

Why Should We Be Good?

Rev. Paige Getty

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia

Sunday, December 5, 2004

READING: excerpt from James Luther Adams, “The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism” (Boston: UUA Pamphlet Commission, 1987), pp. 2-4 – reprinted from his book *On Being Human Religiously*.

Over the course of this church year, I am preaching a series of sermons that are intended as a vehicle to launch small group discussions in our Intimacy & Ultimacy groups, and also to encourage broader conversation in the congregation on the same topic. The series is called The Big Questions—we are exploring and actively wrestling with the questions that religions, for ages, have been trying to address.

Today’s question is, “Why should we be good?” I’ve been posing my question to friends and family and colleagues in an attempt to get a sense of the wisdom out there, and without fail, the initial response has been, “What do you mean by ‘good’?” It’s a fair question, of course, and is a crucial element of the bigger question—why should we be good, and how do we know what ‘good’ is. In a general sense, I want to be clear that I’m talking about moral goodness—not skill or achievement or success or performance, but morality. Why should we be of good character, why should we behave virtuously, why should we choose good over evil? And, yes, how do we judge what qualifies as good?

I have gone around asking others for their input because I have my own answer to the question, and it seems to be the only answer I have. Why should we be good, I ask myself? Because I know to the depth of my being that being good is the *right* way to be human—that virtue and righteousness lead to serenity and peace and well-being. And how do I know? I just *do*. I know it from my experience and I know it from my intuition. I just *know*.

And yet it’s an insufficient response—for if each one of us claims that our individual perspective, albeit based on deep intuition, is sufficient justification, we have nothing but bedlam and turmoil. Yes, the intuition and experiential insight of those who are healthy and prone to goodness is a legitimate means of insight and knowledge. But we know that some individuals are driven by other factors—by greed or anger or hatred—and we know that some individuals are simply unhealthy, whether clinically diagnosed as socio- or psychopathic, or otherwise mentally ill. It is not sufficient to say that we should be good “just because”...

There must be stronger grounding than that for righteousness, and for the ability to know good from evil, and so I turned to other sources. First, to the World Wide Web. (I am, after all, of a certain age, and prone to trust the internet perhaps more than I should.)

When I entered “why be good” in Google, here’s what I got on the first page:

Network for Good (a portal for making donations to charity). Composing Good HTML. Good Technology (a place to buy palm pilots and other electronic devices). Good Tutorials (for learning how to use software). Good Vibrations (where you have to promise that you’re 21 years old to enter). Good Cooking (for recipes and cooking tips). And Good Housekeeping (the magazine).

Not helpful for my cause. But no less helpful than the input coming over the loud speakers in retail stores: “He’s makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice... You better be good for goodness sake... [because] Santa Claus is comin’ to town.” Ah yes... be good so you can *get stuff*.

At this point I am reminded yet again of why we gather in religious community to explore such questions—here we are committed to moving beyond the vapid, banal, merely secular answers to such questions. We seek a meaningful, spiritual response to the question before us—why should we be good, and how do we know what *good* is?

If we were not religious liberals, the answers might come easier. The Westminster Confession of Faith—which I found through the Presbyterian Church in America, but which dates to the 17th century—says,

1. Good works are only such as God hath commanded in His holy Word, and not such as, without the warrant thereof, are devised by men, out of blind zeal, or upon any pretence of good intention.
2. These good works, done in obedience to God’s commandments, are the fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith: and by them believers manifest their thankfulness, strengthen their assurance, edify their brethren, adorn the profession of the gospel, stop the mouths of the adversaries, and glorify God, whose workmanship they are, created in Christ Jesus thereunto, that, having their fruit unto holiness, they may have the end, eternal life.¹

In their faith system, it makes sense—God gave you life; you, therefore, show your gratitude and humility by doing as God instructs; and ultimately, such behavior earns you eternal life.

