

A reading from Isaiah Berlin's *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*:

. . . a liberal sermon which recommends machinery designed to prevent people from doing each other too much harm, giving each human group sufficient room to realize its own idiosyncratic, unique, particular ends without too much interference with the ends of others, is not a passionate battle-cry to inspire people to sacrifice and martyrdom and heroic feats. Yet if it were adopted, it might yet prevent mutual destruction, and, in the end, preserve the world. Immanuel Kant, a man very remote from irrationalism, once observed that 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.' And for that reason, no perfect solution is, not merely in practice, but in principle, possible in human affairs, and any determined attempt to produce it is likely to lead to suffering, disillusionment, and failure.

"The Crooked Timber of Ourselves: Finding Integrity"

a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

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at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

INTRODUCTION: Crooked

Here's an old nursery rhyme for you:

There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile.
He found a crooked sixpence upon a crooked stile.
He bought a crooked cat, which caught a crooked mouse,
And they all lived together in a little crooked house.

There are various speculations as to what inspired such a rhyme, though nobody knows for sure. It's about . . . crookedness.

Hip hop artist Asheru wrote the theme song for the animated series *Boondocks*. The song begins by quoting Psalm 118:22 from Hebrew scripture:

(I am) the stone that the builders refused

Asheru assumes you know the complete verse:

The stone that the builders refused
has become the chief cornerstone.

And the German philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote:

Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.

There's just something about imperfection!

Speaking of which, welcome to the year 2020! If you're like me, if I hear one more summary of the top ten things of the last decade, my head is going to explode.

Yes, here we are in "the twenties." The twenties of the last century were a time of drunken excess, despite prohibition against the sale of alcohol. That decade was an orgy of gang murders and capitalist greed that culminated in the worst of America's many economic disasters . . . the Great Depression.

It was the era of flappers, jazz, the high-point of the Ku Klux Klan, and the beginning of the first fascist dictatorship in the person of Benito Mussolini.

What will happen in *these* "twenties"? It all feels a bit ominous. It all feels a bit "cattywampus."

That claim made by Immanuel Kant:

Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.

would most likely be as obscure as most of Kant's writing if the twentieth century philosopher Isaiah Berlin had not seized upon it. He even used it as the title of one of his books.

As a new decade dawns, I'd like to look backwards for a few moments to what I see as a "usable past."

I intend to do as Berlin suggested in the reading this morning: give ". . . a liberal sermon which recommends

machinery designed to prevent people from doing each other too much harm,

and

giving each human group sufficient room to realize its own idiosyncratic, unique, particular ends without too much interference with the ends of others

As Berlin noted, this “is not a passionate battle-cry to inspire people to sacrifice and martyrdom and heroic feats.”

Yet if it were adopted, it might yet prevent mutual destruction, and, in the end, preserve the world . . .

ONE: Haunted

The philosopher Isaiah Berlin was a Russian Jew who died a British subject. As a child he lived in Petrograd—where the Soviet Revolution began—and experienced the carnage of the Revolution. He was haunted by a childhood memory of watching a revolutionary mob attack a Czarist supporter in the street. He watched the mob beat the man and drag him away, most likely to be lynched.

For Berlin, this was graphic evidence of just how crooked the timber of humanity can get. And it’s why he believed so passionately that

no perfect solution is, not merely in practice, but in principle, possible in human affairs, and any determined attempt to produce it is likely to lead to suffering, disillusionment, and failure.

Instead Berlin spent his life theorizing

machinery designed to prevent people from doing each other too much harm, giving each human group sufficient room to realize its own idiosyncratic, unique, particular ends without too much interference with the ends of others

Berlin was using his acquired English very carefully when he said “the ends of others.” That’s a direct translation from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. As I’ve said many times, it’s a cornerstone of Humanist ethics. We insist that every person must be treated as an end in themselves, not as a means to someone else’s ends. That’s the ideal—each person has the inherent right to live as fully as they choose without being treated as an “end,” as a cog in a machine or a device for someone else’s wishes.

This is the ideal. Berlin strongly suggests that we attempt to reach that ideal without the kind of disjunctive violence he saw in the Russian Revolution.

So, Berlin's questions:

How do we develop and maintain

machinery designed to prevent people from doing each other too much harm
...

And how do we give

each human group sufficient room to realize its own idiosyncratic, unique,
particular ends ...

Those are among the questions we will face in these "twenties." At the moment, we do have "machinery designed to prevent people from doing each other too much harm," although that machinery is failing in synagogues and mosques and churches and delis and many American streets.

And the machinery is failing exactly because we in this country have not yet achieved the goal of giving

each human group sufficient room to realize its own idiosyncratic, unique,
particular ends ...

Native Americans, African Americans, Muslim Americans, immigrants ... increasingly American Jews ... all can say they haven't gotten "sufficient room to realize (their) own idiosyncratic, unique, particular ends."

How do we get there without murderous mobs in the streets?

It's not a new question.

TWO: Wood Is Not Born Square

I don't know how many of you have spent much time *un-metaphorically* sawing logs. When we look at the wooden things in a place such as this, almost all the wood is cut at right angles. But you've noticed that trees don't grow that way. Saw mills are how trees go from round to square. Some trees grow very straight—like telephone poles. Some other trees, not so much. Crooked timber.

Large milling companies such as Weyerhaeuser only take the straightest of the straight logs because they are turning out a lot of wood. Everything needs to be as straight as possible.

Where I'm from, there's a lot of hardwood milling. The large companies take the straight trees and then they sell the crooked timber to small sawmill operators who can afford to take the time to get more crooked timber straight. (One of my uncles ran a sawmill.)

