

## **The Weight of History**

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Wayne B. Arnason Sunday, October 12, 2014  
West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church

**Introduction to the Sermon and the Theme Reading:** In 1853, the celebrated Unitarian minister Theodore Parker preached a sermon on "Justice and the Conscience" in which he declared: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

In 1853, Parker was at the height of his career. His liberal views about both theology and politics had alienated him from the Unitarian establishment, and he had resigned his pulpit in West Roxbury to preach in a theater. His congregation grew so big he had to move to the largest theater in Boston, the Music Hall, to hold the crowds of as many as 2000 that came to hear him preach. The optimism of these words was certainly in contrast to the intractability of the issues that Parker addressed in his sermons. In 1853 the debate about slavery was fierce and Parker was openly defiant of the Fugitive Slave Law. He was an advocate of women's suffrage, and suspicious of the established church. The changes for which he advocated would be decades more in their realization. Why was he so confident that there was a moral arc to the universe, or that it was bending towards justice?

Parker's buoyant optimism about the future was not unusual for his generation of 19<sup>th</sup> century liberal ministers, poets, novelists, and political leaders. The hymnal which I came to know growing up as a Unitarian Universalist was filled with noble 19<sup>th</sup> century optimistic hymns and readings. Let's sing one of them now, to get a feel for that era and its attitude towards our human future. Our first hymn has lyrics composed by Alfred Lord Tennyson, an English contemporary of Theodore Parker's, taken from his longer poem *Locksley Hall*...

### **Reading from Ancient Sources :**

One of the important roles that religion has played throughout history is to give people hope about the future, in this life, or perhaps in a future life. Our readings from ancient texts today represent Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scriptures that speak about different sources of hope:

**From Islam, we hear the words of The Holy Qur'an Chapter #18, Verse #46 :** Wealth and sons are allurements of the life of this world: But the things that endure, **good deeds**, are best in the sight of thy Lord, as rewards, and best as (the foundation for) hopes.

**From the Hebrew Scriptures, Proverbs 24:14** - Know that **wisdom** is such to your soul; if you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off.

**And from Christian Scripture, from Romans 22-25** We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. 23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for...the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? 25 But if we hope for what we do not yet have, **we wait for it patiently.**

### **Sermon Part 1:**

Good deeds, wisdom, and patience – this is the traditional comfort and advice that religion has offered in this world in the face of calamity. From the ancient Book of Job to 21<sup>st</sup> century quasi-religious self-help books, the counsel we get is the same when things are not going well: Be patient—things will get better! Go deeper, and seek the wisdom that is found in faith! And don't despair about the value of continuing yourself to do good, as best you can! Your good deeds will help heal the world. Maybe, at the end of this sermon, and the end of the day, you'll go away feeling like you've received the same advice. Maybe it's all we humans have to give.

But this traditional advice was not what came up first when Dave Willett sat down with us to discuss his idea for this year's Service Auction sermon, for which he had generously contributed the winning bid last May. What was on Dave's mind was what a miserable summer it had been --- not so much a miserable summer for him personally – but a miserable summer for the world as a whole. As we thought about the major news stories of the past months, it was easy to see why he felt that way. All we need to do is recite some place names and the tragic headlines and the intractable problems they represent immediately come into our minds:

Syria, Iraq, Gaza, Israel , Ukraine, Ferguson MO, and I suppose we could add, Washington DC. Problems at home and abroad that we once had some hope could be meaningfully addressed in the course of the current administration's leadership now seem to have not only persisted but become worse. Week after week we have seen stories about new military aggressions, violence in the streets, and brutal assassinations and retaliations carried out by terrorists and governments alike. What is even more confusing is that it seems to make no difference whether a nation-state is strongly influenced by, or even governed through, the beliefs of a particular religion. Countries in the Middle East that say they are Islamic states or Jewish states kill equally effectively in the name of defending their religious identities, without regard to any teachings about wisdom, patience, or good deeds that their faiths proclaim. In Ukraine, as in so many other eastern European countries in the past century, populations that have seen peaceful decades of atheists living side by side with Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim believers suddenly are provoked by geo-politics and political extremism into going to war with each other.

