

Lamentations / Freedom from Consequences

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

February 18, 2018

Rev Paul Beckel

WELCOME

Unitarianism — at least in its origins in New England, and as it evolved into Religious Humanism in the Midwest — is known more for its intellectual than spiritual orientation. Maybe that's been different here on the Left Coast... and as we move deeper into a new century... and as new generations arise who haven't had so much religion shoved down their throats. But to us old-timers from the hard lands of snow and ice, it was the torch of reason in the Unitarian tradition that warmed our hearts. If we had hearts.

So it's been a bit of a stretch for me this year to focus on the comparatively ethereal topic of mindfulness Sunday after Sunday. So I said that I'd speak today about good old fashioned religion through the lens of science. Or at least, given our continued commitment to mindfulness, I would speak on using our heads in service to our hearts.

But predictably, reality intervenes with our best laid plans. And we can no longer speak about abstract theories when confronted with the abject horrors of the murder of 17 schoolchildren. A part of me still says: "This does not compute." But a larger part of me cries: "Why? Oh why? How can this be, again?"

PRELUDE

I'm Rev. Paul Beckel. I'm not the world's most passionate guy. I grew up in a household that didn't show a lot of feeling. I'm rather stoic and rationalistic. And I can make a stoic rationalistic argument to support my view that this is one of many ways... mentally, spiritually, emotionally and morally healthy ways to live.

But I've been emotional this week. Angry, and deeply sad. I'm angry about another school shooting and another round of lip service to the sanctity of freedom, the sanctity of life, and the priority of whichever one of these best suits my purpose at any given moment.

I am frustrated, but not hopeless. I understand those who do feel hopeless. Looking at this situation rationally, we find ample evidence to support a prediction that nothing is going to change. And from an emotional perspective, I also understand — because I have hung at times at the edge of hopelessness.

I feel fortunate to live in community with people who keep showing up for one another. None of us coming here today could know. Whether we've been part of this community for decades or just a few minutes... none of us could know in advance whose distant cousin was shot this week in Florida. There is, in all likelihood, someone here today, for the first time, for whom this tragedy has triggered distressing memories of some kind. There is without doubt among us here someone who

has an unrelated grief that they bring today. Others come with genuine moral anguish in their hearts as they struggle to balance competing values. And others whose hearts are simply full of joy because it's a wonderful world, and countless acts of kindness have been performed this week — so many without our notice.

==

All who come here today in a spirit of goodwill are welcome. If you come with light heart or a heavy heart, or a heart hardened by unmet needs, by betrayal, or grief, you are welcome. If you come, tho, intending to do harm, you are not welcome. We stand here *in support of diverse theological, cultural, and political points of view*. This does not mean that anything goes. We stand here for something that transcends our differences, our commitment to uphold this promise:

Love is the spirit of this fellowship and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace, and honor all creation. This is our covenant.

LIGHTING THE CHALICE

GATHERING SONG

#340 *Though Gathered Here to Celebrate*

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

In the sixth century Before the Common Era, the city of Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonian army. The ancient Hebrews were exiled from their homeland, their social institutions destroyed, their people marched off into slavery far from home. Out of this experience arose some of the most poignant works of poetry and prophecy. In the Hebrew Scriptures we find, in the *Book of Psalms*, both hymns of praise to God, and cries of deep despair. 'Lord you are our faithful protector. Why then? Oh why Lord have you done this to us? Our enemies torture and humiliate us and you just let it happen.' The psalms call for vengeance: 'Please dear Lord, don't let them get away with this.' Psalm 137 concludes: 'Show us that you love us. Take the children of our enemies and bash their skulls against the rocks.'

Some of us may find such expressions shocking. Some may find it familiar. We whose hearts have been mercilessly abused do not at all times retain our own empathic ideals.

For many of us, familiarity with scripture comes through pop culture. So we may know Psalm 137 through Don McLean's soulful rendering: '...we remember, we remember, we remember thee Zion.' Others may know it through the upbeat reggae rendition that we'll be singing at the end of the service today. Tho the tone in these two versions differs significantly, both texts follow the original Psalm: a lament by the Jews, captured by Babylonian soldiers who mock their devotion to Jerusalem. 'Sing us songs of joy,' the captors demand, 'entertain us with the songs of your homeland.' But how Lord, how could we sing your songs? All we can do is remember, and weep. (Both of these pop-song versions skip the horrific last line.)