So, the metaphor is that our human nature is like that crooked timber—a heck of a lot slower and more difficult to work into something usable.

Crooked timber. We live in contradictions we often don't even see.

Consider this example: one of the things we Humanists value is empathy. Last week I mentioned the Platinum Rule: Treat others as they wish to be treated. This ups the ante from the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." With the Golden Rule, you use your own understanding of what you want and don't want and project that onto others. With the Platinum Rule, you work to understand what it is that others want.

Empathy. We value it. But, we're crooked timber: In a recent article in *Wired*, Robert Wright describes a study by the *American Political Science Review* which looked at the issue of political polarization. For the most part, liberals oppose polarization—we want a civil politics. We want conversation. That's what we think, anyhow.

However, the study found that those who score high on an empathy scale are more likely to favor banning certain speakers that they oppose from college campuses. Also, high-empathy people, it turns out, are more likely to laugh when told that a supporter of the banned speaker had been injured in a protest.

Schadenfreude.

It's called the "empathy gap." It's a result of our thinking of in-groups and out-groups. High empathy people have stronger feelings *against* people in an out group than do low-empathy people. We care more.

The authors of the study say,

Polarization is not a consequence of a lack of empathy among the public, but a product of the biased ways in which we experience empathy.

Now, I'm not saying you should stop being empathetic. I'm saying that self-awareness implies questioning our own biases and motivations.

When most people are told that most people are biased, most people reply that they themselves are less biased than most.

Crooked timber. The human propensity toward self-delusion is extreme. We can't stop all of it. But we can be aware of our propensity.

One answer proposed to help with this empathy-challenge is called "reasoned compassion." Reasoned compassion encourages us to take one step back—to look at our immediate, instinctive reactions, and to think through the results of the actions we take. In other words, are we thinking of other people as means rather than ends in themselves.

THREE: *Cool Hand Luke* and Resistance

The theme for the month of January is integrity. The word comes to us straight out of Latin and it means "intact." Other words coming out of the Latin root are *entirety*, *integral*, and *integration*.

Intact.

"Integrity." It's one of those so-called "eulogy virtues." Who doesn't want to be described as a person of integrity?

But what's "intact" about the virtue of integrity?

As I see it, integrity is a meta-virtue. We intend to act according to such virtues as equanimity, creativity, and wisdom. Good goals. Then, there's living in ways that are consistent with these virtues. The match between inner ideals and outer action is what we call integrity.

The match between inner ideals and outer action.

Because notice something interesting: we can describe someone as having integrity, even if we totally disagree with that person's ideas. "Integrity" describes how well our inner morality matches our outward actions.

Take for example the 1967 film *Cool Hand Luke*. Many film critics consider this the greatest movie about civil disobedience ever made. (Everyone knows the great line where the The Captain punishes Luke and says—"What we've got here is failure to communicate.")

The film is about Luke's refusal to allow his spirit to be imprisoned. Now, trivia time: who remembers what Luke is jailed for doing?

Damaging parking meters.

Parking meters appeared on American streets in 1935. That's about the time that streets began filling with automobiles for the first time. Nowadays, we may not *like* parking meters, but most of us see them as just part of the hassle of city driving.

Not so in 1935. Protests broke out when parking meters went up. "This is un-American! This used to be the land of the free, and now you're charging me for space to park! This is a tax on car ownership. You can't do that! It's a tax imposed without due process of law!"

Many refused to put their nickels into the machines.

Now, as far as I'm concerned, those who acted on principle—that the meters were an illegally imposed tax—and refused to pay and then were willing to suffer the consequences—those people were acting with integrity.

Even if—had I been alive in 1935—I think I would have coughed up the nickels for the meter.

And the film *Cool Hand Luke* is about integrity in the face of implacable power. The movie wouldn't make much sense if you think Luke's punishment is justified.

So, integrity is an interesting virtue. We can think other people have it even when we don't agree with what they have integrity about.

Isn't that interesting?

The most recent national example is Senator John McCain. Even those who vehemently disagreed with his ideas saw him as a person of integrity—what he said he believed and how he acted were not hypocritical. He had integrity.

So. My claim is that "integrity" is a meta-virtue. It describes how well our principles and our actions mesh up.

CONCLUSION: Promoting a Free Search

In your order of service this morning are some more words by Isaiah Berlin:

Injustice, poverty, slavery, ignorance—these may be cured by reform or revolution. But people do not live only by fighting evils. They live by positive goals, individual and collective, a vast variety of them, seldom predictable, at times incompatible.

"Seldom predictable, at times incompatible." That's the crookedness of the human condition. It's the un-sexy fact of living in a multicultural world.

I plan to talk next week about integrity as teamwork. And how our FUS mission statement traces what we see as virtuous:

First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is a congregational humanist community dedicated to promoting a free search for truth, meaning, and justice

A "congregational humanist community" "promoting a free search" for truth, meaning, and justice.

We believe here that searching for truth, meaning, and justice is a search for integrity. A search for authenticity.

As I said last week, finding your truth and acting in the world according to that truth.

This is powerful. It requires some creativity. And some wisdom.

When we find that justice is our goal, we seek to discover what justice means abstractly, but, more importantly, what justice means in our own actions and in our actions toward the greater whole. We do it realizing that Isaiah Berlin is correct: "no perfect solution is, not merely in practice, but in principle, possible in human affairs."

All of us and all of the groups we create are crooked timber. Yet we are capable of imagining a world of integrity and freedom.

www.FirstUnitarian.org

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