



*All people are children when they sleep.  
There's no war in them then.  
They open their hands and breathe  
in that quiet rhythm heaven has given them.*

ROLF JACOBSEN

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***“The Question and Call of Truth”***  
*Unitarian Universalist Community Church*  
*Rev. Jill Ann Terwilliger*  
*August 13, 2006*

**Children’s Moment**

Traditional fable as told in *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart: Parables of the Spiritual Path from Around the World*, ed, Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, pp. 64-66

Once, Truth and Falsehood met at a crossroads, and after they had greeted each other, Falsehood asked Truth how the world went with him. “How goes it with me?” said Truth. “Each year worse than the last.” “I can see the plight you are in,” said Falsehood, glancing at Truth’s ragged clothes, “Why, even your breath stinks.” “Not a bite has passed my lips these three days,” said Truth. “Wherever I go, I get troubles, not only for myself, but for the few who love me still. It’s no way to live, this.” “You have only yourself to blame,” said Falsehood to him. “Come with me. You’ll see better days, dress in fine clothes like mine, and eat plenty, only you must not gainsay anything I say.”

Truth consented, just that once, to go and eat with Falsehood because he was so hungry he could hardly keep upright. They set out together and came to a great city, went into the best hotel, which was full of people, and sat and ate of the best. When many hours had gone by, and most of the people had gone, Falsehood rapped with his fist on the table, and the hotelkeeper himself came up to see to their wants, for Falsehood looked like a great nobleman. He asked what they desired.

“How much longer am I to wait for the change from the sovereign I gave the boy who sets the table?” said Falsehood. The host called the boy, who said that he had had no sovereign. Then Falsehood grew angry and began to shout, saying he would never have believed that such a hotel would rob the people who went in there to eat, but he would bear it in mind another time, and he threw a sovereign at the hotelkeeper. “There,” he said, “bring me the change.”

Fearing that his hotel would get a bad name, the hotelkeeper would not take the sovereign, but gave change from the reputed sovereign of the argument, and boxed the ears of the boy who could not remember taking the coin. The boy began to cry, and protest that he had not had the sovereign, but as no one believed him, he sighed deeply and said, “Alas, where are you, unhappy Truth? Are you no more?”

“No, I’m here,” said Truth through clenched teeth, “but I had not eaten for three days, and now I many not speak. You must find the right of it by yourself, my tongue is tied.”

When they got outside, Falsehood burst out laughing and said to Truth, “You see how I contrive things?”

“Better I should die of hunger,” said Truth, “than do the things you do.” So they parted forever.

### **Readings**

From “What Torture’s Taught Me,” William F. Schulz

Sallie McFague, a theologian whose work is popular among liberals, says that “there is no place where God is not.” Process theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki insists that “[God is] pervasively present, like water, to every nook and cranny of the universe, continuously wooing the universe...toward its greater good.”<sup>91</sup> But I would submit that no God worthy of the name is present in a torture chamber. I am sure that some victims of torture have found solace in their faith sufficient to sustain them through the ordeal. That appears to be the case, for example, with some of the Islamic prisoners being held at Guantanamo Bay. But I have talked to dozens of survivors of torture, read hundreds of others’ accounts, and I have rarely, if ever, come across a testimony that it was faith in God that saw them through the night. ...

I am not here scoring some cheap humanist point against vapid notions of God. Over the years I have myself become increasingly comfortable using the word to describe that source of graciousness upon which we depend for our very lives. All I am saying is that, whatever our conception of God, it needs to be both complex enough and circumscribed enough to account for the fact that God’s absence—true absence—is as real a phenomenon as God’s immanence.

From *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The great masquerade of evil has played havoc with all our ethical concepts. For evil to appear disguised as light, charity, historical necessity, or social justice is quite bewildering to anyone brought up on our traditional ethical concepts, ...

*(Then he describes how several different kinds of people fail to effectively confront evil. I’ll just share one, about ‘reasonable’ people.)*

The ‘reasonable’ people’s failure is obvious. With the best intentions and a naïve lack of realism, they think that with a little reason they can bend back into position the framework that has got out of joint. In their lack of vision they want to do justice to all sides, and so the conflicting forces wear them down with nothing achieved. Disappointed by the world’s unreasonableness, they see themselves condemned to ineffectiveness; they step aside in resignation or collapse before the stronger party. ...

Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God – the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God. Where are these responsible people? (p. 4-5)

### **Prayer**

War and torture and terror and failed diplomacy and violated human rights have been in the news daily for nearly five years now. They've become the almost normal backdrop to our lives. But sometimes it gets to be too much, and for some people, when it gets to be too much, they find it helpful to pray, to pour out their hearts to the universe and to listen – deeply listen – for some note of hope. My colleague Jose Ballester came to this place at the end of July as the violence in Lebanon escalated. He wrote this prayer of lament.

“Lamentation,” Jose Ballester (uu) written on July 30<sup>th</sup>.

I cry in the wilderness of my being as I behold the afflictions in our world.  
I am stunned by the death and destruction that numbs us into acceptance and indifference.  
I weep before the images of parents carrying their children's lifeless bodies and children trying to awaken their massacred loved ones.

I mourn how love and hope are dimmed in the pyre smoke of Lebanon, Israel, Gaza, Iraq, Afghanistan and other ravaged places.  
I am maddened seeing all sides of the conflicts and being asked to choose which madness is righteous.  
I feel my heart torn, seeing the victims of natural disasters and the indifference we pay to their suffering.

We forsake our common bonds and pursue riches for our own sake.  
We veil our greed with the cloak of patriotism and our thirst for blood with the mantel self-defense.  
We avenge a child's death by killing a child and thus condemn all children to ceaseless, senseless violence.  
We speak of the sanctity of life and the importance of preserving every embryo while blithely reporting the latest casualty numbers.  
We joyously kill with the hope of heavenly reward and carelessly squander all our earthly resources.

O, Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Spirit of Peace come unto me,  
For I am filled with anguish and despair.  
For I wish us all condemned to specters walking the earth to atone for our blasphemy and our silence, by warning others of our foolishness.  
For I look upon our world and see no hope and look inside myself and feel no joy.

Show me the strength and fortitude I possess to confront injustice.

Show me the seed of hope that I might use to grow hope in others.  
 Show me the faces of all who suffer, and all who cause suffering so I may remember that  
 they are all my sisters and brothers.  
 Show me there is still hope.

**Sermon**                      *The Question and Call of Truth*  
 Rev. Jill Terwilliger, Minister

This past Wednesday evening I heard reported on National Public Radio that leaked documents show that the White House proposes to change the War Crimes Act in a way that would remove “humiliating and degrading treatment” from the category of war crimes. The new language would also (1) affirm that the US is bound by the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners; and (2) disallow reference to the Geneva Convention in court, effectively preventing prosecution for violations of that convention. And, (3) the new rules would be applied retroactive to September 11, 2001, invalidating any prosecutions for American actions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, or anywhere else.

M. Scott Peck is a psychiatrist and author of the best-selling book *The Road Less Traveled*. He is also author of a later book called *People of the Lie*. In his psychiatric practice, Peck began to notice something in a few of his clients outside of the normal categories of mental illness or family dysfunction. Eventually Peck concluded that what he was seeing was “evil” and he developed a definition of evil not as doing something wrong or even horrific – or as committing a ‘sin’ in religious language – but as the inability or refusal to look back on the action and *understand* that it was wrong, a refusal to take responsibility for the actions one has taken.

Like Bill Schulz who wasn’t trying to “score cheap humanist points against vapid notions of God,” as he put it, I’m not here trying to score cheap liberal points against President Bush and his administration. The story about changing the War Crimes Act just jumped out at me this week as a vivid example of the situation we live in today where the distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, peace and violence, truth and falsehood are getting buried deeper and deeper under the veils of politics and policy..

