

CHILDREN OF HERESY

There's a lot in life we can't dictate. We don't select our parentage, our historical period, the country of our birth, or the immediate circumstances of our upbringing. And most of us don't decide the time or manner of our death. But within these limits, we can determine how we shall live: honorably or dishonorably, with purpose or adrift.

We're able, most of the time, to choose our convictions, our commitments, and our communities. And no matter how indifferent the universe may appear to our heartfelt choices, these choices are ours to make, and as we choose, so are our lives shaped. We *are* the sum of our choices.

But, my friends, it's downright scary to really take charge of your life, personally and spiritually. And oodles of people reject the offer, surrendering their lives into the direct control of another person or ideology.

I'm often called upon to counsel individuals who feel trapped in painful impasses. Intellectually, even emotionally, they appear ready to make a breakthrough and forge a new direction. But they keep balking: "I can't do it. I just can't do it." To which I've grown to say: "I believe you may not be ready to take the plunge. I even believe that perhaps you won't ever do it. But I'll never agree that you can't do it. The *can'ts* in your life are few, and this isn't one of them."

This morning I want to share some advice that keeps my own choices as healthy as possible. I do so, both for your individual growth as well as for the future of this, your

beloved Fellowship. I'll start with some personal insights, then move on to historical remarks.

Right off, remember that every moment signals a turning point, a time for discernment and decision. To be sure, some choices may be weightier than others, but every one is significant and to be treated as such. Who we are to become, we are now becoming, choice by choice by choice! Therefore, no choice can be disregarded. Every one matters!

Furthermore, the philosopher William James used to say: "not to decide is to decide." So the real issue, in our daily lives, is never whether or not we'll decide something, but *how* we will decide. Fence-sitting always means coming down on the side of no change—in essence, choosing the status quo. Plus, over time, as you can well imagine, fence-sitting usually hurts our rear-ends.

And every choice has its consequences. We live in a weird, almost make-believe society in which people get upset nowadays, because their choices prove costly and possess consequences. I, for one, grow weary of living in a land that has no-fault auto accidents, no-fault divorce, and is moving with the aid of modern philosophy toward no-fault choices.

We used to make fun of the Victorians for their repressive and hypocritical view of sex. But, at least, the Victorians knew that sex was about something and not nothing. They knew that there was no such thing as safe sex. Safe sex is an extraordinary fantasy of our culture. Sex is never safe. It's risky and often productive of long and dire consequences: emotionally, socially, physically, and economically. And if our sexual

activity is about something and not just nothing, imagine what the whole of our life must be about?

We humans are truly nonbeings without the pain and promise of lively choices. The crucial thing in life, so says our choice-making religion, is not that sometimes we choose badly. The point is that our choices can make a huge and beautiful difference. And the hopefulness that has always been characteristic of our responsibly free faith derives from our stubborn conviction in the human capacity for choosing well.

Unitarian Universalism challenges us to be decision-makers not defaulters. Sometimes we need to exhibit the daring courage of a pioneer...staking ourselves in foreign or difficult territory. Sometimes if we can just manage a beginning move, the rest will follow.

John F. Kennedy loved to tell the story of how as a boy, he and his friends would hike in the countryside and when they came to an orchard wall that seemed too doubtful to try and too difficult to permit their voyage to continue they took off their hats and tossed them over the wall. Then they had no choice but to follow them

And so may it be with us. May we prove bold and intrepid enough to throw some hats over some walls and then follow them.

I've always believed in the sage response given to the woman who complained about her destiny: "Well, surely I'm not responsible for being born a woman?" "Yes, that's true, but being born a woman isn't destiny; it's fate. But how you accept your womanhood and what you make of it—ah, that's destiny!"

You see, there's a vast, critical difference between fate and destiny. And our very lives are empowered by noting, then living, that difference.

