

Is Anything Absolute?

A sermon by Rev. John Morehouse
Pacific Unitarian Church
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“Absolutely! No question about it!” he shouted at me. The discussion had gone far too long into the night. “Life is life, it’s all sacred. God gives it to us, and God takes it away!”. “Oh” I said “does that mean you are a pacifist?” I asked, “or how about that young man – unwanted baby that he once was – who killed those three kids in a California School yard some years ago? Is he some agent for God, is his life more sacred than those children who were wanted by their parents or is this just part of the plan.” We were becoming entrenched and I was becoming more frustrated with his absoluteness. The conversation never really went anywhere, especially when he fell back on quoting scripture as the final authority.” A bit naively at the time – this was over 20 years ago – I concluded from our meeting that there can be no absolutes in such a complex world as ours. That old liberal harbinger: “Truth is relative.”

Is anything absolute? I have asked this of myself over and over again as a citizen, a father, a man and a minister. I mean after all someone’s terrorism is somebody else’s martyrdom. Someone’s atrocities, is someone else’s justice. The search for moral absolutes, a way to establish principles that will be

universally valid and apply in every case has long been the hope of humanity. The absolutes that we are most familiar with – God, the Bible, Nature (what is more absolute than gravity on earth, works every time), death, birth, taxes are all rubrics under which we have tried to limit if not eliminate human subjectivity and moral choice. In science, the value of Pi or relativity of matter and energy are absolutes on earth, but even in space, we now know they are relative. Still we persist. Ten Commandments on courthouse walls, my fanatical conversationalist, all designed to draw a line in the moral sands of our lives. (Thanks in part to “Moral Absolutes and the Plucked Chicken Fallacy” a sermon by Rev. W. Edward Harris, All Souls Unitarian Church, Indianapolis, IN 1988)

Like all religions, Christianity has tried like the dickens to spell out the Law of God, the absolutes so we can deal with sticky situations. But at best, religious law deals with the rather simple difference between right and wrong, not the murky waters of the choice between two rights or three wrongs. Jewish and Islamic law has, at least, tried to apply the absolutes of God’s commandments to the mess of life. “Thou shalt not kill?” really? When? There has always been an effort by those who are fed up with the world’s complexity to wash their hands of it in the seemingly clear water of absolutism. But the water can quickly turn to fanaticism. And that water is deadly.

The modern age has brought about a legal system that codifies morality along a continuum of exceptions. So we get, murder in the first and second degree, voluntary and involuntary manslaughter and so on. But as one judge friend of mine told me, “Justice has almost nothing to do with morals, the only real absolutes are in the precedents we set.”

When an 11 year old boy shot and killed two intruders that had broken into his house, the boy’s actions were excused on the grounds that he was protecting his father’s property and defending himself. But where is the absolute in a situation like this? Well, I believe there is an absolute but it has nothing to do with murder or property. It’s about love and responsibility; social and parental. There is absolutely a parental responsibility in this: why was an eleven year old boy left alone with a loaded gun? I believe that even beyond that there might have been an absolute to call 911 and get out of the house on the grounds that safety and honesty are more important than protecting property.

There are absolutes that we can, even as progressive people, rely on in guiding our actions and our world. Once we open the door and look at the world a bit differently we will find that there is more we can rely on than first meets the eye without having to

resort to a simple mind numbing fundamentalism (Jesus said so, I believe it, that settles it).

One of the most important absolutes for me is trust. Now, I believe that trust has to be earned and that is very limited. I trust all of you to treat each other fairly and to treat your staff here at the church with compassion and justice. Until you betray that trust it holds as an absolute. Beyond these walls or perhaps our families, trust is no longer an absolute. We might be inclined to trust others but it is not something we completely rely on. This is one reason why our vision of building community is so vital to the spiritual quest. When we model and experience trust we are better able to believe in life and our world again. This has particular poignancy around our pledge campaign currently under way. Pledging your treasure, your money to the church absolutely depends on whether you trust the church to do well. In a completely voluntary act of generosity, the more we trust this church to change our lives and this world, the more likely we are to give generously. Open the door to trust. Your money will follow your trust, I guarantee it. Is this the same as in God we Trust left off the newly minted coins? Whose God? Who cares? What if the divine in our lives was the Spirit of each other? Could you trust in that? The inherent worth and dignity of each person.

