

The Magnificent Unitarian Universalist Seventh Principle

A Sermon by John Hocutt to Pacific Unitarian Church

25 September 2016

Let me start by saying that I come forward to share my sermon with mixed emotions. It's not stage fright *per se*... I actually have spoken in public enough that I actually enjoy the experience. In one of my earlier careers I portrayed Soviet Air Guards Capt. Ivan Nikolayevich Podgorny as part of a public affairs presentation on the looming threat of Soviet air power (in other words, US Air Force propaganda). Back when I was still an Episcopalian, I served as a lay reader and would lead morning song and vespers on occasion. Being in front of a congregation is a familiar, comfortable place for me.

No, my angst stems from the fact that by the time I'm finished speaking with you this morning, I'll have managed to draw a line from the 7th UU principle to a position that advocates making the choice to feed oneself solely on a plant-based diet and avoids eating of animals, their eggs and their milk. My hope is that I might move some of you closer to agreeing with me and closer to making such a decision in your own life.

I think I'll pause a moment here to give any ardent omnivores and militant paleo-diet friends a moment to decompress if necessary. (Pause)

I want to be clear here... I abhor guilt tripping and I'm not here to book anyone on a guilt trip for not seeing things the way I do or making the choices I've made. Honest!

While I'm busy practicing clean, direct communication, there's the little matter that after I've spent the next 20-25 minutes hoping to persuade you to consider adopting a plant-based dietstyle, you're going to walk out of here and be treated to another of Andy Kisner's legendary "All American Breakfasts" ... an unabashed Bacchanalian celebration of eggs, cheese, sausage, bacon, butter and probably even more bacon if I know Andy!

All I can say in my defense is it wasn't supposed to be this way! I was originally slated to speak *last* weekend when Margo presented us with an array of her plant-based focused offerings. Not by design, mind you, it just turned out that way. However, Rev Stephen wanted to have this weekend to travel to an event and asked if I would swap weekends and so now, here I am, trying to explain why one might want to avoid eating animals just as they are about to dine on an array of meat, egg and cheese dishes. All I can say is the universe truly appears to move in ironic and mysterious ways! Oy, vey!

Well, with all that out of the way, I guess I ought to get on with presenting to you the ideas I have to offer this morning.

When I first started thinking about how to present my ideas, my first inclination was to craft and present a clever set of arguments. Arguments so brimming with wisdom and compassion that you would be compelled to if not make the choice I have, to at least acknowledge the rightness of my position and thus at least internally admit that I'd 'won'. It didn't take me long to realize what a foolish attempt that would be. Trying to get the last word on a UU is about as likely as finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Furthermore, I imagine you are as tired of the diet wars as I am... maybe even more so... South Beach, paleo, plant-based, Atkins, WheatBelly, GrainBrain, gluten free, dairy free... it's enough to make you scream! So, why am I dragging *that war* into the pulpit? Because I'm not.

My fundamental goal here this morning foster reflection. I'm not here to win. I'm not here to prove that I'm right and someone else is wrong. Out there, I can't tell you how many times when someone discovers that I chose to eat only plants that I'm subjected to lectures or concern trolling about whether I'm getting enough protein. No, I'm more than happy to leave the contest out there.

The 7th UU principle calls us as UUs to have, to show, "*respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*" I personally love and celebrate this principle. I acknowledge, appreciate and value the first six

principles: I understand how necessary they are to each of us as we conduct our journeys of religious exploration and to the fashioning a communal life together. Those principles are necessary... are practical... are functional... but to me, the seventh principle leads us out of our self-centered, human-centered focus and places humanity in the context of the environment in which we live, establishes us as a part of the world, as a part of the universe. And given a chance to spend the afternoon working on a church committee or walking along the beach or a forest trail... well, for me, there's just no comparison.

