

“Flip Sides, Other Hands, and Bronze Linings”

A talk given by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

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One of the small groups I've led as a minister is called Integrating Your Religious Heritage. It has a sort of workshop format, with mix of discussion and presentations. It started off as a program for former Catholics. That's partly because I have expertise in being a former Catholic and partly because, at the time, I was serving over on the more Catholic side of the river, in St. Paul. Eventually, I broadened the workshop to include anyone who came to Unitarian Universalism or to humanism from another tradition.

I've led these sessions because I feel that it's important for UU ministers to reach out compassionately to people who have experienced some kind of what we call "church hurt," or who are living with grief over who or what was left behind when they left their first religion. And many people who have changed their religious affiliations are carrying around questions. Questions like, "How did I get to *here* from way over *there*?" Or, "Is there anything I can bring with me?" Or, "How did I survive in that religion, or that community, for so long?" There aren't a lot of places to have conversations like that. And the fact that these kinds of theological changes happen to people is one of the reasons for the existence of this congregation.

One of the activities in the religious heritage workshop is sharing our individual stories. Sometimes, when people tell their stories, there's a *before* and an *after*. "Going to church was fine until..." Until they were scolded in 4th grade for asking too many questions. Until they were told that their divorce was a sin, or their pregnancy, or their gender identity. Until they became uncomfortable with or suspicious of their pastor's behavior.

Sometimes there is truly no "before," no time when the church was safe, at least not that is remembered. The shaming or punishments or abuse started so early that negative memories are the only religious memories there are.

For most of the people I've worked with on these matters, it's not that severe. Most relationships of any kind aren't unambiguously good or unambiguously bad. There's more of a spectrum of feelings, a complexity; you might hear things like: "I hated that church, but it helped my dad stay sober." "Women were treated like second-class citizens, but church kept us fed during some lean times." "I didn't agree with a thing

our pastor said, but church is where I fell in love with singing." Glimmers of goodness or beauty, tainted but still recognizable.

These are the kinds of complexities I want to talk about today. Our theme this month is gratitude, and there are plenty of times, in our lives and in our world, when gratitude is hard or impossible to come by. Gratitude is often too strong a word to describe our reaction to the benefits that sometimes come along with hard times. A reluctant appreciation may be all that we can authentically muster. And with the one-year anniversary of a world-shaking election on our minds, it's a good time to count whatever blessings we can find, to look for linings that are probably less than silver. But perhaps, if we look hard enough, we might find a few we could call bronze.

This kind of gratitude, this task of finding a single rose amid a thicket of thorns, can be hard to talk about because of those very same religions that many of us came from. That's because those theologies or practices might glorify the virtues of suffering, or put undue emphasis on the idea that everything, no matter how horrible, happens for a reason, that everything is moving toward some greater good. How many times have you heard "It builds character"? Or "That which does not kill us makes us stronger." Nietzsche gave us that famous quote, but I'm more inclined toward the wisdom of Conan O'Brien, who likes to point out that that which does not kill us almost kills us. It's good to be leery of any theology or philosophy that seems to excuse or celebrate pain.

This is tricky stuff. How to be real about what hurts or what has hurt, but not be defined by it. That's one of the goals of the workshop I was talking about – to integrate the pieces of one's past with one's present. I think modern American discourse has made us forget that the word "integrate" didn't originally mean to mix together. It actually means to make whole. Integrating past and present, the good and the bad, helps us live into our full humanity. And that's one of the goals of humanism, for ourselves and for all people. Human flourishing, and people living their truth, surrounded by truth. People having their truth witnessed and their reality respected. And having any burdens shared, and carried in community.

Now, not everyone wants to crack open the doors to their past. *Leave it in the past. Nothing can be done about it. Let it be.* It's understandable to not want to dwell. But one problem with that approach is that the poisons of a person's religious or personal past often find their way out anyway in behaviors, or cause corrosion from the inside. People raised by strident, inflexible Christians might become strident, inflexible atheists if they aren't careful. Simply shifting to a more reason-based worldview doesn't automatically make anyone a better human being. A part of my Catholic past that translated well to my humanism is that it's the works, the things we do, not the faith or

the ideas that we hold, that count most. Our actions matter, if heaven will ever truly be in this place.

