

Sermon Because I Said So

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Mother's Day

I was in the middle of making up a great story with all my toys,
involving much adventure and derring-do
when I finally tuned in to the hollering out in the hallway.
My mother was climbing up the stairs with
the vacuum cleaner in one hand and a trash basket in the other
and she announced that if I didn't pick up every single toy and put them away
she was going to throw them in the trash.
Let me finish, I said.
Now, she said.
Why now, I said.
Because your room's a disaster, she said,
and I've been asking you to clean it all week.
I'll do it in a little bit, I said.
You'll do it now, she said.
Why now, I said.
Because I said so!

Those four words; the second most irritating words in the English language,
are topped only by the most irritating three words, "some assembly required."

What I wouldn't give to hear her say them again.

But back then, I wanted to know what was more important,
letting my imagination play itself out
or getting down to bare wood of the bedroom floor?
And why did she have the power to choose what was more important?

Parents and older siblings are the first authorities in our lives.
Mothers tend to be about delayed gratification.
Cleanliness and manners are all about delayed gratification.
Cleanliness is all about making sure
it takes forever to get your stuff about you again.
Table manners are just about delaying getting the food to your mouth
so you can satisfy your hunger.
These do not make sense to a kid.

So, what is supposed to happen?

We are supposed to obey whether or not we understand why.

The youngest in the family, the youngest in rank,
are supposed to observe rank:

"Theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do and die." (*Charge of the Light Brigade* by Alfred Lord Tennyson)

As we get older, we are supposed to obey and understand why.

By virtue of our age or experience or advance in rank,
we know we have to buy in rather than cave in to demands.

Finally, we are supposed to want to follow the rules, and set them for others.

We have integrated the values of those with power over us
and our reward is to have power ourselves over others.

In this way, we not only have the authority of influence,
but we also have the power to define what is
right and moral conduct and belief.

Man, does it feel good!

We're supposed to ultimately say, wow Mom,
Cleanliness *is* next to godliness.

And let's talk about faith.

Whatever your beliefs are about
the ultimate, or the mystery, or the yet-to-be-known truth of things,
your beliefs set terms on how you mean to be in this world,
how you mean to be a force in this world.
And that's worth talking about here.

Let's take a little side trip into the history of religion.

The history of Unitarians and Universalists tells us
we are the descendants of a people who believed and believe in God.
Much of what we knew about authority was and is wrapped up in what we learned of God.
Is God all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving?
Does God love God's creation?
How do we know this?
What about humankind's relationship with God?
Is there a relationship so to speak?
Is God the ultimate authority and origin of all creation?
The ultimate parent?

The three Abrahamic faiths: Jews, Christians and Muslims,
descended from the ancient Hebrews.
They saw themselves in a relationship with God,
rather than pawns or playthings in some great and unintelligible game of fate.

The law was given to Moses and Moses recapitulated that law to the people.
When Moses died, he left behind the law.
When the people decided to obey the law, they entered into a covenant with God.
This kind of covenant was called a "Suzerainty" covenant.
A suzerain is a ruler who controls his servants or vassals
but allows them some self-governance.
It's an alliance with an entity that holds all the power,
but allows for some agency on the part of the subjects.
In Deuteronomy, the Hebrews agree to observe, keep and
remain faithful to the Torah given by God to them thru Moses.
They are to obey stipulations of the Torah.
It is an act, a commitment, a promise.
What does the suzerain promise in return? That the people will be his.
That there will be a place of meeting, not as equals but there will be a place.
A place of mercy, a place of punishment and enlightenment,
a place where reasons will be made clear in due time if we try to understand,
a place of trust.
We conceived of rituals to demonstrate our commitment and trust.

When Jews and Christians and Muslims seek to
understand how we are meant to be in this world,

they look for understanding in a place of trust,
in Torah, in Testament, in the Qu'ran and
the rituals that speak to a promise to stay in relationship with God.

