

The Seven Deadly Sins

January 31, 2010
Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Reading: from the *Tao Te Ching*

(Translation by Stephen Mitchell)

The supreme good is like water,
which nourishes all things without trying to.
It is content with the low places that people disdain.
Thus it is like the Tao.
In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In thinking, keep to the simple.
In conflict, be fair and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present.
When you are content to be simply yourself
and don't compare or compete,
everybody will respect you.

Sermon

The words of Lao Tze resonate with our optimistic Unitarian Universalist notion that we can trust human nature and learn from the natural; we can trust our animal body, as Mary Oliver has written, “to love what it loves.” Many of us ground ourselves in the natural world when we are overwhelmed or in despair.

Some say Unitarian Universalists don't have an adequate view of sin or evil, that we have too much faith in human nature. Some say that our inadequate view of human nature makes us ineffective and superficial. But it was that optimism that kept me coming back to the same pew after my first visit to a UU church.

I like to say I was “raised” UU in the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Canton. I was not yet forty years old. Canton was a congregation proud of being religious liberals in a town that was largely Roman Catholic. The people in the pews were especially clear that UU's don't believe in sin, hell, evil, or damnation. Coming from a cultural Catholic-Lutheran family where humility and obedience were the mark of a good person, where the possibilities for sinning were everywhere, especially if there was fun involved, my newfound church was heavenly relief from repression.

As a freshly hatched UU, I quickly adopted a smug stance of freedom from sin. I took my UU identity as badge of salvation from my joyless view of human nature. Fortunately, my illusion of freedom without responsibility and shallow understanding of our theology and practice were

challenged often by my minister. Over time I learned that “the quest for truth” is a sacrament in a UU community, and that confession, forgiveness and surrender to mystery are essential rituals. One must be prepared for real encounters with others who will ask for something deeper than a bumper-sticker theology.

That experience of truth seeking in community led me to Andover Newton Theological school and a student field placement as a chaplain at Spaulding Rehab. I was employed as a therapist on the Pain Unit and two evenings a week I would take the elevator down to the Orthopedic Unit as my colleagues, mostly atheists, waved goodbye saying, “Have fun making God!”

At the time, I was enjoying a monthly full moon, neo-pagan, earth- based ritual group. I suggested a reading from the Wiccan priestess Starhawk for the Sunday chapel service. My supervisor, Fran Bogle, smiled with a wink and said, “Sure, Martha, you can read Starhawk as soon as we have a pagan join us for worship. For now, what is the Gospel reading for today?” One Sunday, Fran asked me to bring a prayer of confession, which was a challenge to one who didn’t pray. I wanted to be clear about not losing my UU identity even as I led Christians in worship. I found a liberal Christian prayer by Vivian Pomeroy in the back of our hymnal “Singing the Living Tradition” to share with the people gathered in the hospital chapel:

Forgive us that often we forgive ourselves so easily and others so hardly. Forgive us that we expect perfection from those to whom we show none. Forgive us for repelling people by the way we set a good example. Forgive us the folly of trying to improve a friend. Forbid that we should use our little idea of goodness as a spear to wound those who are different. Forbid that we should feel superior . . . when we are only more shielded. And may we encourage the secret struggle of every person.

After the service was over, Fran asked me: “Did you forget to let the people know that they are forgiven? Where was the prayer of consolation?”

In my ignorance of prayers of consolation, I quickly answered: “We UU’s know that we are already forgiven. We don’t need a priest or even a God who forgives us.” Fran gently reminded me that I was leading worship with Christians and so would need to offer words of forgiveness and consolation after a prayer of confession in the future. I did as she asked, and felt a difference in my body— in the posture of my heart. That difference troubled, and troubles, the waters of my certitude.

I was saved by Fran’s patience with my arrogance and by a good theological education that uncovered my deep ignorance of the long traditions of Unitarian and Universalist conversations about sin and forgiveness in community.

The Worship Committee has been having a conversation about prayer in our worship and I wondered with them if there had ever been a prayer of confession in our liturgy. The conversation brought us to the notion of sin and the Catholic understanding of the Seven Deadly Sins: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony and Sloth. According to tradition, these are the attitudes of separation from God that lead to sinful behavior and shape the kind of person we

become. Pope St. Gregory identified these qualities in the 6th century as those that require the sacraments of confession and communion in order to restore a person's relationship to God and to the Church.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* popularized these sins, naming them as "offenses of love," and organized them into three categories: "Pride, envy, and Wrath are Perverted Love; Sloth is Insufficient Love; and Greed, Gluttony and Lust are Excessive Love of Earthly Goods." (White Stone Journal)

I'll describe each of the seven sins accompanied by an aspiration. I ask you to notice which ones are your favorites and which ones are not at all like you:

