

July 12, 2009 Sermon: Religion, Citizenship, and the American Life

(Target zone 1200-2500 words. 11pm status: 2315 words)

Life is short.

Life is short. Or better said, life is finite. You only get so much time here on earth. Whether a person lives to be 10 years old, or a hundred, there really isn't much time available between the time you pop your head up out of the sea of eternity and first take a look around, and the time you dive back under.

Now on the face of it, a human lifetime can seem like a pretty good run of time. But when you stop to look at it, by the time a person gets done with just the demands of staying alive: earning a living, each day's travels and errands, tending to one's family, eating, and sleeping – there isn't usually much left of a day – or a week, or a month, or a year.

So it ends up that we're left with precious little time for expressing ourselves, letting others know what is essentially us, letting others know what we believe – what we really stand for.

And we have the challenge that American culture works against us. It works against our bringing meaning to our lives. Notice, for example, that American culture says you are not supposed to even discuss politics or religion in polite company.

Why those two topics? Why do you think it is that – I don't know – auto mechanics and art history aren't the two topics that are off the table? How come

politics and religion are taboo, but it's fine to talk about pro football or the latest *American Idol* episode?

I think it's because politics and religion involve the things we care most about. If you extract personalities from politics, and theology from religion, what you're left with are stripped-down ideological frameworks that are pretty much the same thing – sets of ideas about what we should or shouldn't care about. They both concern themselves with values, and the way life should be lived. When you think about it in this way, the line between politics and religion begins to blur considerably.

But whether or not politics and religion come to the same thing, there's no question that it's a little risky talking about these matters. You're revealing yourself to others, and they're revealing themselves to you. Perhaps one or both of you won't like what you see.

So the American taboo against talking about politics or religion is understandable. But it's not really right, I don't think, that the things most important to us, most central to our core values – we're not supposed to discuss those sorts of things in polite company.

OK, I admit I don't really know what it's like in other countries. I always imagined that old Russian men spend their afternoons playing chess in the city square, and arguing about Tolstoy's idea of the religious life. Or that in the Greek fishing villages they stay up late in the off season drinking ouzo and loudly debating the relative merits of capitalism and socialism – maybe getting in a fight but then making up the next day and kissing each other on both cheeks. And in France they spend their evenings drinking strong coffee in small cafes with brass railings,

smoking skinny brown cigarettes, and figuring out once and for all whether God exists.

Maybe. As I say, I don't really know how it goes in other countries. But I do know what happens here in the USA. Here in America, religion and politics should pretty much only be discussed with your spouse, and maybe your children. Or with your dog. Your dog would be OK also.

I heard a radio commentator recently say that he simply could not talk to his conservative Jewish friends about the Palestinian situation. Though he felt strongly about it, and felt that the Palestinian issue was extremely important, he wouldn't even bring it up in conversation. As he said, that would be the end of their friendship.

And it's not even much different with family. If you're at a Thanksgiving gathering with your parents, aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, enjoying the smell of the turkey cooking and maybe having a beer or a little wine – and you do try to start up a conversation about the perils of the military-industrial complex, or why the bible should not be taken literally -- you will not be popular. The room will fall silent and your aunt will suddenly remember that the potatoes might be burning and your dad will sidle away mumbling something about a need to check the score of the football game on TV.

And that's a shame. Because what's the point of knowing only the outer shells of our friends and our family, but not what's inside? Plus, as former Unity church minister Wallace Robbins points out in today's responsive reading: A little wrestling over our own views and those of others can help us all get clearer on

what we're really about. He says: "The dialogue of mind with mind refines religious thought."

So I say, go ahead! Speak up. Get yourself kicked out of a dinner party or two. Hey – your friends and family love you [*ironic*], so they'll always invite you back next time. Won't they? I think they will. Maybe.

Touching back upon the refrain: Life is short. [I bet that you've recently heard someone say: "I can't believe summer is already almost half over!" Time really does slip by so quickly!]

OK, maybe they won't invite you back. So maybe it is best to decide to be prudent, mostly keep your mouth shut, and thereby keep your mother-in-law from being absolutely convinced that she was right from the start and you were never good enough for her daughter. I'm not really saying it's a bad thing to exercise some discretion. Because you still have the option of demonstrating your values – showing them by how you live.

