

“Forging Our Own Deliverance, -- an appreciation of Liberalism”

(First in the series “Roots of our Faith.”)

A sermon by Leland Bond-Upson, given at Honolulu, 21 November 2010

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The following is taken from the report of *The Royal Commission on Children's Employment in the Mines, 1842*

“I found at one of the side-boards down a narrow passage a girl of fourteen years of age, in boy's clothes, picking down the coal with the regular pick used by the men. She was half sitting, half lying, at her work, and said she found it tired her very much, and of course she didn't like it. The place where she was at work was not two feet high... In great numbers of the coal-pits in this district the men work in a state of perfect nakedness, and are in this state assisted in their labour by females of all ages, from girls of six years old to women of twenty-one... although this employment scarcely deserves the name of labour, yet, as the children engaged in it are commonly excluded from light and are always without companions, it would, were it not for the passing and re-passing of the coal carriages, amount to solitary confinement of the worst order.”

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I love liberalism. I love liberals. I'm one myself, and I ain't ashamed. I love liberals because they've encouraged me to be big and whole and generous and loving. I love Unitarianism especially, because I found liberalism there when I was young, and felt safe with those people.

Liberality has a tremendous and honorable history, for liberals and their policies are responsible for reducing much of the pain and strain in the lives of ordinary people.

This is a huge subject, touching as it does on all aspects of modern life, but it's very much worth talking and thinking about, as it is the *primary* impetus of Unitarianism and Universalism, and still forms the core of our modern faith.

'*Liber*'-- that's Latin for 'free.' It's the root for both 'liberty' and 'liberal.' To be liberal is to be free and open-minded. It is also to be generous and open-hearted.

Being truly liberal is hard and unceasing work, not suited to the faint of heart--not suited to those who must have things settled; certainly not suited to those who feel that questioning is somehow disloyal, or heretical.

Excesses—Let us deal immediately with the misuse and excesses of freedom. 'Libertine' and 'libertarian' are also rooted in the Latin *liber*. Libertines are those who place little or no restraint on their personal behavior, that is, they want a selfish freedom, to take liberties with others.

A Libertarian used to mean simply someone who upholds the principles of liberty, as do "civil libertarians" today. But thanks to the Libertarian Party, it has generally come to signify those who desire as much freedom from government as possible, especially freedom from taxation. This too, in my view, is a selfish impulse, for taxation is how the people pay for the services and structures that are beyond the means of individuals or small groups.

Finally, there are those who simply have a habit of disconnecting their theoretical thinking from their common sense and morals. This is best expressed by my dear, late, liberal mother-in-law Gwen, who, when she spotted what she considered irresponsible thinking, would remark, "some people are so open-minded their brains have fallen out."

In a discussion of liberalism, we might keep these extremes in mind, remembering, as with almost everything human, it's possible to distort, or have too much of, a good thing.

[end of introduction]

Liberals have been around for a long time, but *liberalism* is a recent arrival. Its roots are in ancient philosophy, but as a movement it is little more than 200 years old.

There are many individual liberals scattered throughout history: the stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius, the heretic Pelagius in the 5th Century, St. Francis in the Middle Ages, Erasmus, Locke, Descartes, Voltaire, Condorcet and the other French philosophers, and—let's not forget the greatest liberal of them all—Himself, Jesus of Nazareth. Who was more free and more generous? In our own time we have been blessed by a great many more, too numerous to mention, except I have to mention two of my favorites: Eleanor Roosevelt, and the newspaperman Herb Caen, who once remarked that as schoolchildren we respect George Washington for his fortitude, but we *love* Lincoln, for his generosity.

Let us now hear three of those liberal voices that helped create a movement that has swept the west and that both entices and frightens the east and the Third World.

READINGS 1, 2, 3, read by congregants in the pews:

1. Socrates (470-399 B.C.E.)

. . . . Men of Athens, I honor and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet after my manner, and persuading him, saying: O my friend, why do you care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little

about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? This is my teaching, and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, my influence is ruinous indeed Wherefore, O men of Athens, I say to you acquit me or not; but whatever you do, know that I shall never alter my ways, not even if I have to die many times

2. Peter Abélard (1079-1142)

10 of his 158 Problems in Theology:

Should human faith be based on reason, or no?

Is God one, or no?

Is God a substance, or no?

Is sin pleasing to God, or no?

Does God punish the same sin both here and in the future, or no?

Is it worse to sin openly than secretly, or no?

Is God the author of evil, or no?

Is God all-powerful, or no?

Can God be resisted, or no?

Has God free will, or no?

