

**“Not By Compulsion”**

**Rev. Lynn Kerr**

**First Unitarian Church of Toledo**

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Readings:

**Growth that Starts from Thinking**      *from Eleanor Roosevelt*

*I don't know whether I believe in a future life.... I came to feel that it didn't really matter very much because whatever the future held, you'd have to face it, just as whatever life holds, you have to face it exactly the same way. And the most important thing was that you never let down doing the best that you were able to do—it might be poor because you might not have very much within you to give, or to help other people with, or to live your life with. But as long as you did the very best that you were able to do, then that was what you were put here to do, and that was what you were accomplishing by being here. And so I have tried to follow that out—and not to worry about the future or what was going to happen.... You have to accept whatever comes and the only important thing is that you meet it with courage and with the best that you have to give.*

**Holding Up the Sky**      *A Tale from China*

*One day an elephant saw a hummingbird lying flat on its back on the ground. The bird's tiny feet were raised up into the air.*

*“What on earth are you doing, Hummingbird?” Asked the elephant.*

*“I have heard that the sky might fall today. If that should happen, I am ready to do my bit in holding it up.”*

*The elephant laughed and mocked the tiny bird.*

*“Do you think THOSE little feet could hold up the SKY?”*

*“Not alone,” admitted the hummingbird. “But each must do what he can. And this is what I can do.”*

**Joyful Charity Brings Blessings**      *from The Sutra in Forty-Two Sections Spoken by the Buddha*

*The Buddha said, "When you see someone practicing the Way of giving, aid him joyously, and you will obtain vast and great blessings." A shramana asked: "Is there an end to those blessings?" The Buddha said, "Consider the flame of a single lamp. Though a hundred thousand people come and light their own lamps from it so that they can cook their food and ward off the darkness, the first lamp remains the same as before. Blessings are like this, too."*

## *Sermon*

In a Cherokee legend, an old Grandfather tells a story to his grandson, who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice. "I too, at times, have felt a great hate for those that have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do," spoke grandfather.

"But hate wears you down, and does not hurt your enemy. It is like taking poison and wishing your enemy would die. I have struggled with these feelings many times." He continued, "It is as if there are two wolves inside me. One is good and does no harm. He lives in harmony with all around him, and does not take offense when no offense was intended. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way.

But the other wolf, ah! He is full of anger. The littlest thing will set him into a fit of temper. He fights everyone, all the time, for no reason. He cannot think because his anger and hate are so great. It is helpless anger, for his anger will change nothing.

Sometimes, it is hard to live with these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit." The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?" The Grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one I feed."

Like this native tale, the values in Unitarian Universalism guide our decision making every day. One would assume that overall, they are choices made in love, respect, and peace. In fact, this is one of the most basic tenets of historic Unitarianism; humans are basically good, but also fallible. Humankind has free will, thus the responsibility of making good choices.

Similarly, the historic origins of Universalism were based on making the choice of doing good deeds here on earth for the good of mankind, but *not* because you feared eternal hell created by a vengeful god. Of course, our good deeds or choices need not be so grandiose as to save a species or eradicate a disease from the earth. As Eleanor Roosevelt put it, "[Don't] worry about what is going to happen...accept whatever comes and ...meet [it] with the best that you have to give."

This is why liberalism can be such an attractive philosophy. We believe that being good or "not evil" is simply doing good with what you have, the best that you know how. It is simple and straightforward. We need not save the world on our own, we simply do our part. We are not compelled by fear, few choices are forbidden, and we are free to learn from our mistakes without repercussion.

This is an effective way to encourage people to do the right thing. In general, we are not a people who like to see others forced to live their lives bound by fear of their government or their religion. I think we can all agree *that* kind of compulsion is wrong. But is *any* kind of compulsion counterproductive? Can we support *gentle* compulsion in certain circumstances? Consider Don't Ask, Don't Tell. First of all, we celebrated its repeal because compelling people to lie about who they are is counter to one of our most basic beliefs of inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Now no one in the military has to hide their sexuality for fear of losing their livelihood and lifelong dream of serving their country. It was the right thing to do. But I wonder if we all really understood how it affected those who lived with it for decades.