Albert Mohler is the President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. I found an article in which he asks, “Can We Be Good Without God?” He writes, “How do we know what character is without an objective reference? If human beings are left to our own devices and limited to our own wisdom, we will invent whatever model of ‘good character’ seems right at the time. Without God there are no

¹ “The Westminster Confession of Faith, CHAP. XVI. - Of Good Works,” Presbyterian Church in America, 4 December 2004 < http://www.pcanet.org/general/cof_chapxvi-xx.htm#chapxvi >.

moral absolutes. Without moral absolutes, there is no authentic knowledge of right and wrong.”²

The challenge for us as liberals is, in part, our affirmation that revelation is continuous, as James Luther Adams maintained in the earlier reading. We do not, therefore, affirm that the answer to our question is clear-cut, that we can find it explicitly and absolutely in a work of scripture. We do not believe that we have the inerrant word of God immediately at hand. And we do not believe in a God who, as the Westminster Confession states, has appointed a Judgment Day on which God is going to inflict punishment on persons based on their earthly actions.³

No, as the adage goes, we Unitarian Universalists are good... for nothing.

That’s not entirely true, however, because we do have faith in something greater than ourselves to which we are devoted, and which informs our actions. We have faith in what Adams describes as “the inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence.” Human religions have long tried to name and describe that reality—and *we* have rejected many of those names and the unquestioning doctrines. But we do not deny the reality itself.

In truth, we Unitarian Universalist are good for something. We are dedicated to moral goodness for the sake of a reality that begs for meaning and authenticity and love.

We affirm that the capacity to distinguish right from wrong is a divine capacity, but one that exists in us as humans. That is what the story of Adam and Eve is about—they eat from the Tree of the *Knowledge* of Good and Evil. We may believe that the story itself is a myth, written by humans to make meaning of their own existence—but the truth in the story is this, that humans have the capacity to distinguish between good and evil. It follows, then, that we also have the responsibility to distinguish between good and evil, and to act on the distinction.

The Unitarian Universalist Association offers resources for newcomers about the basics of our religious faith, including some statements of “What We Believe”:

We believe that personal experience, conscience, and reason should be the final authorities in religion. In the end religious authority lies not in a book, person, or institution, but in ourselves. We put religious insights to the test of our hearts and minds.

² Albert Mohler, President, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, “Welcome to Rome: Can We Be Good Without God?” Crosswalk.com, 4 December 2004 < <http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/1295449.html>>.

³ “The Westminster Confession of Faith, CHAP. XXXIII - Of the Last Judgment,” Presbyterian Church in America, 4 December 2004 < http://www.pcanet.org/general/cof_chapxvi-xx.htm#chapxvi>.

We seek to act as a moral force in the world, believing that ethical living is the supreme witness of religion. The here and now and the effects our actions will have on future generations deeply concern us. We know that our relationships with one another, with diverse peoples, races, and nations, should be governed by justice, equity, and compassion.⁴

Why should we be good? In part, because we know what the lack of goodness looks and feels like. It is chaos, instability, suffering, meaninglessness, pain, greed, hatred, delusion, ego.

Why should we be good? Because we know what a life *goodness* looks and feels like, too. It is stability, meaningfulness, peace, generosity, health, love.

Why should we be good? Because our faith demands it of us. We are grounded in two longstanding theological traditions that are encapsulated in our first and seventh principles: As Universalists, we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. As Unitarians, we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

A friend and colleague recently told me the story of being asked whether Unitarian Universalists were Satanists. When she said, “Absolutely not!” the questioner respectfully and genuinely asked, “Why couldn’t a Unitarian Universalist be a Satanist?” Her response was that our Unitarian Universalist faith demands that we be generous of heart, affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and actively respecting the interdependent web of all existence. A self-centered existence is, therefore, disallowed, and the Satanist worldview is utterly self-centered.

We are Unitarian Universalists, and we are called by our faith actively to promote moral goodness. Of course, this calling still begs the question of how we might be certain of what is right and wrong... a question without a simple or simplistic response. To be fully and faithfully human means to ask the question, and to care about the response. It means continually to seek right relationship and right action with each other and our world. It means having good intentions. And it means doing the wrong thing from time to time.