It means looking for more than "Because I Said So."
We are invited to interact with scripture, and,
depending on what faith tradition we follow,
we are invited to interpret scripture or
have it interpreted for us by those we believe know it better.
There are centuries of interpretation,
some of which has led some believers to war, and some to peace.
But the invitation to interpret scripture is given to all of us.

We are descended from people who realized that
they could read and gain understanding from scripture
without having someone else interpret it.

We are descended from people who realized that God's message
It is not: follow these rules or die.
It is: follow these rules and live.
It is: follow these rules and know I love you.

We are descended from people who realized that
there are more sources of inspiration and meaning-making
than only Jewish and Christian teachings.

We are descended from people who
have let go of the compulsion
to hold one source as all truth and others as all falsehood.

We are descended from people who
relinquished the comfort and reassurance and safety of a single source of truth.

So where does the authority for right and moral conduct and belief come from
for Unitarian Universalists?
What gives me the authority to speak from this pulpit?
What gives you the authority to believe and to exercise those beliefs on one another?
To be authoritative rather than authoritarian?

We have relinquished the sole authority of God, of scripture, of prophecy, of scientific fact.
Sometimes at great cost.

[story of Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"Ralph Waldo Emerson was a leading 19th-century philosopher, father of the Transcendentalist movement.
Before he became a philosophical and literary luminary, he was a Unitarian minister and served the Second
Church in Boston between 1829 and 1832. In pursuing ministry, Ralph Waldo followed in the footsteps of his
father, William Emerson, a Unitarian minister who served Boston's First Church.

In 1831 and 1832, the younger Emerson became embroiled in a controversy at Second Church. As a Unitarian
Christian minister, Emerson was expected to regularly conduct a communion service. Emerson did not find the
act of communion personally meaningful. Because he was interested in a depth of authentic personal

experience with the sacred that did not have room for ritual for the sake of ritual, Emerson told his congregation he would no longer offer the sacrament of communion.

His decision created uproar. For many Christian Unitarians, communion was a central sacrament. Although the congregation was fond of Emerson, his declaration seemed unreasonable to them. Church leaders tried to negotiate with Emerson, hoping he would change his mind. They offered a compromise: Since the parishioners found the act of communion meaningful, they asked if Emerson could perhaps offer communion to the attendees of the church but not partake of the sacrament himself, in light of his philosophical objections. Emerson did not agree to this compromise and the negotiations were not successful.

Emerson recognized this disagreement with the congregation of Second Church as an insurmountable difference between his philosophical and spiritual understanding and the congregation's, and he voluntarily resigned his pulpit. While he never disavowed Unitarianism, or his status as a minister, he never again used his title "Reverend" nor served a congregation. Instead, he chose to express himself through lecturing and writing.

Emerson believed we cultivate our own character and through this cultivation become agents of good or evil in the world. Further, cultivation of character is grounded in an unmediated experience of the sacred, one that occurs by looking inward. Finding that spark of divinity within us, it is possible to have a direct, transcendent experience of the holy. Emerson's belief became the cornerstone of the Transcendentalist movement, and Emerson's greatest spiritual contribution to Unitarian Universalism.”

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/ethics/workshop1/191704.shtml>

Having no single authority requires a great discipline
a greater love for one another than we could ever imagine.
We can only accept something as good and true and worthwhile
when we understand it, question it and live it with one another.
We can only accept something as good and true and worthwhile
when we know ourselves and how we respond.
Above all, we can only accept that our understanding may change over time,
and that that is not evil.

“We must have the insight to discern our beliefs, the courage to declare them, and the humility to abandon them, no matter how cherished or long held, if we come to know them as false or harmful.” (*By What Authority* Rev. Lisa Doege Oct. 11, 2009 Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN
<http://www.norauuchurch.org/sermon/doege/authority.pdf>)

Our authority comes from the deep place within us and between us.
We promise one another that we will live life intentionally,
studying and reflecting on what is true and what is kind.
What is true within us and what is kind between us.

And the answer to why is not because I said so, but because I care.