

“What Is Our Responsibility to Others?”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
May 2, 2010
Rev. Bruce Bode

Poetry for bulletin

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

(Robert Frost, from “Two Tramps in Mud Time”)

Lighting the Chalice (in unison)

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers today;
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.
(Robert Frost, from “A Prayer in Spring”)

Opening Words & Musical Response

This is a new day that has been given unto us,
Let us then rejoice in it and count our many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and for service to render.

And let us then be especially grateful for the ties of love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

WHAT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO OTHERS?

Introduction

This Sunday’s sermon subject is a requested topic related to last November’s annual fund-raising auction in which members of our congregation offer goods and services that go to the highest bidders, with the funds then going to the support of our Fellowship.

One of my offers at the auction each year is the opportunity for the high bidder or bidders to select a sermon topic of interest to him or her or them, an offer I always make with a

bit of reservation and even trepidation since I never know what topic I will be asked to speak on and to what degree it will be within my comfort zone.

The topic requested this year by the high bidders is not exactly outside my comfort zone, but it is certainly a difficult and complex subject. The questions the high bidders have asked me to speak on are these: How do we weigh between our own needs and the needs of others? What is our responsibility to others? And what can we expect with regard to others taking responsibility for themselves?

Framing my response

As a response, I'm going to frame my answer in terms of the approach I took in the sermon series I completed a month ago on Easter Sunday. That sermon series, you may recall – or not – had to do with what I called “necessary tensions” or “polar tensions” in life ... the idea being that if you ignore or disregard either pole in a unit – as, for example, in an electric battery – then you break the tension, lose the energy, and damage or destroy the values and qualities of each pole. Thus, you need both poles *and* their dynamic tension to maintain either pole.

And so in the questions asked this morning, the polarity we are dealing with is responsibility to self, on the one side, and responsibility to others, on the other side. That is, if you think and act as if you are responsible only for yourself, disregarding others, you have broken the necessary tension and balance. On the other hand, if you neglect yourself, tending only to others, then you have also broken the tension and balance from the other side.

And so the most basic answer in weighing between our needs and the needs of others is to strive to keep the dynamic tension and relationship between the two without splitting them apart. Like an old-fashioned scale, we need to work to maintain a balance between the needs of self and the needs of others.

And so the deeper question is *how* do we maintain the balance and dynamic tension between the two sides; and *what* are the factors, principles, perspectives, and obligations that have to be weighed on that scale to maintain the balance?

An illustrative poem

You may also recall in that sermon series that I used poems of Robert Frost to illustrate some of “necessary tensions” in our lives ... which is something that Frost delighted to do: to give his readers many sides to a subject and to keep the tension between those sides ... so that just when you think you might choose one way or go down one path, he brings in the value and importance of the other path, thus, maintaining a paradoxical balance between the two.

So in thinking this week about the question between responsibility to others and responsibility to self, I remembered a Frost poem that works in a delightful way with this

tension. And so I want to start my approach to our subject this morning with that poem – or, at least, selected parts of that poem.

The poem is titled, “Two Tramps in Mud Time,” and it is they who raise the question about our responsibility to others.

The setting is this: It’s in the middle of April, just when winter is loosening its grip on the land and the land is muddy, that two tramps – two unemployed, homeless lumberjacks – come out of the woods as the poet is chopping wood in his yard.

These lumberjacks are in need. They have been sleeping outside, and are, no doubt, hungry. But they are more than willing to work to earn some money for their survival. And so they approach the poet who is enjoying chopping wood on a spring day. And the question he must now face is this: Should he – is he willing – to give up his love of chopping wood and to pay these lumberjacks to chop his wood for him so that they can meet their survival needs? Let’s see how the poet responds:

Two Tramps in Mud Time

[* indicates parts omitted in the spoken sermon]

Out of the mud two strangers came
And caught me splitting wood in the yard,
And one of them put me off my aim
By hailing cheerily “Hit them hard!”
I knew pretty well why he had dropped behind
And let the other go on a way.
I knew pretty well what he had in mind:
He wanted to take my job for pay.

Good blocks of oak it was I split,
As large around as the chopping block;
And every piece I squarely hit
Fell splinterless as a cloven rock.
[*The blows that a life of self-control
Spares to strike for the common good,
That day, giving a loose my soul,
I spent on the unimportant wood.]