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In the early 1940’s, in Hitler’s Germany, after several years of seeing one institution after another (including the churches) capitulate to Hitler’s power, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and a close-knit group of Lutheran pastors and lay-people decided that the only option left to them for creating peace in their country was to assassinate Adolf Hitler. I’ve talked here about this before, but it continues to challenge me. Here is a man, a pastor, who is a deeply committed Christian. A Christian who sees in his sacred scriptures a call to stand for peace and justice at all cost, a man who takes this so seriously that he leaves the Lutheran church because of its refusal to speak against Hitler and begins a new group called the “confessing church.” This is not a man who takes his religion lightly, particularly not its ethical teachings. And yet, after exhaustive discernment, he and his fellows decide that murder is what must be done in the name of peace and justice. The

fact that they never achieved their aim doesn't change their conclusions about the actions they were willing to take.

These actions are a far cry from the religious voices we are used to hearing about achieving peace, the ones that can be summed up in sayings that go something like "peace is not the destination; peace is the way." We've heard it from the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Men who spoke out of experience. They had seen non-violence work; they had helped make it work. They inspire me and millions of others with the idea that winning by abandoning your ideals is not to win at all, but to lose yourself. But then I am confronted with a man like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and I have to wonder if there are times when peace is not enough, and I have to wonder how it is we tell when those times are.

These are questions I've been pondering for some months as the war in Iraq continues and I read more of Bonhoeffer's writings. Then at General Assembly Bill Schulz added more complexity to my pondering. He asked us, as you heard in the reading, to reconsider the comforting notion of God's pervasive presence. And he asked us to reconsider the notion of the *inherent* worth and dignity of every person. Even the torturer, he begged of us, has inherent worth? The one who inflicts unimaginable pain and humiliation, *not* to get any information but purely to torment the victim and instill fear in the community? This torturer has inherent worth the same as the tortured? How does this message preach, he asked us ministers, if you imagine that in your congregations are survivors of torture, or of abuse, or of rape, as there almost certainly are. Does the presence of God and the inherent worth of all speak to their experience?

I hear in Schulz's challenge a reminder that simple notions about goodness and truth and God and humanity don't *truly* speak to any of us in our world today. He tells a story about himself for example:

When I was seven or eight years old, I lived across the street from a little dog named Amy. Every afternoon after my school let out, Amy and I would play together for an hour. One of Amy's favorite games was a dancing game in which I held her two forepaws in my hands and we would dance around the yard. Sometimes Amy even put her paws in my lap to signal that she wanted to dance. But I noticed that after a few minutes Amy's hind legs would get sore and she would pull her paws away. The first few times we played our dancing game, I dropped her paws the moment I sensed her discomfort and we went on to something else.

But one day I decided to hold on. The more Amy tugged, the tighter I held on until finally, when she yelped in agony, I let her go. But the next day I repeated my demonic game. It was fascinating to feel this little creature, so much less powerful than me, entirely at my mercy. ...

Whatever had come over me that I would treat someone I had loved that way?

Perhaps what makes torture so profoundly disturbing is not just that a human being (or living being) is degraded, humiliated, and caused excruciating pain, but that another human being, someone else we would consider to have some inherent worth, has imagined such acts and has carried them out against another being. It violates our picture of what human beings are. And if we grant the torturer a measure of worth as inherent as our own, we confront in ourselves the terrifying notion that under just the wrong circumstances, we, too, might be capable of great cruelty. Simple notions are not sufficient to deal with the truth of our lives.

This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer discovered, too. Simple notions of right and wrong are not enough, certainly not enough when confronting evil. The reasonable person, he says, fails for lack of vision. The single-minded fanatic has enough conviction but aims at the red cape rather than the person holding it. The person of conscience is torn to pieces by the less-than-ideal choices available and only their own inner compass to make them. And the person of duty will never venture an action on his own responsibility that will score a direct hit on evil.

What is needed, he says, are people who are willing to let go of these ways of being and instead 'make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God.' (repeat) Let me attempt a theological translation, and then an explanation.

