

Sermon *No One Is Free until We Are All Free*

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Delivered September 28, 2014 First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

Last week, I spoke of an internal tipping point for me; that moment when I said to myself: I have to do this, I can't not do this. It had to do with changing the direction of my life; or more, perhaps, finally recognizing the path that I'd been on all along.

Today, I'd like to explore what it means to have a sense of connectedness to all things, and to give up something dear to us for the sake of the whole. It's a kind of maturity, of spiritual maturity. It's what we mean by the word "ethos." It has nothing to do with age, although it generally takes years to develop.

Many of you are familiar with the writings of the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons. We sang her song "All Lifted Hearts Are Free" at our Ingathering service. Rev. Gibbons has crafted a list of twelve qualities of spiritual maturity. One of them is mee-**tah**-koo-yeh o-**yah**-seen. It means "all my relations" in the language of the Lakota Sioux. We are all connected in the intricate web of existence. Each is affected by actions of any other. Everything is interrelated —nothing exists in isolation. Rev. Gibbons defines this as "awareness of universal mutuality and interdependence; accountability even for unanticipated consequences of actions." Do you remember the first time you were held accountable even for the harm someone else did, or that you caused even though you didn't mean to?

Okay, confession time, how many of you – especially the older brothers and sisters – got your younger sibling to do something that would get them in trouble because you really wanted it done and you figured your mom wouldn't come down too hard on them. Didn't always work, did it? How many times did you have to say – why are you picking on me? *She* did it? How far did that get you? Then you got the whole lecture on responsibility for your sister and guilt by association and time out.

Most of us who've spent any time as teens or with teens remember our or their first encounter with the "open container law." The parents get the call and they've got to pick up their kid at the police station because he was riding in the back seat of a car while a bottle of beer was being passed around. Why are you picking on me? *I* didn't drink anything. Then came the whole lecture about responsibility for yourself before your friends and guilt by association and being grounded.

Eventually, at least the theory goes, we grow up and finally figure things out for ourselves. What makes us choose to do the kind thing, or the right thing, or the responsible thing? The psychologists tell us it's a developmental process. Others have weighed in as well. In his book, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations*, author Gilbert Rendle mentions Lord Moulton's "Three Domains of Human Interaction."¹ "The first is the domain of law, where, he said, our actions are prescribed by laws binding upon us which must be obeyed. (I would enter here the mother's word of law as well). At the other extreme is the domain of free choice, [including] all those actions as to which we claim and enjoy complete freedom. And in between, Lord Moulton identified a domain in which our action is not determined by law but in which we are not free to behave in any way we choose. [the domain of obedience to the unenforceable]. [Lord Moulton] called it manners. While it may include moral duty, social

¹ Gilbert R. Rendle *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: a Handbook for Honoring Differences* Bethesda, MD : The Alban Institute, © 1999, p. 31.

responsibility, and proper behavior, it extends beyond them to cover all cases of doing right where there is no one to make you do it but yourself.”

I’ve been thinking of obedience to the unenforceable – ministers do that quite a lot, actually. I can see the principle of developing a sense of what is moral and good and responsible to help us get along. I can see the principle of taking ownership of our intentions as well as our actions. What is harder for me to understand is how and when we get hold of the idea that we have a responsibility to others for our unintended actions. Or that we have a responsibility for the intended actions of others that cause harm.

We are all connected. That’s something spiritual. We are all connected, part of a greater whole. Is this where empathy comes from? How does an ethos get created? Where does the idea of the greater good start? Where in this do we have the power to think or say or do anything? How can we hold on to this idea and live it out in our lives? It takes some of us longer than others to come to grips with all this, doesn’t it? Talk to any child or youth or twenty-something, and, chances are, they’ll fight you tooth and nail and won’t understand why they’re supposed to feel responsible when they didn’t do anything to harm someone. It’s harder for me to accept that mature folks like me will do the same.

We’ve heard all about this in the news lately, haven’t we? Football Commissioner Roger Goodell had to publicly come to grips with this notion. He and the club owners and the managers and the players and we, their fans, have a responsibility for the intended actions of others that cause harm, for the culture of violence that spills off the field in into their players’ domestic lives. Yes, we do.