The sun was warm but the wind was chill.
You know how it is with an April day
When the sun is out and the wind is still,
You're one month on in the middle of May.
But if you so much as dare to speak,
A cloud comes over the sunlit arch,
A wind comes off a frozen peak,
And you're two months back in the middle of March

[*A bluebird comes tenderly up to alight
And turns to the wind to unruffle a plume,
His song so pitched as not to excite
A single flower as yet to bloom.
It is snowing a flake; and he half knew
Winter was only playing possum.
Except in color he isn't blue,
But he wouldn't advise a thing to blossom.]

The water for which we may have to look
In summertime with a witching wand,
In every wheelrut's now a brook,
In every print of a hoof a pond.
Be glad of water, but don't forget
The lurking frost in the earth beneath
That will steal forth after the sun is set
And show on the water its crystal teeth.]

The time when most I loved my task
The two must make me love it more
By coming with what they came to ask.
You'd think I never had felt before
The weight of an ax-head poised aloft,
The grip of earth on outspread feet,
The life of muscles rocking soft
And smooth and moist in vernal heat.

Out of the woods two hulking tramps
(From sleeping God knows where last night,
But not long since in the lumber camps).
They thought all chopping was theirs of right.
Men of the woods and lumberjacks,
They judged me by their appropriate tool.
Except as a fellow handled an ax
They had no way of knowing a fool.

Nothing on either side was said.
They knew they had but to stay their stay
And all their logic would fill my head:
As that I had no right to play
With what was another man's work for gain.
My right might be love but theirs was need.
And where the two exist in twain
Theirs was the better right – agreed.

But yield who will to their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

The ideal of uniting love and need

So what we have here, it would seem, is that the poet is willing to give up his pleasure in chopping wood – a pleasure that is made more manifest to him by the fact that others want to take over the task – to allow those in need to earn a living and to keep body and soul together. He recognizes that they have the superior right on their side.

But he wishes it didn't have to be this way. He wishes he didn't have to give up his pleasure ... for his ideal in life is to keep love and need together ... to be able serve one's self and others by doing what one loves.

“Follow your bliss”

This is also the ideal that Joseph Campbell, the great scholar of world mythology, put forward in his teaching.

As a life-long teacher, the primary task of young persons, Campbell believed, is to find their calling, their deep love, out of which they might then both make their living *and* serve the common good. The developmental task of youth is to go on a journey of personal discovery, to test different societal roles to see what fits for them, to see what calls forth their energy, passion, and deep pleasure.

“Follow your bliss,” Campbell famously said. Follow it wherever it takes you. Don't let go of your deep calling, your true vocation, your soul's love no matter how difficult the journey, no matter how tempted you are to turn aside from it out of expediency or social pressure.

And, thus, for Campbell, the first task of life is to save yourself – that is, to save your soul, to become acquainted with what makes you alive and vital.

And the second task, like unto it in importance and difficulty, is to bring that vitality and love to the world, to find a way to offer *your* gifts to others – to your family and friends, to your community, to the larger world ... which is often a most difficult thing to do because others may not be particularly interested in or prepared to receive your particular gifts.

But don't give up, advises Campbell, keep working at it, keep trying to find a way to bring your gifts, your love, to the world ... for, thus, the world is saved, saved through the uniting of our vocations – our deep loves – and our vocations – our work in the world. Said Joseph Campbell to Bill Moyers in a series of interviews:

The influence of a vital person vitalizes, there's no doubt about it. The world without spirit is a wasteland. People have the notion of saving the world by shifting things around, changing the rules, and who's on top, and so forth. No, no! Any world is a valid world if it's alive. The thing to do is to bring life to it, and the only way to do that is to find in your case where the life is and become alive yourself.

(The Power of Myth, p. 149)

This is another way of expressing Robert Frost's ideal where he said:

Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

A laissez faire method

So the ideal that Frost and Campbell are advocating is, you might say, a kind of *laissez faire* method with regard to our responsibility to others. Both Frost and Campbell assume a connection to the larger community; both assume that it is necessary and important to be connected to others; and they believe that the ideal method is to unite love and need, avocation and vocation.

Thus, if all individuals would discern what it is they love to do, and if all individuals would develop their talents and skills in that regard, and then offer what they love to others and the larger community, our world would be a more vital and vibrant place. No doubt, there would be competition, as persons would have to compete with others to offer their gifts, but that would only hone the skills and deepen the gifts, making the world a richer place.

