

Who's in Charge? Reflections on Authority

Presented by the Rev. Patty Hanneman at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough on August 8th, 2010

Readings from the *Tao de Ching*, translated by Stephen Mitchell

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The Great Way is easy,

Yet people prefer to take the side paths.

Be aware when things are out of balance.

Stay centered within the Tao.

When rich speculators prosper

While farmers lose their land;

When government officials spend money

On weapons instead of cures;

When the upper class is extravagant and irresponsible

While the poor have nowhere to turn –

All this is robbery and chaos.

It is not in keeping with the Tao.

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Some say that my teachings are nonsense.

Others call it lofty but impractical.

But to those who have looked inside themselves,

This nonsense makes perfect sense.

And to those who put it into practice,

This loftiness has roots that go deep.

I have just three things to teach:

Simplicity, patience, compassion.

These three are your greatest treasures.

Simple in actions and in thoughts,

You return to the source of being.

Patient with both friends and enemies,

You accord with the way things are.

Compassionate toward yourself,

You reconcile with all beings in the world.

Sermon

These ancient words from the *Tao de Ching* are but two examples that people have long sought some ultimate authority to guide their lives and actions. In fact, who or what is in charge is one of the five questions that all major religions attempt to answer. What should that authority be? What or who is the ultimate universal value that stands beyond human existence? What is the principle, force, essence, or power that creates or infuses existence with meaning? What holds the universe together?

When we make an interpretation of right and wrong, what guarantees that our interpretation is correct? And one last question, when you hear the phrase “ultimate authority” does it comfort you? Or does it make you feel apprehensive, or even indignant?

I've been thinking a lot the past few weeks about questions of authority. In part, the questions I've just asked stem from conversations that have taken place lately on the Unitarian Universalist ministers' chat line around issues of immigration reform. Several weeks ago we received a call to join other religious leaders in Arizona to protest their new law, and this demonstration took place a little over a week ago. Many emails on the chat used the word "authority" to argue for our need to be there. As UU ministers, we carry the moral authority to do this, one email said. Our training as religious leaders gives us the religious authority we need, another email said. Our authority comes from a higher place than the authority of the state, it was claimed.

What authority is that exactly? Where does it come from, and how exactly was I supposed to catch it by becoming ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister? Is it a theological authority based on an absolute God? Authority based on my superior reasoning capabilities? Authority based on empathy and concern for others? These have all been claimed over the centuries to be *the* ultimate authority for discerning correct action. Let's look at each one individually to see whether they pertain to Unitarian Universalist ministers.

Religious authority, such as one writer suggested we have, rests in the belief that god or a higher power speaks through sacred writings. In its purest form, religious authority is not to be questioned, because to do so would be to question the ultimate Being in charge. By extension, the ordained among these traditions, because they have been trained in the sacred scriptures, embody and represent that sacredness, and so – it is felt – they clearly deserve respect, if not the reverence, that the writing itself commands. Just as the scriptures are not to be questioned, neither should the clergy be questioned. Obviously, this does not hold true for Unitarian Universalists.

In fact, it was with the advent of Unitarianism that religious authority had its ultimate transformation as an end product of the Reformation. Unitarians in the early 19th century totally rejected dogma and creed, and religious authority stepped aside in favor of free inquiry. As a free faith, Unitarians fostered free thought. Brian Hill, a member of All Souls UU in Tulsa writes that religious authority became religious advisor and facilitator for Unitarians.¹ Through the *advice* of religion, individuals within the Unitarian tradition were invited to become their *own* authorities. Never before had a religious body recognized to this degree the capability of the individual to come to his own moral

¹ Hill, Brian, *Simple Gifts*, a monthly journal of All Souls UU, Tulsa, OK, Feb. 2008, Vol. V, Issue VI.

conclusions. And I say *his* in this context because it is unclear at this point in our history whether women were considered to be moral beings.

In large part this sea change was brought about by ministers trained at Harvard reading German philosophers such as Immanuel Kant in the late 18th century and Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early 19th. Kant believed that right action can be deduced from two unique principles, or categorical imperatives. The first: treat people as ends, not the means to ends. Second: act as if your actions will become universal rules. In other words, act in such a way that if everyone acted that way we would still have a moral universe. Using these two principles, Kant believed our reason would be sufficient to lead us to moral decisions.²

Schleiermacher, on the other hand, as a romanticist, claimed that it was our feeling selves, instructed through our personal experience, which leads us to correct action. It's that moment that lies between our coming to a rational decision and taking action on that decision that really matters, and that moment is influenced by our feelings.³ This same emphasis on feelings was voiced a few years ago by Lucia K.B. Hall, a humanist advocate. In her article, "The Irrational Basis of Ethics" she proposes that ethical decisions cannot be made on either religious authority or reason, but it is biologically based in empathy. She writes, "This ability to feel as another person feels, to be able to put yourself in their emotional situation, even wince involuntarily when someone bangs their funny bone – this is the link that binds the human race together, that makes us care about how we act toward others."⁴

So is this – my empathic self – the ultimate authority for my life and ministry?