Joan Darrah, a retired navy Captain, who is also a Unitarian Universalist, testified in 2008 at the House Armed Services Committee hearing on "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" about her experience as a gay service member. Then, again this past April, she wrote a letter to President Obama to urge him to continue the fight for repeal by sharing her personal story. The letter, in part read, *"...on September 11, 2001. At 8:30 a.m..., I went to a meeting in the Pentagon. At 9:30 a.m., I left that meeting. At 9:37 a.m., American Airlines Flight 77 slammed into the Pentagon and destroyed the exact space I had left less than eight minutes earlier, killing seven of my colleagues.... I was a lesbian Navy captain who, at that time, had more than 28 years of dedicated military service. My partner, Lynne Kennedy, an openly gay reference librarian at the Library of Congress, and I had been together for more than 11 years. Each day, I went to work wondering if that would be the day I would be fired because someone had figured out I was gay. I had pretended to be straight and had played the games most gays in the military are all too familiar with.*

*But after Sept. 11 our perspective changed dramatically. In the days and weeks that followed, I went to at least seven funerals and memorial services for shipmates who had been killed in the Pentagon attack. As the numbness began to wear off, it hit me how incredibly alone Lynne would have been had I been killed.*

*The military is known for how it pulls together and helps people; ...especially in times of need. But none of that support would have been available for Lynne, because under "don't ask, don't tell," she couldn't exist. In fact, had I been killed, Lynne would have been one of the last people to know, because nowhere in my paperwork or emergency contact information had I dared to list Lynne's name.*

*This realization caused us both to stop and reassess exactly what was most important in our lives.*

*During that process we realized that "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was causing us to make a much bigger sacrifice than either of us had ever admitted."*

With this, and thousands of other letters, calls, and protests; what was right was finally done. Other than being the moral thing to do, there were other advantages to repealing this coercive law. For instance, from 1994-2003, \$360 million was spent enforcing the law, 12,000 people were discharged during the same time, which meant time, training, and equipment had all been wasted. Not to mention the hundreds of translators, that are essential in times of war, that were basically told, "You're not wanted."

While we applaud our lawmakers, let us also recognize that by passing this repeal, we too encourage a law that compels the military to change the way it currently operates. We are never completely free of compulsion in our lives because there will always be actions or inactions supported by consequences of a negative nature. As an example, in our new health care law, citizens will be compelled to get health insurance, yet most liberals supported the health care bill. In democracy in general, the citizenry, and particularly liberals, give consent to our government to pass laws that benefit the common good, even when it will cost them. This is where liberals walk a fine line between *free will* and *compulsion*.

When we become sure of what is good or right, it becomes quite easy for us to make it a moral issue that we espouse to others and may use pressure, persuasion, or even the threat of total annihilation of the earth to compel people to go along with our ideals and ideas.

In a recent conversation with friends, we were swapped stories about what we have done or wanted to do to people we had witnessed littering. Following the car ahead of us, running after teenagers to go pick up what they threw, or even offering an impromptu recycling course. Or think about the looks we give to people who we see holding a Styrofoam cup, or the excuses we are prepared to make if we are caught walking out of a Wal-Mart.

Whether we like to or not, that holier than thou attitude that we dislike in other religions creeps into our own now and then, whether it is about social justice issues, opinions on what happens after we die, or whether we should carry leather purses. We may even get downright mean about it.

In fact, one humorist, Andy Borowitz, claims that 2010 was the meanest year since 1651 when the book, *The Leviathan* was written by Thomas Hobbes which described humans as inherently violent and awash with fear. Borowitz cites some of the mean comments of 2010 such as those against Bristol Palin in Dancing with

the Stars and the comment from gubernatorial candidate, Carl Paladino, “I’ll take you out.” Or how Clevelanders treated LeBron James when he returned to Cleveland for the first time as a player of an opposing team.

