

## Everything Possible (Letting Go of Prejudice)

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South Valley Unitarian Universalist Society

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Good morning. In case you don't know, I am John Cooper, and this morning, I get to reflect about letting go of prejudices, about creating a world where the song "everything possible" is a reality. It seemed an appropriate topic for Pride Day, with many of our friends taking the opportunity to celebrate their differences and taking a stand to clearly say that they will not accept prejudice towards their sexual orientation.

I think, I hope, that in this community, in this place, we want to challenge our prejudices, after all, our 7 principles sustain fair, respectful and equitable treatment like:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

With concepts like inherent worth, dignity, justice, equity, democracy, compassion and respect at the core of our faith it seems to me that the song, "Everything Possible" is something that most of us who practice Unitarian Universalism likely hope to sustain in our world.

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Personally, Everything Possible by Fred Small is one of my favorite songs. With the version we are singing today, I now know three different arrangements in three different keys that I've sung with two different groups. Its getting to be a core part of my musical life and I love that song because it so reminds me of what I hope our faith, our tradition has to offer our children and the rest of the world. I know that whatever differences I had with my own parents, the message from that song is one they hoped I would hear from them...its a challenging message, one that I think if we really stop to consider, is more challenging than it first seems. That's what we're going to think about today...

"You can be anybody you want to be, you can love whomever you will."

"Don't be rattled by names, by taunts, by games, but seek out spirits true. If you give the best part of yourself, they'll give the same back to you."

You will have to excuse me as I use popular media to illustrate some of these ideas. I once heard wisdom is where you find it...and it stuck, so today you will have examples from mainstream film.

I hope that many of us here identify with the spirit and intention of peace, acceptance and liberty. I do not think its a stretch for us to accept someone who is of different color, heritage or sexual orientation than us.

But who among us has ever had trouble accepting a Republican? Or a born-again evangelist? A fundamentalist of most any faith? How about accepting without prejudice someone that we here, in this liberal, open and respectful community believe is simply wrong?

The word Prejudice means, among other definitions, "an unfavorable opinion or feeling formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought, or reason" - if we stop to carefully and honestly reflect upon our own perspective and choices, I think we ought to ask are there times in our lives when we have acted based on such an unfavorable opinion? If we open our perspective and think about our choices and actions carefully and consider that prejudice is ANY time that we act based on an opinion formed before-hand without just contemplation and consideration, then are there times each of us can recall where we too

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have demonstrated prejudice?

I know there are times in my life when I have done so...I want to give a relatively simple every-day example. My wife and friends wanted to go see the "Prince of Persia" and were very excited about the film. I found myself not excited, and wondered why. The previews looked dynamic, full of action and good-looking people. Right up my alley. It is upon asking that question, why? That I realized something in me simply got turned off by Persian heritage. I don't know exactly why, cannot explain the sentiment, but had to admit to myself that I was pre-judging the movie because it was set in ancient Persia. Though that might seem ridiculous, and unimportant considering its a movie, when I stop to think about what that means I am capable of doing, I find a sobering and humbling thought. And, by the way, the movie was great...my prejudice was not justified.

I think that prejudice is not what we do when we are aware we are doing it. For most of us here, its not a conscious choice to prematurely judge and act based upon that judgment. I am not even sure that anyone does such a thing. Consciously says "I am going to judge this person or thing ahead of time without due consideration." Instead, prejudice seems to be what happens when we hold beliefs and attitudes that color or limit our word view. I think that even those whom we would consider most bigoted and prejudiced act that way because they hold onto a belief of superiority and maybe they hold onto fear.

In fact, when I think about it, I think we might be wired instinctively to engage in some amount of prejudice. For many of our formative young years, the hundreds of thousands of years of evolution that molded us, we lived in the bush, and judging the environs and creatures without giving each one due consideration had some serious survival value. I don't think we really wanted to give that one particular tiger or lion the benefit of the doubt. Certainly, many human beings who approached life with that kind of open-minded acceptance of each individual creature around them probably fell to natural selection. The same holds true for acceptance of other tribes in areas where resources were scarce. Its possible we might be naturally selected for a certain amount of prejudice.

