

**Channing Memorial Church  
Unitarian Universalist  
Ellicott City, Maryland  
The Reverend Susan LaMar, Minister  
January 22, 2006**

**Faultlines and Faith**

We continue this morning exploring the third of the sources of our Unitarian Universalist living tradition. That source is “Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.” [Repeat]

We began our journey into this source last week, with some definitions. I talked about “wisdom” – theologically -- as the teachings within a religion that deal with how to live. It is the practical instructions for living life, those day to day choices we have to make.

I defined religion, as I have before, as “that which binds a community together,” usually within some form or forms of religious “authority.” The four usual sources of religious authority are

Scripture: the writings in a given religion that are considered authoritative: stories, fables, lessons, instructions, and so on.

Tradition: Just the way things are done in the religious community.

Experience: direct experience of the divine on the part of individuals.

And Reason: the intellect. The ability of humans to think for themselves, individually and together.

I talked about how different religions bind their members together using some mix of those four sources of authority, some leading with one, some with another. I talked about in Unitarian Universalism reason is usually front and center, although we draw from scriptures of many religions, affirm the direct experiences of the divine that people have.

I defined ethics, for our purposes, as a system of thinking about right and wrong that grows out of that which binds a religious (or other) community together.

I then raised the question: if individual *reason* is so important within Unitarian Universalism, what is it that binds us together in community? Where does our *collective wisdom* come from?

And I answered that question, as I have before, as follows: *We walk together in the spirit of mutual love*. Walking together is a metaphor for “reasoning together.” And I shared with you my belief that that is the central ethic of this kind of religious community. That reasoning *together* gives birth to new wisdom, and helps everyone figure out how to live life. But it does more than that. By engaging with one another, bringing our individual life journeys to the table – around pearls and nuggets of wisdom contained in scriptures from around the world -- we figure out how to live, and how to live our collective life, together.

This morning, we’re going to go at least one layer deeper. Today, we are going to engage around the wisdom tale that that Pam told this morning; the story of The Stolen Ax. That story resonates for me because it touches one of my weaknesses. I behave like that woodcutter all the time. . . it is almost a reflex action. If something is missing, I immediately think, “*Who took it? Who’s been messing with my stuff.*” A couple of years ago I came back from vacation to find my computer plugged in to the phone line and not off properly, and immediately thought, “Hey, who’s been here? Was the office broken into? Who might it have been.” Then, when I calmed back down, of course, I remembered that just as I was leaving, and was in a rush, I had dashed in to use the computer for one last thing before I had to catch a plane. Yet so ready to blame someone else.

That reminds me of the old Goop rhyme from the Gelet Burgess series of manners books: “scriptural” to those growing up in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“Oh,” says little Susie Smalt,  
“It is someone else’s fault!  
She began it!  
She’s to blame  
She’s the one that spoiled the game.”  
So Goops always blame each other.  
Do you own up *your* fault to mother?

It is so easy to be quick to blame someone else!

Actually, this “not my fault” mentality is deeply coded into our culture in a lot of ways and sometimes the most unexpected ways! A couple of months ago I realized that my oven wasn’t cooking food very well. So I got out the owner’s manual to see if there was a way to recalibrate it. And here is what I found under the section entitled “Oven Temperature Control.” Really, I am not making this up (as Dave Barry would say.)

**Important:** Do not use a thermometer to measure oven temperature because opening the oven door and element or burner cycling may give incorrect readings.

The oven provides accurate temperatures; however, it may cook faster or slower than your previous oven, so the temperature

calibration can be adjusted. [And then it goes on to tell you how to do it.]

In other words, don't check on us; the temperatures are accurate, and if this oven doesn't cook your food right, it is your previous oven's fault.

Of course having been raised during the cold war era, the words "trust, but verify" came immediately to mind, so I went out and bought an oven thermometer. I didn't have to worry about opening the oven door and letting heat out, because my oven has a window in the front; and I understand that it cycles on and off around the temperature it is set at. But I figured that if I set it at 350, it should cycle in and out somewhere in the vicinity of 350. Well, when set at 350, it cycled in and out somewhere in the vicinity of 275. That would explain the raw Thanksgiving turkey.

But why did the manufacturer feel it was necessary to behave like little Susie Smalt? Why not just give the instructions about how to recalibrate the oven?

Oven temperature, of course, is not really what our morning wisdom tale was about. That woodcutter didn't just reflexively blame someone else – some unknown person. He blamed a particular person – his neighbor's son. In his alarm about losing his ax – which represents his livelihood – he "sees" the neighbor's son in a particular way. Standing becomes lurking. He is "shifting uneasily." Hands become "greedy"; they are "stuffed" into his pockets. His face has a "guilty" look.

Have you seen the movie "Crash" yet? It is an extended reflection on exactly this wisdom tale. On how our prejudices – our distrust of one another – across races, cultures, and classes – cause us to try to shift blame, and can lead to disastrous consequences.

The film offers several scenarios in the lives of a few people. Those lives, for literary purposes move in and out of relationship with each other. There are police officers, with an experienced officer breaking in a rookie to the "realities" of the street. There is an Iranian shop owner, fearful for the safety of his property and his family. There is an Hispanic locksmith, fearful for the safety of his family, and recently moved to what he hopes will be a safer neighborhood. There are two hoodlums, robbing and assaulting unwary victims. As the lives of these people intertwine, we, the audience, are given glimpses also into their personal lives, far behind the activities that bring them into contact with one another.

