

Giving Your Whole Self
Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington
October 12, 2008
Rev. Paul Ratzlaff

Today’s sermon results from Vaughn Keller’s winning bid at last November’s Service Auction. (If you have an idea, enter the bidding this coming November 15th.) When Vaughn met with me, we decided that I should preach on this topic near to Yom Kippur. Unfortunately Vaughn is not able to be here today. He is in Sweden learning about new technologies to improve health care in the most impoverished regions of the world. (He plans to read this sermon when he returns.) In the meantime, I want to thank Vaughn for providing me with this evocative topic.

We’ve just finished the solemn holy days of Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur calls us to examine ourselves scrupulously in order to recommit ourselves to our ideals, especially when we have failed to live as we would want to live.

This internal assessment is hard. As humans we want to put our best face forward; we don’t want to ‘fess up to our short-comings. We’re like the defendant who took the witness stand. The judge asked the defendant to put up his right hand and answer the following question: “Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” The defendant responded, “I’ll try anything once.”¹

There’s an ancient story about King David, recorded in the Jewish scripture. He lusted after a beautiful married woman, Beersheba, slept with her, and she became pregnant. He wanted to hide his affair. He learned that her husband Uriah was a general in his army. King David hatched a plan to get rid of Uriah. He had him assigned to the very front lines in a fierce battle, and then had him abandoned, knowing that he would be killed. Indeed he was, and King David married his freshly widowed wife. She gave birth to child that David fathered. At this time, a prophet of the Lord, Nathan, felt compelled to challenge David’s lying and scheming. What’s interesting is that Nathan didn’t confront David directly. He didn’t walk into the king’s court and say “what shameful behavior! You’ve lied and killed a man to have your sexual pleasure gratified!” One can imagine David’s response to such a frontal accusation. Denial, temporizing and rationalization. Instead, Nathan told a story. Here’s the account from 2 Samuel.

*And The Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him,
"There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him.*

Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared it for the man who had come to him.

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, "As The Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he

¹ King Duncan and Angela Akers, *Amusing Grace*, 1996, Seven Worlds Corporation, Knoxville, TN, 437.

shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" ... Why have you despised the word of The Lord, to do what is evil in His sight? You have smitten Uriah ... with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife.... (2 Samuel 12:1-9 RSV)

We may be tempted to distance ourselves from this story. “After all, it’s an old, old story about a man who has nothing to do with us.” On the other hand, we may let the story work its way into our hearts and souls: “Are there ways that I deceive myself like King David – ways in which I do not know myself, and pretend to be doing one thing, when I’m really doing another?”

Who do you consider evil? Who do you hate? Who do you judge as insensitive, selfish, ignorant? In the current economic crisis, who do you blame? “Greedy wall street bankers?” “The Bush administration?” “The anti-regulatory bias of unrestricted free-market ideologues?” “Tax-and-spend liberals?”

Might it be that you are “the man”? Might it be that these actions you hate in others are in some sense actions that a hidden part of you desires?

These are sobering questions. They are also essential to spiritual honesty and maturity.

Some years ago, I began the Buddhist practice of wishing loving-kindness (“metta in the original language of the Buddha, Pali) first to myself, a benefactor, a person I love, then outward to neutral people, my enemies, and eventually to all beings. My “enemies” became interesting. When I reflected more deeply, I often saw that my so-called (by me) “enemies” actually represented parts of myself that I had rejected. For example, there was a person who appeared to me to be unremittingly critical. Nothing ever went well for her; she could always focus on what went wrong and was missing. No matter how much I tried to do something that would meet her stated needs, she always found fault or ignored the offering. When I realized that she represented my own internal critic, my whole attitude softened toward her, and I could wish her wholeheartedly loving-kindness. That was a powerful moment for me. In a sense, I “owned” a part of me that I had earlier pushed away, and projected onto others in the world. As long as I denied my own internal, relentless critic, I easily attached it to this other person, and failed to see her in her fullness and complexity.

As a consequence of that spiritual learning, when I find myself reacting strongly to a particular person, I don’t automatically assume that there’s something wrong with “them.” Truth be told, that is my first reaction! But when the heat dies down, and I have a chance to reflect, I question does their action or language represent some disowned part of myself? Am I reacting so strongly because I am reacting to some part of me that I don’t like?