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So, I guess some prejudice is helpful, or at least, harmless...that's a bit confusing, isn't it?

There must then be some different kind or types of prejudice. Maybe its not just "prejudice" that is bad for us as accepting individuals, but the consciousness, the mindfulness with which we listen to our tendency to judge prematurely that matters.

I can remember an incident in a community to which I belong here in Salt Lake; some members of a that community felt wronged. Maybe rightfully so. Thing is, they felt it was their duty to warn others about the individual and group that wronged them. Others listened to them, and before long, I found myself watching a huge conflict unfold, where many of the people involved took sides against one-another based on the warning delivered by the few who had actual, first hand experience. Those people on either side of the conflict grew prejudiced against one-another, simply by their associations with each other. I saw long-time friends take up opposite sides and lose their relationships, because they could no longer associate with "those people."

Said like that, it sounds a bit ridiculous, nevertheless, it took place. I have seen it happen not once, or even twice, but a multitude of times in my beloved communities. One time, I can recall saying in email, "boy its a good thing you warned me about them <insert racial or otherwise humiliating bigoted slur here> - had I not known that those people, associated with that group, were so negligent in their morals, I might have fallen victim too..." and then I asked if the people engaged in such choices could see why I would draw their attention through such a statement.

And I heard, in reply, "no, this is different. I'm not bigoted or prejudiced because I am protecting those people who might be wronged. Its not bigoted or prejudiced if I'm right..."

Is anyone else seeing something frightening and deeply unsettling in that thinking? What is the language of our most public, bigoted and prejudiced people. "THEY" are diluting our race..."THEY" are endangering our family values..."THEY" are a risk, a danger, to us all...I'm not a bigot...I'm just trying to protect...

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It seems, that when we feel righteous, when we feel we are right, when we believe that someone and those who associate with them are a danger to us, we are at serious risk of fostering bigotry and prejudice. Sometimes being right, and doing the right thing, are not the same at all...I'll go out on a limb here and suggest that perhaps, in this very room, if we each stop to think about those times that we, in our good intentions hoped to warn another, influence them to judge before they have their own personal experience, I think that inevitably, some of us might grow uncomfortable. Has anyone here ever felt endangered, frustrated or put off by those of a different political or religious group and dismissed them as individuals?

I know that if I am honest with myself, there are times in my past where I wish I had not let my own good intentions lead me to spread distrust and judgment. I think that maybe, when we talk about "letting go of prejudice" and contemplate those words, "everything possible" - we mean not just the people with whom we agree, but most of all, those people with whom we disagree. Its when we deal with the people we really do not like that we have the greatest opportunity to sustain the "you can be anybody you want to be" words of that song.

I recall the words of my father. I saw a movie, "The Book of Eli" and I was seriously impressed. I apologize, you are going to get a few key spoilers here, but I hope that if you see the movie they do not ruin the experience for you.

I found it to be a very, very Unitarian Universalist film, though the central character was deeply convicted in his religious beliefs. He was carry a book, a single copy of the King James Bible (there's one of the two spoilers), and he was driven by blind faith that his path was divinely inspired, that God had spoken to him, and chosen him, to carry that book to its destination.

Sounds pretty religious for a Unitarian Universalist, eh? Well, throughout the movie, the whole movie, which unfolded, unlike Hollywood films, at a nice slow walk, the character never once tried to convince another that they should abandon their beliefs and join him.

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Not once did he seek the validation of another for his faith, nor did he allow another to alter his own path or beliefs. I cannot recall a scene where he sat in judgment on another character, and though he expected those who looked like thieves, to act like thieves, the character seemed open to allowing them to prove him wrong.

I was so excited about this film, that I said to my father, "You have to go see this movie...it was uplifting and inspiring.

