

**Reflections on Good, Evil, the Gray Areas in between and the Choices we make.**

Sermon for January 22, 2006 by the Reverend Lone Jensen.

There is a part of me that hates making choices. Not always, of course, for when it comes to my professional life and my role as your minister I seem to have little trouble with decisions. After all I am called to serve the welfare of this congregation in a shared ministry and decisions are usually made jointly, just try to imagine a UU congregation where the minister gets to decide major issues all by her self. I for one cannot imagine such a congregation nor would I really wish to serve one like that. In my ministry I have many guidelines, experience, training, many voices to listen to and the knowledge that we are here, all of us, to become better people and live fuller lives. Myself included.

No, the decisions I have trouble with are the small ones. I stand in front of my closet and ask myself impossible questions: Will this purple dress better express the message of this sermon or should I wear blue? Is this outfit professional enough or do I go with my inner artist? Can a minister, even a Unitarian Universalist liberated woman minister, wear pink cowboy boots in the pulpit? Without having people worry about her sanity? Or I have a precious evening off and wonder with my husband: Should we go see a movie? Should we go out to eat? Or stay home and rest? How about going to a bookstore and feeding my addiction to the printed pages? Bruce refers to this as my “on the other hand

syndrome”. On the one hand a movie would be fun but on the other hand the books are calling... Trouble with those decisions is that once I decide I cannot usually do both. Kid in a candy store syndrome, I guess. And yes, I do know that it is often not the actual choice I am fussing about but something else, left over anxiety, a need for renewal and when it comes to the mirror the uncomfortable knowledge that I need to lose thirty pounds.

How about all of you out there? Does it seem to some of you that choices are harder to make now than they used to be? The price of wisdom I suppose and increased awareness. In fact, some of the most fateful choices in my life, the most life altering ones were made almost out of my awareness. Like getting married at 18 to a dark eyed, handsome Iraqi veterinarian. Like the choice I made to leave the cozy, safe country that Denmark truly was back then for Baghdad Iraq where we had three revolutions and I forget how many coup attempts in six years. Did I sit down and write plus and minus, pro and con? As in let us see: military dictatorship versus Democracy, freedom of movement versus isolation, flower shops and pastries versus tanks and guns? I did not. I was so infatuated, I was not even thinking about the consequences. Put me on that magic carpet ride! Whoosh!!! How about you? Did you sit down at 18 and make deliberate decisions? Most of us, I would guess, did not. Youth is a time when our passions and our hormones are in the drivers seat. Would anything have made me stop and consider? Maybe, but those words were not said. My parents did not protest

much. Today I would have listened and sat down with a pro and con list. But life, as Soren Kierkegaard said, is best understood backwards but it must, alas, be lived forwards. And without that reckless choice I would not have given birth to my son and have a granddaughter. It is all of our life's choices, good and bad and in between that makes us who we are.

Another thing that makes choices harder today is the way the world is changing at breakneck speed. As William Bridges writes in his book *Transitions*. *The experience of being in transition is itself changing. It is as if we launched out from a riverside dock to cross to a landing on the opposite shore-only to discover in midstream that the landing was no longer there. (And when we looked back at the other shore, we saw that the dock we left from had just broken loose and was heading downstream.) Stuck in transition between situations, relationships, and identities that are themselves in transition, many Americans are caught in a semi-permanent condition of transition.*

How true that is. Caught in the changes, in unpredictable and strong currents of downsizing, outsourcing, technology that makes knowledge itself obsolete, most of us better not depend upon our livelihoods for our sense of worth and identity. And we better learn how to do white water rafting. Where indeed is solid ground?

Maybe there isn't any. Maybe what we need is a raft, a boat or a ship to carry us safely through the violent currents. In my first language, Danish the sanctuary where the congregation gather is

called the ship. I love that metaphor for what we do here when we gather. We go on a journey, we explore and we work together. As we keep our ship afloat, we keep each other safe and we depend deeply on each other. I am proud of this congregation and touched by your caring and love in response to the recent tragedy in our church family. Love is not in this context easy or sweet, it is tough and resilient. We dare to trust that the center will hold, that someone will be there for us. We know the cost of caring and the price of love. Which is at the end of life paid in tears and grief. To love what death can take is very human.

