

## REVISITING THE 10 COMMANDMENTS

There are few of us, whether progressive or traditional or some combination thereof, who don't hold that today's central crisis is one of meaning and values. We Americans desperately need guidelines to reform a society beset by greed, arrogance, and brutality. We hunger for a moral vision beyond either rigid conservatism or permissive liberalism. One poll found 78% of Americans "dissatisfied with moral values these days."

We're understandably concerned about vulgar song lyrics, violent movies, raunchy talk shows, and savage partisan politics. We're concerned about a bankrupt economy, ineffective government, rampant racism, and corruption in high places. Furthermore, the United States ranks as a world leader in murder, juvenile crime, imprisonment, abortion, divorce, production of pornography and drug consumption. And, despite our rising hopes for the new administration, everybody's still deeply concerned!

Certainly, in inter-religious circles one place to start a constructive forum is by revisiting the Ten Commandments, a document of immense historical power and relevance for most members of Western civilization. Whether we take this Decalogue literally or creatively, all of us should take it seriously as one of our timeless, moral cornerstones.

I'm certainly not recommending that we baldly display it on government property as an Alabama judge sought to do, a while back, but I am urging us to revisit it, for fresh wisdom and relevance to our moral lives. UU author Kurt Vonnegut used to note with irony that some Christians wanted the Ten Commandments posted in public places, but none of them seemed to want to do the same with the Beatitudes such as placing:

“Blessed are the merciful” in a courtroom? or publicizing prominently “Blessed are the peacemakers” in the Pentagon?

In truth, Jewish tradition encourages everyone to wrestle anew with these moral standards, since they weren't original with Moses anyway. The Ten Commandments were brought into Palestine from the Babylonian captivity, then tested and rewritten throughout the centuries, in classic Jewish fashion. Hence, it's utterly appropriate to continue the evolutionary process by rendering our own creative interpretations or midrash.

We Unitarian Universalists kid about replacing the Ten Commandments with the Ten Suggestions, but we too would do well to take them seriously once again. Of course, we aren't the only ones who joke about them. Someone wrote that “different people look for different things in the Ten Commandments. Some are looking for divine guidance, some for a code of living, but most folks are looking for loopholes!”

Given the limited sermon time, I'll offer but brief, evocative notes to spark your own encounter with this 3000-year-old set of moral guidelines. For starters, perhaps the most underrated yet crucial verse in the entire chapter of Exodus isn't any particular commandment but rather the prologue itself: “And Yahweh spoke saying, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage!’”  
(Exodus 20:2)

You see, all the commandments bank on the saving event of the Exodus. Because Yahweh has freed them from slavery, the Israelites are urged to conduct lives of justice and mercy. These ethical imperatives, then, are in direct response to mighty works and

precious gifts beyond our own doing. Ethics follow the Exoduses in our existence. We love in response to being liberated!

The Ten Commandments, therefore, aren't mandates in a vacuum or demands in the desert. Hebrew religion says, and I would agree, that we do genuinely good deeds neither out of guilt nor fear, neither to impress our neighbors nor gain heaven. No, we lead moral lives mainly because we don't know of any better way to say thank you to God, to the Creation, to Life itself for our very existence, and for being freed from all sorts of slaveries, and for being loved ongoingly.

Now, on to the commandments themselves. The first four have to do with our relationship to God or the Great Spirit, or life's vertical dimension. The final six center on the horizontal plane of our human obligations. I like the balance, because robust religion impels us to respond both to God and to fellow humans with keen minds and compassionate hearts, to pursue holiness *and* goodness. Indeed, Jesus, as a practicing Jew, noted that the whole of the law, the heart of the Hebrew scriptures, could be summed up in two commandments: "love of God and love of neighbor." (Matthew 22:37-40)

***I. You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me!***

While originally a device for preventing the mixing of cults and the degradation of religious rites, there remains a profound truth in the observation that no one can truly worship more than one supreme being or concern.

