“THREE ANSWERS FOR THE LONG HAUL”

Sunday, May 17, 2015
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Readings

(1) On this 61st anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education on May 17, 1954, I begin with words from that Supreme Court Decision.

[D]oes segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does. ...

We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

(2) Attorney Charles Hamilton Houston for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund orchestrated the legal cases culminating in this historic decision, and this morning, I also turn to Richard Kluger in his magnificent book Simple Justice, which traces the history of the Brown decision. He described Houston this way:

Charles Houston was not a noisy man. Few black Americans have ever heard of him, and fewer whites.... Yet Charles Houston became the critical figure who linked the passion of Frederick Douglass demanding black freedom and of William DuBois demanding black equality to the undelivered promises of the Constitution of the United States.

(3) Finally for our readings, I offer again a story about an esteemed colleague, Harry Scholefield, who some years ago received the Distinguished Service Award from the Unitarian Universalist Association. These are his closing comments upon receiving this great honor, when he summarized the saving grace of our path of spiritual freedom.

Sometimes it seems to me that what we are all about as Unitarian Universalists can be summed up in just three words. The first word is ACT. Don't just stand there. ACT!
The other two words come to me through a Quaker friend. She went one Sabbath day to an old New Jersey meetinghouse. It turned out to be what the Quakers call a "gathered meeting," a meeting where no one speaks and the silence grows deeper and deeper. Fifteen minutes, a half hour, three quarters of an hour went by and nothing was said. The only sound in the meetinghouse was the ticking of an old grandfather's clock. As the meeting was about to close, a woman rose and said, "I've been sitting here trying to understand what the clock is saying to us. Now I think I've got it. It's saying, 'Think. Thank.' ‘Think. Thank.' ‘Think. Thank.'"

[Harry Scholefield then continued.] I feel that I am an old grandfather's clock that has been ticking away in our ministry for fifty-two years. And what I hear myself saying to you now in celebration of this occasion is,

Think. Thank. Act!
Think. Thank. Act!
Think. Thank. Act!

“THREE ANSWERS FOR THE LONG HAUL”
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What in the world is going on?

There is much that is blessed and serves human community and dignity, and there are those events that baffle, offend, or harm.

The loss of eight lives is incalculable, yet I was heartened to hear the many stories of injured passengers stepping up and helping one another to escape the wreckage of the Amtrak train earlier this week (with just a few reports of the "me-first" fear of a handful of distressed victims).

I was also strangely pleased by a particular newspaper story about the record-breaking sale at auction of one Picasso painting for $179 million. In case you missed it, Christie’s handled the artwork this past week and sold it to an anonymous buyer.

Surprisingly, at least to me, the Times’ article was in the Art Section, not Business. It examined in detail a thesis that had been rattling around in my head immediately upon hearing about this extraordinary price. On the Art pages, the sale was described in terms of global income inequality, the guestimated wealth needed to
spend so much money, and the speculation that not all, but some billionaires (as many as 50 of them) would find it affordable.

The writer, Neil Irwin, invoked French economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez. Their analysis of income disparities and the increasing extremes in Europe and the United States went viral just a year ago, reinforcing a new emerging cultural narrative.

That narrative speaks of the new Gilded Age, the 1% vs. the 99%, the one tenth of a percent and the one hundredth of a percent, and the social inequalities that arise from massive inequality of wealth and income.

The good news is that this narrative, the unmasking, now appears among the Arts pages, not simply book reviews, op-ed, or business sections.

What does the sale of the Picasso represent? Business as usual… Celebration by Picasso fans that he is the greatest… Some anonymous individual’s bragging rights, limited as those may be to fellow billionaires…? There also seems to be a reflection of cultural amnesia of core values of shared humanity.

Maybe, perhaps, just maybe, this art sale also represents that a tipping point could be at hand regarding economic inequality, as the larger narrative of our culture continues to be exposed for its radical excesses. Is it one more signifier that the American Empire with its excesses of capitalism is weakening?

Helping each other is deeply embedded in our culture and in human nature – cooperation, altruism, and sharing – and these are ultimately a more powerful force than worshipping the almighty dollar, as powerful as that is.¹

In the newsletter note for today, I alluded to the root cause of the ills of Western culture. I’ll have to explore the details on some other occasion, but I’ll give the outline for a moment.

The root cause of what ails us in daily life, personal life, and the globe is the myth of the individual, and more specifically the despicable doctrine of original sin, as promoted throughout most of Christianity, that has infected the West.

“In Adam’s fall, we sinned all.” So goes the teaching from the New England Primer from the 1680s through the 20th century, which sold 2 million copies throughout the 1700s as a reading guidebook with moral instruction.

¹ Washington Irving first used the phrase “the almighty dollar” in his story “The Creole Village”, which was first published in the 1837 edition of the literary annual, The Magnolia.

