



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Learning in Humility”

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Centering Thoughts

Anti-intellecualism has been a constant thread winding through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge.’ Isaac Asimov

Sermon

As I stated in the call to worship, our theme for the month is humility. And, just so my wife, Sally, gets the point of my sermon, let me state it at the outset: What I would like to offer you this morning are some thoughts on “learning in humility.” This involves looking back at history and being honest about the impact of our ancestors’ actions. I want to do this as a community or nation and not as individuals, although we as individuals are ultimately responsible for how the larger community behaves. The question then is, how do we observe our past with enough humility to look honestly at our history and ourselves and behave in a more moral fashion in the present?

My source from within the choir has shared with me that during practice they had a spirited discussion about the words in today’s anthem: Specifically, the words about taking up the torch of continuing the quarrel with the foe. Some members reasoned that passing on the torch meant to carry on the war, while others were more inclined to see the torch as representative of furthering the cause. Subsequently, I learned that our granddaughter’s high school chorus recently sang the song, and they were taught that the poem refers to carrying on the torch in memory of the fallen soldiers. As an English major in college, I am well familiar with that kind of endless argument, especially when the author has left for parts unknown and cannot offer the exact meaning of the words. I can see all sides as valid. The passing of the torch may indeed call us to battle, or it may call us to the remembrance of fallen comrades, or, in a broader sense, it may call us to never lose sight of the value of our freedom.

Tomorrow is Veterans Day. The holiday was originally called Armistice Day in commemoration of the ceasing of WWI hostilities on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. In 1926, Congress passed a resolution to officially mark the holiday. Interestingly, the resolution called for thanksgiving and prayer and spoke only of a wish for peace and a desire to avoid future conflict and such unprecedented devastation. I was surprised to read no drum beating in the resolution!

In any case, as the saying goes, you probably “had to be there” to appreciate the depth of feeling conveyed by the poem and the actual intent of the author. My current counseling work with veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq tells me that members of the military have not only been trained to carry out their mission, but that looking out for one’s comrade is paramount. On the battlefield, whether it is in Flanders or Afghanistan, ensuring your buddy’s welfare, as well as your own, leaves little room for politics or larger moral judgment.

Political decisions and larger moral judgment fall to you and me and to those we elect to represent us. By the time our military is involved, it is too late for not honoring their heroism and individual sacrifices. One of the most difficult tasks for those of us, who lived through Vietnam, and later the second Iraq war, is to separate the warrior from the war; or, to recognize that the military is but a tool of our national will. The military carries the torch while we, the citizens, give it purpose! Or, in some cases while we fail to give it purpose.

The narrow meaning of Veterans Day is to honor military veterans. However, it seems to me that anyone who has preceded us in life is a veteran of one or another of life’s struggles. As we look back at where we have come from, it is easy to note the points of pride. If you have ever listened to a UGA football pregame show, you may have heard them do a segment called “Bulldog Points of Pride,” in which some outstanding individual or team play is recalled, often with the voice of legendary announcer Larry Munson. You are less likely to hear about a mistake or embarrassing moment. You might think Georgia won all of its games and with nothing but great plays. I think we approach most of life like that. In its extreme form, we call it revisionist history.

Therefore, we have been handed a torch of national pride that too often prevents a humble viewing. Consider the founding and expansion of our country. The earliest settlers that we so revere, and will honor later this month as we each consume a year’s worth of calories, would have all died if not for the generosity of the nearby Indians. How were the Indians repaid? Poorly! Because the Europeans had developed the ability to make glass, we bought their land with glass beads. When the Indians finally wised up and realized what was going on we just took their land with superior firepower. They did not even understand the concept of owning the land. I suppose this is often the way things happen, but our textbook writers have offered our schoolchildren for generations a romantic notion of the settling of the colonies. If we are honest, our torch also sheds light on the Trail of Tears and the other injustices many of our ancestors perpetrated on the Native Americans.

I recently picked up a copy of the November Smithsonian magazine, special collectors issue. Each page held short stories and pictures of objects from the Smithsonian collection that highlighted an important contribution to American history. Its pictures and articles impressed me, but what hit home was the juxtaposition of its contents. Mingled together were objects from our past that demonstrated goodness and progress as well as shame and oppression. Let me just name a few and you can make your own judgments.

The magazine cover featured an American buffalo. The corresponding story read, in part, “Some plains Indians believed the buffalo, their source of sustenance, arose each spring from their dwelling place within the earth. The Indians believed that inattention on their part to the spiritual necessities would cause the Great Spirit to withhold this gift. The buffalo, thus to them was very much a religious symbol. Our contemporary contemplation of the buffalo is always accompanied by nostalgia and some regret. This is to say it is never untinged with shame—which means it is a religious symbol still.”