3. The English Bill of Rights, 1689

. . . . the Lords spiritual and temporal, and diverse principal persons of the Commons, being now assembled in a full and free representative of this nation, do in the first place, for the vindicating and asserting their ancient rights and liberties, declare:

- That the pretended power of suspending laws, or the execution of laws by regal authority, without consent of Parliament, is illegal.

- That levying money for or to the use of the crown, by pretense of prerogative, without grant of Parliament, is illegal.

- That it is the right of the subjects to petition the king.
- That the raising or keeping a standing army within the kingdom in time of peace, unless it be with consent of Parliament, is against the law.
- That excessive bail ought not to be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishment inflicted.

What we heard was Socrates, defending intellectual freedom while on trial for his life, then Abelard ‘innocently’ introducing the element of doubt, opening the way for independent thought, Does God have free will?—what kind of a 12th C question is that?—and lastly, we have, in writing, the triumph of the people over royal absolutism. (That last clause was borrowed word for word and made into our own 8th Amendment.)

All right—what beliefs define liberalism?

Value of the individual--“The fundamental postulate (underlying assumption) of liberalism has been the moral worth, the absolute value, and the essential dignity of the human personality.” (--J. S. Shaprio)

Freedom—Above all, liberalism favors freedom, as opposed to authoritarianism, be that of the state, the church, a political party, or public opinion.

Freedom to associate—groups of individuals can join together to assert themselves against injustice.

Intellectual freedom—the most-prized freedom is that of thought and expression

Equal Rights—civil liberty and equal rights before the law

Toleration—respect for differences

Rationalism—liberalism believes in objective truth, and that we are essentially—not always—rational creatures capable of discovering it.

Change and Progress—a modern and characteristically liberal idea. As one writer put it “Vaguely conceived in the 17th C., proclaimed in the 18th, the idea of progress,” of betterment, “became an article of faith in the 19th.” (J.S.S.) From this came the ideas of step-by-step improvement, via a series of reforms.

READINGS 4, 5, 6, read by congregants in the pews:

**4. Mary Wollstonecraft, 1792
“A Vindication of the Rights of Women”**

My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness

5. John Stewart Mill—On Liberty, 1859

If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. . . . The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the cleaner perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

6. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience . . .

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status.

(Notes on readings: 4. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) is generally credited with being the first feminist of the English-speaking world. Her contemporary, the French feminist Olympe de Gouges (1748-93) was guillotined during the Terror. She was too liberal.

5. John Stuart Mill, a child prodigy who began learning Greek at age 3, was the greatest of the liberal philosophers of the 19th century, and had a major influence on liberal legislation in England. He was also one of the first male feminists.

6. An amazing force for good in the post-war world, Eleanor Roosevelt was the driving inspiration behind the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights.) [Herblock cartoon]

Liberalism's accomplishments—During the 1988 election, the Republicans successfully tarred Michael Dukakis with the shameful brush of Liberalism. I was furious! At Dukakis, for not defending liberalism! It's such an easy case to make. Here is a short list of liberalism's accomplishments:

- representative government;
- republicanism, that is to say, no kings—the people are sovereign (ironically, for centuries only the most radical were republican)
- the very idea of progress; and with it
- the idea of reform, and gradualism;

- the end of the slave trade, and then the end of slavery;
- the steady expansion of the voting franchise, from only white men with a certain amount of property, to white men of the middle class, to white men of the working class, to white women 28 and older, to white women 21 and older, and finally to people of color;
- in commerce, free enterprise in place of the heavy controls of mercantilism. Later, in promoting government regulation to keep the inherent selfishness of capitalism from getting out of hand;
- improving conditions in the factories, such as fencing the dangerous machinery;
- improving conditions in the mines, including such a simple thing as facilities at the pit head where the miner could get clean before going home;
- ending child labor in both factories and mines;
- support of the trade union movement;
- winning limits on the hours of the work week, from unlimited, to 60 hours a week, to 48, to 44, to 40;
- support of racial justice;
- support of economic justice;
- support of feminism;
- support of gay rights;
- opposition to abuse in all its forms;
- protection of the environment (conservation!);
- public education;
- public health;
- birth control;
- prison and punishment reform (ending routine flogging in the army and navy, and reducing the number of capital crimes from more than 200 to a handful, and now working on the elimination of capital punishment entirely);
- humane treatment of the insane;
- the end of the worst forms of poverty;
- old age insurance (Social Security);
- disability insurance;
- unemployment insurance.
- health insurance;

These are all liberal programs.

At the outset almost all were opposed by almost all conservatives.

[Conservatism] A word about conservatism. At its best, conservatism preserves what is good, slows down change, restraining recklessness, giving us time to thoroughly consider, informed by what has been successful in the past.