But, with all that said, I know that I can't spend my life living on the mountain tops or looking to others to lend the hands needed to keep things running around here... eventually, regularly, we have to come back down and "(do) the work of committees and (stay) to the end"

Interconnectedness... we are so surrounded by connections to one another, to our environment... within the environment... as a physics teacher, I often end up guiding students through Newton's three laws of motion which they dutifully memorize, and are sadly allowed to memorize without understanding what they are memorizing. I imagine that many of you can complete Newton's third law of motion... "for every action... (there's an equal and opposite reaction)". Ask those students what it means, and you often get a rephrased version of the law. At its core, Newton's Third Law is a manifestation of the interconnectedness of the physical world... what Newton's third law says is that *forces always appear in pairs*. And those two forces will be the same size, but pointing in the opposite direction. Newton's law of Universal gravitation predicts that any two masses will always *pull* on one another. Right now, as I stand here, my all too ample mass is pulling on Marvel. Newton's third law tells us that Marvel is simultaneously pulling just as hard on me right back. She's pulling me south, I'm pulling her north, and our respective forces are exactly as strong as the others... equal and opposite.

In the world of interpersonal dynamics, it's all about connections. It's about how we show love, affection, and respect for one another when relationships are healthy, and the absence of those qualities when they aren't. While those relationships aren't as precise and definitive like those of physics, there is a joinedness. And that joinedness can be on an intimate scale: joined at the hip, or thick as thieves. And, it's possible for those relationships to be present, yet invisible to us. I can choose to let someone cut in front of me in traffic or wave indelicate gestures at the SoB who just cut me off. We can cast votes to support the improvement of society or to support programs which will favor me at the expense of others who I'll never know or even see. I can support just commerce by buying organically grown foods or I can exploit the misfortune of impoverished workers halfway around the globe when I buy those "Always Low Price(d)" goods instead of buying goods made in countries with fair labor laws.

I don't know whether our recently departed interim minister, James Ford, (oops, that didn't come out quite right!) shared the metaphor of Indra's Net during his stay with us over the past year... he shared it with me when I had the good fortune to be in a Pacific-Southwest District Leadership School 15 years or so ago. Let me share it with you by quoting a passage from historian Timothy Brook's book, *Vermeer's Hat*:

Buddhism uses a similar image to describe the interconnectedness of all phenomena... called Indra's Net. When Indra fashioned the world, he made it as a web, and at every knot in the web is tied a pearl. Everything that exists, or has ever existed, every idea that can be thought about, every datum that is true—every dharma, in the language of Indian philosophy—is a pearl in Indra's net. Not only is every pearl tied to every other pearl by virtue of the web on which they hang, but on the surface of every pearl is reflected every other jewel on the net. Everything that exists in Indra's web implies all else that exists.

When I think upon the world, and how connected it is, I easily slip into thinking on Indra's net... each sound I voice ripples out through this room until it reaches you, and if the room is quiet and empty... it will return back to me, and return to you until all its energy is diminished through the mechanism of entropy. As a scientist who's studied phenomena at the atomic level, I know that every molecule or atom exerts and experiences forces upon and from every atom in its vicinity, and in theory at least, with every bit of matter in the universe. Matter at the smallest scale, animals throughout our world, you, me, people who we are oblivious to, we all exert influences, maybe so small that

we don't necessarily perceive them, but we exert and experience influences from throughout the web of interactions about us... a veritable interconnected web of existence.

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

I think one of the great challenges facing humanity is the fact that while we as a species are intelligent, creative, and resourceful, we can be rather myopic... I think deep down we don't recognize how connected humanity is to the natural world, or we trivialize our role in its degradation. Now, some of that lack of awareness is understandable given the subtlety of some, even many, relationships. And some of that unawareness may be induced when opportunities we might be pursuing happen to be to our economic benefit. While I think we as UUs are better than most about being cognizant of our place in the world, if we're to be honest with ourselves, our hands aren't clean. Speaking for myself, in my business as a free-lance tutor I drive from student to student around the Westside and the South Bay, knowing full well it would be better for the environment if I rode on busses. Unfortunately, I'd probably lose at least 75% of my income due to scheduling problems. I daydream about moving to a city with robust public transit, but the fact of the matter is, my left behind Angelinos would continue to have to make the same trade-off as I do give how crappy our public transit system is.