And after all - while talking about what you believe in is good and valuable and can be helpful – what mainly counts is what you do. The problem here isn't so much *hypocrisy*, though there's plenty of that around – for example when the politician gets all misty-eyed and proclaims that "our most important resource is our children" while slashing funding for school and child support programs, and at the same time supporting increased war and military spending. This type of hypocrisy isn't really the issue for most of us. The problem for most of us outside

of public life has more to do with wasting our time and money – our human energy - on things we don't really care about.

As has been pointed out many, many times before: We should all live our values, we should all live our love. But as it turns out, that's not so easy – it takes a fair amount of swimming upstream.

As in the case of speaking our values, it seems that American culture is working against us with respect to living our values. Because American culture – dominated by television and its evil henchmen, pro-sports and celebrity worship – asks us not for citizenship, but for passive consumerism.

Years ago, a friend of mine recently arrived from overseas commented on the phrase he kept hearing: American consumers. His general observation was that Americans seemed to be a pretty shallow breed, focused mainly on figuring out what they were supposed to acquire next, and led around by the nose by advertisers. “American consumers?” he said somewhat scornfully. “You might as well just say Americans.” Ouch! That kinda stung.

What about this phrase *American consumers*? We hear it so often we scarcely notice it. On television, on the radio, in news reports, when heads of government and businesses talk, they talk about “the consumer.” As if we should all understand that unless you or I happen to be an “important person,” our role in society is to work at our jobs ...so we can buy more thingsso we will need to work more at our jobs... so we can buy still more things.... and so on.

American consumers?! [*disgusting*]. On the news reports you'll hear authoritative voices proclaiming “Consumers are staying home, and away from the malls!”

Consumer confidence is down for the sixth month in a row.” We want to give the American consumers what they want...”

Consumers. That is how we – you and I, are thought of!! Consumers. Creatures whose main job it is to consume. We are not even thought of as people, as individuals! Instead, we are spoken of as a sort of drone class of worker insects, expected to toil away, work happily at our jobs, keep buying things, and not make waves.

Through this kind of language, American culture is telling us to keep quiet, stay home, avoid connecting with others, pay attention to trivialities, and ignore what’s most important to us. And to varying degrees, we all put up with it.

But we shouldn’t. We don’t have to take what we’re handed. Instead, we should be thinking of ourselves as American citizens -- people who have agency, who are expected to speak out, to work for making the world a better place. It is true that in the public sphere, in the media, active citizenship – caring about your neighbors, your neighborhood, your city; or working to correct injustice – that sort of thing is rarely encouraged. But we Unitarians are used to being a little contrary. We’re not really big on following someone else’s rules. So pulling in a different direction shouldn’t be that hard for us.

I think I mentioned this before, but: Life is short. Isn’t it strange to notice that others are seeing you as old – when you yourself don’t see yourself much differently than you did 10 or 20 or 50 years ago? Mostly we don’t notice time passing.

Oh, and did I discuss TV? All the statistics I've seen say that we Americans spend on average, 28 hours a week watching television. 28 hours!!! What a tremendous time drain! What a tremendous week-long immersion in corporate-driven news reports, mindless trivialities, and relentless advertising. Looking at the world 150 years ago, Karl Marx observed that religion was the opium of the masses. Maybe that was the case in his day, but I'm convinced that in our times, television is the drug that keeps the American people drowsy, listless, distracted, unconcerned and unable to work on what matters most to each of us. If you let it, television will drain away your time and energy, and through the influence of its advertising, it will even drain away your money.

Look – in our short time on the planet, each of us has only a limited amount of time and money. These are the only energy sources we have at our disposal to use for making a difference – for acting upon the world around us in accordance with our ideals. Each of us only has so much of this energy. So we have to decide what we are going to do with it. We have to choose. How will we spend our time? In front of a television set? Or doing the things we care most about?
[examples]

How will we spend our money? Giving over our money - this source of energy - to operations that cause harm or destruction – or that we don't even care about? Or in ways that nurture and support the work of people whose values align with ours? [provide an example or two]

What will you do with your one wild and beautiful life?

