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Onward and Upward Forever

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The last time I spoke here, my subject was Robert Ingersoll, the iconoclastic orator of the nineteenth century. Many of Ingersoll's contemporaries referred to him as "America's greatest agnostic" and some called him "America's greatest infidel." Ingersoll would happily agree with the first description, but anyone, then or now, with any knowledge of his work, would see the absurdity of the last description. No one who ever read Ingersoll would question his fidelity to the truth as he saw it. The subject of my talk today is not Robert Ingersoll, but it is about truth, the truth as you see it, as I see it and our fidelity to that truth whatever it may be.

"Walk the talk" is a phrase we here a lot nowadays. Another way of saying the same thing is: *Do as you say*, don't lie to yourself. This sentiment has been around for a very long time. Shakespeare said what I've just been saying, but he said it far more eloquently. He said:

"This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not be false to anyone."

If, as the Bard says, being true to ourselves precludes us from being false to others, what happens to our relationships with others when we *are* false to ourselves? If we are not true to ourselves, can we be true to others even if we want to?

But first things first. Before we attempt to answer that question, we have to ask a more basic question: *Can* we be untrue to ourselves? It almost sounds oxymoronic, doesn't it? How can the person telling a lie be unaware that they are lying? And yet, when faced with solid facts concerning serious problems in our own lives or in the life of

someone close to us, our first response is sometimes denial.

Eons ago, in the African veldt, our ancient ancestors, when faced with physical danger, followed their instincts and fled from that danger. Millennia later, during the last great ice age, emboldened by fire and tools, they found that suppressing the instinct to flee and standing their ground sometimes offered a better chance for their survival. On the other hand, sometimes it didn't, but at least a choice was now there. As societies and relationships grew more sophisticated so did the number of choices we had before us.

Today, when confronted with a physical threat fleeing may still often be the best choice, but only in the short run. Fleeing a human attacker or an aggressive animal may take us out of harm's way, but to protect others we sooner or later must stand our ground by seeking help from the institutions created to supply that help. Justice and fair play cannot be based on the instinct to flee.

At the emotional level, denial is a corollary to fleeing danger on the physical level. Sometimes it may be useful in the short run. It gives us time to rally ourselves and prepare to stand our ground. But if denial continues, it becomes a crutch. Then we are indeed being untrue to ourselves. We become self-destroyers and, unless we are hermits living solitary lives in an isolated cave or cabin, our self-destruction can hurt or even destroy those we love as well as ourselves. If a problem is not with us, but with someone close to us, then denial of that problem makes us enablers, helpmates to a downward spiral of hurt and even destruction.

So, in my opinion, while Shakespeare was right when he put those words in the mouth of Polonius: "To thine own self be true ... and thou canst not be false to anyone." He did not remind us that the opposite is true: If we are false to ourselves we cannot help

but be false to others as well. Was this omission accidental or did he think that it was too obvious to justify the waste of his time, his ink and his paper?

I have often wondered how much of our denial is well-intentioned. As an example, while there are certainly sincere believers in all religions, there are also doubters who hide their doubt out of kindness to relatives or friends or out of fear of those in a position to punish them for their doubts. In the current social climate, especially in some areas of this country, “Deacon of the First Baptist Church” looks far better on a resume than “Vice President of the Bertrand Russell Society of Atheists.” Even though it is true that the one needn’t be any more or less sincere than the other, the applicant who claims the former is usually far more likely to be hired than the latter. Even here in a land that claims religious freedom, it is often easier for doubters to put bread on the table by lies or omissions than by being true to others and thus themselves.

To me free thought is only valid when it is what it claims to be: “free”. The “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” the Fourth Principle of Unitarian Universalists, might lead some to God and others away from the concept of God. It is not so important where the thought leads, but only that the process is free and honest.

Martin Luther King saw us all as the children of God and could not imagine a fair and loving God favoring some of His children over others. Robert Ingersoll and other humanists saw us as the products of a long, sometimes terrible history, but while we struggled through the horrors of war and conquest, we also longed for peace and justice. We gained wisdom and wisdom taught us love and mercy. They preached that the ultimate wisdom, the ultimate realization is that we are all of a single family. Whether we agree with Dr. King that the brotherhood and sisterhood of the human family will

come through the love and grace of God or whether we believe, along with the free thinkers and humanists, that that same brotherhood and sisterhood will come about through growth and wisdom, maturity and progress, we both reach the same inspiring conclusion.