An example of the coordination of need and love

As an example of this, I'm remembering a woman I knew a number of years ago who was trained as a pediatric nurse, but because of health reasons was not able to work in her chosen profession in a hospital setting. However, she could still be a nurse in her home.

And what she did, then, was to care for severely handicapped infants and young children who needed a great deal of special care; children who would never live anything like a normal life; children who would never be able to do anything for themselves, sometimes not even breathe for themselves; children who would not likely live very long; children who needed around-the-clock attention and care; children so handicapped that if a parent

were to care for such a child, it would mean they would have to give up practically everything for that child.

But this woman – called a saint by others – felt a strong desire to work with these children in her home. And so the hospital would work out a situation in which she would care for these children in her home, and the parents of the children could visit from time to time. And she would often have several of these children in her home at once.

But she and her husband also had two of their own children, who were developing normally. Thus, her calling also involved the rest of the family, for, to some degree, they would all have relationships with these severely handicapped children – they became, really, part of the family. I did memorial services for several of these children upon their death, the services attended by both the nurse's family and the biological parents.

This is an example in which someone is doing what they love and meeting a need that that very few would want to do or be capable of, but something that she wanted to do and felt called to do.

I must say I sometimes wondered what her calling meant for the rest of family, and what stresses it put on them, because, certainly, the rest of the family's lives were greatly affected by the calling and passion of the mother.

Where the ideal is not met

Well, it would be fine thing if love and need could always be so coordinated – that wherever there was a need, there was a love and a calling equal to it. To paraphrase Marx: "From each according to their gifts and loves, to each according to their needs."

But that is not exactly our world. Our world is not one in which love and need are perfectly matched. And one of the reasons I like the Frost poem I read is because it deals with a situation that is less than the ideal. In this poem, the poet grants that the need of others – the need of the two lumberjacks – outweighs his pleasure of doing what he loved at that time.

But how do you decide when the needs of others should outweigh your own pleasure? How much of your time and resources may be spent just for yourself and for the sheer joy and pleasure it brings you, whether or not it seems to serve others; and how much of your time and resources are spent for others and the larger world out a sense of duty, responsibility, and obligation?

Ultimately, I believe, these are decisions that each of us must weigh and make on our own. It's part of the privilege and hardship of being human; it's part of what makes of life a real living experience.

But let me conclude by putting before you four of the factors, principles, perspectives, and obligations that I think have to be weighed and kept in dynamic tension with regard

to our responsibilities to others and ourselves. (And, certainly, these four could be added to.)

We belong to others

1) And let me begin, first, with the principle and perspective that we belong to others and are connected to one another.

In a time when greed and selfishness in the banking industry – almost pathological, it would seem – have sent the whole world reeling, it needs to be asserted as strongly as possible that we belong to each other, that we are part of each other, and that we have obligations to each other.

All teachers of the spirit have taught in one way or the other we are our “brother’s and sister’s keeper” and that we should “love our neighbors as ourselves.” If we don’t honor this reality, not only do we not fulfill our individual human destiny, but we ultimately threaten humanity and the larger world.

Albert Schweitzer identified three aspects of the will-to-live that is within each of us: the will-to-survive; the will-to-self-development or self-realization; and, thirdly, the will-to-solidarity, or the will-to-relatedness, or the will-to-love. (He used all those terms for this third aspect).

With regard to this third aspect of our will-to-live, Schweitzer wrote:

Though humans are egotists, they are never completely so. They *must* always have some interest in life about them. If for no other reason, they must do so in order to make their own lives more perfect. . . .

The important thing [he said] is that we are part of life. We are born of other lives; we possess the capacities to bring still other lives into existence. In the same way, if we look into a microscope we see cell producing cell. So nature compels us to recognize the fact of mutual dependence, each life necessarily helping the other lives which are linked to it. In the very fibers of our being, we bear within ourselves the fact of the solidarity of life. Our recognition of it expands with thought.

(“The Ethics of Reverence for Life,” Christendom, Vol. I, Winter, 1936, pp. 225 and 237, text adjusted for gender)

Thus, we don’t live our lives by ourselves alone or for ourselves alone. We *are* our brother’s and sister’s keeper, and, as Frost recognized in his poem, we must reach out to others when they are in need, even when it might inconvenience us.