I think we should think about life as though we all are working as gardeners in an enormous garden. The garden is too big for any of us to take care of all the plants there, but there are many trees and flowers and vegetables that we love. At the same time there are many plants there that we wouldn't want to take care of – they aren't useful, or aren't beautiful, or tend to overrun the vegetables, or have obnoxious thorns or burrs. So it becomes our job to be careful and seek out the plants we will nurture and water and fertilize with our human energy. But we must also take care not to pour our time and energy into weeds – plants that we don't care about, or that we hope will not grow bigger and stronger.

Our religion calls on us to live lives of integrity, service, and joy. It calls on us to swim against the current, and live out our values – to show by our lives that we care about our neighbors, and our society, and that we are willing to put our energy into making the world a better place.

Our religion calls us to imagine a new American Dream – not one focused on a big house, a big yard, a couple of late-model cars in the driveway, and a lake place with a boat up north. A new American Dream that has us in the role of citizens rather than consumers.

Citizens – people who stay away from the opiates of American culture, people who are awake to the world, and who take an active role in their neighborhoods, schools, and civic organizations. Citizens – who are vigilant, who watch what is happening around them, and work with neighbors and friends to encourage positive developments and guard against unhealthy incursions. Citizens – who see their role as gardeners, using their time and energy to water only the fruits and vegetables and flowers, and see that the weeds are left to perish.

Life is short.

You do care – we all do. We all have our strong beliefs. So let's live more boldly - like citizens, not consumers. Tell people what you believe in. More importantly, show it by the way you use your days. Spend your time and money on what you care about.

Because... Life is short.

The Summer Day, By Mary Oliver

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?"

Prayer is an Egg by Rumi (Translated by Coleman Barks)

On Resurrection Day God will say, "What did you do with the strength and energy, your food I gave you on earth? How did you use your eyes?"

What did you make with your five senses while they were dimming and playing out? I gave you hands and feet as tools for preparing the ground for planting. Did you, in the health I gave, do the plowing?"

You will not be able to stand when you hear those questions. You will bend double, and finally acknowledge the glory. God will say, "Lift your head and answer the questions." Your head will rise a little, then slump again.

"Look at me! Tell what you've done."

You try, but you fall back flat as a snake.

"I want every detail. Say!"

Eventually you will be able to get to a sitting position.

"Be plain and clear. I have given you such gifts. What did you do with them?"

You turn to the right looking to the prophets for help, as though to say, I am stuck in the mud of my life. Help me out of this!

They will answer, those kings, "The time for helping is past. The plow stands there in the field. You should have used it."

Then you turn to the left, where your family is, and they will say, "Don't look at us! This conversation is between you and your creator."

Then you pray the prayer that is the essence of every ritual: God, I have no hope. I am torn to shreds. You are my first and last and only refuge.

Don't do daily prayers like a bird pecking, moving its head up and down. Prayer is an egg. Hatch out the total helplessness inside.

A Liberal Church, by Wallace Robbins

Let this church ever seek the one-ness of God, and never turn from that venture, to the dark byways of quarrels and competitive struggles which interrupt the human pilgrimage.

We aspire to be catholic and to take into account all people.

We reject that which scatters us into ghettos, or forces upon us an ultimate loneliness.

Ours is a church which holds the dead in sacred memory, and the living in a goodly fellowship.

We desire to live together in such affection as will not allow us to feel threatened by such differences –

Happy in the liberty which encourages each to make his words correspond with his thought, her acts with her conscience.

Ours is a non-credal church – not because we have no beliefs, but because we will not be restrained in our beliefs.

Ours is a church of conscience – not because we hold that conscience is infallible, but because it is the meeting place of man and God.

Ours is a church of reason – not because the human mind is free of errors, but because the dialogue of mind with mind, and mind in itself, refines religious thought.

Ours is a church of reason – not because we think morality is a sufficient religion, but because we know no better way of showing our gratitude to God, and our confidence in one another.

We dare not fence the spirit, nor close off the sincerity of conversation with which souls must meet in religious association.

As others have their ways of religion, so do we have this faith; and, in honest difference, we order our lives together.

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

By Wendell Berry

Love the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay. Want more of everything ready-made. Be afraid to know your neighbors and to die.

[Do this] And you will have a window in your head. Not even your future will be a mystery any more. Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer. When they want you to buy something they will call you. When they want you to die for profit they will let you know.

So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it. Denounce the government and embrace the flag. Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands.

As soon as the generals and the politicians can predict the motions of your mind, lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the trail, the way you didn't go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection.