

**“Stories, Samaritans, and Synapses”  
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
November 1, 2009  
Dennis Reynolds, Ministerial Intern**

**Lighting the Chalice**

At times our own light goes out,  
And is rekindled by a spark from another person.  
Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude  
Of those who have lighted the flame within us.  
(Albert Schweitzer)

**Opening Words**

Our opening words are from the recently deceased, Reverend Forrest Church. He was for many years the senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, one of the largest Unitarian Universalist churches in this country. He also authored and co-authored a number of books about religious thought and living a religious life. He spent the last years of his life battling a cancer he knew was terminal. Through his writings he shared that process. While he faced the end of his life he crafted the following mantra.

“Want what you have  
Be who you are  
Do what you can”

I invite you to repeat it with me as a mantra

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**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: From the fragmented world of our everyday lives we gather together in search of wholeness.

CONGREGATION: By many cares and preoccupations, by diverse and selfish aims are we separated from one another and divided within ourselves.

MINISTER: Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed from the Tree of Life that sustains us all.

CONGREGATION: We cherish our oneness with those around us and the countless generations that have gone before us.

MINISTER: We would hold fast to all of good we inherit even as we would leave behind us the outworn and false.

CONGREGATION: We would escape from bondage to the ideas of our own day and from the delusions of our own fancy.

MINISTER: Let us labor in hope for the dawning of a new day without hatred, violence, and injustice.

CONGREGATION: Let us nurture the growth in our own lives of the love that has shone in the lives of the greatest of men and women, the rays of whose lamps still illumine our way.

MINISTER: In this spirit we gather.

CONGREGATION: In this spirit we pray.

(Phillip Hewitt)

## **Reading**

Today's reading is from the Christian Bible, Luke 10:25-37:

A lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus said to him, "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?"

He answered: "You shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself."

And he said to him "You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell into the hands of robbers who stripped him, beat him and went away, leaving him half

dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So likewise, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

“But a Samaritan while traveling came near him and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put the man on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him and when I come back I will repay whatever more you spend.’

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

### **“STORIES, GOOD SAMARITANS, AND SYNAPSES”**

First, let me clarify who I think the storyteller we call “Jesus” was. In addition to my own efforts to meld and reconstruct my childhood Christian teachings and my seminary studies, I am also strongly influenced by the work of a group of historical and biblical scholars who call themselves the “Jesus Seminar.”

The Seminar's reconstruction of the historical Jesus portrays him as wandering Jewish teacher whose personal philosophy owed a significant debt to the Greek philosophy of the Cynics.

According to one source, the Cynic philosophy was that the purpose of life is to live a life of virtue in agreement with nature. This meant rejecting all conventional desires for wealth, or power, or fame, and by living a life free from all possessions.

As reasoning creatures, people could gain happiness by living in a way that was natural for humans. Cynics believed that the world belonged equally to everyone, and that suffering was caused by false judgments of what was valuable and by the worthless customs and conventions of society.

Hmm?

Sounds like some old hippie friends of mine.

But I digress, as this is not a sermon about the philosophy of the Greek Cynics.

This Israelite storyteller, Jesus, did not in the view of the Seminar scholars die to wash anyone's sins away and did not rise from the dead. He did, however, preach a social

gospel that urged individuals to seek justice for all, and he is credited with some pretty good stories.

Let's take a closer look at this particular story. It is prefaced ("set up," you might say) by an exchange between Jesus and a man specifically identified as a lawyer, or, in some contemporary translations of the Bible, as an expert on or scholar of the law. Unlike modern lawyers, this one was versed in religious law, because there was, in those times, little separation between the law of the temple and the statutes of the state.

When Jesus asked him, "What is written in the Law? What do you read there?" he answered: "You shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself."

This is a quotation from the Jewish Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament. Specifically, it is from the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. So you might say he cited the biblical equivalent of a "legal precedent". The lawyer thus demonstrates solid knowledge of Jewish scripture. When the lawyer asks Jesus for a clarification of a term, Jesus answers with the now famous story about the wounded stranger on the side of the road.

