

Choose Something Like A Star
A Sermon Towards Integrity
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Beacon UU Congregation

In the Gospel of Matthew, we have a fragment of a tale, not much to go on really, that speaks of three wise men or *Magi* from the East who are commanded by King Herod to follow a star. Each carries a treasure, and together, in the words of Matthew, "they set out, and there ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was." The Magi pay homage to the baby Jesus and having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they return to their homeland by another route.

Much has been made of the Magi and their journey in song and story and legend and theology. In fact, the Christian feast of Epiphany honoring these three fellows takes place on January 6th. In some parts of the world it's a bigger deal than Christmas! The word *epiphany* itself comes from the Greek words for appearance and manifest. Epiphany celebrates the day when Christ's divinity was revealed to the Gentiles, represented by the Magi. But in everyday parlance, an *epiphany* denotes a sudden discovery or revelation. Things fall into place and gain clarity. Bang! We'll come back to our epiphanies down the road.

It's been suspected that the Magi were Persian priests who followed the ethical teachings of the prophet Zoroaster. Others speculate that the Magi were astrologers --expert star-readers --which might explain the uncanny ability of three wise guys to get to Bethlehem so quickly without getting lost, without a GPS, and without asking directions! (not that they would, mind you.)

The star they followed has been called (in our hymnody) "a star of wonder, a star of light, a star to guide us through a perfect night. It is a star of truth in which every searching eye divines some partial glimmer of its light. And, perhaps most importantly, it is within the shining of this star that we catch a glimpse of who we are, how we are connected to all life, and of the essential integrity that shimmers like a priceless treasure we carry within us.

My sermon today is called "Choose Something Like A Star" and it is from this firmament of light and wonder and character that I'm encouraging you to choose. As the Rabbi Lawrence Kushner has reminds us so powerfully in his stories: "the more we comprehend our mutual interdependence, the more we fathom the implications of our most trivial acts. We find ourselves within a luminous star of sacred responsibility."

In other words, when we realize that everything we do matters, that every choice we make has consequences, we see ourselves rightly as stars linked in a constellation of community.

We discover what it might mean and what it might take to act with integrity in a milieu where, too often, doing what's *necessary* can mean doing only what's safe or what benefits the individual above all else. Haven't we seen that fester and grow (in Washington and beyond) over the past four years? Our egos or our lack of intentionality, like supernovas, can too easily blot out the more subtle star of truth and can lead us astray into black holes of self interest, greed, corruption, cruelty, and apathy.

The Rev. Katie Lee Crane makes a fascinating connection between the significance of the star followed by the Magi and the principles and values we strive to follow as Unitarian Universalists. She notes that some of the Babylonian belief that influenced the Magi's Persian cult followed a supreme god, *Ahura Mazda*, the Lord of Life and Wisdom. "Their god, who was revealed to them through Zarathustra, taught individual reason and intelligent action.

And their faith was based on the basic dualism between good and evil in which human beings have both the freedom to choose and the responsibility to bear the consequences of their choices. They emphasized the importance of human reason and ethical behavior and, at its center, they believed in good thoughts, good words, good deeds as the basic teachings of their faith." This resonates for Unitarian Universalists," Rev. Crane tells us. "Choice and responsibility, Reason and ethical behavior. Good thoughts. Good words. Good deeds." In a word - *Integrity*.

I learned recently that Unitarian Universalism is the most *values coherent* denomination in America. Most of us will cite our seven principles as the guiding lights in our lives. Yet, that doesn't necessarily mean we're *behavior coherent*. We may believe in "Justice, Equity, and Compassion in Human Relations" in principle, but in the harsh light of reality, our everyday actions can, at times, belie our values.

It does sound simple enough, doesn't it? Good deeds, reason, responsibility. Surely, we *want* to embody integrity, and we used to *insist* that our leaders do. Yet, it's not always clear how to find our way from Herod's palace to Bethlehem's manger, even on a cloudless night with the North star of seven principles illuminating our path.

It's challenging -- questions arise like: is a *little bit* of lying okay? ; what should I tell my kids about winning and cheating?; is flirting with a co-worker on Facebook innocent enough?; do I return the extra change the waitress gave me by mistake?

Should I give spare change or even a \$10 bill to a homeless man; should I speak up about that racist or homophobic remark I just overheard?; Do I leave the warmth of my living room to march in a wind-whipped protest downtown? Do I wear a mask, or flaunt safety guidelines? There is so much temptation to slide by in our values-compromised, maybe-I-do world.

In his book entitled Integrity, (written in 1996, its worth noting) the scholar Stephen Carter asks if we, as a nation, have lost our understanding of integrity. One can only imagine what question he would be asking in the America of 2021. He notes how popular the word is, even if people don't exactly agree on its meaning. Carter recalls beginning a university commencement address by telling the audience that he would be talking about integrity. The crowd broke into applause. "Applause!," writes Carter. "Just because they had heard the word integrity -- that's how starved they were."

Interestingly, the word *integrity* comes from the same Latin root as the word *integer* or whole number. The word is about *wholeness*. A person of integrity, like a whole number, is a whole person, somehow undivided. The word conveys a sense of completeness and right livelihood. Carter explains that the enterprise of living what he calls "an integral life" is anything but easy, and he lays it out for us in three clear steps. I'd add that growing in integrity requires reflection and a commitment to spiritual development beyond weekly attendance in church (even on YouTube). It's not a rainy afternoon spiritual DIY project.

