

It's Hard To Keep A Clean Shirt Clean
A Sermon Towards Character for the High Holy Days
Beacon UU Congregation
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A taxi sits blocking part of an intersection in downtown Pittsburgh. An irritable taxi driver waits impatiently for an elderly woman to navigate over a puddle, off the curb and into the back seat. The driver does not get out to help her. Other motorists are going berserk, screaming profanities and leaning on their horns. The elderly woman becomes flustered and nearly trips. A man, 40 or so, happens by with his 9-year-old daughter, and as the girl looks on, her father gently takes the woman's arm and accompanies her to the taxi, opens the door and guides her and her walker inside. With mutual smiles, he waves her on. The daughter beams with pride and admiration for her father as the taxi pulls away from the curb and into the bustle of the city. Another driver shouts a profanity and a slur at the father as he screeches past around a corner. Dad shrugs his shoulders, and looks down at his feet with some embarrassment and shame.

Here's what vexed my friend, Barb, who shared this recollection with me. Why was the man somewhat uncomfortable publicly with this impulse of character and his genuine act of kindness? To that puzzle, I'd add: Have we become irreparably coarsened by the spiraling crudeness and cruelty in our culture? Is kindness perceived as an effete virtue lacking charisma and clout? Or, does this incident on a urban corner point to something far deeper, namely the erosion of the very seed bed of character and civility in our country? I wonder. I worry. On social media, I cringe and gasp.

In America 2021, we certainly don't lack for examples of incivility, or what some sociologists term, "the culture of meanness." As American essayist Laura Pappano has observed: "Whatever the reason, there is a widespread perception that in America we have become a ruder, less caring, less connected, less civil society, that we are unclear about the meaning of character and integrity, that we are disconnected.

We see that decline in basic civility on the airwaves, in social media, in entertainment, in our public spaces, in schools and on the road. We see it in the violent self-absorbed response to mask mandates and public health. We saw it in spades in the scandal-plagued, bullying, and corrupt administration of our former President. People today routinely backbite, browbeat, denigrate, and tailgate. They cancel each other and condemn. Public discourse has become policed for offensive buzzwords and in many cases, has become argumentative and raunchy.

Parents threaten teachers and coaches who do not amply reward or coddle their children or expect too much of them – like homework and civil behavior. Folks tear pages out of library books (truly!), they bark orders at baristas in coffee shops, they punch flight attendants, they dump trash by the side of the highway. In the words of a colleague: "it is transparently obvious that the milk of human kindness would welcome nourishment."
(Richard Gilbert)

Some argue that the pandemic has made us kinder, more tender, more aware of our finitude and the vulnerability of others. Some say our climate crisis, now impossible to credibly dismiss, is waking us up to our mutual responsibility to avoid extinction. And although this may be true, to a degree, go online and google COVID heat map and you'll see that a significant swath of our fellow citizens remain in their own self-serving bubbles.

You may recall that back in the 1980's, then President George HP Bush (41), often spoke of a kinder, gentler nation filled with a 1000s points of light." Then Junior, George W Bush, (43) came along and gave us "compassionate conservatism," and a pledge to restore what he and his jargon-meisters called "the civil society." 43 also gave us the tragic 20-year Afghan war which recently wound down after 1000s of deaths, billions of dollars, and endless destruction and the denigration of woman by the Taliban. "W" also bandied about traditionally liberal concepts like "communitarianism" during his tenure in this century's first decade, while the actual fabric of community became increasingly torn and threadbare.

I'd reckon that former President Obama (a grassroots guy to his core) and our current leader, President Biden, would agree, at least in theory on definitions of character and civility. That is, that they exist when we exercise compassion, kindness, politeness, and moral reasoning; when we check, control and balance out our immediate personal needs or preferences (mask wearing, for instance) with an appreciation and respect for the valid needs and rights of others with whom we share time and space in society. (especially one beleaguered by a grinding plague and its consequences).

It means balancing me and we, freedom and responsibility, an enterprise requiring a maturity and constraint to behave like a citizen and a decent human being. Don't look on Tik Tok, Twitter or Facebook for the primer on this enterprise. Look to exemplars who have endured through the ages. Who are yours? Gandhi? Malala? Frederick Douglass? Who will be the exemplars of character in our modern, compromised world? Kanye West? Donald Trump, Jr? God help us.

A "citizen." That's become quite a loaded word, hasn't it? Someone owing allegiance. Someone who is legally recognized. I'd add, in a civil society invested in collective character building, someone who gets that you can't relentlessly "do your own thing," soil everyone else's shirt while you soil your own, and our neighbor be damned... "personal freedoms" have their limits in a truly civil society.

Several days ago, on Thursday September 16, Jews throughout the world observed Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, the holiest of days. A day to examine one's heart and one's character and how soiled one's shirt may have become in the previous year, and to make amends in order to wash out the stains of the past year (at least to the extent that can occur – collar stains are especially persistent, aren't they?

Each year, this Jewish Unitarian minister welcomes the opportunity to join in spirit with the Jewish community to contemplate our transgressions and to restore our right relationship to ourselves, to the Sacred as we understand it, and to one another. It is a time when we are meant to wrestle with remorse in a healthy way, lifting oppressive guilt from our hearts through confession and forgiveness. This, ultimately, is an act of self-love, rather than self-loathing.

The Days of Awe, the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur focus on *teshuvah* or “turning.” Nature turns instinctively with the seasons, birds migrate and store food for the winter, crops are harvested, buds emerge, leaves fall. But, for us humans, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will and a developed character to make us turn. It means breaking old habits. It means taking responsibility for when we have been wrong or with have wronged another. It takes an open heart of make peace, to forgive and be forgiven. It might mean losing face or being humbled and starting all over again. And this is often painful or, minimally, uncomfortable. But it is a gift. Because it means we recognize what is called for and that we have the ability to change.