A priest comes by, probably riding on a camel, traveling the 17-mile road between Jericho where many priests lived and the temple in Jerusalem. This road could be the priest's regular commute to and from work. Even though the story clearly indicates that he saw the hapless victim, he passes by on the other side offering no aid, choosing to not get involved.

Soon another traveler comes by, perhaps a short distance behind the priest. He is identified as a Levite, a member of an important clan in ancient Israel. He too saw the victim but offered no aid. Perhaps he was thinking, "Hey, the priest passed by, and he did not stop, why should I get involved."

The third traveler is a Samaritan merchant. Do you know who a Samaritan was in Jesus' time?

Let me elaborate: Samaritans were a religious community whose beliefs and practices were outside the accepted standards of Judaism of the time. They were, in the view of many in Jesus' audience, heretics, perhaps how some now view Unitarian Universalists.

At any rate, this traveling salesman, who is not local to the area and who is one perceived by many as an unwelcome alien, hops off his donkey and immediately offers first aid. He then used his supplies to clean and dress the man's wounds. Next he loaded him on his donkey and walked him into town.

In those days there were no urgent care clinics, so he took him to a motel and nursed him back towards health. The next day when he needed to resume his journey, he left money, two denarii, an amount equal to two days wages, behind to cover the anonymous victim's

bill.

The biblical account ends with Jesus' exchange with the lawyer. He asks, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Let me tell you another story. It took place 50 years ago. It was in Salem, Oregon in the suburban neighborhood where I grew-up. One day in early summer, my father summoned my brother and me into the living room.

"Tomorrow," he told us, "I want you to take the lawn mower down the street to the yard on the corner and mow the lawn there."

He reported that the old man who lived there was in a foot cast and thus unable to mow his normally carefully trimmed lawn. Dad reported that he had seen him trying unsuccessfully to manage a pair of crutches and an old-fashioned rotary push mower.

"I need you boys to do it for him. And if he offers to pay you, do not take his money."

Both my brother and I were frustrated to hear that we would spend a portion of a lovely summer day mowing, and likely raking too, the lawn of some stranger down the street. To make it worse, we could not accept any offered pay.

"Why do we have to do it?" we whined.

Dad answered, "Because he needs the help, and because I told you to do it."

We trooped down there the next morning and started up the mower pushing it slowly through the tall grass and raking up the mounds of cuttings. The man came out of his house and was surprised to see us. We explained that our father had sent us to do this. He reached for his wallet. We told him, "No, thank you;" our father has told us not to take any pay.

He stepped back into his doorway mumbled, "Why, thank you," as a tear seemed to fill his eye.

As we returned to the job, my brother and I looked at each and we smiled. We learned that day how good it felt to give a gift of loving kindness to a neighbor, acting not out of self-interest, but simply because someone needed the help.

I remember another incident that occurred 20 years later. My first wife, Sarah, and I were driving across the busy Interstate 405 Bridge in Portland. It was the middle of rush hour, and we had just begun our daily commute. Suddenly, several sheets of plywood flew off

of the roof of a car in front of us.

We and other drivers managed miraculously to avoid the flying plywood as we and the lumber-laden vehicle came to a stop. We jumped out of the car and, dodging traffic proceeded, to begin to wrestle the wayward sheets of plywood out of the freeway and back onto the roof rack. Cars passing by on both sides honked and stared angrily at this delay in their daily commute.

We rounded up the lumber and re-secured the load. After quick handshakes and a shouted “thank you,” we jumped in our cars and drove on. Sarah and I looked at each other and smiled.

The next day several work colleagues approached Sarah during the morning coffee break and asked if it was she they had seen in the middle of the freeway. When she answered “yes,” they asked, “What the heck was she doing out there?” When she explained that we were helping with the wayward plywood, they asked, “But why did YOU do it?”

She answered, “Because they needed help.”

Let’s travel forward another 30 years to this fall. It was only about a week after I had begun my Ministerial Internship here at the Quimper UU Fellowship. It had been a busy day and Bruce Bode, your minister and my internship supervisor, and I had not been able to fit our weekly supervisory meetings into our schedules, so we met that evening at his home and I joined him and his wife, Flossie, for dinner.

