

The Devotional Heart

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When was it ever simple to know what to do? We humans are complicated creatures, full of conflicted passions. We tend to be preoccupied with what we want and what we don't want, engaging life with a push-pull agenda that never ends.

There's a Cherokee folk tale of an elder teaching his children about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to them. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, greed, guilt, resentment, and false pride." He continued, "The other is good – he is love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, and compassion. The same fight is going on inside you – and inside every other person, too."

The grandchildren thought about it and after a minute one of them asked, "Which wolf will win?"

The elder simply replied, "The one you feed."

Sounds simple, doesn't it? And yet, our choices rarely seem that simple. We know how often we feed the angry wolf that harms others without regard for their welfare. And we certainly know how often we have been harmed by the angry wolves of others. And so we make rules, laws to tell us what not to do. Perhaps the initial intent was to give us some guidelines to follow, but as long as the guidelines are composed in the negative, they embody distrust. We presume that people can't or won't make good choices about how to behave so we institutionalize our distrust through laws and enforce them formally through the legal system or informally through group norms and shaming. We may internalize the rules and self-enforce through feelings of guilt. And many religions have sought to enforce their rules through threats of eternal damnation.

And yet, all the "thou shalt nots" in the world will never teach us how to open our hearts in love and compassion, how to feed our loving wolf.

I'd like to share a story I heard a few weeks ago. It concerns Blanche, a woman running some errands at a shopping center. Sitting at a red light, she saw a woman in a minivan in front of her who appeared to have "lost her cool" and was striking something or someone who looked like a child. She didn't move when the light turned green, but continued what she was doing. Honking the horn caught her attention but only as far as the next light when she resumed her actions. Other motorists noticed her behavior and started honking as well.

When the light turned green, she turned onto a highway on-ramp and pulled over onto the shoulder. Blanche pulled over behind her. The woman got out of her minivan, continuing to yell at someone inside. Blanche started walking slowly towards her, unsure of what to say or what to do. Her thoughts raced. "Should I call the police?" "Can I really talk this woman down?" "Am I doing the right thing?"

Blanche was not facing a simple decision.

As soon as the woman saw Blanche, she yelled, "Get back in your car and leave! This is none of your business!" Blanche suddenly realized that any challenge would be misinterpreted and the outcome would not be good.

She struggled to find the right words, finally deciding to say the simplest, most direct thing she could. Blanche said, "I'm a nurse, and I stopped because you looked like you could use some help. Are you OK? Is anybody hurt?"

The woman blurted out that her small son who had attention deficit disorder had unbuckled himself from his car seat, was crying and throwing a tantrum and wouldn't sit back down and she wanted him to sit down. Blanche peeked into the minivan and saw two small boys, one in his car seat and the other standing and crying inconsolably.

Seeing that the children weren't injured, she told the woman that she seemed distressed, and looked like she could use a hug. "Can I give you a hug?"

The woman broke out in sobs as she entered the embrace, saying how hard this was on her, she felt she couldn't handle it, and so on. Blanche just held her, listened to her, comforted her. She said, "You're doing the best you can. Children are not easy at times, and motherhood is not an easy job. You'll be OK. You'll

make it. You're doing a good job. I can see you love your boys and don't want them to get hurt."

When the woman finally calmed down, they turned their attention to the little boy, still crying. Having won the woman's trust, Blanche rocked the boy in her lap, telling him that his mother loved him very much. He calmed down and they parted ways.

Blanche later said that she felt motivated to show the mother love and compassion rather than anger and judgment, realizing that the first step to being understood is trying to understand.

When is it ever simple? The rules say to report an abusive parent to the authorities. But Blanche's heart told her otherwise. This woman was struggling with her own two wolves. But when the loving wolf became frustrated, she turned the job of loving over to the angry wolf. How many of us have hired our own angry wolves to do our own job of loving for us? And how successful do we think we were?

But we still do it. And we make laws to restrict the angry wolf, even though deep down we know that the true way forward is through nurturing and embracing the loving side of our nature.

This is a dilemma as old as humanity. It is the conflict between head and heart, between judgment and compassion. It's the conflict between faith and works that motivated Martin Luther to protest against the Roman Catholic Church in the early 16th century.

The church had rules for everything, including rules about how to get out of the rules through buying forgiveness for cash. This didn't seem right to Martin Luther, who read the Gospels differently than the pope at the time. He understood that rules were what you resorted to when you couldn't trust the natural compassion of the awakened human heart. Luther felt that the Gospel was about opening your heart to God's love; that a loving heart could be trusted to behave kindly, while rules only worked to prevent certain overt behaviors and never reached the soul within.

He harked back to the discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees, where the Pharisees demanded that religion required everyone to follow the law to the

letter, but Jesus said that people were more important than laws, that kindness and compassion trumped the rules and regulations.

This conflict, present at the beginning, is a theme running all the way through the history of Christianity. After all, Christianity's goals are pretty lofty. Peace, kindness, compassion, turning the other cheek can seem unrealistic. So religion has a tendency to turn legalistic and judgmental, to become rule-driven rather than heart-felt.

