

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

ANOTHER QUESTION OF BALANCE

By

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READING

There is – deservedly, I think – a lot of attention paid these days to seeking “balance” in our lives, especially as our work lives seem to demand more and more overtime and “billable hours” while our families and personal lives sometimes get short-changed.

But today I want to speak to a different kind of balance that also deserves our attention.

Our Reading for this morning is from the writings of Elie Wiesel and derives from the kabala tradition of mystical Judaism. It concerns the ancient Jewish legend of what the Jews call the lamed-vav tzaddikim, which translates as the 36 righteous people by whose merit the world is said to survive.

The legend suggests that in every generation there are 36 secret tzaddikim. These are saints, in effect. Nobody knows who they are – not even they themselves – but, according to the legend, if it weren't for their lonely example, the world would collapse.

Jewish author and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel tells of a story about one of these tzaddikim who came to the sinful city of Sodom of biblical lore, determined to save its inhabitants from destruction. Wiesel writes,

Night and day he walked the streets and markets preaching against greed and theft, falsehood and indifference. In the beginning people listened and smiled ironically. Then they stopped listening; he no longer even amused them. The killers went on killing, the thieves continued to steal, and the wise kept silent, as if there was no Just Man [or woman] in their midst.

One day a child, moved by compassion for the unfortunate preacher, approached him with these words: “Poor stranger. You shout, you expend yourself body and soul; don't you see that it is hopeless?”

“Yes, I see,” answered the Just Man.

“Then why do you go on?”

“I'll tell you why....In the beginning, I thought I could change these people and their ways. Now, I fear I cannot. [But] if I still shout today, if I still scream, maybe it will at least prevent them from ultimately changing me.”

“Another Question of Balance”

The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy

The celebrated children’s author, E.B. White, once said,

It’s hard to know when to respond to the seductiveness of the world and when to respond to its challenge. If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were [only] challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning, torn between the desire to improve [or save] the world and a desire to enjoy [or savor] the world. [And] this makes it hard to plan the day.

Yes, on the one hand, we are probably all at least occasionally aware and grateful for the fact that we live in a sometimes stunningly gracious and beautiful world — a world of excitement and stimulation, warmth and intimacy, good humor, hard work, manifest truth and beauty, goodness and love.

And, on the other hand, we are also probably equally aware, at one level of consciousness or another, that, in many respects, we live in a brutal, wanting, and deceitful world — a world plagued by hardship and disease, exploitation and war, starvation and political repression.

Indeed, it is perhaps one of the enduring paradoxes of life that our world should be so incredibly and abundantly shot full of both wonder and horror, grace and exasperation, powerful love and loveless power. Indeed, “Joy and woe,” as the poet William Blake once observed, “are woven fine.”

Even while we try our best, perhaps, to maximize our joy and minimize our woe, the harsh realities of the larger world cannot be escaped. Privation and hunger, violence and neglect are everywhere, though we often do our best to blot them out. But, alas, they’re in the news. They’re woven in and around and among our homes and communities. They beg at the church door. They crop up in our literature, drama, television, and fine arts. And, as writer Peter Marin once pointed out, the harsh realities of the larger world are even to be found in our morning coffee.

In our coffee? Yes, as Marin suggests, and as we’re all dimly aware, I suspect, the very coffee we drink — unless it’s “fair trade” coffee, like the Alterra Coffee we serve here at church — in all likelihood, comes from South America, Central America, or Africa — places where the landowners are typically few, the workers are many, and the wages paid to those who work the land are often so low that they are barely able to eke out their simple existence in disenfranchised powerlessness and poverty.

As my friend and colleague David Phraener puts it, “No matter how hard we try to deny it, the world-at-large exists. It is there. It impinges upon us all the time. Perhaps it is not

always part of our awareness," says Phraener, "but it lingers at the edges of our awareness like a ghostly presence."

Because of the world's "ghostly presence" lingering at the edges of our conscious awareness, it is difficult for me (and perhaps for some of you) not to be at least occasionally, if not regularly, aware of the routine inequities of consumption and distribution throughout the world. And because of these routine inequities, many of us, I suspect — even though we know we're not personally responsible for the plight of the South American coffee bean workers, for example — nevertheless, many of us, I suspect, tend to share in a strange, nagging, almost annoying, sense of generalized guilt. So that, paradoxically, even as we sometimes struggle at home to pay our bills, we also may well feel guilty for our relative abundance.

And so, we try to convince ourselves (and one another, perhaps) that our own relative good fortune is somehow justified, earned, or deserved, or, alternatively, in order to distance ourselves, we may well simply close our hearts and say something like, "Well, that's just the way the world is. I can't help it!"

Try as we may, however, the "ghostly presence" of the world's misery remains. And to many sensitive souls — mine certainly included — it hurts. It hurts to face the fact that 98,000 children a day starve to death, and that this number has not changed substantially for at least the last 20 years. It hurts to read the Amnesty International magazine (and other such accounts) of people being tortured in countries all over the world -- and sometimes, as we've learned in recent months, by our own CIA. It hurts to hear of the millions — even billions — of good people seemingly hopelessly trapped in relentless cycles of poverty, ignorance, economic and political repression both abroad and here in our own country, here in our own city, here on our own front steps. It hurts to watch the news with its daily toll of murders, poverty, war, and racism. The travesty of Frank Jude, for example.

II

So, one understandable response that many of us tend to make to our painful awareness of the world's woes is to somehow justify ourselves.