When we finished our litany of world woes, Dave told me that he had two questions that he wanted me to speak to today: First, in the face a world that looks like it's going to hell in a hand-basket, is there any reason to be hopeful? And Second, Is there anything we can do in our

own lives to make a difference in these far-distant struggles that are in our living rooms every day when we turn on our media? Given the short-answer choices I have for answering these questions: No, Maybe, and Yes – the answer I choose is **Yes**. To begin to tell you why my answer is Yes, I want to start, not by talking about religion, but by talking about history.

I love history. It was my best subject in high school because I knew it had a certain weight. In history, things really happened! They weren't theories, like in science. They weren't matters of faith, like in religion. They weren't metaphors, like in literature. History had things you could know because they had already happened, and no one could argue about that.

But the more I learned about history, the more I realized that you could argue about history as much as you could any other area of knowledge, because history is not just what happened. It's a *story about* what happened. Who tells the story, and why they want to tell the story, makes a huge difference in how the story goes. Often, history is the story told by the winners – the winners in conflicts over land, resources, and power. The winners, whether they are the believers in a particular religion, or a certain group like old white men, or the leaders of the strongest army, will usually control the media through which their story is told – so it can take a long time and a lot of effort to have a history that contains any stories from those defeated or ignored by the winners.

The other thing I learned about history as I studied it some more is that it does have weight, but people handle that weight in different ways. Sometimes the history of a person, or a people, or a nation is like a burden that we carry. We can't get it off our backs. It's been there all our lives, and we can't take it off to unpack it and really see what's inside. Sometimes the history of a person, or a people, or a nation, has the weight of a rock that we are pushing. Like the mythical character, Sisyphus, we are trying to get to the top of a particular hill so we can get

a wider view and see where we truly are, but we have this rock of our history that is right in front of us and we have to keep pushing this rock up the hill if we are ever going to be able to see beyond a past that is always in front of us.

It was the 18<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher Edmund Burke who said "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it." Yet there are plenty of people and civilizations who think they know their history quite well, history as the story they themselves tell. These people and civilizations idolize their history, and want to repeat it, especially the parts that they focus on as times of glory. The weight of history can stand in the way of courageous compromises that could resolve long-standing deadly conflicts such as those in Israel/Palestine, when two sides are so deeply imbued in their own history of tragic and noble martyrdom. One side pushes the weight of their history towards a fortress of security that is as high as Massada – the other side carries the weight of their history like the backpack of a suicide bomber, never sure when it will go off.

I wish that we could use the weight of history differently. History should be used to tip the scales of judgment in a world where we have to make decisions on sharing our planet's resources rationally and not on the basis of who has the biggest bomb or the most compelling story. History's weight and importance lies in helping us understand everyone's story, and why they have it. Retaining what has really happened and analyzing why it has happened that way does not always make as good a story, but it produces better decisions about what to do next.

While I love the optimism of our 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian ancestors, I think that assuming that human history has an inevitable direction towards progress is a dangerous belief. This is one way to look at the image of the moral arc of the universe – that it represents a slow but relentless and inevitable turning towards a world of wonders we may never know, but can have confidence

will come. One of the dangers in believing in this kind of destiny is that almost any change can be mistaken for a change for the better.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher George Santayana had something very similar to say about history and change as Edmund Burke did two hundred years earlier, but his view was framed by a rational non-theism which assumed no overarching plan or destiny. “Progress”, said Santayana, “far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement....”

The retentiveness that Santayana advocates is more than just the stories passed down from generations of winners. It is a passion for understanding our human story as fully as possible, so that we can set our own course, and not rely on divine providence or a master plan to do it for us. We must remember all of our past, for as Santayana warned: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Notice he used the word “condemned”, not “destined”. Destiny is something in our stars, in a power beyond us. I don’t believe in destinies myself. I believe in causes. I believe in accumulations of many decisions that can set a direction. I believe that we human beings can condemn ourselves to decades of war and centuries of injustice because of our own selfish misunderstandings of how the world works. I also believe that human beings can turn the moral arc of the world in which we live in the direction of justice by the decisions we make, informed by a clear and comprehensive understanding of the decisions we have made in the past and the consequences they have had.

In the second part of the sermon, we’ll look at how the moral arc of our lives has been bent in recent decades and centuries, but first let’s enjoy some of David Blazer’s music while the offering is gratefully received. Our offering is a perfect symbol of how the accumulation of many individual decisions over the years to give what you can to support West Shore Church and the

values for which it stands has been able to make a difference in our own lives and the life of our community.