There just isn't enough room or time in our spiritual voyages to accommodate passions and goals without adequate devotion to any of them. With too many conflicting

gods vying for our allegiance, our lives fritter and frustrate. We need a supreme focus and governing loyalty and a willingness to give our being and doing to that vision. For me, the central life mission/vow is loving and being loved—deep, inclusive, hard-nosed love

At the heart of Unitarianism has always been our monotheistic emphasis, for as one wit put it humorously, “Unitarians believe in, at most, one God.” Seriously, we do believe the universe is unified, one, interdependent, and to be treated as such. This first commandment, then, would invite us to surrender wholeheartedly to a unifying and ultimate holy power or passion, however personally interpreted.

***II. You Shall Not Make Any Carved Image, or Representation of Any Kind,  
Nor Bow To Or Worship Them***

God is everlastingly impossible to represent. You can feel the Spirit, but you can't capture it. When we enter the most secret heart of the tabernacle, the holy of holies, we will find it to be empty, because no image or picture or sculpture of Yahweh can be made. We Unitarian Universalists join Judaism in claiming that Moses, Jesus, Sojourner Truth, Buddha, Hildegard of Bingen and countless others have been pointers to the substance of divinity—plus there dwells a divine spark within the most ordinary of us—yet there exists no earthly incarnation that can harness the ever-elusive, mysterious Creative Soul empowering the universe.

This means that we aren't gods ourselves nor is anything else God that we might create out of wood or words, clay or stone, or anything we might wear around our necks or anything we might place on our church altars or car dashboards. The Infinite One transcends all that. The reality of God is beyond our creation, comprehension, and

control. Period. And we'll never do any better than Moses who caught only occasional glimpses of God's hind-parts.

### ***III. You Shall Not Take the Name Of The Lord Your God In Vain***

We slam or slur God's name whenever we use it to bless ourselves or denigrate others. We insult Yahweh whenever athletes say "Thanks to God we won this game" after a victory, as they're ever wont to do...as if God didn't have more important things to do than watch sports events, let alone cheer for one team. We humans perennially exploit God's name to satisfy our own needs. That's a direct violation of the third commandment.

There's a rabbinical legend that portrays God as chastising the angels of heaven who wanted to exalt him in ecstatic hymns of thanksgiving, when the waves of the Red Sea closed over the drowning Egyptians: "**My** creatures are perishing, and you want to sing praises!" No deity worth its moral salt ever takes sides in elections, in battles, in games, in partnerships, in religious debates, in anything!

Moreover, chattering incessantly about God doesn't bring you closer to the Divine Presence. Sometimes, in fact, words become an escape or a substitute for a real, soulful struggle. I'll never forget the insight of a parishioner who said to me once: "Tom, even though we don't use the word God much around First Church, I often feel its presence in the music, the messages, the mission we experience together. "So might it be.

### ***IV. Remember the Sabbath Day, To Keep It Holy***

As productive Unitarian Universalists, highly motivated to change the world, there's probably no more important commandment than #4, an imperative that urges us to honor times of utter rest and renewal, deep contemplation and conversation.

Hopefully, attending worship here at the Fellowship affords you some profound Sabbath, helping you to focus upon, then boldly serve, the ultimate values in your journey. Yes, sabbath literally means to draw a deep breath, without which our lives quickly succumb to stress and chaos.

Yahweh takes the primacy of Sabbath personally, for in the book of Exodus we read: “In six days, God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested and was refreshed.” Here the word refreshed literally means, “and God exhaled.” Folks, the healthy flow of our lives requires inhaling and exhaling in rhythmic measure, all the way home.

#### ***V. Honor Your Father and Mother***

Authentic family solidarity was as crucial for the Hebrews as breathing and eating, absolutely integral to the social fabric, clearly a commandment. But the word honor here reminds us not to worship, romanticize, or idolize our parents but rather to take them seriously, the only way parents ought ever to be taken.

The Hebrew scriptures also invite us to honor them in this commandment, while, in another book, urging us to leave them: namely, at the point when we children forge our own primary adult lives and bonds. The Buddhists call it “creative detachment,” and it surely poses one of life’s trickiest yet most necessary relational passages. Honor your folks, then dare to separate from them!

Another spin on #5 is this: if your parents aren’t exemplary or useful with respect to healthy honoring, then, go ahead, broaden the spirit of this commandment to read: honor all those adults who truly nurture and lead you!

## ***VI. You Shall Not Kill***

Life is our most precious earthly possession. But when this noble and sweeping commandment is put in absolute form, “thou shalt not kill”, we find that it’s plainly impossible to heed. For life feeds on life; it exists only by the destruction of life. We cannot help but kill to live.