Well, that was not quite fair of me. The judgment was in the article! So let us do this one: the museum has Nat Turner's Bible. The Turner led uprising resulted in countless deaths, white and black. Who was to blame? They hung Turner. Or this one: a jacket that belonged to Cesar Chavez. I never think of him when I buy or eat a grape. Then I found a couple of women. The museum has Susan B. Anthony's gavel and Sandra Day O'Connor's judicial robe. I sense some real progress there! There is a real point of pride: from suffragist to Supreme Court Justice! Then, just when I thought things were getting better, I found the lunch counter from the 1960 sit in at the drug store in Greensboro, NC. Later, from 1963, the magazine has a picture of shards of stained glass from the shattered window of the 16th St Baptist Church in Birmingham where a bomb killed four young black girls. The civil rights struggle has been long and at times bloody. There were also representations of hope, such as Harriet Tubman's hymnbook; she was known as the Moses of her people for her work with the Underground Railroad. Finally, under this theme, we find one of the pens LBJ used to sign the 1964 Civil Rights Legislation.

Moving to a different category on two facing pages, we find the 1903 Wright Flyer airplane, the Bell UH-1H Iroquois Helicopter, known as the Huey and later as the Cobra, which has become such a staple of warfare, and the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, and our military's current most advanced weapon, the Predator Drone. Flip a few pages and you will find the Colt revolver, which helped win the west from a different group of Indians. A few more pages bring us to an old suitcase that was used by one of the 120,000 Japanese Americans during their internment in 1942. Together on the same page, we find a fallout shelter, a World Trade Center sign, and a gas mask from WWI, maybe from Flanders. So far, in looking at just a few pages, I had a multitude of feelings. At this page, I felt shame, fear, anger and pride. It will take some humility to sort out all of these feelings

Maybe for balance, the Smithsonian also featured an old comic book of Wonder Woman, Dorothy's red slippers, R2-D2, and an early Barbie Doll. An interesting fact I learned is that every 3 seconds there is a Barbie sold somewhere in the world. A picture of an AIDS quilt from 1987 again dashes the frivolity.

One of the more personally poignant pictures was of Mohamed Ali; the museum has one of his robes and a pair of his gloves. I found this poignant because I remember watching on TV the weekly boxing matches with my grandfather. I remember how much he enjoyed them. I can still hear the jingle of the Gillett Razor ad. I also remember the thrill of seeing the Olympic Torch as it was carried through Watkinsville in 1996, and then I remember watching Ali light the Olympic flame at the top of the stadium in Atlanta with his battered brain barely able to steady his hand to hold the torch. It humbles and shames me to think I cheered him on to that moment.

There are nodal points in history where a decision must be made for a torch of light or a torch of destruction. If we choose a torch of light, we see messages from the past. If we look humbly, we may be able to use our knowledge wisely. We see that our country was partially built on the backs of slaves and indentured servants. We take for granted that it is a good thing that we have outlawed child labor, yet we buy clothing and other goods produced by children in deplorable conditions in other countries. The light of that torch is just beginning to shine beyond our borders.

While at home, in yesterday's Banner Herald, the front-page article was about racial slurs posted on a hacked UGA student's Facebook page. I was not surprised that we are still plagued by that kind of hate; but the torch for cauterizing it rose up immediately with an interracial effort. The

good news is we are moving forward in many areas.

It is easy to limit our perspective to quarrel with the foe at Flanders, but that foe does not even exist anymore. However, there are many foes and many quarrels. Several people, including John Kennedy, have paraphrased the admonition from the gospel of Luke, “that to those who have received much, much is expected in return.” Our veterans of war, our veterans of civil rights, our veterans of education and medicine, and many others, have given much from their time, their health, and their lives. Many of our gifts were ill gotten, including our wealth from slavery, and the land we took from others. I believe what is now required of us is to use wisely all of these sacrifices from others.

For example, going forward we have the responsibility to hold high the torch of wisdom in deciding how to use our vast arsenal of military power. Speaking of power, I am old enough to remember what it felt like to drive a car with a V-8 engine and a four-barrel carburetor. I see the wisdom in giving up that feeling of tremendous power. It is wise to give up that power in favor of being able to breathe, to save our planet’s atmosphere, to save our polar bears and to be able to pass on life and health to future generations.

So find a torch. Take it up. But, do so in humility from the lessons of history! May it be so!