My colleague, Victoria Safford, tells us: “Imagine that during the Days of Awe, your task was not to patch things up or smooth them over, reach a compromise or even to feel better. The task is ownership. Abandon the pleasant piety that claims knee-jerk forgiveness as the unquestioned moral course. You get to choose the course, you get to choose what will make the world more whole.”

Pleasant piety. I love that. Thoughts and prayers, hm? – even when schoolrooms get shot up or migrant children die at the border. Is character so elusive these days? We toss this word around a lot...I’ve used it at least a dozen times in the past 10 minutes. I do believe we still grasp the essence and substance of its meaning – the embodiment of honesty, courage, ethics, and self control.

According to studies, the major factors that influence character and moral development include heredity, early childhood experiences, modeling by the important adults and older youth in our sphere, peer influence, geography and local culture, the media (more than ever), curricula, religious ideologies, and specific situations that elicit corresponding behaviors. For instance, your parents or closest friends are enthralled by QAnon and you follow suit.

In an article on the elements of Character Education, the author Francis David, which is quirkily weird, in that one of our Unitarian exemplars, the Transylvanian named Frances David, laid out an essential interdependence of knowledge, reasoning, and actions. Coincidence? I think not! Francis David (the contemporary one) explains that the Character education partnership defines character as a three-part concept: understanding, caring about and acting upon core ethical values. As useful mnemonic for the triad is head, heart and hands. David emphasizes that you cannot separate the head from the heart or the hands, and I agree. No pleasant piety or faux morality. Moreover, countering meanness with kindness whenever possible is another component to character and to bending ourselves and future generations in the direction of love and light. It’s gonna’ mean looking up from our phones. Say a prayer.

Hebrew Scripture gives us the story of Daniel. He is the protagonist who is “resolved to not defile himself” by eating forbidden foods. It is a test of character and he passes with flying colors. I found an article recently that explores the some of the reasons it is so hard to “resolve to not defile ourselves,” why it is a formidable challenge to become a better person, to keep our clean shirts clean. You can decide whether you agree with the list. Subtitled, “10 reasons during the Days of Awe,” the journalist Dennis Prager, begins with #1: “People focus on being happy rather than being good. He remarks that “people may not realize that goodness leads to increased happiness.”

#2: Confusion about what goodness is. More than anything, kindness is the apex of character. How we treat people is the key – the golden rule, not manufactured doctrines, wokeness, or political posturing.

#3: Goodness is not about intentions, it is about actions.

#4: We don't learn how to be good – as I mentioned earlier about role models and teachers. Prager notes that “we spend years learning how to be good at things like basketball or plumbing, while character education falls by the wayside.”

#5: We think too highly of ourselves. Too much self esteem and not enough humility can lead us to believe we are better than other people and that we deserve to go our own way, regardless of its impact on others. Once again, “mask wearing” – case in point.

#6: We think we will be taken advantage of. People confuse goodness with weakness. Yet, true goodness and character requires strength and cultivates courage.

#7: Few positive personal models. We've covered that. A tough nut to crack in our diverse society.

#8: We don't believe there are rewards for being good. Note the shoulder shrug to corruption at our highest levels of government. It saddens and shocks me.

Prager wisely points out that, in actuality, goodness offers many valuable rewards – good people have far more inner peace, they learn to trust others. (the cheater doesn't trust because he thinks everyone may be like him). You will make more lasting friends, and people will like and even more importantly, respect you because you embody goodness and loyalty in your words and deeds.

9: We are gripped by anger and fear. The dual gremlins of activating our goodness and kindness.

10. I am a victim. Prager reminds us that a victimhood state is often cultivated...and now, fed daily by social media. White grievance is at an all time high. OK, there are times when we are all unfairly treated but this does not offer a pass on how we treat others or behave in a civil society.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Gospels, Jesus stops to offer compassion and care for a wounded outcast whom others had scorned. What would Jesus do? There it is – golden rule – go and do likewise – is the advice he gives at the end of the parable. Closer to home, we can look to our UU principles, to our individual moral centers and to our collective conscience as tools to support the fragile interdependent web that connects us to one another in this fractured world.

Can we take seriously that the lives we touch, for good or ill, with random or deliberate acts of character, sets that great web atremble? Alongside a taxi cab at a busy intersection? In the way we speak to one another across the dinner table or the conference table? In how we balance me-ness and we-ness, freedom and responsibility, as members of this community and society as a whole? In our most ordinary actions, in the votes we cast, and the voices we raise in advocacy rather than stay safe and silent?

In the end, keeping your clean shirt clean, with multiple stains acknowledged and tended as possible, is redemptive and healing. “Imagine how many deep breaths you would need to take,” asks Victoria Safford. How many breaths to choose character over convenience. How many awkward moments or phone calls or texts to demonstrate you

know right from wrong. To be willing to answer the knock at the door to forgive and be forgiven?

The poet June Jordan also understands this rigor. She writes: At the pocket and around the shoulder seam and on both sleeves, the direct, the paw prints that tantalize soap, my water, my sweat equity invested in the restoration of a clean white shirt. And on the 11th try, I see no more, no anything unfortunate, no dirt. "It's clean. A clean white shirt. Nobody wanted to spoil or soil that shirt; much cleaner now but also not the same as the first, before that shirt got hit, got hurt, not perfect anymore, just beautiful. A clean white shirt. It's hard to keep a clean shirt clean." Blessed be. Blessed we. And amen.

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