

Everyday Ethics

by Dr. Lisa Jones

Delivered at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton on August 25, 2002

Note: This service was interwoven with readings and hymns listed below.

Opening Words

Today I call upon you to help me contemplate a question that nags at me: "Am I doing enough?" I grew up in Culver City, California, (part of L.A. County) on a block with many two and three bedroom homes and no apartments. People drove practical cars. I felt very safe and provided for. I was taught to be compassionate. I was also a naive middle class child who assumed that any inequities in the world were on their way to being fixed by the adults.

I remember while I was still in grade school, hearing my father send someone away from our door. When I asked him about it he said that the person wanted money for a charity. I asked why he hadn't contributed and he replied that he already gave at the office. I was surprised by my father's response. I knew nothing about the charity, but I suspected our family could give more than whatever we had allotted to be withdrawn from his paycheck. We had a comfortable life, so why would he turn away someone asking for something? This is not a judgment of my father. Today there are many charities I would turn away without any pangs of guilt, but this memory sticks with me none the less.

It seems like a common scene. We have all been that child and that parent I suspect, at different points in life. Today, I am asking us to re-enact the scene--let us pull each other's pant legs like that child and say "hey, what's going on?" I am calling on you to help me figure out how to go about answering that question "are you doing enough?" And related questions like: When are we indulging more than necessary or giving as much as we can? When we explain our choices are we rationalizing ourselves out of guilt's way? How can we act with integrity?

Chalice lighting words (unison):

Hymn 109 As We Come Marching, Marching

"Now are the hours of work, and tomorrow comes the harvest . . . "

I suspect that DuBois might have been talking about the work of fighting racism, I am not sure.

Whichever struggle he was referring to, I have several reactions:

1. agreement-there is much work to be done in this world to make us a healthy, just planet;

2. inspired--by his poetic expression; but
3. to be honest, I find myself a little bummed out that he's telling me I have to work.

And, more importantly, that he promises a harvest I'll never get to share in personally. Tomorrow is someone else's tomorrow. Racism and other inequalities will not be gone in my generation.

So how will I sustain myself if I personally never get to enjoy the harvest? I have some answers. First, I can rise to the challenge if a community shares that plight with me and will keep me going. If you help keep me focused on our values I can make a sacrifice for others.

But I am still going to need some periods of rest and celebration along the way. Which brings us to the question: Must we make a choice between personal pleasure and doing the right thing? When are the two compatible?

Children's story

This story has no ending, you have to provide the ending.

Once upon a time there were two sisters who were twins. They were both good to each other and loved each other very much. They were friendly and people liked to play with them. Many people came to their birthday parties and gave them presents. Each year, more and more people came into their circle of friends and gave them more and more presents. At first they shared them with each other and invited their friends to come share them too whenever their friends came to play. As time went on . . .

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"Bread and roses"

A similar sentiment was expressed by Emma Goldman, too.

Ever hear the quote "If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution"? Emma Goldman lived (1869-1940). Alix Kates Shulman describes her as a feminist heroine, anarchist activist, editor, writer, teacher, jailbird and general trouble-maker. In fact, though the sentiment is indeed Emma Goldman's, one she frequently pronounced and acted upon and has been attributed to her on buttons, posters, banners, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and in books and articles, for nearly twenty years, she never actually said exactly that. In Kates Shulman's article "Dances With Feminists" she explains that although Goldman never wrote those exact words, they were a paraphrase of something she did write. From her 1931 autobiography Living My Life, here is what she did say:

At the dances I was one of the most untiring and gayest. One evening a young boy, took me aside. With a grave face, as if he were about to announce the death of a dear comrade, he whispered to me that it did not behoove an agitator to dance. Certainly not with such reckless abandon, anyway. It was undignified for one who was on the way to become a force in the anarchist movement. My frivolity would only hurt the Cause.

I grew furious at the impudent interference of the boy. I told him to mind his own business, I was tired of having the Cause constantly thrown into my face. I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement should not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. "I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things. " Anarchism meant that to me, and I would live it in spite of the whole world--prisons, persecution, everything. Yes, even in spite of the condemnation of my own comrades I would live my beautiful ideal.

Living My Life (New York: Knopf, 1934), p. 56

Yeah, Emma Goldman!

So on the one hand, I reject total asceticism. I believe people do their best work when their psyches are well cared for--we need bread and roses too.

On the other hand, I feel a harshness towards myself and others when I think about how much of my money and time goes to play and leisure . . . and how my culture makes it all seem appropriate.

I have been reading Thich Nhat Hanh who suggests we should not "take as the aim of your life sensual pleasure." He doesn't say we shouldn't enjoy sensual pleasure, we just shouldn't let it be the focus of our lives. I want you and I to think about this. Do we agree? What does that mean? How many of us can say that the pursuit of wealth or pleasure for us or our families doesn't predominate our lives? What would it take to reorganize our lives so that sensual pleasure is there, but not predominate. What would we put in its place? I am not a hedonist, but my culture is hedonistic. My culture equates consumption and indulgence with patriotism and goodness. Buy things--it will improve the economy. Buy things, it's a way of sharing your wealth. Finding rationalizations for our purchases is easy.

When I first brought this subject up with friends I noticed silence and it occurred to me that no one feels comfortable with these questions. Some people are just struggling to survive--so of course the question irritates them, and most of the people I know are well off enough to know that someone has it harder than them, and yet those people who have it harder are surviving, so that implies that my middle class peers could do more than they do and get by with less. The question is uncomfortable.

One person said, "you do as much as you can. " My response was "how do you know if you are doing as much as you can?" We get used to the psychological comforts of our consumption habits and our leisure time--it is so easy to feel like we need those things and therefore we are doing the best we can. She followed with "you push yourself a little more each time. " I like that.

But it is so easy to slip out of that habit. I think you need a community of people with shared intentions to help you resist the mantra of advertisers. You need a community to understand why you want to share activities with them rather than buy gifts for them . . .

This is one reason I sought the UU church despite my prior comfort with secular life. I wanted a community of people who might help keep me on a mindful path. I really think we need each other's help to make a meaningful difference in this world. We have to wilfully create a new culture.

Let's sing our second hymn now . . . and as we do so, think about the word love as a caring community . . .

Hymn #131 Love Will Guide Us

Small Group Discussion: The congregation regroups into small circles of 5 to 7 people to discuss the handout of excerpts from Peace in Every Step.

At end of discussion time

There are no easy answers. I have garnered perhaps two insights though:

1. We need to help each other by sharing these values, encouraging these questions without judging each other
2. We must become comfortable with partial vision and trust the process of continuing to try to answer the question-"am I doing enough?"

Hymn #297 The Star of Truth

"1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth. "

". . . 4. Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, by all means, including personal contact and visits, images, and sound. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world."

"5. Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need."

- 3 (out of 14) "precepts of interbeing" (principles intended to "help and protect" us) as articulated by Thic Nhat Hanh, in

Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life