There's also the reality that, for those with a challenging past, carrying a secret or story can have a very high personal cost. In our country right now, we are seeing painful personal stories being brought into the open, at a dizzying rate, especially around sexual harassment and assault. I share Rev. Kelli's appreciation for the words of Adrienne Maree Brown: "Things are not getting worse, they are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil."

Brown posted those words in the summer of 2016, a few days after the killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling, as tragic stories of African-Americans and militarized policing were coming more and more to the fore. Since then, things *have* gotten worse for some populations – immigrants, for example. But the underlying American values that are allowing these devastating situations are the same values that have existed for a very long time. The storyline of domination, of the powerful taking what and who they want, continues. It is both painful and beneficial that things are getting uncovered.

Examples have been everywhere in just the past several days, as we have heard more and more stories about the abuses that men have perpetrated on women and girls. Human beings who live in female bodies are not reliably safe in the presence of comedians or movie executives, or with their coaches or team doctors, or at the Minnesota State Capitol, or basically anywhere.

Women across the country know the pain of keeping those poisonous stories inside, sometimes for decades, and they are showing the value and the tremendous risk in calling out the pervasive misogynistic rape culture we live in. And some of those risks can be traced back to the religious positions I was talking about earlier. Western civilization is based on a biblical origin story in which a sole woman is blamed for humanity's eternal downfall. And to this day, at least in our country, it remains a staggering challenge for women to be trusted.

We have a front-page example from just the past few days. A woman named Leigh Corfman told the Washington Post that Roy Moore, currently a U.S. Senate candidate in Alabama, initiated sexual contact with her when she was 14 years old and he was 32. Moore has denounced her account of this sexual assault as fake news, and his defenders have questioned why Corfman would have waited so long to tell the story.

Corfman, who is now 53, explained that she was concerned that her personal life might undermine her credibility – she has been divorced three times, had a suicide attempt in her teens, and has been through bankruptcy. But, those who study childhood sexual abuse know that its survivors often have difficulty in maintaining trust and personal relationships, and suicidal ideation is not uncommon. If anything, Corfman’s turbulent coming of age and adulthood bolster her case.

It’s horrible stuff we’re hearing about, but there is reason for gratitude. Gratitude to all these women who are coming forward, making the truth visible, opening the door for even more women (and some men) to stop carrying around secrets, and shining a light on this pervasive problem.

Would all these conversations be happening if we didn’t have an admitted sexual predator as our president? It’s difficult to say. His candidacy and his multiple accusers certainly put the topic in front of the public in a new and lasting way. Perhaps a female president would have created an environment for these first steps to happen. But we still can appreciate the ways this is all moving forward, out of the shadows.

The clearer bronze lining of the 2016 election is that the outcome held up a big, brutally honest mirror to the United States, about who we really are, a mirror that helped more people to see the real America, its unresolved past, and its deep and wrenching problems in the present. One of the many downsides is that white nationalists and other extremists have been emboldened; one of the flip sides is greater awareness and mobilization against a number of ugly and persistent poisons in American life. The constituencies that tend to embody life-giving values are united and working together in profound new ways.

Another bronze lining worth pointing out is that our first authoritarian president is not terribly competent at his job. A brilliant authoritarian would be much scarier; world history is full of examples of evil men who were very skilled at leading their nations through years or decades of atrocities. This could still happen here. But as devastating as some of the changes have been in the United States so far, we actually are getting a taste of authoritarianism without its full potential impact. I’m grateful that there’s time for us to study up, work hard, and try to bring about a course correction.

To that end, Kelli and I took a special online class for Unitarian Universalist clergy last winter. The topic was strategic nonviolent resistance to authoritarianism. It was taught by Dr. Sharon Welch, a great humanist, ethicist, and activist who’s on the faculty at Meadville Lombard, the UU seminary in Chicago. I hadn’t ever planned to study authoritarianism, and she may not have ever expected to need to offer such a class in

America, but it was instructive in understanding how our country got into this situation. Researchers have known for a while that a significant and even dangerous portion of the American people have characteristics that make them more likely to embrace authoritarian leaders. Such people have a more fear-based outlook, a willingness to turn to a strongman for protection, and lots of us-vs-them thinking.