But, I think the pivot point in the seventh principle isn't the existence of the interdependent web of existence, or acknowledgement that we're part of that interdependent web, but acknowledgement that others are linked to us and that we have a responsibility to them and to their well-being.

Okay, here it is... this is the part of the sermon that I, and probably you too, have hoped we could avoid. Don't worry, I promise to not start a slide show with a Sarah McLaughlin *Wings of an Angle* sound track in the background while shivering, terrified, depressed dogs and cats looking up at us with eyes so deeply filled with anguish that I have to turn the channel because I can't take how powerless I feel. I'm not here to induce a guilt trip. But that said, just last Sunday, Rev Stephen told us that "religion is an *irritant*, not a *salve*", that "the prophetic message puts the lie to complacency". I can't say nothing about the fact that such suffering exists and I feel the need as a moral, empathetic being to do *something*.

Over two years ago, I reached a point where I couldn't continue to rest in complacency. It was triggered by my viewing two images... which I've had included in our order of service today. The first was that picture of those two pigs. I don't know what website it was where I found them, but every time I see that image, I can't help but smile at that pair of happy pigs. A line from my childhood was to be "happy as pigs in mud". Now, I'm not going to equate pigs with humans, but I am going to claim that pigs are capable of pleasure, if not joy. Pigs are definitely able as we are able to experience sheer terror... and when pigs are treated like objects the way American agribusiness does, they are capable of experiencing profound depression as well.

But that wasn't the image that tripped me over the threshold of deciding that I never wanted anything to do with putting an animal on my plate or in my body. The other curious image on your insert was the one that put me over. That spiky ring, almost looks like a toy that should've been banned by the FTC, is put on the nose of calves' dairy farmers want to keep away from mom's udder. You see, milking cows dry up unless their pregnant and so they have to keep their cows in a state of perpetual pregnancy. Trouble is, cows, being mothers, experience anguish when the dairy farmers separate them from their calves, and *vice versa*. (Per the USDA, this happens to roughly 97% of all dairy calves.) A "humane" invention is to put these rings on the noses of the calves so the calf can be near mom, but mom will push the calf away when it tries to nuzzle up to try and get at mom's udder.

Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "One's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions." That image changed the dimensions of my mind that day. And, to be honest, I was not a happy camper about the situation. I can still hear in my mind when I told myself, "Man! Now I'm gonna hafta be a *vegan*!"

During that time, I was heavily conflicted... after all, my mind had been carefully molded by the California Cheese

Authority and the American Egg Board...

Milk! It does a body good! Makes strong bones!
 California cheese comes from happy cows!
 The incredible edible egg... natures perfect protein!

And what was with those happy Foster Farms chickens who so desperately wanted to become chicken's worthy of the honor of being slaughtered on a Foster Farms' chicken processing line?

Although I'd been an avowed vegetarian for well over a decade, I was comforted that I was getting all that *crucial* protein from the milk, eggs and cheese I ate, which I also happily happened to *love*. But now, I felt like I was turning away from the safety of civilized nutrition and was heading out into the wilderness of veganism. Was I preparing to sacrifice my health and wellbeing for that of the cows and the chickens I was no longer going to eat?

To make a long story short, the answer was 'no'. Living in the United States, much less in California, one cannot escape the fact that people are living, indeed often thriving, without availing themselves to eating flesh, eating eggs and cheese or drinking milk.

So, if it is not only possible, but demonstrably well established that one need not eat flesh, milk and eggs to be well nourished, why do we continue to eat those things? In a word, pleasure.

Now, before I come off as one of our Puritan ancestors who wants to ban pleasure like they banned Christmas because someone, somewhere might be having fun, let me assure you that I heartily endorse the idea of pleasure. But, I hope we all are agreed that the mindless pursuit of pleasure can quickly take us to places that aren't healthy for us or for our society.

A question: Is it right for us to harm or even kill animals for pleasure?

I will note that we have laws against bear baiting and dog fighting because amusement of humans is insufficient to justify the pain and killing of those powerless animals. I will readily grant that the pleasure taken from eating delicious food and the harming of animals for sport aren't equivalent, but I think the core question applies to both scenarios. If there are ways to feed ourselves well without harming animals, how do we justify their harm and slaughter?

I think the key aspect of the seventh principle is

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

To respect someone or something is to hold them or it in high regard, to esteem or to honor.

A question: how does the way our society treats the animals we use for our food reflect respect?

Another question: all things being equal, would you rather harm an animal, or cause it no harm?

I won't answer that question for you. I won't tell you how you should answer. I will tell you that my answer to that question two years ago led me to choose to feed myself by eating a whole-food plant-based dietstyle. I can tell you that not only has my health not been harmed, it's improved markedly. In those two years, I've dropped the need for four of the six medications my cardiologist had me on. My cholesterol is below 150 and my blood pressure now runs at 112/65.

Was it a simple choice to make? Yes, and no. It took time for my taste buds to adjust to cooking without butter, eggs and cheese. I had to learn new ways of cooking and some of those early meals were, rough. If you look at me, and if

you remember me when I was 75+ lbs heavier than I am today, it's fairly obvious that I love to eat. At the end of some meals, I'd look over at Jennifer and sigh, "Well, that was decent." I was fearful that I'd traded delicious for decent.

But each time I was tempted by the smell of bacon, or ribs, or the sight of fried chicken or sea food, my reflecting upon my commitment, my desire to honor the animals I share the planet with made that choice easier and easier over time. And I've learned how to cook delicious food that uses only plants. And believe it or not, I've reached the point where bacon, and grilling meat no longer appeal to me.

"One's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions."

My hope is that I've been able to stretch your mind a bit this morning. My promise to you is that if you are interested in making a change to avoid harming the animals we share this planet with, I am happy to help you. I have packed up my blender, pressure cooker, spices and a box of food and taken them to PUC members' homes and taught them what I wish I'd known when I started on this journey. I regularly hang out with the Redondo Beach Seventh Day Adventist who are a great resource on how to cook and eat this way and who generously share their knowledge at no cost and with nearly no proselytizing. In fact, this coming October, they will have their seventh annual cooking school on four successive Tuesday evenings. If anyone is interested in learning about these resources, I'd be happy to share what I know.

So, coming round back to where I began... the little matter of the "All American Breakfast" that awaits you in about ten minutes... I am not meaning to be a buzzkill this morning. Even if you were to decide that you wanted to join me in eating this way, I'd honestly encourage you to enthusiastically avail yourself to Andy's hospitality. There's nothing to be done about the fate of the cows, chickens, and pigs that went into our meal. To choose to waste that food to my mind would only worsen the situation and disrespect those lives. The Buddhist, some of whom do eat animals, have a wonderful practice of mindful eating. The gifts that Andy's prepared for us have come together from the earth that supported those animals, through the farmers and ranchers who raised those animals, via the infrastructure of roads and stores that carried all that food to us. And finally, Andy and his team of sous chefs have labored in the kitchen to bring us our daily bread. Regardless of how you choose to eat, I simply encourage you to do so mindfully.

So, in closing, I have one concern... that some of you might be open to making the sort of change that I'm advocating but tempted to say, "what difference does my small grocery bill make against the backdrop of the yuge American agribusiness". To that idea, let me offer Loren Eiseley's *the Starfish Story* which I first heard years ago...

The Starfish Story

A young man is walking along the ocean and sees a beach on which thousands and thousands of starfish have washed ashore. Further along he sees an old man, walking slowly and stooping often, picking up one starfish after another and tossing each one gently into the ocean.

"Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?" he asks.

"Because the sun is up and the tide is going out and if I don't throw them further in they will die."

"But, old man, don't you realize there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it! You can't possibly save them all, you can't even save one-tenth of them. In fact, even if you work all day, your efforts won't make any difference at all."

The old man listened calmly and then bent down to pick up another starfish and threw it into the sea.

"It made a difference to that one."