Arguing with God, questioning and even cursing God, these are pretty common themes in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, my favorite, the author essentially throws up his hands and says, 'Why bother? Why do I even try? Nothing works, nothing helps, nothing lasts. Our efforts are as fruitless as chasing after the wind. The best we can do is to eat and drink and find the pleasure in life, for tomorrow we die.'

The entire *Book of Lamentations* is devoted to songs of mourning by those who have been deported to Babylon: 'Our young men and young women lie in blood in the streets. Were you so angry with us Lord? Have you no pity? You hide from us behind clouds so even our prayers cannot get through to you. You have made us a laughing stock, scum among the nations.'

But the Hebrews have no monopoly on despair or lashing out against their god. Fourteen centuries (!) earlier, in the same part of the world, dirges were written to commemorate the destruction of five Mesopotamian cities. The phrasing of these laments, attributing the devastation to their angry gods, is remarkably similar to that in the Hebrew Bible.

==

Good god how could you do this to us? How could you do this to the children and the parents, the teachers and cops? Those waiting in horror at the hospitals ready to respond however they could? How could you do this to the janitors? How could you? Did you allow this? Did you cause this? Should I even ask or care what you might be thinking?

You call yourself a god? *We* call you god of power and goodness? How is that possible? How is it possible that you are both powerful *and* good?

And you: elected leaders? How could you? How could you allow this? You call yourselves leaders? You call yourselves compassionate and respectful? You call yourselves powerful when you want us to elect you and then excuse yourself as powerless when something needs to be done.

And you: Reality, how could you? Is it not possible that things could have turned out differently? I just don't understand. We return to love, again and again. We feel powerless at times but we come back to love. We are grateful people. We are hardworking. We overcome obstacles and they just keep coming back at us. How can evil always come back upon those we love?

We are angry now; so many are in despair. Thousands today will die by suicide and overdose. Tens of thousands anesthetize themselves with alcohol and drugs and shopping and distraction.

Countless millions, tho, will seek solace in beauty to regain their strength. We'll seek solace in the woods and hills and on the water that we pray will remain clean enough to nourish and cleanse us... and sustain our children's children. We'll seek solace in music and poetry. Happy music and blues. Love songs and breakup songs.

Lord god, Gaia, Arc of the Universe, whoever the hell you are. We are doing our best here. We really are. We face our limits and we fail again and again. That's not an excuse: that is our best. We fail and we get up. Our tongues slip; we say unkind words... or, distracted, we take one another for granted. We grasp for things we might not need. And we walk right by so many opportunities to give of our surplus love, our surplus food that we throw out. We don't have time, we don't have strength, we don't have the ability to concentrate more hours in a day. We have so many tools at our disposal. But we are besieged by information, by our own receptivity to stimulation. We have all of the knowledge we can imagine to answer our questions and save ourselves. It's just too much. So it's never enough.

Do we have what we need to stop the wars? To end the hunger? I don't see it. We look to science and technology and organizational systems and we say yes this should be enough. We know how to do this. We want to do this. The vast majority of us want to do better, to give more, to withhold weapons of mass destruction from those who cannot be trusted. Provide care to survivors.

The vast majority of us want to honor the dignity of all humanity. Those described in our national songs and religious texts as our neighbors. Our ancestors and our genetic research tell us that we are one. There is no they.

But we argue anyway. And that's ok. We have different ideas about how to make things better. But when we vote, many are not counted. Is this the best we can hope for?

Why does only power in the crudest sense prevail? Winner take all? My god. Trees and flowers and ants and birds. Planet Earth. Why do you not save us? Are you too caught in cycles of growth and decay? Gravity and entropy and shifting tectonic plates?

We defy your cosmic logic. We will not bow to your demands. We will build, we will dig, we will burn. You will see. We have plans.

Our hope is boundless. We set aside our fears as footnotes. We see the arc of the universe of justice. We see it bending in the direction of love. We will keep believing, we will keep returning. What else are we to do? Will I stop loving my children because their future is not assured? Will I care less deeply for my second cousins, for my Facebook friends, for my neighbors whose names I do not know? Will I care less for the children and for the leaders of nations near and far because I don't know if there will be a payoff? Will I give up my love for them because they might be doomed? Because they will suffer, or they will cause suffering? Will I give up my love for them because it will hurt too much to imagine, it will hurt too much to know that we will not get out of here alive?