The depth psychologist Carl Jung observed that each of us has what he named a shadow. It’s that part of our psyche which houses the inadmissible urges and attitudes that we are ashamed of. Jung’s words, “... the strong man must somewhere be weak, somewhere the clever man must be stupid, otherwise he is too good to be true and falls back on pose and bluff.” (CW 18, pg. 261.) As we mature, he suggests, we may, if we are willing to undergo the “aesthetic discipline of mind,” “own” our shadow, integrating into our self-awareness these shameful wants and desires.

This is not easy. To cite Jung, “When we must deal with problems, we instinctively resist trying the way that leads through obscurity and darkness. We wish to hear only of unequivocal results, and completely forget that these results can only be brought about when we have ventured into and emerged again from the darkness. But to penetrate the darkness we must summon all the powers of enlightenment that consciousness can offer.” (CW 8, pg. 752.)

However, if we fail to “own” our shadow, we become dangerous. Lacking awareness of our shadow, we are likely to do some horrible things to others and to ourselves. In Jung’s words (which are framed in patriarchal – and racial - language of Jung’s time), “Unfortunately there can be no doubt that man is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.” (“Psychology and Religion” (1938), in *Collected Works (CW)*, pg. 131) That’s a sobering assessment, especially given our liberal optimism about the human spirit.

Jung goes on, “It’s a frightening thought that man also has a shadow side to him, consisting not just of little weaknesses and foibles, but of a positively demonic dynamism. The individual seldom knows anything of this; to him, as an individual, it is incredible that he should ever in any circumstances go beyond himself. ... Blindly he strives against the salutary dogma of original sin, which is yet so prodigiously true.” (CW pg. 35.)

By not acknowledging our shadow, we fall under its influence compounded by being self-righteous. Jung, reflecting on the defeat of Germany, warned of the shadow seeking a new what he called “prey.” In his words, “No, the demons are not banished; that is a difficult task that still lies ahead. ... [T]he demons will seek a new victim. And that won’t be difficult. Every man who loses his shadow, every nation that falls into self-righteousness, is their prey.... We should not forget that exactly the same fatal tendency to collectivization is present in the victorious nations as in the Germans, that they can just as suddenly become a victim of demonic powers.” (“The Postwar Psychic Problems of the Germans” 1945.)

Might our preoccupation with terrorists indicate the presence of the shadow in our American psyche? Might we attribute to the so-called “terrorists” unowned aggression and atrocity in our national soul?

How do we see our shadow? We need to look carefully at our projections, i.e., the unadmitted parts of ourselves that we note so gleefully in others. As Jung warns, “Projections change the world into the replica of one’s own unknown face.” (CW 14, pg. 17.)

Jung notes, “It is the face of our own shadow that glowers at us across the Iron Curtain.” (CW 18:pg. 85.) I take this to mean, that the bared teeth we fear in our enemies is at some level our own unacknowledged viciousness and aggression mirrored back at us.

Sociologists regularly observe that we attribute to marginalized groups, the unacknowledged impulses of the privileged group. So outsiders become sexual predators, lazy, thieving, and conniving as privileged people try to suppress their own sexual aggression, and so on.

Of course, I don't want to psychologize away critical moral judgments. I don't want to be misunderstood as implying that once we integrate our shadow, there's nothing in the world that we don't judge as evil.

What I am asking of us is that we become a little less quick in our judgments. Instead of assuming the worst of those with whom we disagree, we need to question whether some of our judgment is fueled by unacknowledged parts of ourselves.

Richard Niebuhr gave a warning that inspires me. “No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.”²

I've titled this sermon “Giving our Whole Self.” I think of living as a chance to give ourselves away. Larger life uses us to create new life by giving ourselves away. We give ourselves away in our love, our knowledge, our caring. As the folksinger Bob Franke puts it in his song *Thanksgiving Eve*, “What can you do with each moment of your life/But love till you've loved it away.” Of course, some try to hold on tight, to accumulate, to defend, but that leads only to unhappiness. The more we understand that our purpose is to give, the happier we will be.

Along with this foundational attitude of generosity, spiritual maturity calls for us to become more whole, that is to “own” the whole of ourselves, shadow and all. As we integrate, even the most challenging parts of ourselves, we become more compassionate, more flexible – more able to love completely. Such a person grants “to the other its rightful personality.” (CW 9, pg. 237)

In Jung's words, “Anyone who perceives his shadow and his light simultaneously sees himself from two sides and thus gets in the middle.” (CW 10, pg. 872.)

May each of us aspire to heal the inner conflicts, to acknowledge the entirety of our being that we might help heal our world. Amen.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 1952 quoted in *Familiar Quotations*, 14th Edition, by John Bartlett, 1968, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1024.