

“The Seduction of the Absolute”

A Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, September 17, 2006

For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

What do you know that you're absolutely sure about? And how do you decide? Do you use your masculine, rational side the most, or your feminine, intuitive side the most?

One of the painful lessons that I've had to learn over and over is that when I am most certain, that's when I am most likely to have overlooked something that throws my conclusion into doubt. The signals that remind me of this appear when I am listening to someone else who is absolutely sure about something that I have doubts about. The more certain the other person is, the easier it is for me to see the problems and for him to leap over his own gaps in information, not even recognizing that something could be missing. As Phyllis McGinley said

When folks with views opposed to mine
Their arguments will not resign
For all my pleas, 'tis nothing less
than plain, unvarnished Stuffiness.

How different, on the other hand,
When I take up some valiant stand.
I merely keep, sans contradictions,
The Courage of my own Convictions!

I thought of this when I read a few years ago of a man in Atlanta who was shackled and driven 450 miles by the Military Police to Camp Lejeune. They threw him into the Marine Corps brig there and charged him with desertion. He insisted he had never been in the military. The MP's were absolutely sure he was their man. Martin L. King (guess what the "L" stands for) got into trouble by jumping a commuter train turnstile. Saving that buck got him 40 days in the brig before the Marines reluctantly admitted he was the wrong man and released him. He sued, of course. His wife had been holding supper for him for a long time and wondered where he went and when he'd be back. (You and I paid for the settlement of the suit in our taxes.)

People who get seduced by the Absolute tend to make that kind of mistake. They know what the truth must be, and whatever evidence they collect points only to what they have already decided. The military has always been vulnerable to this because of their authoritarian ways.

Back in the 6th century BCE, Croesus, the king of Lydia, lost his throne because of his certainty when he should have been cautious. He wanted more land but, worried about how tough his Persian neighbors were, he sought advice from the oracle at Delphi, allegedly the wisest of all seers before launching his attack.

The oracle said that if he went to war he would absolutely destroy a great empire. That was all Croesus needed. He attacked and was beaten decisively by the Persians. They chased him back into Lydia and threw Croesus himself into chains. Somehow he was able to send an envoy again to the oracle to ask "Why did you deceive me?" The priestess replied that she had not. Croesus had indeed destroyed a great empire, his own.

We've seen that kind of tragedy repeated in modern military ventures, over and over. It's happening in Iraq. It happens in civilian life too. Fortunately you and I don't have to make decisions on the basis of flimsy information sources, decisions that could ruin the lives of many people.

When we have important decisions to make, we always have good fresh, reliable, resilient,

stable information available to us. When we choose our mates and rear our children, select our careers and decide where to live we always have sources of information that tell us what we need to know. Don't we? Didn't you?

Well, that was a dumb question. We make decisions about the most important issues in our lives without all the formation we need to be wise. The more important the decision, the less certain the information. "No one ever told us we had to study our lives," Adrienne Rich said in one of her poems, "make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history or music, that we should begin with the simple exercises first and slowly go on trying the hard ones." But in fact that was true for every one of us.

We just don't know enough. We never know enough to be certain about the hard questions and the hard decisions. And yet we have to make them and continue reaffirming them every day, in the midst of evidence that tells us something is wrong. It's then that the Absolute is most seductive, when we know that we don't know what we need to know, and yet we have to keep deciding. How do we do it?

Fundamentalists of any faith act like it's easy. They run into the paradox of uncertainty that is familiar to us all, the paradox that the most important things we decide are in areas where we have the least information.

Fundamentalists flee from the responsibility of making their own decisions by trusting something outside themselves to be always and absolutely right. It doesn't matter whether they are Christians or Jews or Muslims or Scientologists or even Atheist Fundamentalists. Whatever is absolutely fundamental frees those who are committed to it from having to acknowledge the awesome gap between what we need to know to make up our lives and what we know we must do without knowing enough to justify them.