I will not give up my love for you. I have given up your name. I despaired long ago that I could not know you, but I am past that. I cannot know your name and I will not know all of your ways. I cannot justify the contradictions whether they are in you or in me. The contradictions that pull my head and my heart asunder. Even they at times are at war. My head and my heart struggle with one another. And even struggle within themselves. But there is a me that is part of you that is part of us in which this head and this heart can sing in harmony. They both sing. Each with their own rhythms and reasons.

But it is too late and too early to look for reasons. It is too late and too early for the thoughts of our minds and the prayers of our hearts. It is time only to gaze now into the weeping eyes of those all around us. And if that intensity is too much to bear, then to hold the hands around us, to link ourselves to the ancestors and the children.

It is too late for action to change the past. It is time now to embrace our pain and our passion. It will be forever too simple to languish in thoughts and prayers. It will be time only to feel what we feel, and do what we are called to do. Here and now.

==

Remaining seated now, let's sing together. Let's sing #1002 in the teal hymnal. #1002, Comfort Me. Afterward we will bless and sustain ourselves with a time of shared silence.

[Bell]

The text of the song that the choir will sing for us now is a lament:

*Father, God Omnipotent,
What is my transgression?
What wrong have we done you, O Lord,
What have we done, my Lord,
That we kill each other like this!
In this world we are loaded with troubles,
I have an unceasing sob in my heart.*

Sung in the context of South African apartheid, its rhythm and energetic tone speak to us of resilience.

CHALICE CHOIR *Bawo Thixo Somandla*

[Copy that title into a You Tube search... you'll find a variety of choirs performing with an exuberance that might be difficult to fathom if you hold the English translation, above, in mind.]

REFELCTIONS, Part 2

A bolder preacher, or one more insightful, a true prophet perhaps would state now clearly, and with some precision: this is the sin of which we are guilty. This is the sin of which we must repent.

But I honestly don't know. It's not that I'm trying to coddle you now and say, 'you poor religious liberals, it's not your fault.' In fact it's the opposite. I don't want simply to proclaim some theory to which you could so easily reply: 'Yeah, yeah, preach it! That's what those other people need to do.'

The Hebrew prophets to which even the most atheistic Unitarians typically turn are those who lamented the sins of Israel, crying out in the desert not so much against God, but on behalf of God: 'O Israel you unfaithful lover: how could you betray the Lord as you have? You've brought this exile upon yourself. Your enemies have conquered you. Perhaps even the Lord has abandoned you. Because *you* have abandoned the spirit of Justice. You have forgotten that the Lord God made that covenant with you as a community. You have turned to other gods, and less metaphorically, you have withdrawn your love from your own people. You have forgotten your covenant. You have abandoned the poor in their need.'

'People of God it is you, yourselves, who have split from one another and trampled upon the Lord's precious gem of community. You have forgotten the most basic command: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.'

==

For centuries, the Unitarian tradition has upheld ideals of human freedom, and for this I am deeply grateful. Four centuries ago in the city of Torda, Transylvania, King John Sigismund declared an Edict of Religious Toleration, opening the door to the eventual flowering of freedom of conscience.

Half that long ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson and his American Transcendentalist friends advanced a more radical spirit of free thought: the insistence that we must not follow conventional wisdom, not even that of the church. We must come to our own conclusions about truth and ethics based on our independent study and contemplation.

It was actually in critique of his Unitarian colleagues that Emerson insisted that every one of us has direct access to the Divine. Neither sacraments nor dogmas are necessary to mediate between our individual souls and the ultimate source of truth.

And we also like to point to Thomas Jefferson as a proto-unitarian advocate for religious liberty and the sanctity of the individual conscience.

Each of these (Sigismund, Emerson, and Jefferson) nudged our consciousness and social structures in the right direction. For most of human history we had had little opportunity to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, or act for ourselves. Authoritarian political and religious structures took care of all of that for us.

It's taken a very long time, but we've gone from one extreme, of having very little individual agency, to the opposite extreme, where we now balk at the idea, we laugh at the idea, we detonate the idea that anyone or anything should ever get in the way of our thinking or judging or acting. Even reality itself has no business getting in our way.

It's a free country. I'm a free spirit. I am free to find my own facts. Buy my own votes. And use words to mean whatever I wish them to mean.

Freedom has found its final frontier: set free from responsibility. Truth set free from the bounds of evidence. Acts set free from their consequences.

