

The Call and Cost of Conscience
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A few weeks ago we reflected on the “still, small voice” that resides within each of us. I spoke of how that voice can serve to guide us through the challenging times in our lives if only we will stop long enough and listen hard enough to hear its quiet call. I believe that voice is always present, but there are times in our lives when it can feel utterly elusive. Sometimes we have to work really hard to hear it. We have to pay attention if we are to hear its whispers echo in our hearts.

But there are other times when that otherwise still, small voice cries out so powerfully that we cannot help but hear its call. The voice that Theodore Parker remembered hearing as a young boy was such a voice. This is the voice that cries out forcefully and with urgency saying either, “Act!” or “Don’t act!” This is the voice that cries out at some injustice, either observed or experienced, and says, “It is wrong!” This is the voice that Parker described as “an involuntary but inward check upon [his] actions.”

I wonder, does his recollection resonate with you? Have you ever had an experience like that? Before we get too far into this sermon, I’d like to invite you to reflect for a few moments on when in your own life, you have heard your inward voice cry out as little Theodore Parker heard his own.

When did your still, small voice speak up so powerfully and so passionately that it could not be ignored? What is your earliest memory of having been commanded by your conscience? What made it cry out saying, “That’s not fair?” Did the voice stop you from doing something that you were about to do? Did it goad you into action that you hadn’t planned to take?

And I wonder, too...Do you still hear that voice now that you’re an adult? Does it still cry out as powerfully at unfairness? Do you hear it as often as you once did, or not as much? Does it still move you to act? Does it move you at all?

I don’t know how it is for you, but I have a hard time thinking of one specific incident like Parker’s standing over that tortoise with a stick. And yet, I do believe that I was shaped by such incidents just as he was. I think that’s why I still root for the underdog in Baseball and in Life.

What I also know is that, generally speaking, I have not heard that voice as loudly and clearly as an adult as I did when I was a child. I suspect that what happens to many of us is that when we are children and see something that is unfair, the inner voice cries out loudly and clearly and grabs us and shakes us from head to toe. We cannot resist it.

But then, as we grow older, some of the adults around us, adults who are very well intentioned, hear us cry out at injustice and respond to our sense of indignation saying, “Life isn’t fair. Who said that life was fair?” How many of you heard those words as a child? And how many of you, as adults, have said some version of those words to a child? I know that I have.

When that happens to us we are really hearing two voices: the powerful and elemental voice of our own conscience and the voice of the world, the voice of adults whom we respect and love, adults on whom we depend, adults whom we trust to know. And overtime, the voice of conscience may begin to subside, as the voice of the world grows louder and more clear.

I like to imagine that Mrs. Parker never encouraged young Theodore to resign himself to life’s unfairness. She encouraged him to listen to his conscience over and above the voice of the world. And the other thing Mrs. Parker didn’t tell her son – at least as far as we know – is that following his conscience might entail some costs. She didn’t say, “Teddy, if you don’t kill those turtles, your friends may make fun of you.” She wanted him not only to listen to his conscience, but also to respond to it. He, no doubt, would learn about the costs on his own in time. We all do.

There are plenty of examples of people throughout history who heard the call of conscience, responded to it – people who’ve stood up for what they believe – and then paid the price for doing so. Martin Luther King, Jr. was one, of course. Gandhi was another. You know their stories.

St. Valentine was another. Yesterday, many of us celebrated Valentine’s Day and the love that is central to it, with cards and candies and bouquets of flowers. Perhaps not as many of us are familiar with the history of the man who lends his name to the holiday. Valentine lived in Rome during the third century during the rule of Emperor Claudius II.

One day the Emperor decided that single men would make much better soldiers for his armies, because they wouldn’t be distracted by wives and children. And so, to build a better and stronger army, he declared that young men would no longer be allowed to get married. Valentine, who was a priest, thought that declaration terribly unjust. And so, he continued to marry young lovers secretly although he knew he was breaking the law. And he paid the cost. He followed his conscience and, in the end, he gave his life for it.

Our own Unitarian Universalist tradition is filled with similar stories of people who have heard and responded to the call of their conscience despite the costs they might incur. Little Theodore Parker heeded his mother’s words, continuing to listen to and obey the voice of his conscience all the way into his adulthood. He grew up to become a minister. His beliefs about Jesus – that he was thoroughly human – were radical even among his Unitarian colleagues of the day, and for his theology, he was banned from their pulpits and eventually lost his official standing among them.

He not just a religious reformer, however, he was also a social reformer. He became a prominent abolitionist, who used to hide fugitive slaves and freedmen from the mercenary slave hunters in

Boston. He also performed marriage ceremonies for escaped slaves who were on their way to Canada via the Underground Railroad. His conscience told him that the Biblical passages that supported and sustained slavery were wrong. And he chose to listen to his conscience despite the potential costs. He received all manner of death threats because of his anti-slavery positions and actions. He used to write his sermons on justice and love with a loaded pistol on his desk.

The history of Unitarianism in Europe is also filled with such stories. Jan Hus, a 15th century Czech priest and reformer, burned at the stake for following his conscience. Michael Servetus, a 16th century Spanish priest and reformer, burned at the stake for following his conscience.

Francis David was the founder of Unitarianism in Transylvania – home of our partner church – and its first Bishop. He followed his conscience as it led him from Catholicism to Lutheranism to Calvinism and ultimately to the establishment of Unitarianism. He was a strident defender of religious liberty and religious tolerance, who believed that the Sermon on the Mount was the core of Christianity and that Christianity was fundamentally an ethical religion, meant to show us how to live together in peace, with justice. He died in a prison cell where he'd been thrown for following his conscience

Most of us, I dare say, don't often face the possibility of having to pay such a cost these days for answering the call of our own conscience. Perhaps we never will. But we still pay costs.