He did. He called me up afterwards and said, "Well I didn't like that much. I didn't think too much of that."

In our ensuing conversation my father said to me, "I just didn't like all that bible stuff."

And I asked, so if the movie was about a Shaolin Monk carrying a Buddhist Sutra, would it have been more acceptable...and he said, "Oh that would have been a much better movie..."

If not one line was changed, not one scene, but the book that Eli carried was a different book, and his faith was a different faith, my father, who raised me as a tolerant, patient and accepting Unitarian Universalist, openly said that it would have been a better movie.

So I asked him, "Now pops, if maybe the main character had just been a white man, the movie would have been better?" Ohhhh...he didn't like that question much, and it took nearly 2 hours of conversation to unravel my point after I solicited such a strong reaction.

I can recall during part of the conversation, he said, "Well, I just don't think the world needs more of that bible stuff. We've got enough." There's that instinct to protect again...that sentiment that my father knows what's best for the world, because he himself had some bad experiences with religion based on biblical perspective and that by standing up and sharing how "God-awful" (grin) that bible stuff is, he can help set us all right. It took a very long time to explain to him that his belief that he was right was turning him into an anti-bible, anti-christian bigot...and I did not mince words.

In the end he said, "John, I think I understand, and I think that the movie just became a better movie for me..."

I was very proud of my father at the end of that conversation for his efforts to grow and confront his own prejudice about the Bible.

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I recall the end of that movie, the last scene (second spoiler). The King James bible on a shelf next to that Buddhist Sutra, the Koran, and the Ramayana - any number of holy texts. That last scene made me think about why we have so many faiths in this world....and I think that maybe its because we are all diverse enough to be inspired by different things....and that we all deserve the opportunity to be inspired.

The only way that can happen, given our diversity, and make no mistake, I believe that our diversity is an absolute necessity for our survival...the many changes and challenges of our world, necessitate a diversity of people to handle them and survive. Any creature is threatened when its diversity is diminished too far.

So given the necessity of that diversity, and its inevitability, I think that the ONLY way we can all have the opportunity to be inspired by our sacred texts, by our sacred words and thoughts, is by the diversity of those faiths and works.

So, now what do we do? How do we handle these instincts that lead us to say, "hey, THEY are not one of US?" If, as I've supposed this morning, such instincts are an integral part of our evolution, what are we supposed to do to let go of them?

I think we handle them like we do any feelings. We listen. We care about such reactions and feelings. Since when have any of us ever over-come a reaction or feeling without listening to it carefully?

Certainly, learning to listen to our instincts, our reactions, instead of following them requires very mindful and diligent practice. Thing is, if we don't engage in such practice, nothing changes. If we are talking about any tendency to judge prematurely, for me, that's something I would hope to change.

One of the funny things I heard recently from Nancy Bowen, our district representative is that Unitarian Universalism is about salvation...we want to save people, like many faiths. I had to really stop and think about that idea. I think that we hope to save people by

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sustaining our practice of covenanting with one-another, by modeling and demonstrating ways in which we can focus on doing right in our relationships instead of having to be right...ways where our principles of acceptance, our challenge of our prejudices come to life through our actions.

In other words, I think that part of what is sacred to our living faith is in our relationships, the way that we treat one-another, how we practice and sustain our covenants together. I think that in that daily practice, we have an opportunity to find something sacred.

When I think of mindful, diligent practice, I find myself returning to my many years of Kung Fu. So I will leave you with my last pop-media/film reflection.

They are remaking The Karate Kid. I recall words from the preview...as he makes the kid put on and take off his jacket over and over again. Jackie Chan, his teacher says...

"Kung fu lives in how we put on the jacket...be strong...take off the jacket and lives in how we treat people...everything is Kung Fu."

If such mundane actions like putting on and taking off a jacket can make our Kung Fu strong with mindful practice, maybe we can learn to let go even of our most innate prejudice. Maybe everything really IS possible.