Well, what does all this have to do with heresy, with being children of heresy? Everything, my friends, everything. For, did you know that the word heresy is actually a respectable and responsible term despite its lousy press? Heresy is derived from the Greek word meaning “choice.” As Unitarian Universalists, we ardently contend that choice not inheritance or fate or default must determine the course of one’s existence. Put simply, we’re a choosing not a chosen people.

Choosers second the indomitable spirit expressed in the Billie Holliday lyric and World War II Army Corps of Engineers motto: “The difficult I’ll do right now. The impossible will take a little while.”

Therefore, if being a heretic means being a relentless choice-maker, then we proudly belong to the heritage of heretics: from Dorothea Dix, who launched support for the mentally ill rather than keeping folks shackled in prison; to Susan B. Anthony, who battled ceaselessly, over decades, for woman’s right to vote; to medical doctor, Benjamin Rush, who, from his Universalist convictions, willingly signed the Declaration of Independence; to Olympia Brown, the first woman ever ordained by any denomination, Universalism, way back in 1863; to Whitney Young, Jr., moderate yet effective civil rights activist; to Sophia Fahs, Unitarian religious educator who was ordained to our ministry at the ripe age of 82.

And look at our history of freethought. Ralph Waldo Emerson told the students at Harvard Divinity School to refuse mimicking other people, even good models, and to dare to seek the sacred without mediator or veil. A heretic to be sure.

It was 100+ years ago that James Martineau, British Unitarian giant, was searching for the seat of authority in religion. Is it found in hierarchy or in a creed, in a

holy book or perhaps a saintly person? Can we safely hand over our minds to any of the above? Martineau answered with a resounding: No! For he discovered that there was only one place for the seat of final authority in all religious matters, and that was in the individual conscience. Another one of our heretics.

And it was an heretical move that led Francis David, back in 16th century Transylvania, to urge King John Sigismund to issue the Western World's First Edict of Religious Toleration. The crux of this decree stated that "no one shall be reviled for their religion by anyone," encouraging all to hold fast to the directives of their own inner lights. The language is clearly 16th century, but the message rings valid in 2007, especially here in the United States of America where the radical religious right is feverishly toiling to make this nation a theocracy rather than a democracy, and where every faith that isn't Christian (their brand of Christianity, to be sure) will suffer dire consequences.

On the contrary, our spiritual ancestors argued that religion must remain unfettered, that in questions of faith there's no place for compulsion or conformity, only free choice. It's notable that during the only time in history that a Unitarian government held sway, it immediately used its power not to oppress other forms of religion or to secure exceptional privileges for its own adherents but to insist upon equal rights and benefits for all.

Do you realize how radical, how far-reaching, how utterly heretical an edict was rendered by Unitarian king, John Sigismund in 1568? To live according to our own informed and ever-expanding consciences is to live according to the heretical imperative:

heretical because it means you and I are ultimately responsible for the shape of our lives and *imperative* because it's not an extraneous matter but a mandatory one.

I want to expand this morning upon one of our religious ancestors, Michael Servetus, literally called the “hunted heretic,” who was martyred in 1553. His is the story of the courage and faith necessary to become a bona fide heretic. A story to be known and internalized, for you and I are the children of heresy.

Michael Servetus was born in 1511 in Spain. His intellectual abilities and reflective personality fitted him for the priesthood. Living during the turbulent period of the Reformation, when a revival of learning and a protest against dogmatism stirred active minds, Servetus grew increasingly dissatisfied with the “infallible truths” of the Catholic Church. And he was devastated, early on in his life, when the Inquisition ordered some 20,000 Jews and Moslems burned to death, for not accepting the Christian dogma of the Trinity.

At the mere age of twenty, Servetus sat down and wrote a book destined to become his death warrant, but also a gateway to the religious liberty we presently enjoy. It was called ***On the Errors of the Trinity*** and was published in Alsace by a printer who dared not add his name to the title page. For both Catholics and Protestants of the day banished the book.