And so we try narrowing the scope of the commandment, thou shalt not kill persons. Put thus, it reflects our deepest ethical impulse, and yet there may be instances where the refusal to ever kill persons can lead to vastly greater hurt and destruction.

No simple rule. On the one hand, the iron necessity of nature: life kills to live; and, on the other hand, the humane commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.” So, here’s where I end up. There’s an essential sanctity that attaches to life, to all life, including animal and plant life, and, it’s right to violate that sanctity only when the failure to violate it would lead to violence even more grave.

Granted that sometimes I must do what injures life; therefore, let me dedicate myself never to injure life except in the necessary interest of life. And let me, as I value life, come humbly to every choice I make be it concerning abortion, animal rights, capital punishment, euthanasia, or warfare.

And one more thing. May I be eternally vigilant not just about killing the body but killing the mind and the spirit within others as well as within myself.

## ***VII. You Shall Not Commit Adultery***

Of course, the complexity of human love in today’s world can’t be easily handled by any simple dictum. Adultery, in a profound sense, is a private matter, not something for public legislation or tribal law. One thing I’ve learned, often the hard way, over my

ministerial career is this: never hastily judge the inner life or choices of another person or couple.

And to add to the confusion and ambiguity, even dark humor of it all: remember Moses went up to shape and receive the commandments, when he had two wives; then he came down the mountain, but without changing his own marital situation. Talk about a double message.

But life is imperfect and flawed, so are our religious sages, and so are our living commandments.

Nonetheless, the kernel of this commandment wisely challenges us, in all our human friendships and loves, to be careful not to adulterate, shortchange, compromise, or sabotage life's central vow of enduring loyalty and love. Commandment # 7 claims that fidelity (faithfulness) remains the most fulfilling way to mature a bond of primacy and intimacy. That's certainly been true in my adult life.

And yes, folks, fidelity costs energy, sacrifice, and time...often a lifetime!

### ***VIII. Thou Shalt Not Steal***

This commandment rests on the belief that property is a kind of extension of the owner's self. Therefore, acts of theft are violations of personhood. That's why, on a communal scale, mature morality requires us to construct economic systems where everybody can share equitably in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This commandment has to do with caring for the weakest and most exploited members of our human race. Justice means making sure that what belongs to people gets to them, stays with them: be it food, job security, housing, or dignity.

In addition to issues of economic justice, commandment #8 prompts us to halt the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional robberies we commit daily. The stealing of time, of ideas, and of space. We must simply monitor and minimize the pillage and theft we commit intentionally and unintentionally in all zones of our lives.

And perhaps, most importantly, this commandment reminds us that the possessive instinct has its limits. There are realities which cannot be owned, only enjoyed. Always remember that so many of the wonders of nature and relationships lie in the category of being non-possessible. Like love and stars, trust and oceans.

***IX. You Shall Not Bear False Witness Against Your Neighbor***

This commandment, although referring explicitly to the judicial system, would urge integrity in every area of our lives. Absolute honesty may not always be the best policy, yet we need to cry foul whenever we hear a press official claim that “our government has an inalienable right to lie.”

A New Testament passage strikes a golden mean between utter brutal truthfulness and destructive duplicity, when it exhorts us “to speak the truth in love.” In sum, honesty must always dwell in the service of compassion.

But in practice the lines are fine. We live in the gray zones, and always will.

***X. You Shall Not Covet the Possessions of Your Fellow Human Beings***

A neighbor once spotted Abraham Lincoln trying to separate two of his sons, locked in a bloody-nosed battle. “What’s the matter, Mr. Lincoln?” “Just what’s the matter with the whole world,” he answered. “I’ve got three walnuts, and each boy wants

two.” We all covet something of somebody’s at sometime. Envious, greedy beings, you and I.

Yet I know of no better antidote to the pernicious demon of covetousness than genuine self-love. Our mission is to love ourselves sufficiently that we might be free to admire without envy, respect without coveting the possession or the personhood of our neighbors.

In sum, the key to a happy and holy existence is to want what we have and be who we are.

Over 3000 years after their formulation, the Ten Commandments may not speak the final moral or spiritual word, but they’re a damn good start.

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