The people who built this sanctuary, whose tool marks can still be seen on the rough-hewn beams in the belfry, called themselves Christians. They ordered that a cross be set in the stained glass above the doorway along with the words, First Universalist Church. They shared many of the beliefs that inspired Dr. King, over a century later. Dr. King was a Baptist and they were Universalists, but there was a common bond between them. Well of course, you say, they were all Christians, but Christianity is a very broad, some might even say ambiguous category.

Torquemada and Erasmus of Rotterdam were contemporaries during the late 15th century and both claimed to be Christians, but Torquemada was the Spanish Inquisition's chief inquisitor, some might say chief torturer, and Erasmus of Rotterdam once wrote:

“It has been written that those who lived before the advent of Christ were ignorant, barbaric and cruel. Yet, as I read the ancient books, I find they were written by men of wisdom, mercy, nobility, and justice. Often am I tempted to utter, “Pray for us, Saint Socrates.”

Erasmus took his religion *seriously*. He knew that when Jesus spoke of mercy and justice in the Beatitudes, he was not inventing anything new, but reminding us of ideas, ancient even his time, that are forever new because they are forever true.

In the case of Torquemada, how could anyone who has read the Sermon on the Mount possibly see the actions of Torquemada or the judges of the Salem Witch trials or

the words and deeds of other equally violent fanatics, then or now, as anything but a mockery of the prophet they claimed to adore?

Erasmus, by his own admission, felt far more comfortable with the ideas of the pagan, Socrates, than the “Christian” Torquemada and Martin Luther King, by his own admission felt more comfortable with the ideas of the Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi than some “Christian” hellfire preacher putting volumes of hate and vengeance, but scarcely a sentence of love into the mouth of God.

Dr. King, as I said, believed in a god of justice and love, who did not play favorites with his children, hence King’s involvement in the civil rights movement. The people who built this church believed the same, hence their involvement in the abolitionist societies and the Underground Railroad. The atheists, agnostics and humanists of the free thought movement also were found working on the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century and, arms linked with Christians and Jews, attempting to cross the bridge in Selma during the twentieth. The difference, of course, was that they thought mercy and justice and wisdom came not from god, but from the highest planes of human reason. Well, that is a significant difference isn’t it? Even though it ends up in the same place, there doesn’t seem to be a common road to that place.

God did it, we did it. What common road is wide enough to encompass both ideas? Clarence Darrow knew, Robert Ingersoll knew, Dr. King mentioned it, more or less in speech after speech and the Universalists used it as a slogan. I used it as the title for this talk: “Onward and upward forever.”

Depending on one’s point of view, “onward and upward” can be theological or philosophical, religious or secular. It simplifies things by suggesting, at least at first

sight, that there are only three alternatives in life. We can move onward and upward, we can stay in one place or we can go backward and downward.

Let's start with the middle option first; stasis, staying in one place, choosing a position and staking it out. Of course, in a universe where the only certainty is change, this is a bit difficult, it may, in fact, be impossible without involving a large degree of self deception. There's that "To thine own self be true" thing popping up again.

The absence of an unchanging present is so obvious that we have to deceive ourselves to buy into it. If some of us are currently happy and comfortable we might utter, "I wouldn't change a thing, ever." And then pretend that changing nothing while everything around us changes is a possibility. Like children at the end of a perfect day in spring they pretend that the sun is still high in the sky and dusk will never come. Some of us refuse to consider that just as morning is a prelude to noon, so even the darkest night is the precursor of a new dawn.

Since we do not live in a changeless world, not even from moment to moment. I wish the *last* option was as easily rejected by reason as the middle. It isn't, of course. Downward and backward is just as much an option as onward and upward. In fact, it is chosen so often that it undermines the faith of some in onward and upward. It turns some of us into cynics.