At its worst, conservatism is blind opposition to change, acting on the low impulse to restrict and deny, and maintain inequality, usually for economic reasons.

Of course, each of us is a mix of liberal and conservative. We liberals are conservative about a lot of things: fiscal policy, conserving natural resources, use of military force, to name a few.

Now—there's a strange and wonderful thing—the conservative of today accepts and honors—as conservative values—most of the triumphant liberal agenda. Each of those reforms I listed was opposed by the conservatives *of that day*. But today's conservative, even the most reactionary, doesn't want to bring back absolute monarchy, nor trade controlled by guilds, nor education controlled by priests and restricted to the sons of the nobility, nor limiting the vote to propertied white men, nor slavery, nor flogging soldiers. The list of things they don't want to change includes most of the reforms instituted in the last 200 years.

So consider this: taking the long view, compared to the views of an 1810 rock-ribbed conservative, the views of a 2010 rock-ribbed conservative are 90 liberal! Conservatives do get it right eventually, it's just that they're very slow-adopters.

Does this not give us some hope for the future? It tells us that liberalism's going to continue to advance, in its typical herky jerky way. It's just a matter of time. Time, and persistent effort.

What are the current hot-button conservative issues? They are: abortion, gay marriage, gun control, disregard for the environment, more tax breaks for the rich, and the unilateral assertion of American power. But if history is a guide—and it is—then all we need to do is keep the pressure on. What's the most likely next candidate for conservative capitulation? I'm guessing marriage equality. It's happening now, state by state.

Religious Liberalism:

Most UUs hold most of the liberal values, and our liberal religious ancestors built a religion around them.

We believe, do we not, that truth is consistent and universal—not partitioned—therefore religious truth does not contradict truth from any other source.

The Dalai Lama has said “essentially, my religion is kindness.” We believe in and practice kindness. Random acts but more often, intentional ones.

Problems—But there are difficulties. The better the liberal, the rockier the path—our beliefs must be *constantly* revised in the face of new information. We are a non-creedal faith, and there's a price to pay for it. No rest.

Should we care to take a good long liberal look at ourselves, we will find we are quite imperfect liberals in this regard. It's natural to want to fall back sometimes on things we 'know' are true, and to quail before the duty of looking again, deeper.

Falling short of our ideals. How can we be better liberals?

- well, we need to oppose political correctness—the power of P.C. is mighty, claiming that there are some things that shouldn't be

questioned or criticized. And the corrupting power of power has us forcing liberal values on those who haven't made up their minds, or have a different idea. It's hardly better than forcing reactionary values on people.

- And let's not forget the liberal, generous, open heart. Let us practice constant acts of kindness. Let us give to causes we believe in. Let us give something to the beggar we pass by. Give to the people so close we hardly think of them as needing kindness. Oh, but they do, they do.

- We will fail to be perfectly free and perfectly generous, of course. Bob Dylan mocked us when he sang: wal, I'm liberal, but to a degree. I want everyone to be free. But if you think I'm gonna let Barry Goldwater move in next door, marry my daughter, you must think I'm crazy. I would do it for all the farms in Cuba!"

10 years later, John Lennon sang to us, in *Working Class Hero*, "Keep you doped on religion and sex and TV, And you think you're so clever and classless and free. But you're all" f-, f-, f- friggin' peasants as far as I can see." So let us be liberal and generous to ourselves, and forgive ourselves. And then try again.

[sadly] I know our world seems filled with fools and demons. That you can't get away from mean-spirited radio talk show hosts, and pompous TV talking heads. But history shows us that everybody aspires to freedom. History shows us that progress, despite the frequent failures and setbacks, is steady, and we are moving forward three or four steps for every one back. In my own lifetime we have seen a revolution in the status of women; of blacks; of Latinos; of Asians; of Native Americans; of the sexual-orientation and gender-identification minorities; of the disabled; of children, and students and the elderly; of those desiring birth control; against cruelty to animals; of death with dignity; of our attitude toward the earth and her bounty; of our

attitude toward mistreatment in all its forms. Nationalism is no weaker, but internationalism is strengthening.

Since I was a boy, there has been an increase in general kindness and respect. You might be surprised at what they're teaching in the schools. The idea of honoring diversity instead of trying to stamp it out is a huge change.

We must oppose the fools and demons, of course, and though they may seem forever on the throne, yet our quiet witness and our activism sways the future.

I have an unshakable confidence that liberalism will continue to work its magic, not as a movement or political party, but as an attitude, as a habit of kindness toward people we don't know. Liberalism is moving with the tide of history, and will some day, some day sooner than we think, in the words of our hymn, "see the Earth made fair, and all her people one."