So I was especially gleeful to see all the young faces on that climate march last Sunday. Last week’s march for climate change in New York City gathered 400,000 – not 1,000 as in year’s past – but 400,000. They were marching for Matafele Peinem and millions like her who will not have a home unless we act now. It was a great collective act of hope in the face of evil. We are all connected and that makes us all responsible in a way for the well-being of others. No one is free unless everyone is free. No one is healthy unless everyone is healthy. No one has a home until everyone has a home. Will it make a difference? Should that stop us from trying? I think the hardest thing to overcome, once we wake up to our responsibility, is that feeling of helplessness and hopelessness.

In my reading for today, I came across a sermon by Rev. Kent Hemmen Saleska. He reminded me of an exercise he remembered from college, and I remembered it, too. It goes something like this: “Imagine that you lived in a beautiful city, the ideal city. Imagine that there was no poverty and no war. Imagine that the people of this city had decent jobs and homes and families, and that education was free for everyone, and that no one went hungry. Now imagine that there was a price to pay for this – that for this beautiful world, one child was kept alone in a dungeon, was malnourished, and never got to go out and play. The question we were asked was something along the lines of, “Would you be willing to live in a world like that, where you and all your family and friends and the entire city could live in peace and good fortune, but where everyone also knew that one child, somewhere, was having a terrible life?”²

Our first response was to express outrage: no, of course we wouldn’t be willing! Then came the moment we realized: but we are *letting* this happen, every day, whether we are willing or not. There are peoples and entire cultures whose homes are being wiped out by our greenhouse gases. There are countries whose inhabitants have to pay our soft drink conglomerates for their own fresh drinking

² Kent Hemmen Saleska “Mitakuye Oyasín: All My Relations” UU Church of Minnetonka, May 5, 2013

water. There are 28 million slaves worldwide, including the U.S. They are producing our clothes, our chocolate, and the diamonds we wear on our fingers.

My diamond ring was a gift of my husband's grandmother. I loved her dearly. She's one of the reasons he grew up to be the man I love. It's not as valuable monetarily as others because it's old-fashioned and not perfectly round. But for me it is priceless. It symbolizes her, and his love for me. Every time I look at it, though, I remember another minister with another story about her diamond.

Dr. Gwen Purushotham's story begins in the parish where she was a minister in the mid-1980s. One day she was stopped in the grocery store by a parishioner to take her to task on the hypocrisy of wearing her diamond ring when it was a devastating symbol of apartheid. Dr. Purushotham was asked to consider divesting herself of diamonds as an act of protest. The ring was her wedding ring.

Dr. Purushotham considered the issue very deliberately, even writing about it. She began to see her ring as privilege and perversion bound together. She made what to her was an inseparable connection between diamonds and death. She began to think about small acts of hope in the face of evil.

Eventually Dr. Purushotham decided to engage in quite a different ceremony. "I asked my beloved to remove the diamond from my finger. This removal ritual was a reminder of the sacred covenant that we had with each other – love dies unless it is given away." "I know not the power of a small offering to water the seeds of transformation in South Africa," she said. "I do know its power to change me."

I can't get the ring off my finger, couldn't then, can't now. Apartheid ended, truth and reconciliation are beginning to take its place. There are other things I love that I could give away. It is possible that the collective power of small sacrifices does make a difference in the great scheme of things. It is possible that the power of large demonstrations does make a difference in the great scheme of things. It is possible that refraining from buying our staples from our favorite store will force the management to resolve strife. It is possible that graffiti, and dance, and songs and the gestures of protest make a difference – especially when they capture the imaginations of people worldwide.

What ring will you take off your finger? What will you give up to save the miserable child? Love dies unless it is given away. Love for all that connects to our relations dies unless it is given away. Our relations die unless we can give away our love. It is possible by acts small and large to force change for the greater good. It is also possible for us to change for the greater good. There is hope that by so doing, by so transforming, we bring that light and that strength to all our relations.

Let's live as though we have that power. Let's live as if we are connected to the well-being of a child in a dungeon across the world. What can you do? What can we do together? Let's live as if our actions and our voices can make a difference alone or together. In truth, they are the only things that do.