“The almighty dollar, that great object of universal devotion throughout our land, seems to have no genuine devotees in these peculiar villages; and unless some of its missionaries penetrate there, and erect banking houses and other pious shrines, there is no knowing how long the inhabitants may remain in their present state of contented poverty.”
We know the story: Eve ate fruit of the Tree of Knowledge – so the myth goes – and shared it with Adam, and human consciousness entered creation, which is a good outcome.

But the story as interpreted most of the time reinforces patriarchy and sexism in blaming Eve (although also Adam).

The message as traditionally interpreted is not one of human radiance – of awakening to consciousness and freedom to think and choose. Rather, we humans are inescapably, not just subject to making mistakes, but essentially evil, unworthy.

- That makes it hard to shape community, if we cannot ultimately trust others.
- That view slaps us with low self-esteem, and we can never be good enough.

The Roman and Protestant message of depravity rejects the beauty and truth of original blessing: the story, the narrative, the theme, the initial message that it was not only good but also an “exceedingly good” thing, when God on the Sixth Day – in that myth – created human beings.

We forget that blessing when warped by the ugly destructive message of original sin (which I do want to add is not a central teaching of Judaism, Orthodox Christianity, or Islam).

Islam, for example, does not make much of original sin, but when spoken about is characterized as human forgetfulness… forgetting that we are part of a larger Creativity, divinity, of god, interconnected with Creation and each other…. Forgetfulness – which is a recognizable trait we do seem to share with one another.

Thus, I suggest and conclude “Forgetting – Original Sin” as a much needed, new cultural narrative rather than the debilitating dominance of depravity. Forgetting Original Sin in both senses: Forgetting as (1) the meaning of and (2) the attitude to take toward the traditional doctrine.

Now you know! To be continued….

For a moment, celebrating the power of sharing, helping, giving, and supporting one another, I return to Ralph Waldo Emerson, our eminent activist and provocateur who helped to shape our faith in the mid-19th century. In addition to honoring human nature and encouraging us to experience the glory of this life at first hand, he wrote:

We are not born free, we are born with a mortgage. That mortgage is a debt, a debt that we owe to the past and to the future. While we live,
we pay interest and then pass it on to the next generation. That’s how churches, communities, and nations survive; by accepting what has been bequeathed and passing it on to those that come after them. This ritual of receiving and giving is an act of Thanksgiving.

Also in the spirit of blessing and summoning the best from ourselves and how we think about money (for example, our pledge drive too), I offer again a story from my wise colleague Rev. Anita Farber-Robertson. I heard it a few years ago when she was serving as Interim Minister of First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts:

The story is told of a pastor who made an appeal in church for a great and worthy cause. A certain woman, a member of the church, came to him, handed him a check for $50, and asked if her gift were satisfactory. The pastor looked at her and replied, “If it represents you.”

After a moment of soul-searching thought, she asked to have the check returned. A day or two later, she returned and handed her pastor a check for $5000, again asking, “Is this satisfactory?”

Once again her pastor replied, “If it represents you.” The truth seemed to be driving deeply. After a few moments of hesitation, she took the check back and left.

Later in the week she returned, again with a check. This time it was for $50,000. As she placed it in the pastor’s hand, she said, “After earnest, prayerful thought, I have come to the conclusion that this gift does represent me, and I am happy to give it.” (James Hewett, editor, Illustrations Unlimited)

Anita adds, as do I, “Not all of us have $50,000 dollars to give. But all of us have some gift that is enough of a stretch” that it will make us feel good… that will grace ourselves, this community, and all we do… a pledge that will represent you, deeply represent you…

Is it easy – such spiritual discipline?… Not always, but “it is worth it.”

Part of the theme this morning is also that from the reading from Harry Scholefield when he described what we are all about in our religious path:

Think! Thank! Act!

Think! Thank! Act!

Those are three good answers to how to live and make a difference each day, three answers for the long haul.
In addition, Leo Tolstoi offers a story, “Three Questions”, which some may recall... Tolstoi whose writings deeply influenced Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. To summarize:

Once upon a time, there was a king who was concerned how he might be the best person and best ruler possible.

The thought came to this king that he would never fail if he knew three things. These three things were:

- What was the right time for every action?
- Who were the most necessary people?
- What was the most important thing to do?

Many educated... (members of his court) attempted to answer the king's questions, but they all came up with different answers. The king decided that he needed to ask a wise hermit in a nearby village.

The hermit would only see common folk, however, so the king disguised himself as a peasant, left his guards behind, and went to see the hermit. The hermit was digging flower beds when the king arrived.

The king asked his questions, but the hermit went on digging rather laboriously. The king offered to dig for him for a while. After digging for some time, the king again asked his questions.

Before the hermit could answer, a man emerged from the woods. He was bleeding from a terrible stomach wound. The king tended to him, and they stayed the night in the hermit's hut.

By the next day the wounded man was doing better, but was incredulous at the help he had received. The man confessed that he knew who the king was, and that the king had executed his brother and seized his property.

He had come to kill the king, but the king's guards had wounded him. The man (now) pledged allegiance to the king, and he went on his way.

The king asked the hermit again for his answers, and the hermit responded that [the king]... had just had his questions answered.