==

We could blame a lot of it on Jefferson. He made a point to set the Church free from bondage to the State, and vice versa. And in another important project, he took scissors to the Christian Scriptures, actually cutting the pages apart, discarding the parts he objected to, and pasting it back together again. Now I happen to agree with his criteria for what stayed in and what was left out. He separated the supernatural stories from the ethical teachings of Jesus.

But I'm not sure how, as the centuries passed, somehow the spirit of independence has devolved so much that in our minds we carry our own private ticket — a get-out-of-reality-free card that we can use whenever we choose.

The ideal of liberty seems to have been separated not only from responsibility but from reality itself.

==

On the day that Timothy McVeigh took it upon himself to bomb the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, he wore upon his chest a t-shirt with a quote from Jefferson: ‘The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.’

McVeigh, reasonably enough, felt that he had the right to interpret Jefferson according to the dictates of his own conscience. Unfortunately, he also felt free to involve others in his exploration of the limits of liberty — without their consent.

I don’t remember to what extent McVeigh attempted to deny culpability for his acts. Many terrorists and serial killers and perpetrators of mass shootings, of course, do not try to escape, do not try to deny, do not separate themselves or their grand ideologies from their despicable acts. So, while their heartlessness crushes me, that’s not my focus today.

My concern, rather, is for all of us when we fall, to whatever extent we fall into the trap of separating what we think and say and do from the consequences. When we knowingly deny, pretend we don’t know, or casually change the subject.

==

All year here we’ve been talking about mindfulness. So I’d best say something about mindfulness and denial. As I mentioned last week there are many different forms of meditation. In one form of meditation we attempt to clear our minds entirely. In practice, this means focusing on one thing in particular, often our breath, so that when thoughts flicker through our consciousness we can acknowledge them and then return our focus to our breath, allowing the distractions to float away.

Mindfulness meditation is different. In mindfulness meditation, we do not try to clear everything from our minds, but attempt to stay tuned-in to here and now. Acknowledging our immediate experience without judgment. If we are grieving a painful loss or need a break from stressful and complex circumstances, mindfulness meditation can be helpful as a rest period. Moreover, it can be a training regimen, so when we go back and place our lives’ most stressful complex questions within our immediate consciousness, we find that we can do so without becoming overwhelmed.

Each of these types of meditation (and many others) have benefits that suit different people on different occasions. Neither practice is about denial — in which we deliberately repress or pretend not to notice the pain and the paradox that swirl around us.

When I talk about freedom from consequences I’m talking about denial. And I know that I practice denial myself — maybe we all do from time to time. Instead of taking *temporary* breaks from distress, or instead of mindfully *acknowledging* distress, or instead of *responding directly and acting assertively* upon our distress, we pretend that we can just shoo it out of existence. We don’t have to take care of ourselves. We don’t have to take care of each other. We don’t have to take care of where we live and work and worship because it doesn’t matter. Or someone else will do it... Or the evidence demonstrating the repercussions of my choices and actions is simply wrong.

I find it easy to accuse others of such mindlessness, thoughtlessness, heartlessness. I am either not bold enough or insightful enough or arrogant enough to specify how each of you may seek freedom

from consequences. It's totally understandable that we need, at times, to step back from the incessant drumming and thrumming of our lived experience.

In the coffee house Friday night Rachel McCausland shared a poem with a line I found distressingly true — something I took to be about our genuine struggles to stay in touch with the real world, without being crushed by it.

In her poem Rachel referred to

*songs I've had on mental repeat
For more than a week
In episodes of welcome to night vale
I've listened to [,] to drive back the beat
Of my own heart to something bearable*

Songs I've had on mental repeat... to drive back the beat of my own heart... to something bearable.

==

In times of grief it can feel wrong, even disrespectful to the depth of our feeling, disrespectful to the suffering of others if we abandon the pain for even a moment to allow joy or pleasure into our lives. But many of those who know suffering most intimately have found paths of integrity: rocky winding paths of integrity, thru eras of injustice still unfathomable to me. Winding without whining without denying the depth of their feeling... through poetry, ritual, and song. Practicing the simplicity of love within the complexities of community. Protesting, enduring, grieving, and celebrating side by side.

SENDING SONG

#1042 *Rivers of Babylon*

[Copy this title into a You Tube search... again you'll find a variety of exuberant performances. This song is sung in English, using the text of Psalm 137 — only the parts about weeping and longing. Again, its bright catchy tune speaks to me of resilience.]