

Old Enough to Know Better?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
January 31, 2010

Meditation

We pause in the spirit of love. Center in the spirit of love. Pray in the spirit of love.

Embraced by one another, and the care we feel from one heart to another...

Embraced by this place, echoing with and holding the joys and sorrows, the concerns, the love of generations who have worshipped here before us...

Embraced by the spirit of life by whatever name, embraced by God, Allah, Brahman, Tao... the nameless sustainer of all that is...

And whatever our life has brought to us this day, this season...

May we connect once again with this indwelling spirit, divine light, giving renewed strength to our heart and to our hands... hearts yearning to heal, hands yearning to help... as our prayers extend to all in need of healing and help, as the prayers of our hearts seek to become the work of our hands...

Reading – from the *Gorgias* by Plato

Socrates: Follow me then, and I will lead you where you will be happy in life and after death.... And never mind if someone despises you as a fool, and insults you, if he has a mind; let him strike you, by Zeus, and do you be of good cheer, and do not mind the insulting blow, for you will never come to any harm in the practice of virtue, if you are a really good and true person. When we have practiced virtue together, we will apply ourselves to politics, if that seems desirable, or we will advise about whatever else may seem good to us, for we shall be better able to judge then. In our present condition we ought not to give ourselves airs, for even on the most important subjects we are always changing our minds; so utterly stupid are we! Let us, then, take (this conversation) as our guide, which has revealed to us that the best way of life is to practice justice and every virtue in life and death. This way let us go; and in this exhort all to follow...

Sermon

It was at this year's Martin Luther King Day breakfast at the Glastonbury Abbey that I first heard the quote at the top of your order of worship. It was spoken by one of the children from the Children's Theater Company of Greater Boston, and attributed to Shirley Chisholm. It

does indeed sound like something that that courageous and passionate African American woman might have said, perhaps during her ground-breaking presidential campaign in 1972.

“No one knows the age of the human race. But everyone agrees it is old enough to know better.” And she called us to that “better.”

For in announcing her candidacy in Brooklyn, New York, on a cold January day, she affirmed her belief that we human beings are able to look beyond self interest and partisan bickering and instead work together to seek the larger good, a larger good that has more to do with meeting human needs than with bowing to human greed. That would be “knowing better.”

Old enough to know better.

Parents sometimes say “You are old enough to know better” to their children as way of encouraging more mature behavior, a way of firmly suggesting that as children grow they become (or should become) capable of making more mature ethical choices. Saying “You are old enough to know better” names that what was acceptable or understandable when the child was younger is no longer acceptable or understandable. You are old enough to know how to share. You are old enough to know to say “please” or “thank you.” And so on.

So we are talking about maturity – moral, ethical maturity.

To begin with, then, before we get to the entire human race, what is maturity in a single human being?

I expect that some of you are familiar with Arthur Miller’s play, *All My Sons*. I would contend that the heart of the play could be described in terms of this question of what makes a mature human being.

The central character, Joe Keller, had been a contractor during World War II. We learn early in the play – which takes place in 1947 – that he and his partner had been convicted of knowingly shipping aircraft engine cylinders that were cracked and therefore likely to result in engine failure. We also learn early on that twenty-one American planes went down because of these faulty cylinders.

Joe’s justification for his actions was that he couldn’t afford the lost time to redo or recall the cylinders, and that after all his business was for his family, for his sons; and that in any case his son Larry, a pilot missing and likely killed in the war, hadn’t been flying the kind of plane that used these cylinders anyway.

Joe’s perspective was, in short, for all the love in it, a narrow one to say the least.

Yes, of course family matters. Yes, our sons and daughters are in so many ways in the first circle of our love.

But what Joe failed to realize is that family is not the only circle of love.

“All my sons?” How about *every* American pilot.

“All my sons?” How about *every* child everywhere on the planet.

So whatever else we might say about maturity, isn’t this opening our hearts to an ever larger circle of sympathy and concern one sign of a maturing human being?

The philosopher Bertrand Russell believed it was so. I think it was Russell who once described the maturing process over the course of a lifetime in very much these terms. And we can see it, can’t we? Even though all too many human beings open their hearts only so far and no farther, we see the direction in which our growth tends.

The infant? All about me.

Then the circle widens. Mom and Dad. Family.

Then the circle widens. Friends. For many a spouse. Then children.

Then the circle widens. Community. Nation.

Then... one hopes... the circle widens yet further. The human family, all a family under one sky as one of our favorite songs here at Old Ship has it.

So that eventually, the most mature human beings, while quite naturally holding family closest to their hearts, include in their circles of sympathy and care and love... the entire family of life.

Maybe it is as simple as that, that the central task for each of us as a human being is to grow in that direction, the direction of a heart open and sympathetic to the entire family of life – so that we'll become increasingly not just older, but old enough to know better.

And it seems to me that other qualities that we commonly associate with mature human beings are connected to this ever more open and inclusive heart:

An attitude of humility (it really is *not* all about me... and we actually *don't* have all the answers to life's most persistent questions...).

A sense of responsibility (doing what we can, not worrying about credit... but willing to take blame...).

Kindness (realizing that everyone has his or her struggle).