What has been the most important decision of your life, absolutely the most important? I know what it was for me: the choice to join my life with that of my life-partner Mary. I'm one of the fortunate ones who knew the instant I saw her who she was, and I wasn't even near her. I was standing in the pulpit when she pushed open the door at the back of the church, 50 feet away from me, on the first of many occasions when she'd be late to church.

I'm glad she was late that day because no one else saw her enter the room, squeezing around the door and closing it softly. But I saw her. And even though I was the most obvious person in the room, the one at the front who had everyone else's attention, she doesn't remember seeing me. Of course she saw me subsequently. She couldn't help it. But that instant was not a memorable one for her.

When we married four years later we had no help from the Absolute, but lots of pressure from inside ourselves. Our awesome decision was naive (though we were old enough to know better), perhaps misguided, certainly rash and according to all the statistics, likely to come to nothing. It was right for us in spite of doubtful circumstances and six kids already on the sidelines (three each) who weren't sure they wanted us two to be their parents. I cannot now imagine our having made any other decision.

As Pearl Buck once said, "in this unbelievable universe in which we live there are no absolutes. Even parallel lines, reaching into infinity, meet somewhere yonder." I'm not sure about the physics in that but it's good theology. We were fortunate that our parallel lines met in church that Sunday and quickly curved to intersect.

The best decisions I've made in my life have all come without a sense of absolute certainty and

usually without much clear logic guiding them. That's a big confession for someone who is so sequential and so rational in his thinking as I am. There's nothing wrong with logic except that it often gets you to the wrong place. It all depends on what assumptions you start with. There are no more philosophically logical and coherent intellectual people on earth than the Jesuits. I just don't agree with where they start and where they go with their logic. I think the Absolute has seduced their reason, and it takes them where it says they must go.

In my own life and commitments, I've often found that I make my most important decisions by intuition, using what is called my feminine side rather than my reason, which is supposed to be our masculine side. I think giving gender to these poles that are in each of us is nonsense. I've seldom known for sure what would be the right decision and some of my best decisions have been absolutely crazy. Other people tell me that. I never know at the time. I'm too busy living my decisions to know they're crazy.

When I got married the first time (incidentally, a sensible decision in which I thought it all out logically, and married a very nice person who remains a dear friend to this day), the one thing I told her I absolutely knew I would not do was go into the ministry. It was hard to give up that marriage. It was so sensible, so rational, so wrong. I've liked the ministry, though.

When Mary and I married years later, I told her the only place in the country I knew I would never move was Chicago. So flat! So big! So grimy! No place to live. We moved there in the early 80's, and knew we wanted to build our own home. There was such a depression in construction that everyone told us to not even think of building. So we bought a low-priced piece of land that had been for sale for 35 years. It was low-priced because the city always refused to approve a building permit on it. Then we figured out how to get a building permit and we built our home there.

I used to think I was a very rational, logical person and I am, in all the things that really matter, like what I believe about the universe, and what to eat for lunch, and whether to buy a big dog or a small one. In all the things that really matter, I'm logical, sensible, very reasonable. It's just the little things that I decide by my heart, like who to marry and what to do with my life and where to live. A sense of the Absolute hasn't helped me at all in these choices.

How do you make your most important decisions? There's a personality inventory test called the Myers-Briggs that is based on Jungian psychology. You may have been subjected to it. It says everyone makes decisions based on how their scores fall on a scale between sensing and intuition. Sensing means using your good senses and calculating your way to an answer logically, one step at a time.

We who use intuition just know what feels right and we go that way. Now, we aren't without reason, but it's a little screwy sometimes. As I said, I'm a switch hitter, depending upon whether I'm looking for wives or looking for dogs. I've stopped looking for wives. But no matter whether I'm using my masculine reasoning side or my feminine intuitive side, the Absolute never really seems to help me much. It woos me, but it never really helps.

As Lord Byron said "There is something pagan in me that I cannot shake off. In short, I deny nothing, but doubt everything." Especially I doubt the Absolute at least as much as I doubt myself.

Dick Weston-Jones