We belong to ourselves

2) But, secondly, we also belong to ourselves and have an obligation to tend to ourselves, to develop ourselves, and to become self-responsible persons with dignity and worth.

We are obliged not to waste the gift of our lives. Life has evolved in us in its own unique way, and, thus, we have an obligation that life thrusts upon to honor and care for this individual life.

We are to regard all life, including our own, as a gift. It is not to be taken for granted. We are not entitled to it. It is a gift, a precious gift. And we are to learn to love our life on behalf of the creative power of being that has given us that life.

All our lives we struggle to love ourselves, to hold dear the dignity that is our birthright. And it's pretty hard to love ourselves, if we haven't been loved by others. And it's pretty hard to love others, if we don't love ourselves. Again, both sides are dependent on each other. And so all our life we are learning to love who and what we are, despite our failings, despite being in need.

In the Frost poem, the two tramps, the homeless lumberjacks, represent the self in need and the community in need. But take note that they, the lumberjacks, kept their dignity. They recognized the rights of the one chopping wood. And they didn't demand, and they didn't act as if they were entitled. And they were willing to work; they were willing to do what they could. But at the same time, they presented their case. They revealed their need, and they waited to see if the poet was in a position to assist them in their need based upon the principle of a shared humanity.

We belong to the power of being

3) Then, thirdly, in addition to belonging to others and ourselves, we belong ultimately to the power of being. As Jesus put it, summarizing the whole of the law: "You are to love God above all, and your neighbor as yourself." Thus, there are three parts to this: God, neighbor, self.

And so a third part of this dynamic tension has to do with loving the creative power of life and being, by whatever name one speaks of it. And our obligation here, as the great teachers of the spirit have also taught, is to become awake. It is to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand. It is to sing and to dance and to appreciate and to praise.

Who else among the creatures of the earth can praise as we humans do? This is not to set ourselves above the other forms of life and being, but it is to recognize that we are the power of life and being come to self-consciousness, self-awareness.

And, thus, we must make room and find time to commune with the power of being, for we belong not only to others and not to only ourselves, but we belong first and foremost to the infinite, eternal, ongoing, forward-pushing creative urge that is at the heart of all being, ourselves included.

Humility

4) And, then, fourthly and finally, I would put another perspective on the scale and make it part of the dynamic tension, namely, that it not up to us to fix or save the world.

Every single day our life is muddled by our dissatisfaction with the way things are. Every day our life is filled with a host of things that we can imagine could and should be different.

We do what we can do to alleviate suffering and to meet the desperate needs of the world; but ultimately, we must be humble; ultimately, we must accept our limitations; ultimately, we must grant the right of the universe and the power of being to unfold in its own way, to go through its changes and experiments. Only in such humility will the glory and beauty of things be revealed; only in such humility will we find humor and happiness.

In this regard, let me conclude with some excerpts from a sermon by the person who reached out to me and gave me my chance in the liberal ministry. His name was Dr. Duncan Littlefair, and this sermon, titled “Response to Futility,” is related to humility and to accepting our limitations in life. He said:

We can't live each other's lives, but we can give each other a chance for life.

We can't solve another's problems, but we can support each other in their efforts to solve their problems.

We can't stop wars, but we can promote peaceful attitudes and loving relationships wherever we are.

We can't eliminate hate, but we can live so that “in the time of our life there will be no ugliness or death for ourselves or for any life that our life touches.”

It is not given to us to finish the job, but neither are we free to leave it off.

Therefore, let us accept our limitations. Not merely accept them, but glory and delight in them.

Glory and delight in the privilege and joy of participating in the complexity and wonder and tragedy of this world;

And in the privilege of expressing the wonder and miracle of our bodies and minds, in the unbelievable delight in touching someone in love and affection.

Benediction

In the time of your life, live – so that in that good time
There shall be no ugliness or death
For yourself or for any life that your life touches.

Seek goodness everywhere; when it is found
Bring it out of its hiding-place
And let it be free and unashamed.

Discover in all things that which shines and is beyond corruption.

Encourage virtue into whatever heart
It may have been driven into secrecy and sorrow

By the shame and terror of the world.

In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time
You shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world,
But shall smile instead to its infinite delight and mystery.

(Preface to “The Time Of Your Life” by William Saroyan)

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
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 The Reverend Bruce A. Bode on May 2, 2010. The spoken sermon, available on CD at the Fellowship, may differ somewhat in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)