Translation: This weekend Charles and I saw the film *Water* at the Kalamazoo Film Society. It is beautiful and sorrowful and is tinged with joy and hope (and has 4 more showings today if you haven't seen it yet.). It's a story about the plight of widows in 1930's India, just at the time when Gandhi is gaining a wide following. One of the last scenes is Gandhi making a five-minute train-stop to speak to the people. He speaks only a few sentences. The last one is something like this: *I have believed for a long time that God is truth. Now I believe that truth is God.* It sounds like an equivalency where the order shouldn't matter: god is truth; truth is god, they are the same. But the order is everything if you are a seeker. Do you focus your search on God with the faith that where you find this God, be it in scriptures or traditions or devotional practices, there you will also find truth? Or, do you focus your search on truth with the faith that wherever you find this truth, be it in your conscience or in philosophy or in science or in scripture or from the mouths of widows and children, there you will also find holiness. Searching for truth will take you to God.

For centuries this is the way that Unitarians have ordered the religious quest. And we have not settled for easy truths. We have tried to weave together the truths that can be known through learning and study with the truths that can be found through the inward journey. At our best, we have tried to make our lives answers to the question and call of Truth. That is the translation.

Now the explanation: Truth is not always reasonable, does not always follow principles, sometimes challenges the conscience, may not make you free, and may not protect your virtue. Bonhoeffer and his friends knew that by any reasonable list of principles or

virtues assassinating someone was wrong. They attempted it knowing it was wrong. They held that ‘wrongness’ before them. “Is it still what we must do to answer the call of Truth? They judged that it was.

Neither the Unitarian nor the Universalist church (nor the present day UUA) has ever declared themselves to be pacifist in principle. Others have – the Quakers, the Mennonites, the Brethren – but not us. Over centuries we have supported wars and we have opposed wars (sometimes both at once). I think this is a result of our choosing truth over principle. Not that we have always known the whole truth or acted courageously on what we did know, but putting truth above principle means that we are always open to knowing more and we may be willing to take unconventional actions in the service of a greater call.

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I prayed my colleague’s prayer over and again this week:

*O, Spirit of Life, Spirit of Love, Spirit of Peace come unto me,  
For I am filled with anguish and despair.  
For I wish us all condemned to specters walking the earth to atone for our  
blasphemy and our silence, by warning others of our foolishness.  
For I look upon our world and see no hope and look inside myself and feel no joy.*

*Show me the strength and fortitude I possess to confront injustice.*

And I saw this congregation, gathered to seek the truth together and root out foolishness, gathered to show love to one another, gathered to love the world so much that we might raise our voices as one against injustice.

*Show me the seed of hope that I might use to grow hope in others.*

And Mike walked into my office (our wonderful administrator) and he told me what his friend says these days whenever someone begins to get morose about the world. “They’re planting a million trees in the city of Los Angeles, you know.” Now, Mike is very adept at mixing irony, cynicism and humor together so I didn’t quite know how to take this at first. “You’re serious,” I said, “this is an actual current event, not a dream or a joke?” “Nope, it’s real. They’ve got this great progressive mayor and they’re planting a million trees in LA. Think about how much carbon monoxide that will suck up!” And I thought about how much more green it will be, how much more humane for its residents.

*Show me the faces of all who suffer, and all who cause suffering so I may  
remember that they are all my sisters and brothers.*

So I cruised the inter-net looking at faces on news sites and human rights sites. And I kept reminding myself, they are all my sisters and brothers; the wealthy and the poor, the whole and the ravaged; the grieving and the joyous; the soldier, the commander, the militant, the civilian, the child; the movie star, the refugee and the terrorist; the wounded in body, mind and spirit; the healers who move among us. They are all my sisters and my brothers. I am one of them.

*Show me there is still hope.*

And I read Bill Schulz's essay again and noticed this paragraph:

Human rights are whatever the international community—through its various declarations, covenants, treaties and conventions—says that they are. This means that, theoretically at least, the world could regress and torture could once again be deemed acceptable. But experience seems to show that the more people who are involved in decision-making about rights, including the victims of their violation, the less likely the backsliding. If there is one arena in which Theodore Parker's famous dictum that "the arc of the universe bends toward justice" seems to have been borne out, it is the evolution of human rights.

Truth is a hard and scrappy character. It is unlikely ever to flourish in finery like Falsehood may, but it is possible to keep Truth alive. Truth is best fed by many, many hands and minds and hearts and voices working and listening and speaking together. Truth is the antidote to evil. This is the seed of hope.

Now, Let us be the sowers of hope.  
Amen.