### **Offering and Offertory**

**Reading from a Modern Source** from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In his 1967 Beacon Press book, "Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?"

Dr. Martin Luther King called poverty, racism, and war the "Triple Evils" saying they are forms of violence that exist in a vicious cycle and are interrelated, all-inclusive, and stand as barriers to our living in the "Beloved Community." When we work to remedy one evil, we affect all evils.

What was written by King in 1967 reads as contemporary, timely, and valid today as it did nearly 50 years ago.

**POVERTY** "There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it. The time has come for an all-out world war against poverty ... The well off and the secure have too often become indifferent and oblivious to the poverty and deprivation in their midst. Ultimately a great nation is a compassionate nation. No individual or nation can be great if it does not have a concern for "the least of these."

**RACISM** "Racism is a philosophy based on a contempt for life. It is the arrogant assertion that one race is the center of value and object of devotion, before which other races must kneel in submission. It is the absurd dogma that one race is responsible for all the progress of history and alone can assure the progress of the future. Racism is total estrangement. It separates not only bodies, but minds and spirits. Inevitably it descends to inflicting spiritual and physical homicide upon the out-group."

**WAR** "A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war- 'This way of settling differences is not just.' This way of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our

nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

### **Sermon Part 2:**

Dr. King has been on our minds this week because on Thursday night a small group of us got together to talk about *The Selma Awakening*, a new book by Mark Morrison-Reed about the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery, and about its impact on Unitarian Universalism and our lives today. Five of us are planning to go down to Selma in early March to join in a national Unitarian Universalist commemoration of that anniversary and renewal of the dedication and vision that emerged from that experience. Interestingly enough, it was at the successful completion of that third attempt that the civil rights activists made to finish the march from Selma to Montgomery, on March 25, 1965, when Dr. King spoke the words that affirmed his connection to the vision of Theodore Parker from the steps of the Alabama State Capitol. In that same stirring conclusion to his speech he also quoted by heart two other 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian poets, James Russell Lowell & Julia Ward Howe. Here is part of what he said:

"I know you are asking today, "How long will it take?"....

"How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

"How long? Not long, because you shall reap what you sow....

"How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

In affirming Parker's vision of a world that has a God-given direction towards justice, Dr. King was affirming the hope of the Christian faith he shared with Parker that a loving and creator God

was moving the arc of the universe in the right direction. Nevertheless, King was not only a preacher but a historian and a scholar. He could deliver an academic address as skillfully as he could a sermon. The reading that we chose to offer you a few moments ago was one of analysis and not preaching, in which King looked at the history of the civil rights movement that he had led and analyzed what it was up against. “Where Do We Go From Here” was a book not about particular battles that had been won, but a book about the larger war – and in it he declared that this larger struggle around the world throughout history, and not just in America, was a struggle against poverty, racism, and militarism. King did not foresee how despair about climate change would come to be a dominant concern in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and over the past year how to deal with that despair and issue has been the focus of several Sundays. Today let’s stick to three major world challenges that King identified.

Is the struggle to overcome those challenges over, fifty years after he wrote those words? Of course not! Has there been progress that can give us reasons to be hopeful and confident that we can address these three evils. Yes – there has been!! This is where the weight of history must be considered, rather than the latest blog pronouncement that comes up in an internet search or the immediate despair you feel when you turn on the news. Let’s look at what has been happening in the world in the years since Dr. King made that speech.

When it comes to poverty, even the most conservative and cautious estimates that come from the World Bank tell us that in the past forty years the world’s poverty rate has gone down by 25%. Even if you correct for the huge successes that China has had in reducing poverty for their population, the rest of the world outside China has seen the rate of poverty drop by ten cent –and China’s successes demonstrate what can be done. Compared to the world humans have lived in throughout the larger sweep of history, more humans live healthier happier longer lives

today than ever before. Does that mean we stop being concerned about the portion of the world that remains impoverished? Not at all! We all know that at practically any time of day we are a few media clicks away from access to a personal story about a person or community that is suffering from poverty. We are more aware of the world's poverty than ever before. – and there is more reason to hope than ever before that we can make a difference for those impoverished than there are reasons to despair.