I'd like to return to Immanuel Kant for a brief moment if I may. For all his emphasis on reason as the site of moral agency, Kant also describes a movement, a process by which we become authors of our own moral law, which we are then obliged, as rational beings, to follow. This process begins with having pure concepts or ideas – *dinge* in German – that act as the building blocks for what we later recognize as Truth with a capital "T". From this we develop a sense of meaning about those things those ideas, and how we relate to them. We arrive at Kant's *gegenstande* – an "I-Thou" relationship that solidifies our sense of our place in the family of things. We then have a movement between *gegenstande* and *objekt*,

² Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason*. Translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2002.

³ Schleiermacher, Friedrich, *On Freedom*. Translated by Albert L. Blackman. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992.

⁴ As quoted in Richard Gilbert's *Ethics: an Exploration in Personal Morality*, Boston: UUA, 1994, p 10.

or the place of reason. It is this re-presentation of our world that allows a unique moral law to develop in each of us. Then, from a place of reason, we must follow through with an appropriate action.

If we look at our moral agency as this series of events – events that affect every ethical decision we make – we notice that at each step along the way, there are various elements at play. The concepts we develop as the basic building blocks of decision making may include religious stories, wisdom literature, overtones of religious authority such as the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments, or the Seven Principles. The next movement may include feelings of empathy or feelings of distance, feelings of being part of or feelings of being alienated from the person or people involved in the decision. From our sense of the world and our place in it we then hope to come to a rational decision. And finally, we act or we don't act. Each of these steps claims authority for us. And as we grow to adulthood, different steps along this process will take priority in our decision making.

Something that Kant could not appreciate when he was developing his theories about reasoning capabilities is that our neo-cortex, the part of our brain responsible for rational thought, does not fully develop until we are in our early 20s. So rational thinking cannot be expected to guide children and adolescents in their decision making. Instead, as parents, teachers, and caring grownups, we provide the concepts, the rules, the stories, the love, with *authority*. We provide the *dinge* on which they will begin to make sense of their lives. They will soak it up like water to a sponge. Later, during adolescence, their focus of authority will shift to their peers as they seek to understand their place in the world. Eventually, if they've been given the chance to practice making decisions with our guidance, they will grow to make rational decisions on their own.

So where does authority ultimately lie?

The danger of an ethic based solely on principles and dogma is that if that dogma is challenged or denied or found to be false, then the basis of morality disappears. This is a deep fear for many people whose ethics are based primarily on religious authority.

The danger of an ethic based solely on empathy is that our empathic circle may not be large enough. If we are not exposed to people different from ourselves, if we have not cultivated a sensibility to all of our world, then our empathy will be too limited to guide our actions.

The danger of an ethic based solely on reason is that we often act in unreasonable ways. We persistently exaggerate human goodness. One of the first theologians to advocate a religion based primarily on reason was John Calvin, and few of us would recognize his actions today as reasonable.

The great religious traditions are aware of the discouraging realities of our collective life. They recognize that at each of these movements described by Kant, human error is possible, and that should lead us to a degree of humility. It is the paradox of having hope in the midst of human failure that sustains faith traditions. And I would argue that it is this sense of hope while recognizing our failures that lies at the heart of our sense of authority. It is born of compassion, for ourselves and for others.

As I was reviewing the cottage meeting comments a few nights ago, I was struck by how many of your comments address the importance of creating a place where these issues of moral agency are addressed. Many of you said that one of the most important things about UUCH for you was to create a place for children to learn principles consistent with your values, laying the groundwork for ethical lives. You were also discouraged that we tend to lose families when their children reach adolescence because we have been unable to create a large enough peer group for them to comfortably address with one another how they see themselves in the world, where they can reinforce with one another the values they've learned. And many of you expressed your appreciation for being able to think freely among other people who value moral and intellectual integrity.

Each of these issues speaks to a step along the path toward claiming your own internal authority. Ultimately, this is what our free faith tradition is about, that each of us develops the capability and the responsibility for discerning what is right and what is wrong for ourselves. As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I cannot tell you what that is, for I am not a religious authority. I am perhaps a religious advisor and facilitator. And to the degree to which I can move through Kant's process with attention, intention, and compassion, I can be an adequate one. In that role I can share my own truth, and be present to you as we become co-creators of an ethical community. A community created through remembering our history, engaging with our world, sharing our stories, and holding one another accountable for our actions. May it be so, and blessed be.