Fundamentalists want so badly to require prayer in school. Where is the trust in that? Why does prayer need to be mandatory if God's trust in us is absolute. Hmmmm.

But what about skepticism, one of the cherished by products around here? Is too much skepticism too much of a bad thing? Actually I think it can be. If we question everything how can we suspend disbelief long enough to see that another way of looking at the world is worthy? I used to be vehemently distrustful of prayer. Anyone who prayed over me, around me, for me was trying to put one over on me. Then one day, during my early years as a minister I was visiting a non-UU in a hospital where she and her family were waiting for old man death. She asked me to pray with them. I knew they were Christians and so I prayed with all the Jesus I could muster. I heard the quiet 'yes', the 'amens' and then I looked up and witnessed the grace of tears. I could feel the room being lifted, the spirit rising. The absolutes of love and trust opening the door to the mystery of it all, to a surrender of the unchangeable into a simple faith that when it is all over it will be all right. I know better now. I pray with the best of them, because it's not about me, it's about them.

Another absolute must certainly be kindness. Ever try just being kind to someone who is difficult? Or just agreeing with them? "The service goes on too long" someone complained to me.

“You know you are right.” What? “Right?” “Yes, right.” I make no promises to change it but in my kindness you know you have been heard. The etymology of the word kindness is instructive here. It means to treat others well. To treat others as your own kind, “kin”, “kindred”. It’s a soft word with a harder meaning. My absolute unless pushed into a corner is to kill you with kindness. And search for solutions from that kindness. Appreciative inquiry. Fake a little kindness, its absolutely necessary.

Honesty is an absolute for me. The only exception is when I need to lie to protect the health and well being of those I know. See kindness above. The fall of honesty in our society is no doubt the result of life’s complexity . but how complicated it can become if we start to lie. I remember the best advice on honesty from Mark Twain. “Tell the truth and you don’t have to remember anything.” “The badge of honesty is simplicity” wrote the German poet Novalis. Honesty is a door we can we walk through over and over again.

I could go on and on, but there are more absolutes in your life than you might first think. And we rely on each of them more often than we realize. Love, kindness, trust, respect, honesty...each one of those is an absolute in my life and even when confronted by difficulty I have learned to rely on them more and more as I get older.

When we made the decision to come here back in 2005 we left much behind. Our family, hitherto closely domiciled, would be scattered to the wind. Our home of a decade sold, our finances, well, you all know about that. And yet, we relied on these absolutes; knowing that love would sustain our family no matter what the distance, that your kindness and respect would sustain me and this ministry, and that I honestly did and still does feed my deep calling to be your minister. Life is still hard for us here, but those absolutes, those points on my moral compass sustain me still. They allow me to open the doors of possibility here at PUC. They gave me the faith, the bedrock unshakeable belief that we have good work to do together here. My absolutes, our absolutes, take us beyond just searching but through the door to understanding. Searching is encouraged, supported by these morals of human being but, like freedom, it is not the end of our faith. We really do hope that by relying on these absolutes and searching with an open mind and heart we will find something even greater. Doors are meant to open to something.

Picasso, who could scarcely be accused of religious dogmatism saw through the idolatry of searching when he wrote: “In my opinion, to search means nothing in painting. To find is the thing. The one who finds something, no matter what it might be, at least arouses our curiosity if not our imagination. When I paint,

my object is to show what I have found and not what I am looking for. (From “Truth, Beauty and Love – These Three” by Rev. Carolyn Owen-Towle’s *Step Off the Sidewalk*, Rising Press, 1992).

Is anything absolute? Oh yes, for us there is, but its not the usual religious suspects. Kindness, respect, truth, love and honesty. We can lean on those, like door posts around us, until we find the strength to open the door, and find in the words of T. S. Elliot “What we call a beginning is often the end, and to make an end is the beginning. The end is where we start from. We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

May it be so. Amen.