There's a passage in the Bible in which Jesus remarks on how we tend to try to count the costs of something before we jump in and do it. And to a certain extent, it makes a good deal of sense. After all, if you start a job and then find you don't have the resources to finish it, the world may think you're a fool. But, he goes on to say, you can't be his disciple – you can't follow him, in other words – unless you're willing to take whatever is “dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it goodbye.”¹

As Unitarian Universalists, we might well say the very same thing about our conscience: sometimes following our conscience will require that we take that which is dearest to us and be willing to kiss it goodbye. Perhaps that is literally our life. More likely it is the stuff of which our life is made up – our time, our energy, our resources.

The thing we tend to forget – the thing that both Jesus and Mrs. Parker seemed to understand – is that although there are costs to answering the call of one's conscience, there are also costs to not answering its call. The way Mrs. Parker put it was this, “If you listen and obey [your conscience], then it will speak clearer and clearer, and always guide you right; but if you turn a deaf ear or disobey, then it will fade out little by little, and leave you all in the dark without a guide. Your life depends on heeding this little voice.”

I would guess that Martin Luther King, Jr. and Francis David and the others understood that, too. They acted because the cost of not acting was too great.

Take another moment to reflect on a time when your conscience called out to you to take some action or another to address some unfairness in the world, and when you turned a deaf ear. You

¹ Luke 14:33 in *The Message*.

must have counted the costs of responding to that call. What were they? What would it have cost you in terms of your time, your energy, and your other resources to respond? What were you protecting in that moment in which you let the call of your conscience go unanswered?

Mrs. Parker said that one's life depends on heeding that little voice. If that is true, can you imagine what happens when one does not? Do we somehow become less alive? Less vital? Less powerful?

In a word, I think yes. When we don't respond to the voice of conscience that calls out in the face of injustice, yes, we become impotent – literally – to address the injustice we see. We give up our power. When the voice of conscience begins to fade away, so does our vitality... and our integrity. When we can hear stories of suffering or witness suffering with our own eyes without being moved by compassion to take action, I would suggest that we are not fully alive. Jesus said if you give up your life, you will have life and have it more abundantly.

So, for those of us for whom that voice has become dulled over time from disuse, what can we do to hear the call of conscience afresh and anew in our lives? How can we wake up that inner voice once again?

Becoming a mother has helped to awaken that voice in me. There is something about having an infant at home, a baby who depends on us entirely...that is making that voice of conscience cry out in me more loudly, more clearly, and more often than it had in the recent past. Multiple times each week I read a story in the paper or hear a story on the radio that makes that inner voice shout out forcefully about how unfair this or that really is and brings tears to my eyes.

I think that spending time with someone who is so vulnerable is opening my eyes and ears to the experiences of others who are also vulnerable. There but for the grace of god goes she. St. Catherine of Siena, a 14th century Dominican nun who devoted her short life to service, once wrote...

Vulnerable we are, like an infant.
We need each other's care
or we will
suffer.

But of course, I don't think that having a baby is the only way to reawaken that sense. I wonder if anything that puts us in closer relationship with a heightened sense of vulnerability can do the trick.

Travel to a foreign setting can do it. As one poet has written,

Every trip we take...
...can be a voyage into renewal,
as, leaving our selves and pasts at home and
traveling light, we recover our innocence abroad...
If every journey makes us wiser about the world, it

also returns us to a sort of childhood. In alien parts, we speak more simply, in our own or some other language, move more freely, unencumbered by the histories that we carry around at home, and look more excitedly, with eyes of wonder.... We travel, initially to lose ourselves, and we travel, next to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate.²

Travel to any place that is new – even if that place is but 10 miles from your house – can do the trick. For the trick is really to have your eyes and ears opened anew to what is really going on in the world – to the messiness and the suffering, to the poverty and hunger, to the injustice and unfairness and vulnerability that is all around us every day, but which we mostly do not see.

Young Theodore Parker wasn't reading a book about tortoises or thinking about them in the abstract when his conscience cried out to him. No, he was in close proximity to that tortoise with a real sense that the creature's life was in his hands.

Perhaps the best way to start reinvigorating the call of our conscience is to bring ourselves into personal contact with real human beings and their real needs. It's hard, for example, to feel compelled to act in relationship with our Partner Church in Romania when we don't know the people there and we don't know their needs or their hardships. Our conscience is seldom aroused through abstraction. Our challenge is to figure out ways to get to know the members of the church in Magyarandrasfalva – as real people with real joys, real sorrows, and real vulnerability – as a people who need us just as we need them.

It's hard to feel compelled to act to alleviate hunger and poverty, when we don't know people who are poor and hungry. It takes more than bags of groceries to build relationships. Our challenge is to figure out ways to get to know people who are hungry, to get to know their stories and their sufferings and their vulnerabilities – to come to know them as people who need us just as we need them. Then perhaps our conscience will be re-awakened and it will cry out, "That is wrong!" and we will hear the call in our hearts to act like we have not heard it for a long, long time.

Part of my vision for this assembly is that we will spend the next year figuring out ways to develop those relationships both with our Partner Church and with the hungry and impoverished people in and around our own community. My hope is that we will begin to hear anew the cries of our conscience, which call us to take action. My **fondest** hope is that we will respond, despite the costs, trusting and believing that in giving our lives, we will find new life and life that is more abundant.

Let ours be a prayer of service – of reaching out to others near and far. So may it be.

² Iver, Pico. "Why We Travel: A Love Affair with the World."