The first step, explains Carter, is the act of discernment during which we must deeply consider what is right and what is wrong. This discernment is a lifelong process of integrating one's values and beliefs and responses to the world. Once we've discerned, we're asked (in the second step) to act on what we believe, even if it is at personal cost. We must translate our beliefs into courageous action. And lastly, the hardest step -- the willingness to openly tie our actions to our principles; to state boldly, "I'm doing X because I believe Y; *because I am a Unitarian Universalist.*"

In an opinionated, damaged society driven by conformity and conspiracy theories at one end and cringe-worthy "wokeness" at the other, this may not be easy. It will require not only stating what you believe and why, but being open to hearing how others interpret integrity and principle (even if it's based on an obedience to God, or ideas we might consider quirky, or even offensive). It may ask us to value *engagement* above *agreement*.

As Stephen Carter points out, we usually know what is right when we listen to ourselves. The impulse is there. The Buddhists would certainly nod along with this notion. According to classic Zen teachings, integrity isn't a matter of molding ourselves to fit abstract moral ideas of what we should and shouldn't

do, but rather of responding to life in a natural and authentic way. Integrity is not "out there," beyond ourselves. It is a holistic and spontaneous naturalness. As Polonius advises his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "And this above all else, to thine own self be true; and then it follows, as night the day, thou canst not be false to any man."

In some ways, it's like one shimmering *epiphany* -- an intuitive revelation breaking into our consciousness. Yet, when we have become disconnected from our genuine integrity, and no longer trust our natural or basic goodness or "the wisdom of the heart," we resort to external concepts of righteousness (even the morally empty ones of Trumpism). We get caught up in moral judgments and perpetuate a culture of critique, rather than one of curiosity. Interpersonal feuds, wars, human suffering, callousness, disconnection are the inevitable results. Listen to Gandhi: "Don't listen to friends when the Friend inside you says, 'Do this.'"

The fabled Magi had a relatively glitch-free journey, but still needed to decide to "Do this." They did what they were asked to do, and their outing appears to have been a relatively quick excursion, seemingly without foul-ups, distractions, or speed bumps. Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar. They came, they saw, they gifted, they went home. Let's eat.

A far more gripping yarn involves a fourth Magi named Artaban. You've probably never heard of him, because he never makes it to Bethlehem...and, oh, he's not *real*, either! He follows another star and his fictional tale is told in a wonderful little book entitled "The Other Wise Man," written in 1895 by a Mr. Henry Van Dyke.

Artaban the Median doesn't listen to his three better-known colleagues. He heeds the Friend within who says, "Do this." He is integrity personified. His original journey to find the baby Jesus and give him a sack of precious stones is delayed and misdirected and sabotaged by his own acts of humanity, kindness, and love. He gives one of his jewels to help a beaten man recover his health; he relinquishes another to spare innocent children from being slaughtered. He sacrifices others to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit prisoners.

He arrives in Jerusalem 33 years later at the time of Christ's crucifixion, and offers his only remaining jewel to buy the freedom of a slave girl. At last, as he meets Jesus on the road, Artaban protests that he no longer has a gift for the him. Instead of chiding him, Jesus thanks him for his many priceless gifts of doing what was necessary, regardless of the cost. "The good we do is immortal," Jesus tells him. Of course, Artaban knew this all along.

As he sets out on his pilgrimage 33 years earlier, he explained to his son that "It is better to follow even the shadow of the best than to remain content with

the worst. And those who would see wonderful things must often be ready to travel alone." Integrity personified – walking nobly, like Jesus did, in a lonesome valley.

You may or may not recall a major motion picture released in 2001, entitled, fittingly enough, "Three Kings." If I were writing one of those quotable blurbs for the newspaper ad, I'd say something like "a boffo action picture that packs a wallop of a message." In the film, three cocky Gulf War soldiers discover a bunker filled with gold and they devise a plan to steal it.

They sarcastically explain this greedy scheme as just "doing what's necessary." Through a sequence of unexpected events, the three kings come to discover their need to not only depend on their intended victims, but in the end, to view the whole concept of "doing what's necessary" through a less self-centered, more Gandhi-esque, lens.

Like Artaban, who can't help but live in relationship to others, who diverts his journey to Bethlehem time and again in order to do what's necessary, and who gives away his treasure in the process, the three cynical soldiers in this movie experience an epiphany of interconnectedness to humankind and to their own essential integrity. This transforms them from cads into heroes. Their collective act of generosity at the end of the film is truly inspiring.

Luckily, because discernment is a lifelong process, we (like the characters in this film) often get a second or a third chance to do what's right, to act with integrity. But then again, one shining opportunity is sometimes all we get. We each carry within us the freedom to choose and the responsibility to bear the consequences of these choices. We each carry within us the natural impulse for integrity and wholeness.

The minister Howard Thurman calls the moment when we decide to *enact* our integrity, "the moment of High Resolve," and he acknowledges the challenge of keeping it radiant and clear before us. He writes: "In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading Mysterious Presence, my heart whispers: Keep fresh before me the moment of my High resolve, that in fair weather or foul, in good times or in tempests, in the days when the darkness and the foe are nameless or familiar, I may find that star and not forget that to which my life is committed."

You are going about your business, when you stumble onto something that has your name on it. Or, to be more accurate, a task with your name on it finds you. Its execution requires inconvenience, self-sacrifice, even risk. You step forward and encounter your destiny. You step inside the moment of your High Resolve. You step directly into the star-shine of integrity within you. It is a human

story, this life-long journey home to Bethlehem or Jerusalem or the reclaimed temple of our own wise hearts.

Now is the time to reestablish a beachhead for integrity in America. In this hopeful New Year to come, in good times or tempests -- choose something like a star. Follow something like a star. *Be* something like a star -- whole and radiant and linked to other stars -- within the shimmering and glorious constellation of community.

Be the gift. First we give, then we come to love.”

Do *this*.

Blessed Be, Blessed be, and Amen.

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