

PROPHETIC LISTENING

Sermon by
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First Parish in Framingham Unitarian Universalist
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Last September our grandson Milo entered the freshman class of a fine liberal arts college in Ohio. We were proud of him; we basked in the glow of his academic achievement. We were reasonably assured that Milo would gain the kind of intellectual and social tools that would equip him for a fulfilling, and hopefully successful, measure of life achievement. As doting grandparents we look forward to his scholastic advancement

At about the same time that Milo was headed for Ohio I came across a magazine article that cast a shadow across the collegiate and social path that we had encouraged Milo to walk.

The article in *The American Scholar* magazine is by one William Deresiewicz and titled, “The Disadvantages of an Elite Education”. Ominous title; ominous content. It seems that the author, Deresiewicz, who had academic degrees from both Yale and Columbia and had taught English for a decade, discovered that there were holes in his own “elite” education.

Deresiewicz was 35 years old; had just purchased a house; discovered that some pipes needed fixing; and found himself standing in his kitchen with a plumber.

There he was a short, beefy guy with a Red Sox cap and thick Boston accent and I suddenly learned that I didn’t have the slightest idea of what to say to him. So alien was his experience to me, so unimaginable his values, so mysterious his very language, that I was unable to engage him in a few minutes of small talk before he got down to work.

Fourteen years of higher education and a handful of degrees and there I was, stiff and stupid, struck dumb by my own dumbness.¹

I confess that I have, upon occasion, found myself in circumstances not unlike the author’s discomfiting experience.

According to author Deresiewicz the first disadvantage of an elite education is that it makes you comfortable around people like you and uncomfortable around everyone else And this social discomfort is not a matter of race; it is a matter of class.

¹ William Deresiewicz is an essayist and critic. His article "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education" appeared in the Summer 2008 issue of *THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR*.
<http://www.theamericanscholar.org/the-disadvantages-of-an-elite-education/>

At elite institutions, white children of business and professional people happily study alongside the children of black, Asian and Latino business and professional people. I know that that is true of the college Milo attends. But here's the rub. What NONE of these students are taught (according to the author) is how to relate to people who are smart in other ways, or who aren't smart at all. A humanistic education should connect you with all things human, not alienate you from most of humanity.

The second disadvantage is related to the first in that it tends to promote a false sense of self worth. The message to students at elite institutions is this: because you had the grades and the test scores and the connections and the finances to get there, you deserve more than those who didn't.

One of the great errors of an elite education is that it teaches you to think that measures of intelligence and academic achievement are measures of value in some moral or metaphysical sense.

NOT SO, says Deresiewicz. Graduates of elite schools are not more valuable than stupid people, or talentless people or even lazy people. "Their pain does not hurt more. Their souls do not weigh more, ... God does not love them more."

These issues, confronting both the students and the graduates of elite academic institutions, confront us, members of the liberal religious establishment as well.

We are Unitarian Universalists. Demographically speaking, we rank second among religious traditions in the United States in average household income (Jews are first), and second in average household education (Hindus are first).

And we wonder why diversity has been such a tough nut to crack for Unitarian Universalist congregations.

I readily confess that I have done my share of hand wringing over this situation. I know that the character of our congregational life depends on having people among us who don't have string of degrees from elite institutions, or perhaps don't have any degrees at all. The character of our congregational life depends (dare I say it) upon people among us who don't instinctively turn left when walking down the political aisle.

The point of a liberal church is to enable us to view our lives, as well as our social and political circumstances, from a deeper clearer perspective than the one dictated by the assumptions dictated by the system that surrounds us and imparts its elitist values to us.

The students who get into elite schools are precisely the ones who have best learned to work within the system and so its very difficult for them to see outside it — or even to see that the system is even there. Such vision takes more than intellect. It takes courage, it takes imagination, it takes love.

Being a religious liberal means thinking your way toward a vision of the good society and then trying to realize that vision. And how do you “realize that vision”??????? by showing up; by standing up; by “listening up” which means sharpening your ability to “listen prophetically”.

Prophetic listening takes more than intellect (and more than perfect hearing - says he who is himself deaf!). It takes a generous receptivity. Prophetic listening begins with the ability to hear the voices that are so often smothered by roar of the media. It precedes prophetic declaration.

Professor James Luther Adams, probably the greatest liberal theologian of the 20th century, coined the phrase “the prophethood of all believers”. I think Jim would be pleased to acknowledge that “prophethood” begins with “prophetic listening” - and that is the task that we of the liberal church are called to act upon.