After dinner, we both rushed off to a meeting at the Church. I was in my car following Bruce in his. When we arrived at the Fellowship, I was surprised to see that he did not pull into the parking lot but had instead pulled into the grassy area in front. I pulled in beside him.

I soon noticed why he had made a detour. A young woman, whom I later learned is named, Lorna, was sitting at the side of the road with several people around her. She had been playfully skipping down the road with her daughter when her foot landed on the edge of the pavement causing her to turn her ankle, stumble, and fall. She was feeling pain, frustration, and embarrassment and was unable to rise.

I soon met some of the others gathered around. They, like Bruce and me, were arriving for a meeting of the Social Justice Council. There was Diane Bommer, co-chair, a retired nurse, who quickly got a bag of ice. Diane Haas, the other co-chair, and Stacey Larsen had begun to develop a plan to meet the fallen neighbors needs. Jen Taylor offered a ride and others were ready to offer whatever assistance might be needed, just because someone needed help.

My car was closest, so Bruce and I lifted Lorna in and took her to Jefferson Hospital for an X-ray. In route, she called her partner for a ride home, so Bruce and I were able to return to the scheduled meeting. As we left the hospital, we smiled.

What is it that compelled Bruce and me and my father and my brother and Sarah and the Social Justice Committee members and that long-ago good Samaritan to not pass by on the other side but rather to stop, to set aside our own agendas and offer assistance simply because someone else needed help?

Some might say, "That's just the kind of people they are, or that's the way they've been brought up;" that it is either a matter of temperament or of teaching. These two explanations represent the different perspectives of the age-old Nature vs. Nurture debate about the motivating factors that shape human behavior.

New information from cognitive neuroscience demonstrates that this debate is a false dichotomy. Recent studies of the development and function of the human brain demonstrate that, in fact, nurture creates nature.

The new fields of affective behavioral neuroscience and developmental neuroscience science have found that what we experience and what we do creates the internal wiring through which the electrochemical impulses in our brains flow. The neural circuitry of the brain is established by use. How we react to different situations and how our brains respond to these situations varies across culture and is strongly influenced by early training teaching and by example and action.

When the neural impulses associated with a particular thought or action or feeling travel through the brain down a given neural pathway, that pathway gets coated with a bit of a substance called "myelin." With each repeated use the pathway gets a bit more coating. This process, called "myelination," makes it easier for the brain to react in the same way next time it responds to the same stimuli or situation. That next time, in turn, triggers more myelination, and so on. It is like a bare piece of copper wire that gets coated with a bit of insulation each time an electrical current flows through it.

Repetitive action and thought makes a particular neural pathway easier for the brain's electrochemical impulses to travel down and, thus, establishes an increasingly more likely way for one's brain to respond.

It is like walking across a grassy field or lawn. If we walk across the grass in the same place day after day, we eventually wear down the grass, creating a pathway.

Our thoughts and actions create patterns within the brain that shape future behavior. This is especially true for young, developing minds whose pathways are just being formed. For adults, it requires more effort to avoid following familiar habitual paths, but practice of new behaviors and deliberately engaging new ways of thinking can, over time, change the neural patterns of our brains.

It is sometimes merely a matter of practice.

The field of affective neuroscience is perhaps discovering what religious teachers from

many traditions have been telling us for centuries.

We can nurture compassion and caring.

When we practice loving kindness towards others, we build increased capacity in our brains for more loving-kindness.

When we walk the path of care and compassion, we deepen the care and compassion within ourselves.

As the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh advises, “The great miracle is not to walk on water but to walk on the earth with mindfulness.”

Or as Gandhi advised, “Be in the world what you want to see in the world.”

Or, as is expressed in Judeo-Christian teaching, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Practice.

Practice, that it may be so.

### **Benediction**

Our Benediction is from the from the Christian Bible, the book of James:

Be doers of the word and not merely hearers.  
Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty and persevere,  
Being not hearers who forget,  
But doers who act, they will be blessed in their doing.

### **Extinguishing of Chalice**

We extinguish our chalice  
But not the light of truth,  
The warmth of community,  
Or the fire of commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon given by Dennis Reynolds on November, 1, 2009. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)