Nonetheless, thousands of copies were sold throughout Switzerland, Germany and Northern Italy. But at the time of the trial of Servetus, just before his death, so few copies were available, due to the ban, that his enemies had great difficulty in even finding copies to quote again him. Today only three copies exist.

After the banning, Servetus fled. He was forced to change his name; he went into hiding. He had to alter his profession and roamed from country to country for twenty odd years.

In the end, Servetus went to see Protestant leader, John Calvin, confident that a meeting of minds was still possible. It wasn't. Calvin had him arrested and tried for heresy; then Calvin sentenced Servetus to death by burning at the stake with his books tied to his waist.

Servetus' crime was publishing a book that redefined Christianity in a more tolerant and inclusive manner. He was also guilty of having threatened the security of John Calvin and his theocratic government in Geneva. Keep his heresy in mind when you ponder the religious right's agenda in America today.

Urged to recant as he was led to the stake, Servetus refused, crying out as the flames consumed him: "O God, save my soul..." Calvin remained at home behind closed doors. The next Sunday Calvin entered the pulpit to boast of the deed before a stunned to silence congregation. Ironically, the people of Geneva, following Calvin's death, erected a great statue not of Calvin, but of the person he burned alive, Michael Servetus.

And so, my fellow San Dieguitans, we must never forget that heeding the heretical imperative proved costly to our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors. Katherine Vogel was also burned at the stake for her heartfelt beliefs. Francis David and John Biddle died after many years of imprisonment for their heretical words. Joseph Priestly and George deBenneville were driven out of England and France, respectively, because of their freethought. Unitarian minister, Norbert Capek, died in a Nazi concentration camp in Dachau, Germany, because he resisted fascist practices. And the religious

persecution of Unitarians and Universalists has continued well into this century in Romania and the Philippines.

Just recently, one of our most prominent and bold heretics, suffered a grave setback: 19th century Thomas Starr King, who served as a minister of both Unitarian and Universalist congregations during his short 40 year life. He was a Unitarian, believing that humans are too good to be damned as well as a Universalist, contending that God is too good to damn anyone—either way, Starr King unashamedly affirmed the supreme worth and value of every human being.

Thomas Starr King was a fiery Republican with an oratorical flair, who stood shoulder to shoulder with Lincoln during the Civil War, barnstorming California to preach the gospel of unity when our nation had split apart and secessionist feeling was high out west. In short, King saved California for the union.

A short while back, our California Legislature, at the behest of a Republican lawmaker, decided that the statue of King should be replaced in the National Statuary Hall at the United States Capitol by one of our more modern Republicans, with a similar gift for public speaking, but a radically different approach to issues of religious freedom and diversity: namely, one Ronald Reagan, who's already been championed to have a project in every state named for him.

Politics aside (since King and Reagan were both ardent Republicans), it's a sacrilege to diminish the legacy of King and to undo history this way. Legislator Dennis Hollingsworth, who was mostly accountable for this historical abuse, was surprised to learn that King was representing his state, alongside the missionary Father Junipero

Serra. “To be honest with you,” Hollingsworth said, “I wasn’t sure who Thomas Starr King was, and I think there’s probably a lot of Californians like me.”

Shame on our legislature for this demeaning decision, who, at the least, should have done some homework before they summarily demoted Thomas Starr King, a great American who raised more than a million dollars for pro-union causes as well as the Sanitary Commission that cared for wounded soldiers.

So, if America becomes a fundamentalist theocracy, in any way, shape, or form, which is the clear mission of the religious right, then Unitarian Universalists and other freethinkers would likely be marginalized, if not considered doctrinal enemies to purge. Thomas Starr King won’t be the only one to go.

Hence, each of us must honestly ask: is there enough evidence, as of today, against me for a conviction as a card-carrying heretic? In short, am I daring to practice my chosen faith like my forebears did: at work and at play, during worship and in community outreach, at home and here at the Fellowship? Do I choose to influence history or am I content to be pushed around by it?

I’m a child of heresy; am I brave enough to act like one?

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