Lust is said to be "the desire for desire itself, "a rush to satisfaction without relationship. Time and money spent on being attractive are evidence of the prevalence of this sin in our culture. *Making love at a leisurely pace, in a way that is like more like a duet than conquest and submission, is an aspiration that creates a context of love rather than competition.*

Gluttony is the consumption of anything past the point of usefulness. Gluttony wastes energy. Eating more than one needs, driving large empty cars, wasting money on useless trinket and gadgets while people starve are forms of gluttony. The modern economy based on over-consumption would collapse without the sin of gluttony. *Savoring every moment is an aspiration that teaches us how to distinguish "want" from "need."*

Anger is a waste of passion. Anger can keep us from taking useful action, causes stress for others, and does not lead to calm. *Non-violent social action, righteousness grounded in love, is an aspiration that creates the space for real justice and transformation of hearts.*

Sloth, the "whatever" stance of our culture, chooses to avoid action by numbing the senses and doing nothing when others need assistance, filling our lives with such business that we forget what is most important. *Zest is the aspiration that creates possibility of loving our neighbors as ourselves. Zest is what is required to engage fully with the lives beside our own.*

Greed fears losing what one has and results in useless striving for more. We can never get enough of what we don't really need."

Satisfaction is the aspiration that allows the experience of appreciation and gratitude.

Envy consists of secretly desiring what another has while consciously wishing another harm, unhappiness, bad luck. Envy asks, "Why not me?" assuming that others don't deserve their success, fame, talent, or wealth. Life is a zero-sum game in which there is only so much good stuff to go around. *Emulation is the aspiration that invites us to learn from one another in a respectful way. We can learn from the effectiveness and wisdom of others.*

Pride is a delusion of control and mastery, as if all the good we experience is the result of our efforts alone. Pride only considers one's own view of the self as valid. Pride keeps us from forgiveness of ourselves and others. *Humility is the aspiration that allows for mystery, surprise, learning from and leaning on one another.*

What is your favorite sin of the seven -- Lust, Gluttony, Anger, Sloth, Greed, Envy, Pride? There is an online survey of favorite deadly sins. Here is the order of preference as of October 2009: Lust, Anger, Pride, Sloth, Envy, Gluttony, and Greed.

Now, if you are willing, privately consider what sin is especially present in another person or group that you disagree with or that makes you irritated or judgmental.

I believe sins we see most clearly in others are the ones we most deny, and the most unsettling when we discover them in ourselves. These are the ones that need confession and a practice of communal confession because we are so horrified and shamed to see what we most despise in ourselves. In that state of shame, we need the body of community to re-member that we belong and will not be cast out -- that we are accepted as we are.

For me, listening to fundamentalist claims to being the one true faith is disturbing. I get irritated when I hear anyone speak as if they have a lock on the truth. I judge fundamentalists as examples of pre-modern magical thinkers who should be embarrassed by their wrong-headed certitude. I judge the surety of others as arrogance.

I don't have to reflect on the feelings that arise in me for very long to know that I am also a fundamentalist of sorts—one who absolutely believes in the power of human agency. My ready willingness to consume the advice of quick-fix, self-help gurus is evidence of this pride in the possibility of instant elevated enlightenment. My pride is obvious. Not so obvious is my envy of the capacity of some fundamentalist and conservative religious communities to surrender into the arms of a loving and forgiving personal god. Not so obvious is my envy of those who have made a commitment to a community of practice.

I am slowly learning that we don't have to beat each other up when we notice our smug claims of being the most rational, justice-loving, influential religious community in America. We don't have to beat ourselves up when we discover UU's are just as human as everyone else—irrational, narcissistic, self serving, insensitive of privilege, sheltered from real suffering, and numb.

Like all people we need to practice seeing and naming our failure at loving compassion from the point of view of loving compassion, rather than from a posture of condemnation and shame. Having a sense of humor about our foolishness might be a sign that we are ready to stop being a community that judges others and start becoming a community that learns and transforms failure into wisdom.

My aspiration for me and for this religious community is that we arrive and thrive as a zestful place, engaged with life in a spirit of gratitude, satisfied that we are all doing the best with the information and talents we have, connected to ourselves and each other via mystery and surprise rather than addicted to self improvement and salvation by character.

Perhaps we might welcome regular prayers of confession and forgiveness in our worship as a way of being publicly gentle with ourselves rather than carrying our scalding secret shame. Perhaps we can "begin again in love," week after week.

Perhaps we can humbly return to earth as a people right now— putting aside our aspiration to be spiritually elevated in exchange for the devotion to being grounded.

In a world without end, Amen

Benediction:

by Mark Belletini

Go in peace. Live simply, gently, at home in yourselves.

Act justly.

Speak justly.

Remember the depth of your compassion.

Forget not your power in the days of your powerlessness.

Crave peace for all people in the world, beginning with your selves,
and go as you go with the dream of that peace alive in your heart.