Cynicism is a foolish response. I once heard it said that a cynic is a wounded idealist and I suppose there is a certain amount of truth in that. Cynicism, like denial, is just another form of fleeing, of being untrue to ourselves and to others. Perhaps it too, has a temporary value. It can us teach something about the irony and absurdity of life, but full blown cynicism finds irony in everything and assumes that absurdity is the

normal state of being human. A wounded idealist, yes. A wise observation. Sometimes wounds are unavoidable, but they can never justify permanent cynicism. We must respond to wounds, physical or emotional, by helping to heal them. Cynicism is the spiritual equivalent of responding to a physical wound by becoming addicted to pain pills.

A wounded idealist. An idealist who embraces cynicism is, by definition being untrue to his or her true self. When confronted with greed, ignorance and hatred, and the horrible injustices we see and read about every day... I admit, it is wearying and the temptation to leave the fight is strong, but it is exactly at those times when the world is moving backward that cynicism is most destructive. "All that is necessary for evil to succeed," said Thomas Jefferson, "is that good men do nothing." Agreeing with the cynics on the basic worthlessness of human beings is worse than doing nothing. Wounded idealist? I can't feel sorry for wounded idealists. Goodness knows they don't need my pity anyhow. They're more than capable of heaping a world of pity on themselves.

The optimism of the nineteenth century Universalists took a beating in the twentieth century, first with World War I, which inspired philosopher will Durant to write:

"Then the Great Madness came, and men discovered how precariously thin their coat of civilization was, how frail their freedom. Science, which was to be the midwife of progress, became the angel of death. Brave aviators in clever machines dropped bombs upon women and children, and learned chemists explained the virtues of poison-gas. When it was all over it appeared that the victors as well as the fallen had lost the

things for which they had fought. The idea of progress seemed now to be one of the shallowest delusions that had ever mocked man's misery, or lifted him up to a vain idealism and a colossal futility.”

The optimists, for there were still a few left, countered that it had been the war to end war, that the human race had learned its lesson. It hadn't, of course. Despite the blood and the horror that dwarfed all previous conflicts, The First World War was merely a prelude to greater bloodshed and greater horror.

The Holocaust, some claimed, proved that onward and upward was a well-intentioned, but misguided myth. Some asserted, quite reasonably, that the extent of the Holocaust and the unspeakable of destruction of World War II could not have happened without the huge leaps in technological progress that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Who could argue that? Who could argue against the obvious fact that the same skills used to make ploughshares in ancient times could as easily be used to make swords?

Yet, lest we forget, the people responsible for World War II and the Holocaust lost the war. Lest we forget, technology has continued to advance far beyond anything that the survivors of World War II could have imagined on VJ Day. In fact, lest we forget, science and technology are still in their infancy. Say what you will about them, they are not going away, they are not going to stop or even slow down. We have advanced to the point where the two world wars of the past century would be but a mild prelude to the horror and destruction of a third world war.

What should be our response be to all of this? Should we sit around and speak of a metaphoric doomsday clock and the inevitability of it's advancing hands? Should our

response to the future be, “Boy, I’m glad I won’t live long enough to see the worst of it”? Is that what religious liberals do? No, it’s not. It is not for us to speak of the Last Days. Leave that to the millennialists. Let those who hate the world speak of the “good news” of its demise. Let those incapable of imagining a future for us and the earth rejoice and sing out their hope for the end of time.

As for myself, I would prefer to question Will Durant and say that “The idea of progress is not a vain delusion. It is all that we have. The road to the past lies ruined behind us and that ruined way does not lead to golden ages just waiting to be resurrected. The franchise of Athenian democracy, the best the ancient world had to offer, was closed to women and slaves. So was our own democracy until a few lifetimes ago.

Back in the darkest years of the Great Depression, Thomas Wolfe wrote: “The evils that we hate cannot be overthrown with shrugs and sighs and shakings of the head however wise. To believe that new monsters will arise as vicious as the old, to believe that the great Pandora's box of human frailty, once opened, will never show a diminution of its ugly swarm, is to help, by just that much, to make it so forever. We must meet our enemies; fear, hatred, slavery, cruelty, poverty, as they come to us. From there we must proceed in the affirmation of the fact that the continuance of that unceasing war, is our religion and our living faith.”

So said Thomas Wolfe.

We may see the past only through the fog of human history, but no fog is dense enough to hide a Camelot or a Shangri-La or a Utopia. They just ain’t there. If there is ever to be a golden age, it can only be in the future and we will have to build it and we

will have to build it facing forward and moving upward.

Amen.