When it comes to racism, or other forms of categorical discrimination and hatred, there is not as much statistical evidence as on poverty – but when it comes to stated beliefs, the World Values survey, a global network of scientists that have done regular survey sampling of values in over 100 countries covering ninety per cent of the world's population tell us that racist attitudes over all are declining. The direction of individual human attitudes is towards greater understanding and tolerance of people who are different. We don't need a survey to appreciate that over the past few centuries of human civilization, institutionalized racism in the form of slavery or oppressive systems like apartheid has declined significantly. Does that mean that we don't have to worry about racism any more? Of course not. People who were moved by Dr. King's preaching in the fifties and sixties made decisions and commitments that joined them together into a movement that altered the course of American democracy and the influence of racism within it. The moral arc of our country was changed. It would be very easy right now to look at the events of this past summer and wonder whether any of that made a real difference. For several weeks in August, all the news media were filled with the story of a tragic shooting and protests against it in one suburb of St. Louis, Ferguson Missouri. Hour after hour of the 24 hour news cycle, day after day, that was what we heard – street interviews, talking head pundits, bloggers, media interviewing media quoting bloggers. You would think that it was 1965 once again. But believe me, 1965 was

much worse. That doesn't mean that the issues the incident in Ferguson raised are not our concern. It means that we should feel outrage, rather than despair or complacency.

What about war and militarism? Many of you have talked to me about Steve Pinker's book *The Better Angels of our Nature* which documents quite convincingly that violence over all in the world has declined over recent centuries, and that a human being is less likely to die a violent death today than at any time in human history. This has happened not because of the influence of religions like Christianity, according to Pinker, but because of multiple human institutions restraining, controlling, and changing human behavior – in other words, because of different choices we all made as we learned how to live together in ways that make the world better for all of us. What about war? The last decade has seen fewer war deaths than any decade in the past 100 years, based on data compiled by scientists at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo. The reputation that the 20<sup>th</sup> century has of being the most violent century ever is also wrong. Steve Pinker points to at least nine other periods of previous history with death rates from atrocities that exceed the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war – and the first world war is way down the list.

Does this mean we shouldn't be concerned about violence and militarism – whether it's found in local police forces or in gun violence on our streets or in a renewal of calls to increase our military budget? Not at all! Next week's sermon will be about gun violence. When it comes to war, even when the world's military engagements are in remote and isolated parts of the world like the desert that spans Syria and Iraq or the tribal areas of Afghanistan, we are more aware of them than we were able to be when this nation was fighting the Second World War, or when more Americans were dying in our Civil War. We are particularly more aware of the relatively small militias, armies like ISIS that are not sponsored by states but essentially represent tribes, that have in our technologically intimate world the capacity to have such a high

profile in our minds and hearts. Am I saying we don't have to worry about domestic terrorism? No. But compared to the threat to this country represented by fascist states that led to World War 11, we are nowhere near the place we were then when it came to homeland security.

So my answer to the question about where we find sources for hope after we finish watching the news or reading our blogs is – look at history! Put it on the scale of your emotions and see how it balances out the evening news. Look at where we have been and what we can learn about what is possible for our future. I am not a 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic liberal optimist, but neither am I going to have my spiritual and political compass set by those who create the 24 hour news cycle's drama to drive up ratings. I do believe we are heading in the right direction as a human civilization even though I don't believe the evolution of our civilization is guided by a divine plan. I do believe, however, that our human civilization does have a moral arc, a moral arc that we create, by our actions, by our laws, by our institutions, by our communities, by our social movements, by our church's social justice task forces. I believe that it all makes a difference.

There is no inevitability to the progress of that moral arc. It moves its course influenced by millions of daily decisions that we all make – whether to give money to help out a person or an institution or a value in which you believe; whether to find a way to spend time in a cultural milieu or with a person that is different from you in race or culture; whether to get involved in one of the task forces here at our church that engage with all these issues; whether to take a deep breath when you get angry at someone that offends you and engage in mindful awareness and non-violent communication. So maybe the spiritual advice from the world's religions that was offered in our first reading today was not that far off. Wisdom, good deeds, patience. Every decision that demonstrates those virtues makes a difference in our world, and every decision can raise our hopes that the moral arc of our universe will continue to bend towards justice.