And we, the audience, watch as fear that is the [driving force] behind all of these people's lives, leads them quite "reasonably" – in their minds – to tragic actions. We watch, for example, as the Hispanic locksmith tries to explain to the Iranian shop owner that he cannot properly fix the lock because the door is

broken . . . that for the lock to work properly, he must first have the door repaired. The shop owner, whose English is faulty, thinks the locksmith is trying to rip him off. And when his shop is broken into a day or so later, he believes that it is the locksmith who did it, and tracks him down at home to shoot him in revenge.

We watch, too, as the white, rookie cop begins to learn to stand up for what he believes is right . . . stand up to his partner and other officers. And yet, when he picks up an African American hitchhiker, his underlying fear comes forward as the conversation takes on a tone and tenor that he is not familiar with. The rookie has a statue of St. Christopher on his dashboard, and we, the audience, know that the hitchhiker has the same statue in his pocket. As they drive along together, the hitchhiker notices the statue and begins to laugh. The rookie asks what he is laughing at, and the hitchhiker gives him a little lip, in a way and style that is very common in the Black community when someone has a harmless secret that he is about to share. They go back and forth for a few moments, with the rookie getting more and uncomfortable, and finally the hitchhiker says, “You want to know what I’m laughing at? I’ll show you what I’m laughing at . . .” and begins to reach into his pocket. And the cop, seeing body language and speech that he only knows how to interpret as aggression, assumes that the hitchhiker is reaching for a gun, and reaches his first, and shoots him. And the matching St. Christopher statue falls from the hitchhiker’s hand.

[Pause]

It is easy to sit here in our safe sanctuary and “tut, tut” about these misunderstandings. The more interesting question is how we live our lives in ways in ways that ensure that we have reasoned deeply together about how to live our lives in community with people who may look or seem different from us. How we get past our assumptions.

I’m going to share with you this morning some information about an incident that occurred at our denominations’ General Assembly last July. Each year, Unitarian Universalists come together from all over the world to conduct the business of the Unitarian Universalist Association – to think together how best to serve the needs of the member congregations and implement our principles. In addition to the business meetings, it is a conference where Unitarian Universalists can attend workshops on a host of topics related to our faith, worship in many styles, even party together. Take a moment to imagine what that might look like – thousands of Unitarian Universalists together.

I am going to read to you now from an open letter from the Association’s Board of Trustees, written shortly after the close of General Assembly. It says, in part:

At General Assembly in Fort Worth, there were several incidents that reminded us that we have much work to do in our journey to becoming an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multicultural association. We, the UUA Board of Trustees, want to express deep sadness and regret that these incidents took place . . .

We have been disturbed by reports of incidents in which UU youth of color were made to feel that they were not welcome. There was an incident outside the hall during the closing ceremonies . . . Based on the reports of witnesses, the incident involved several UU youth of color, a UU adult who questioned their right to be there, provoking an angry response from the youth, a UU minister who intervened in support of the adult, and another white youth who defended the youth of color and verbally attacked the minister, who responded in like fashion with similar inflammatory language. This was not the only incident. We have also heard that on several occasions in Fort Worth, white UUs assumed that UU youth of color were hotel service people and asked them to carry luggage or park cars. We are troubled that some UUs may have treated other UUs as if they did not belong among us. We can and must do better.

Now think again about the image that you had in your mind a few moments ago, when I asked you to imagine what thousands of UUs together might look like. When you imagined that group, did it include a fair number of youth of color, perhaps dressed in “urban chic” – baggy pants and all – lots of visible piercings, bling? Were you thinking that leaders within some of our congregations . . . from campus ministries to urban ministries . . . might look like that? Be brutally honest with yourself, now. Because they do. Some are the children of long-time Unitarian Universalists (including the President of the Association!); some are new to the movement just like many of you.

Imagine, welcoming them in to this congregation. Imagine being welcomed in to a congregation that looked different from you.

The wisdom in our story of the woodcutter’s stolen ax reminds us to look with brutal honesty at ourselves . . . at our own assumptions . . . yes, at our own ethics. I’ll be honest. When I first heard the stories about what happened at General Assembly I had a reaction similar to what some of you may be thinking:

“Well, if they are going to dress like that, then they have to expect to be challenged. It is outside the ‘norm’ of the majority.”

And, to be fair, that might, *might*, also have a bit of truth in it.

However, it does seem rather self-serving that suddenly the incidents are their fault. It does seem a little self-serving that because *I* am uncomfortable

about the way *they* look or dress, they should change and be more like me. That it's OK to treat them rudely, and assume that they are gang members or otherwise up to no good, and with no right to be at the Assembly.

That discomfort is a signal that there is work to do in my ethical and spiritual life. A wisdom tale such as the one about the woodcutter, grappled with and reflected on and reasoned with, *if I take my ethical and spiritual life seriously*, inspires me to notice and own what *is my fault*. That woodcutter has some serious interior work to do. The spiritual question might be something like: "Why am I now seeing that boy differently?"

And the ethical question might be something like: "How will I now treat my neighbor's son."

A striking element of our woodcutter story is that between the two characters . . . the woodcutter and the neighbor's son . . . there is no relationship. The woodcutter never says, "Hey, Jimmy, have you seen my ax?" So the neighbor's son never has the opportunity to say, "Yeah, it's right over there by the firewood," or "No, but I can help you look." There wasn't any space for "lurking" to turn back into standing, or "hanging out." There wasn't room for "greedy hands stuffed into pockets" to turn back into bored hands, or perhaps cold hands, simply in pockets.

It is in actual relationship where there is room for spirit to move and ethics to be practiced. That is what is at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Whether it is here in our congregation, or at General Assembly, or in the world at large, that is what we are called to do.

May it, in practice, be so.