Nor is such action limited to our ranks alone. Last month the Boston Globe published a story about a group of family members from families, each of which had lost a member on 9/11. The group is demanding that Kalid Sheik Mohammad, mastermind of the 9/11 bombing, be tried in a civil court rather than by a military tribunal.

The group names itself, “September 11 Families for a Peaceful Tomorrow”. (one of them, Wright Salisbury is Melanie Salisbury’s father and father-in-law of Ted Hennessey, Melanie’s former husband) “If we stand by the U.S. Constitution” says the group, “we have the best chance of producing verdicts, that the world will respect!”

THAT is an example of reasoning which is produced by “prophetic listening” to the world.

Other “Prophetic listeners”? They are all around us: Al Gore, Bill Moyers, Barbara Ehrenreich (who detailed the lives of the working poor), Justice John Paul Stevens, Howard Zinn — of blessed memory, and John Ruskin - a name that is probably as unfamiliar to you as it was to me when I encountered it in author Deresiewicz’s essay of which I’ve spoken.

John Ruskin was the most famous and most influential art critic of the 19th century. Which is all very well but I confess I would not have included him in the list of those who, listening prophetically in his own time, spoke “truth to power”. And I would be wrong!

It seems that, in addition to art criticism, John Ruskin wrote vigorously on politics and economics and he was no slouch when it came to criticizing the doctrines of free market capitalism.

In a book titled *Unto the Last* he argued that it was the government’s responsibility to educate — at public expense— the nation’s youth in three areas: the laws of health; the habits of gentleness and justice; and the skills of a profession.

Ruskin argued that it was the government’s role and responsibility to ensure that poor people could afford basic necessities of life; to retrain the unemployed and to provide for the old and the destitute.

The main problem with the free-market economy, he argued, was that it was governed strictly by what he called “balances of expediency” rather than “balances of justice”.

During the recent health care debate we hear a lot about the “balances of expediency” - what was “suitable”, “reliable”, “prudent”..... with precious little said about “the balances of justice” - righteousness, goodness.

I only wish that someone had handed President Obama a copy of Ruskin’s *Unto the Last* with the phrase, “the balances of justice” underlined.

So where should we look to discover the spirit of John Ruskin alive and at work today??? I suggest that we do well simply by turning and looking around us. I suggest that this spirit is alive within this space and every space that is dedicated to the balance of justice and in the passions of those who gather here.

In a world where the structures of power tend to be self-replicating and self-protective, it is to religious communities like this one [that we look to] as places of imagination and courage.

When we gather together in this dedicated space, we seek to renew our sense of what is sacred and true - and in so doing, we recommit ourselves to the work of transforming our own lives to live lives of larger purpose as individuals; and to systems of greater fairness and justice as a nation.

Last year Sheryl WuDunn and New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof published a book titled *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*

The authors tell about the time some years ago when the U S withheld its funding for the United Nations Family Planning Association (a sum of \$34 million) and a retired French teacher from California decided to get involved.

She wrote a letter to her local paper pointing out that a week had passed since the cuts, with little public reaction.

“Ho Hum” she wrote, “This is vacation time. Columnists have written about it and newspapers have printed editorials of lament. Ho hum. More women die in childbirth in a few days than terrorism kills people in a year. Ho hum. Some little girl is having her genitals cut with a cactus needle. Ho hum. That’s just a cultural thing.”

She closed letter saying, “As an exercise in outraged democracy, would 34 million of my fellow citizens please join me in sending one dollar each to the Us Committee for the UNFPA? That would right a terrible wrong... and drown out the ho hums.”

A grandmother in New Mexico had a similar idea. She started a chain letter also asking people to send in a dollar. The two eventually joined forces. By the time federal funding was restored, they had raised 4 million. They had also started an organization uniting people around the country on behalf of women worldwide. They helped drown out the ho hums.

I am proud of the fact that my church, this church, should count among its members people like Dorothy Stonemean and John Bell who created the Youth Build, USA organization to address the need of inner-city youth; like Linda Mason who traveled to both Bosnia and Darfur in order to create linkages of care and support for the desperate people in both of those areas; We are all still reeling from the earthquakes that have devastated Haiti and Chile. I'm proud that my church has sponsored at least two fund raising events to address those areas of terrible need.

“What does God require of us?” asks the prophet Micah. Only that we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God

When you hear of tragedy or some travesty of justice, listen prophetically; set you mind on how you might respond- do it, and your heart will surely follow. No more ho-hums, only hope and courage.

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