There were the more serious events too, such as the Arizona law that allowed police to demand papers from anyone they had a reasonable suspicion of being an illegal immigrant or Pat Robertson blaming the Haitian earthquake on what he called a pact with the devil made by the people of Haiti. Borowitz, a long-time political commentator, also jokingly wrote that Robertson recently “claimed that God created the blizzard ...battering the Northeast “to punish Americans who were planning to drive to do something gay.” Now that’s mean.

I imagine that if we looked closely at every year, we could find just as much meanness as was present in the year before. The current year’s is just fresh in our minds. But we know that meanness is not the answer. I believe that as Liberals, we need to be more conscious of the need to use education and teaching by example, whenever possible, to motivate people to do what we deem to be the right thing. In some cases however, we have accepted that laws must be made to enforce the good such as anti-discrimination, because we know illegality does deter some people and education and morality will never sway a certain number of holdouts.

Other people don’t need laws to make them act with common sense, and, for example, would wear their seat belt and survive a car crash, even if there were no seat belt laws. Let’s face it, even we don’t want things like these to be left up to choice and that means knowing how to walk the fine line between friendly persuasion and friendly compulsion through laws.

However, the real ideal, the place that we strive to be, is a goal of ethical behavior as a human matter by choice, not mandated by a religion or government. A life of choices not motivated by fear or hampered by lack of knowledge. That which Albert Einstein described as “free and responsible development of the individual, so that he may place his powers freely and gladly in the service of all mankind.”

Ultimately, I believe Einstein defined Liberalism in that statement. I say today, the only New Year’s resolution we need to make, is to be proud to be in the liberal fold. We need only proclaim that we have made a choice, to *happily* to do all that we can in the *service of the world*. And to remember that we won’t be alone, we need only do our best. As Mythologist Joseph Campbell described it, “The best we can do is lean toward the light, toward the harmonious relationships that come from compassion with suffering.”

And we will make mistakes. Every once in a while, even the good guys; miss an opportunity to make the choice that would bring us closer to the light. Then, the best we can do- is do better next time. This is exactly what Eboo Patel, a world renowned social activist did. He told this story in 2005:

*I am an American Muslim. I attended high school in the western suburbs of Chicago. The group I ate lunch with included a Jew, a Mormon, a Hindu, a Catholic and a Lutheran. We were all devout to a degree, but we almost never talked about religion. Somebody would announce at the table that they couldn't eat a certain kind of food, or any food at all, for a period of time. We all knew religion hovered behind this, but nobody ever offered any explanation deeper than "my mom said," and nobody ever asked for one.*

*A few years after we graduated, my Jewish friend from the lunchroom reminded me of an experience we both wish had never happened. A group of thugs in our high school had taken to scrawling anti-Semitic slurs on classroom desks and shouting them in the hallway. I did not confront them. I did not comfort my Jewish friend. Instead I averted my eyes from their bigotry, and I avoided my friend because I couldn't stand to face him.*

*My friend told me he feared coming to school those days, and he felt abandoned as he watched his close friends do nothing.*

*Hearing him tell me of his suffering and my complicity is the single most humiliating experience of my life. My friend needed more than my silent presence at the lunch table. I realize now that to believe in pluralism means I need the courage to act on it.*

*In the words of the great American poet Gwendolyn Brooks: "We are each other's business; we are each other's harvest; we are each other's magnitude and bond." I cannot go back in time and take away the suffering of my Jewish friend, but through action I can prevent it from happening to others.*

As this year begins, may we choose to live in the belief that we are all each other's business. As UU Robert Weston puts it,

*Let us dare to believe in the future;*

*A future when people shall have learned to live by freedom*

*And not by compulsion, by love and not by fear*

*They shall live in peace and share*

*They shall be continuously hungry for knowledge*

*And none shall say it is forbidden them*

*They shall explore without fear of what they may find*

*None shall create barriers between a person and the fulfillment of the human spirit*

*This could be the future of humanity if we dare:*

*The people seek to master themselves instead of others,*

*And rejoice in the fruits of disciplines*

*They choose for themselves.*

May it be so.