There's actually a simple test that can predict who is likely to favor authoritarianism; maybe you've heard about this. It was developed in the early 1990s by a professor named Stanley Feldman. It's four short either/or questions about parenting. Parenting – not politics, because researchers discovered that authoritarianism is actually more related to personality than to political preferences. Here are the four questions (and please feel free to take this quiz right now in your head if you like):

Please tell me which one of the two choices you think is more important for a child:

- To have independence or to have respect for elders?
- To have obedience or self-reliance?
- To be considerate or to be well-behaved?
- To have curiosity or good manners?

These simple questions turned out to be remarkably good at predicting authoritarian tendencies, and they've been in use ever since. (Perhaps you could bring copies of this quiz to Thanksgiving dinner for your relatives.) The respondents who choose the more hierarchical, rule-oriented answers are more likely to be authoritarian. And because parenting perspectives are passed down in families for generations starting at birth, you can see why this kind of thinking might be challenging to dislodge, and might be immune to political arguments entirely. It's a primal way of knowing.

Religious tendencies also indicate who will have authoritarian tendencies. Peer-reviewed studies have found that while religiosity often goes hand-in-hand with authoritarian thinking, it generally depends on the kind of religion. It's perhaps not surprising that researchers have found that authoritarianism is particularly strong for those who believe that there is only one "inerrant set of religious teachings" – in other words, fundamentalists. In the words of one study, right-wing authoritarianism "is positively associated with a religion that is conventional, unquestioned, and unreflective." Another study found that, on the other hand, those with more of a questioning, seeker attitude have characteristics that are antithetical to authoritarianism.

I think we know which camp we fall into around here – not too much goes unquestioned. And we can feel good about that. But each of us, whether we come from a Catholic background or not, has to decide how much of our correct thinking to convert into works, into action, at this time in our national life. This past week actually turned out to be a less painful one-year anniversary than many of us were expecting, with candidates of diverse backgrounds breaking barriers as far away as Virginia and as close as Minneapolis, and with dog-whistle racism finding less success than usual at the polls. For people who believe in equity and the dismantling of white supremacy, there was a sense of gratitude, or at least momentary relief.

None of that happened without a tremendous amount of effort. And of course there's still a tremendous amount to do.

Internally, we each are challenged to keep learning about this reality we find ourselves in, and how we might serve this world where so much ugliness is being brightly illuminated. And we're challenged to live our truths, to be our whole selves, and to remain hopeful. "Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter," Martin Luther King said, 60 years ago, living as an African-American in Alabama. If he could stay hopeful with all the situations he faced, maybe all of us can find our way to keep acting with hope, too.

There's also plenty to do here in our congregation, which has long served as a landing spot for those whose hearts and minds have led them away from the religion they were given and toward a more chosen theological outlook. Our role as a beacon and a harbor is as important as ever, and we are a launchpad and support system for much social justice work. Also important is our role as a place that provides wisdom and knowledge – those researchers I talked about earlier noted that education is the strongest moderating influence on the religion-authoritarianism relationship. There's a reason authoritarian leaders always want to cut funding for education.

And saving public education is just one of example of all the work going on right now in the public sphere. The to-do list is a mile long, from securing transgender rights to blocking deportations to tackling climate change. The good news – the silver lining of the present – is that there's a high level of motivation, energy, and organization around so many pressing issues. That's also something to be grateful for.

I want to close today with one final idea about gratitude. It's from Lena Gardner, a brilliant activist whom some of you know. Lena lives in Minneapolis and is the executive director of the national Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism movement. At this past June's UU General Assembly in New Orleans, Lena talked about her experiences

confronting deadly systems of power. After one of the standing ovations she received from the thousands of people present, she said this: "My challenge for all of you today is to stop thanking me for my work and join me."

So as we head into this second year of the new reality, and deeper into this month of Thanksgiving, may we strive to be our best selves. May we never shy from the truth, about ourselves or the world. And may we practice the kind of gratitude that moves.