Playfulness and a sense of humor (yes, life is short, life can be hard, but it doesn't all have to be serious – we need to laugh... at ourselves, and at the amusing and sometimes absurd human comedy...).

I asked one of our Old Ship elders, Walter Gnoza, about maturity when I visited with him last week. “Walter, you are 92 years old. What do you know now about life and living that you didn't know when you were much younger?” The first thing he said was, “Hold your tongue!” (Walter laughed – I had the impression he had learned this the hard way!). Yes, don't say something in a passing moment of pique or upset that you know in your heart you will later regret. This practical wisdom, learned in a lifetime, is it seems to me, a variety of kindness leavened with humility and responsibility – and a sense of humor too.

And then Walter added, “And don't hold a grudge.” Boy, he is right about that too. Life *is* short, way too short to waste much or any of it holding on to a grudge. Just get on with doing what we can to ease another's pain, to share another's burden, to add to the world's beauty and joy. Walter would demure, but that's what he does. Because he is old enough and wise enough to know better about lots of things... and he acts accordingly. In the physically narrow confines of a nursing home, Walter's heart is open to everyone, all a family.

Well, this is just a sketch – there is so much more that could be said, that you may be thinking, as to what makes a mature (or at least maturing) human being: Widening our circles of sympathy and care, practicing responsibility, humility, and kindness, keeping our sense of humor in the midst of what Zorba called “the full catastrophe” of a human life.

But back to the entire human race. Are we collectively “old enough to know better”? Does it make any sense at all to talk about maturity in the entire human race as we would in a single human being?

Now, if you ask several people whether the human race is making moral progress – is maturing ethically – you will almost certainly get several different answers.

Heck, I have more than one answer myself, depending on how the day is going, how much sleep I got the night before, what disasters the morning headlines have brought to our breakfast table...

On the one hand, I marvel that we human beings crafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and created the World Court. Never before has humanity agreed on these kinds of high and lofty shared standards of human rights and behavior. Remarkable. A clear sign of a maturing race, no? And though in fits and starts, we can more specifically note pretty clear moral progress on civil rights, women's rights, gay rights... Check, check, check.

Yes, maybe we are, as a human race, widening our circles of sympathy and care and even love. Maybe we are maturing. Maybe we have gotten old enough to know better, so that we might even someday put aside the weapons of war, put aside the conflicts of religion and ethnicity, deal with global climate change, put aside our greed and seek instead to meet human needs.

Yet... yet... (second answer): how dare I claim that the human race has matured, when war, torture, terrorism, rape, degradation of the environment... all continue apace? And how can I say that the entire human race is maturing when degrees of maturity vary so wildly from person to person, group to group, nation to nation?

So then I retreat (or maybe step forward...) to my third answer – maybe my final answer: Who knows? After all, how can we measure once and for all whether or not we are making moral progress, becoming more mature, actually getting “old enough to know better”?

Taking this agnostic answer (or non-answer) to heart, it seems to me that each of us simply needs to act as if it were so. For as another of our members told me this week, the only way to make a mature human race is for each human being to strive to become more mature.

Now, there are those who say that one mark of maturity has to do with letting go of youthful ideals. I disagree. I really disagree.

To the contrary, I would affirm that a mature person holds *firmly*, maybe more firmly than ever, to the ideals of youth, but simply in a more realistic way. We no longer expect immediate results. But we hold the ideal, hold to the vision of how things ought to be, as a guide to our actions today. Otherwise, despair. And the truth is that we don't know enough to despair.

But we *do* know enough, and we can feel *deeply* enough, so we *are* capable enough to live *as if* it were so, as if the new world not only might someday arrive, but has already arrived. Hence kindness, hence humility, hence responsibility, hence love, embracing those larger circles of sympathy and care.

Now, I was scanning the shelves at Barnes & Noble this week, and of course just the right book caught my eye: Jeremy Rifkin's latest book, *The Empathetic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. 616 pages, not including the additional sixty pages of bibliography, notes, and index. (Good thing I have extra time to read during the next couple of months!). His basic premise? First, that *empathy* is coded in our genes – not just sympathy, but empathy, this inborn ability to feel with another, to imagine ourselves into the life and pain or joy of another. Modifying Bertrand Russell's schema, it might be that even within the infant are the beginnings of empathy. (And we surely feel it every week here, don't we? When

we share our joys and sorrows?) And second, that the same technological progress that is knitting us closer together in a single interdependent world has at the same time brought us closer to global catastrophe. So third, the central question of the book and of our lives in these times: “Can we reach biosphere consciousness and global empathy in time to avert planetary collapse?” Can we mature in time?

Well, some of us may live into the answer – or our children or theirs may live into the answer. But as mature – or at least maturing – human beings, we can each and all live in the direction of the answer we would of course envision, live in this direction by cultivating empathetic, compassionate hearts which embrace all life.

And this, it seems to me, would be a way of mature living expressed well in the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, in words printed at the back of our hymnbook, (selection 461) with which I’ll conclude today:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;

Therefore, we are saved by hope.

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;

Therefore, we are saved by faith.

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;

Therefore, we are saved by love.

No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;

Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

In this spirit, then, may we continue on this shared journey of our lives amidst the empathetic circle of the family of life: with responsibility, humility, loving kindness, and when we can, with a smile.

So may it be.