This was the case in seventeenth century Europe. The Reformation had led to decades of war and conflict over doctrines and beliefs. There was a growing interest in finding a more heart-filled religion that would embody a God of love rather than hatred. This movement was called "pietism," and its leading advocate was Phillip Jacob Spener, whose book, *Pia Desiderata*, said that people wouldn't be judged on whether or not they had believed the correct doctrine, but by how they had behaved; whether they had sought to bring about God's kingdom of love on earth. And with this came a different view of scripture. He believed that the Bible was meant to be experienced as a "living Word," not read literally but directly appropriated into the lives of believers. Spener's view was that the work of the church was to minister and care to one another with clear consciences and open hearts.

A multitude of new sects arose from Spener's influence and many experienced persecution by the more established churches. This led to an extensive emigration of European Pietists to America. They included Moravians, Bretheren, Quakers, Mennonites, and Baptists and others.

Universalism was a strong theme for many Pietists, who believed that, since God was both loving and just, God wouldn't create humans to send them to eternal punishment; all would eventually return to God's loving embrace. One leading early American Pietist was George de Benneville, who echoed the Cherokee fable when he wrote that "Every man carries withinwith him two persons, an outer and an inner." The outer person, "a complete man, of a mortal body, soul and spirit," is "animal-man, fallen, corruptible, and subject to dissolution. The inner person, complete and perfect, and a union of an immortal body, soul, and spirit is the sole subject of regeneration." De Benneville also

wrote of his intention to “Preach the Universal and Everlasting Gospel of Boundless, Universal Love for the entire human race, without exception, and for each one in particular. . . My happiness will be incomplete while one creature remains miserable.”

Universalism grew first, under the leadership of John Murray, whose called people to “Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.” And then under Hosea Ballou, who urged, “We must not look for religion in creeds or formularies of human invention. We must look for it in the honest, the pious, the devotional heart.”

But even as Universalism grew, so did Unitarianism. Unitarianism was as head-centered as Universalism was heart-centered. The Unitarian impulse arose from a conflict between the harsh Calvinist theology of the New England Congregational churches and the emerging Enlightenment ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. As people came to value their unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, it became more and more obvious that this conflicted with the doctrines of a human nature that was inherently corrupt and lacking the capacity to make meaningful decisions for the good.

When the Unitarians thus reasoned original sin out of existence, they replaced it with a multitude of other sins. By their emphasis on rectitude and character, they created a religion as intolerant as anything they’d rejected. Unitarianism became the religion of the upright and proud, an intellectually arrogant doctrine of right-thinking as judgmental as any traditional orthodoxy.

The pietist impulse didn’t entirely bypass Unitarianism, though. It simply took a different form. The Transcendentalist Movement, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and others, called for a return to a heart-felt religion of emotional experience and sensitivity through nature. Emerson proclaimed that revelation was not sealed; it was possible every moment in every heart; that revelation is the disclosure of the soul within each of us; that we are connected to all creation.

Exploring the roots of a natural piety, Emerson wrote in his essay, *The Oversoul*, “Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest

dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds. As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, and God, the cause, begins.” Emerson continued, “I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine. There is a deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us. Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is memorable. It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur. The soul’s health consists in the fullness of its reception. For ever and ever the influx of this better and more universal self is new and unsearchable. Within us is the soul of the whole; the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One. When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will, it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.”

Unitarianism received a renewed influx of the Pietist spirit with its merger with Universalism in 1961 to become the Unitarian Universalist Association. Despite the influx of Universalist piety, Unitarianism’s staunch secular humanism has proven mostly resistant to the new influences.

The problem has been that pietism tends to lose its meaning when deprived of a sense of the sacred. The Unitarian rejection of traditional views of God has often led to throwing the baby out with the bathwater by denying any and all notions of the sacred or holy. When pietism’s inclusiveness is deprived of the power of the sacred, it tends to dilute down into a general, mushy inclusiveness that loses focus and purpose. It’s as though we’ve ripped the doors off the barn but forgotten what the barn was for. Where once there was a vital community united by love, we now often have a loose collection of lukewarm folks who wander in and out, depending on conditions or whim.

Our denomination has failed to grow because we have neglected the basic human need for reverence, compassion, and love. Let these be our doctrine and all else will be well. Our challenge now is to find new pathways to the heart that respect the mind but refuse to give it control over what is none of the mind’s business: the actual living of life itself.

Last June this congregation agreed that we valued being a compassionate community. A compassionate community is a community grounded in love, a community that intentionally chooses to feed the good wolf and resist the temptations of the angry wolf.

In the closing section of his book, *The Devotional Heart: pietism and the renewal of American Unitarian Universalism*, John Morgan lays out a plan for reform:

1. A renewal of the positive elements of the Pietist legacy could immeasurably enrich the diversity of Unitarian Universalist theology and live.
2. Pietism could provide us with a deeper understanding of Protestant Evangelism today, which is the fastest growing segment of the Christian church and perhaps connect us to this movement on various issues of common concern – world hunger, war and peace, etc.
3. Pietism's insights could help us clarify the theological base for social justice into living faith instead of simply talking about it.
4. Pietism could help our movement reconnect with other movements, such as the Society of Friends, Mennonites, Brethren, Moravians, , Methodists, and Lutherans.
5. Pietism offers us a renewal of the old Universalist sense of hope.

We have much to learn from those who value the path of the open heart. May we always continue to learn, to grow, and to deepen our capacity for love. May we learn to value the feelings of others as highly as our own, for it is only through true understanding that love can find the right path to follow. Have you made the wise choice in choosing which wolf to feed? Have we?

May it be so.