If we do not allow ourselves to be fully human, risking doing the wrong thing for the right reasons, we risk paralysis by fear. Many of you know of the Rev. Forrest Church, who is the longtime minister of All Souls Church in New York City, and also a prolific writer on topics of liberal religion. I had the pleasure of participating in a retreat with him a couple months ago, where he described his 60/40 rule for moral (and other) decision-making. I found this explanation of it in one of his sermons to his congregation:

⁴ Marta Flanagan, “We Are Unitarian Universalists” 4 December 2004 <<http://www.uua.org/aboutuu/weare.html>>.

Some years ago, undecided on which path to follow at a major junction in my life, I came up with what I subsequently have called “the 60% solution.” You have a decision to make. It may be an important decision. Should you marry him or not? Should you quit your job? Adopt a child? Come out of the closet? Move to Vermont? Though I would counsel against doing all five of these things at once, even a single momentous decision can paralyze us. What if we do the wrong thing? What if we make the mistake of our life?

This is where the 60% solution comes in handy. The 60% solution is to act on 60% convictions. Once you reckon that the odds for things turning out well outweigh the odds for their turning out badly, on a 60/40 decision you go for it, remaining mindful that you may be making a mistake. Presuming an average capacity for judgment and a balanced apportionment of luck, if one acts regularly on 60% convictions, 60% of one’s decisions will tend to turn out pretty well. As for the other 40%, you can either write them off as a cost of doing business or—the spiritually finer approach—add them to your balance of humility.

Contrast this with the 40% solution[based on the 40% doubt, not to act lest our action prove wrong]. With the 40% solution, dreading the consequences of doing the wrong thing, you don’t lay a bet even when the odds are in your favor. Unlike Yogi Berra, when you come to a fork in the road, you don’t take it. You only dare to act on a lead pipe cinch or with a money back guarantee. Because real life is far from cinchy and tends not to come with money back guarantees, over time you venture (and venture out) less and less often. You are completely safe from failure, of course. No one has ever missed a shot he didn’t take. But absolute safety has its consequences. It’s like practicing being dead.

A few dangerous souls escape this problem entirely. Unlike 60%ers who act on their faith and 40%ers, who, by temporizing from one expiration date to another, act instead on their fears, these folks are 100%ers. 100%ers trumpet and act on their convictions with absolute certitude. Obviously they are right, and anyone who thinks otherwise ought to have his head examined. As my erstwhile All Souls colleague ... John Buehrens said ..., “Whenever someone I agree with is 100% sure that he or she is right, I am tempted to run in the opposite direction.”

Like my colleague Forrest, I believe we must act on our convictions, and I believe we have the capacity to know in most circumstances whether there is a 60% or greater chance of our convictions leading us in the right direction.

Later in the essay I excerpted earlier, James Luther Adams says, “The reign of God, the reign of the sustaining, commanding, transforming reality is the reign of love, a love that fulfills and goes beyond justice, a love that cares for the fullest personal good of all. This love is not something that is ultimately created by us or that is even at our disposal. It

seizes and transforms life, bringing us into a new kind of community that provides new channels for love and new structures for justice.”⁵

What is good? The question is an eternal human dilemma, and it is the calling of the faithful human life to keep seeking the answer. There will be grey areas, have no doubt. We will not all agree on the moral goodness or evil of war, vegetarianism, the death penalty. We may have an easier time of questions of respect, inclusivity, acceptance of diversity, offering kind words. But we may not.

This is not an ethics course aiming to provide a rigid structure within which to make such decisions. And ours is not a dogmatic religion which insists on particular moral action with promises of eternal reward. Our task as a religious community is to hold up the ideas—to recognize and name the qualities of abundance of goodness, as well as the qualities of its absence. We must recognize and celebrate the virtue of goodness, and together we must live our way into the specifics.

Ultimately we strive to be good because we have *faith*. Because we have faith in that inescapable, commanding reality that sustains and transforms all meaningful existence. Because we have faith in the capacity of the human being to make meaning. And in goodness there is meaning.

Amen. So may it be.

⁵ James Luther Adams, “The Five Smooth Stones of Liberalism” (Boston: UUA Pamphlet Commission, 1987), 7.