Another perfectly natural response, it seems to me, to the world's woes is to pull in and try to block them out. And, to a certain extent, we *need* to do this or we'll go nuts! And so we shelter ourselves, and avert our eyes from the poor, from the homeless, and from the street-bound mentally ill. We limit our exposure to the news — and distance ourselves from the exposure we do have. We read selectively, avoiding those issues which we may feel are too complex or are simply too painful for us. We may even deliberately try to keep the conversation light and cheerful, while we concentrate on our families, our fitness, our hobbies, and our careers. We may feel like, "Well, I'd *like* to help those in need, but I can't solve anyone else's problems — let alone the world's problems — I've got too many problems of my *own*!"

And so we pull in, and sincerely hope that the world and our neighbors can somehow get by all right without us.

Now, at *some* point in the arrangement of these concerns and priorities – and it will be different for all of us -- we run the risk, it seems to me, of elevating the importance of our own happiness and self-satisfaction to a level of unconditioned significance, and thus, as writer Peter Marin suggests, we dangerously elevate *ourselves* to the level of God, in effect, and narcissism to a state of grace.

Narcissus, you may remember from Greek mythology, was the young man who fell in love with his own image, his own reflection in the water of a quiet pool. Narcissus pined away for it until he finally died and changed into the narcissus flower. This one thing, himself, he elevated to a level of unconditioned significance, and thus his own image became so important to him that he finally sacrificed everything for it and, ultimately, ironically, ended up sacrificing himself. We run the same risk, I would suggest.

Similarly, there's a story which comes to mind from my favorite of all novels, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. It's about a woman who had always and only looked out for herself. She had been extremely self-centered and selfish, and had always connived and cheated others so that she would get what she wanted.

When she died she went to hell and was cast into a lake of fire. So her guardian angel wondered what good deed of hers she could remember to tell God and plead for her mercy. She finally remembered that the woman had once pulled up an onion in her garden and had given it to a beggar. The angel told this to God, and God said, "Okay, you take an onion, then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold of it and be pulled out. And if you can pull her out of the lake, then let her come to paradise. But if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is."

At this, the angel flew to the woman and held out the onion to her. "Come," she said, "catch hold and I'll pull you out." She began cautiously pulling her out. She had just about pulled her out when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, caught hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But the woman was very selfish and began kicking them off. "*I'm* to be pulled out, not *you*. Get away! Get away! It's *my* onion – *mine!* – not *yours!*"

It was at that point, of course, that the onion broke. She fell back in the lake and, according to the story – Dostoevsky being the good Calvinist that he was – she is there to this day.

The impulses and drives to care for our families and for our jobs, to tend to our yards, to putter in our homes, to keep physically fit, to travel, to patronize the arts, and to otherwise enjoy ourselves and the world around us – these are unquestionably worthy pursuits.

But there's also a world in *need* out there! And when we elevate ourselves to ultimacy, to an ultimate and absolute good – to the level of God, in other words, whether we believe in God or not – and when we elevate narcissism and our own self-satisfaction to a state of grace, then we seriously cut ourselves off from others and, moreover, from our deeper selves. And *that*, in the end, can be as disastrous for *us* as it was for Narcissus and as it was for the woman in the lake of fire.

Thus, I would suggest that we need to remind ourselves, from time to time, that there's more to life than our own contentment and self-satisfaction. In the end — surprise! — it's *not* all about *us*! There's a world out there, a world that needs us, a world that thirsts for bread and water, and for freedom and justice. There are people who need jobs and dignity, food and shelter, education and health care. There is, in my judgment, a badly flawed proposed amendment to the Wisconsin state constitution that needs to be defeated. There are children and foster children who need our support and our love. There are wounds to be healed, programs to be funded, letters to be written, emails to be sent, and various causes and committees to be served (including some of our own church committees).

III

My call, then, is simply for balance.

If we are heavily involved with the world already, it may be good for us to become a little more involved with ourselves and our families. If we are heavily involved with ourselves and our families, it may be good for us to become a little more involved with the world. Both extremes, I believe, hold their dangers. If we're too active trying to solve everyone else's problems, we may lose touch with ourselves and our own needs, and thus project our own problems and frustrations out onto the world. And at the other extreme, if we're too involved with ourselves and our own self-satisfaction, as I've just suggested, we may lose touch with the world and its needs, and thus lose perspective on ourselves and our own self-importance. My call, then, again, is for balance.

For every recreational group we join, for example, we might also join a social service organization, a hospital group, a peace group, a mental health group, or a parents' group. For every hour we spend enjoying ourselves jogging, walking, watching television, shopping, playing tennis or whatever it is, we might also spend an hour writing letters to our representatives in congress or visiting a friend in need. Now that my be overly simplistic — an hour for an hour. It probably is — but *however* we do it, my concern is that we avoid the extremes and, thus, my call, once again, is simply for balance.

One very simple thing we can do — tomorrow — is to observe the Latino boycott in support of our nation's immigrants.

IV

In conclusion, then, the question, I believe, is not whether to save or to savor the world. To choose either extreme is spiritually a mistake, in my judgment. The question, I believe, is how both to save *and* to savor both the world *and* ourselves.

And this, of course, is not an easy task. The best I can suggest is that, first, we seek to achieve a balance in our concern for others as well as for ourselves. Second, that we learn to live with the absurdities and manifest incongruities of living in a world shot through with equally incredible beauty and wonder, on the one hand, and brutality and privation, on the other hand, without either being seduced or immobilized by *either* of these twin realities. And, third, I would suggest that we continue to do what we can and should and must in the world, no matter what the results of our efforts may be.

"[But] don't you see that it is hopeless?" asked the child.

"Yes, I see," answered the Just Man.

"Then why do you go on?"

"I'll tell you why....In the beginning, I thought I could change these people and their ways. Now, I fear I cannot. [But] if I still shout today, if I still scream, maybe it will at least prevent them from ultimately changing me."