps you might leave behind the magnum of Champagne, keeping only a plastic canteen and a water purification pump. Enlightenment is the discarding of unneeded burdens. What then, is an "enlightened person"? Please consider the following:

An enlightened person discards blind obedience to dogma;
instead, (s)he considers every issue fully, and then decides
what is the morally right direction in which to proceed.

What kind of issues might an enlightened person consider? They could range from questioning the administration's doctrine of global preemptive aggression to their propagation of torture as an acceptable method of interrogation. They could range from questioning the administration's defiance of wiretapping laws and their unwillingness to adequately help the injured, hungry, and homeless people of New Orleans.

Other issues which an enlightened person could consider include: animal rights, free speech, abortion, gay marriage, science, taxation, relational fidelity, education and academia, immigration, intoxicating substances, state killing of prisoners, vegetarianism, biological research, welfare reform, zero population growth, stewardship of the environment, violent games and toys, etc.

Using the terms of philosophy, what we have is a clash between two different world views: deontology and teleology.

Deontology is rule-bound rigidity. There is a rule and you must follow it. For example: Only married heterosexuals may adopt. It is easy to follow that rule. Are you a gay couple? You can't adopt. It doesn't matter that you are wonderful people, full of love. It does not matter that you can provide a comfortable home for an orphan. It does not matter that you are willing to take an adolescent. You know the rule: If you are gay, you can't adopt. Period.

Teleology is where thinking occurs. To be teleological is to question rules, traditions, doctrine and dogma. The thinker is not swayed by prevalence, mores, or the temptation to conformity; rather, the teleological person asks questions such as "Why can't a qualified gay couple adopt?" or, "Isn't a child much better off with two loving parents, than in foster care?" or, the

teleological person may observe, "The research literature shows that adoptive gay couples have higher income, greater education, and their adopted children have a greater chance of attending college. The research literature also shows that adopted children raised by gay couples have no detectable deficiencies in psychological or social development, when compared to adopted children reared in non-gay homes."

Enlightened people drive deontologists crazy! The deontologist wants you to follow prescribed rules without question, and in the case of some religions, will tell you that failing to do so will cost you your soul.

As enlightened people, liberals think and ask questions. The rights and freedoms which Americans enjoy were wrought by great liberals such as the founding fathers, who envisioned a land free of religious fundamentalist control, where a person could speak his or her mind. Those pioneering notions were quite radical in their day. Remember, Rome was not built in a day; neither was America's pathway to enlightenment instantaneous. America's beginnings were imperfect; Enlightened minds, working together, have helped America shed many deontological burdens. Emancipation, women's suffrage, child labor laws, abortion rights, civil rights, gay rights, these are but a few examples of advances won by enlightened people who acted upon their conscience. Kinetic enlightenment advances the human spirit, and the human condition.

The thesis we are contemplating holds that enlightened persons have an obligation to act for change. Is that correct? Does enlightenment obligate us to action? A thought experiment may illuminate an answer, and provide directional clarity. In this experiment we will evaluate several circumstances, using Unitarian Universalist principals as our moral guideposts, then we will see if an answer emerges. Consider the following vignettes:

- Suppose we become aware that our neighbor has not eaten in a week, due to lack of food. Do the virtues of worth (1) and compassion (2) obligate us to feed our hungry neighbor?
- Suppose that our government blasts, burns, maims, and shoots between 30,000 and 100,000 non combatants in a foreign country, during efforts to steal their natural resources and colonize their lands. Do the virtues of worth (1), individual justice (2), compassion (2), world peace (6), world justice (6), and respect (7) obligate us to resist our own government's war efforts?
- Suppose more than 100 people have been released from death sentences after newly emerged forensic technology proved their innocence. Statistically it is a mathematical certainty that there are other innocent people presently on death row. It is also a mathematical certainty that innocent prisoners have already been killed by the state. Understanding these things, do the virtues of individual justice (2), and a free and responsible search for truth (4) obligate us to work to stop state killing of prisoners?

For most of us a moral compass did emerge; enlightenment does, in fact, carry with it an obligation to action. This is not something new to Unitarian Universalists; we share a long tradition of social, political and moral activism.

It is not possible to do all things, to serve on all committees, to protest

all evils, to join all enlightened organizations, or to advance all enlightened issues. Unfortunately, we are human and we need sleep, recreation, and our time and capabilities are limited. That noted, if we accept the posit that there is an obligation to act for change which accompanies enlightenment, all that remains is to determine when, where, and how one will become involved.

If a person is willing, there is always something (s)he can do. As an example, consider the photocopy shop back home in Gold Beach, Oregon. The shop is staffed by 20 developmentally special adults, each with limitations, and abilities. Photocopy orders are a team effort. Stella runs the cash register, and she whispers to Cindy how much money you owe. Cindy counts your money and then hands it to Stella, who places it in the register drawer. Stella is helping Cindy with her counting and money skills.

Matt takes your original, and ask how many copies you purchased, then he puts that number into the copier, which is right behind the counter. Matt always smiles, talks in simple sentences, and when he is excited he can be quite loud. Sometimes Stella has to tell Matt to talk in a quieter, gentle voice. Marylou is in a wheelchair, and she can only move one hand. Marylou's job is to push the big green start button on the photocopy machine, and she has been doing that job quite well, for years.

If you are ever passing through Gold Beach, Oregon, and you need photocopy services, stop at the shop. It is on Ellenberg Avenue across from the Curry County courthouse. And, if you are on the pathway to enlightenment, be like Marylou. Find a cause, find something to act upon, so that you are helping to advance a more liberal, enlightened world.

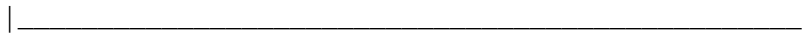
But then, I'm preaching to the choir. You are already involved. You are the kind people who quietly give of your time, your money, your love in order to help those less fortunate. You are teachers, passing the tools of enlightenment to the next generation of thinkers. You are librarians, helping people to read, to research, to develop a love for literature. You are parents, guiding your children towards an enlightened view of mankind. You are the members of this church who have protested US aggression towards Iraq. You are the many who protested Fred Phelps when his group brought hatred to some of Matthew Netto's students last year. You are the people who support the arts, and who are patrons of the symphony. You are the people who quietly contribute to worthwhile causes which fight for justice, equality, and peace.

May I close by saying good job, well done. There is more work to be done, so let's go out and do even more.

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COGNOPENIA

ENLIGHTENMENT



spectra of thinking

Realm of....

- * deontology
- * selfishness
- * force
- * dogma
- * the past

- * teleology
- * selflessness
- * peace
- * self-actualization
- * present and future