"Do you not see," replied the hermit. "If you had not pitied my weakness yesterday, and had not dug those beds for me, but had gone your way, that man would have attacked you, and you would have repented of not having stayed with me. So the most important time was when you were digging the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business.

"Afterwards when that man ran to us, the most important time was when you were attending to him, for if you had not bound up his wounds he would have died without having made peace with you. So he was the most important man, and what you did for him was your most important
“Remember then: there is only one time that is important – Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power.

“The most … (important) person is … whoever you are with for no one knows whether we will ever have dealings with any one else;

“and the most important thing to do is to do good to the person with you, because for that purpose alone were we sent into this life!”

(Tolstoi, “Three Questions” in What Men Live By (1885) and Wikipedia summary adapted)

- The most important time is now.
- The most important person is whoever you are with.
- The most important thing is to do good

To these various fruits from the wisdom tree, I offer three more… Three more effective tools that help change the larger narrative of human greed, me-first, and inequality. And to me, these next three have long-term consequences. They reflect what Charles Hamilton Houston was up to with his younger legal colleagues, those like Thurgood Marshall, that culminated in Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision on this day 61 years ago.

They were integral in the strategic planning and activism of James Bevel, Diane Nash, Angela Butler, Ralph Abernathy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and so many in, at, and after Selma. They are part of community organizing and social change in many arenas.

This final triple play comes to mind in terms of how to frame that part of our lives that contributes to the larger good.

Three Essentials for
- giving meaning to Life,
- blessing the universe,
- recasting the narrative of our culture,
- reclaiming the greatness of our faith, and
- any other shared goal you may have.

Also for enjoying the long haul… Three essentials.

The first is: Show up!

Show up for Life… partners, family, community. Show up for the struggles at hand as best you can rather than a soliloquy of good intentions, or expecting others be champions of kindness and change while expecting little of yourself.

Show up: Be here now… in the Buddhist sense.
Enter the flow of Life in the Taoist Way of virtue in action.

To show up is to be mindful… appreciative of what is before us – the time, the people, the good that can be done – just as Tolstoi’s king was to learn.

Because we need an ice hockey illustration in the midst of the NY Rangers’ pursuit of the Stanley Cup, I turn to Wayne Gretzky. He once said, “You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.” I translate that to mean, “Be in the game….” Let’s imagine you need to win three games in a row to stay in contention…. Show up.

Someone once said that 90% of life is showing up; or 80% of success is showing up, or is it 99%? {Various attributions and expressions, but you get the point…}

More than 60 years ago, Dr. Harrington, our Senior Minister showed up with a small group in our city to work here in solidarity with the African National Congress against apartheid; thirty years ago, Unitarian Universalists in this congregation and metro area, and many from other faith groups repeatedly showed up and protested apartheid and argued for boycotts and sanctions, and some of us from Community got arrested along way, as did so many across the country.

Tens of thousands showed up in Selma…. Examples are legion.

First, Show up!

Second, Shut up! Shut up? I don’t like hearing that so much; seems so rude, so how about Hush?

Hush, my darlings, or Listen/learn… Listen up!....

Some prophets are not very good at that and some are, but most of us will benefit from listening and learning when we show up. Those of privilege – the affluent, white/pink people, men – are especially vulnerable to needed education if after showing up, we can listen.

Various privileges that society unjustly bestows to some groups/classes seem to include ears that are stuffed with cotton, or stiff necks that do not allow bowing one’s head, or showing some humility.

One of the hardest things in the world is described by Ezekiel in Jewish scripture. This prophet reports going to the Jewish settlement in Tel Abib by the river Chebar during the period of exile from Jerusalem 2600 years ago. He reports, “He sat where they sat and was astonished by what he learned.”

He showed up and quit barking his harsh words. Even prophets can listen….
Shut up? Or Listen up, or Hush my darlings…. Active listening is the gentler admonition…. With an open heart…. Then we can ask, contribute, share our ideas, and listen some more….

Number three has variations…. Show up, Listen up, and Step up…

Step up… take action… Speak up… Act up….

And community comes into being. We are not alone. Sometimes we follow; sometimes we may lead. Step by step, we do what we can, as best we can, given the season of our life.

Our tradition affirms that our lives are fulfilled in character, and character is the result of what we do, how we behave… our kindness, courage, and deeds. Simple kindness is an amazing gift to offer.

Of course, life is a balancing act, and we are confronted with constant choices. Choosing is hard to do sometimes, the choosing of which cause, event…. Larger cultural narratives also may seduce, distract, or weary us.

Sometimes we forget the big thing: We are the stars awakening, the universe coming to consciousness and practicing the art of compassion and collaboration. That we are not isolated individuals, but inevitably shaped by social interactions and helping others.

And, we know something that comforts and frees: our freedom of spirit and mind and our deeds anchor us.

Strange and foolish walls separate us…. But they need not.

Think, thank, act….

Live, knowing the most important time is now, the most important person is whoever you are with, and the most important thing is to do good.

Show up, Listen up and Step Up… which of course, is not too hard to remember, and you already know….