Now there are some who would say that we really have fewer choices than we do. That indeed genetics and our “inner ape” determine much of what we do. I suspect it is far more complicated than that. In his book: ***Our Inner Ape*** Frans De Waal writes:

*Everyone has heard of the chimpanzee, known to science since the seventeenth century. Its hierarchical and murderous behavior has inspired the common view of humans as “killer apes.» It’s our biological destiny, some scientists say, to grab power by vanquishing others and to wage war into perpetuity. But we shouldn’t ignore our other close relative, the bonobo, discovered only last century. Bonobos are a happy-go-lucky bunch with healthy sexual appetites. Peaceful by nature, they belie the notion that ours is a purely bloodthirsty lineage.*

*The power-hungry and brutal chimp contrasts with the peace-loving and erotic bonobo-a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Our*

*own nature is an uneasy marriage of the two. The French refer to bonobos as “Left Bank chimpanzees”-a name that summons up images of an alternative lifestyle.*

Now I find that to be a very interesting image. So what would you rather be a bloodthirsty chimpanzee or a peaceful sexy Bonobo? We cannot deny our impulses toward violence but we can choose to feel and hear that small inner voice that is able to express compassion. Neuroscience seems to confirm that we have an inborn empathy. I find hope in these findings. To quote De Wall: *By placing people in brain scanners and asking them to resolve moral dilemmas, experts have discovered that such dilemmas activate ancient emotional centers deeply embedded in the brain. Instead of being a surface phenomenon in our expanded neo cortex, moral decision-making apparently taps into millions of years of social evolution. And if all that people care about is their own good, why does a day-old baby cry when it hears another baby cry? This is how empathy starts. Not very sophisticated perhaps, but we can be sure that a newborn doesn't try to impress. We are born with impulses that draw us to others and that later in life make us care about them.*

It is a great Universalist tenet of faith that God is love. We need to support each other and help our youth make the choices that affirm this. Choices are hard and sometimes it is even harder to figure out what is clearly on the side of love and what is not. Or in other words how do we decide what is a good choice or a bad one

when all choices seem to be painterly mixtures of various shades of gray? Maybe our ability to see the shades is a kind of salvation. After all much of the world's evil have been done by very righteous people, who were absolutely certain that they were doing good. Just think about the inquisition or Hitler's utopia or the hostage takers who will kill the innocent in the name of God. It is an insult to God instead. But most of us thankfully do not have to face these horrors. And just like life is best judged looking backwards so too must we live it going forward. Our choices, in whom we love, in jobs, in much of our lives are often based upon hunches and insufficient information. If you want to know if a choice is ultimately evil or good, well as the prophet Jesus said: By their fruits shall you know them. Look at our principles especially the first one. To respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person seem to me to be quite incompatible with any number of horrible choices like burning someone at the stake to save their soul.

But for the rest of us who will never have to make such ultimate choices. If I ask you if you have ever made a choice you deeply regretted and you do not raise your hand well I do not believe you. Every one of us, if we have lived long enough, has made choices we would do almost anything to undo. And yet without these choices we would not be who we are. Guilt serves no useful purpose unless you can actually make amends. Do not beat your self up over your choices. Sometimes the only life you can save is your own. Think back over your life. Every choice you

made has made you who you are. As Edith Piaf wrote in her song: Non Je n'regrette rien. No I do not regret anything that happened in my life; not the good, nor the bad for all of this has made me who I am. Think about it. You are a unique work of art, a blessing on the world. Martha Graham wrote: *There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly, to keep the channel open.*

(Agnes De Mille, ***Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham***)

Forgive yourself for your choices. There is always another way to look at things. As in this story: (From *The Art Of Possibilities* by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander)

*A monastery has fallen on hard times. It was once part of a great order but because of religious persecution it was decimated so that there were only five monks left: the Abbot and four others, all of whom were over seventy. Clearly it was a dying order.*

*Deep in the woods surrounding the monastery was a little hut that the Rabbi from a nearby town used for a spiritual retreat. One day the Abbot visited the hut to see if the Rabbi could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The Rabbi welcomed the Abbot and commiserated. "I know how it is," he said, "the spirit*

*has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore.” So the old Rabbi and the old Abbot wept together and spoke quietly of deep things.*

*The time came when the Abbot had to leave. They embraced. “It has been wonderful being with you,” said the Abbot, “but have you no piece of advice that might save the monastery?” The Rabbi responded, “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”*

*When the other monks heard the Rabbi’s words, they wondered what possible significance they might have. “The Messiah is one of us? One of us, here, at the monastery? Do you suppose he meant the Abbot? On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas, who is certainly a holy man. Or could he have meant Brother Elrod, who is so crotchety? Surely, he could not have meant Brother Phillip? Of course he didn’t mean me- yet supposing he did? As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.*

*The forest in which it was situated was beautiful so people came to visit the monastery, to picnic or to wander along the old paths. They sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that surrounded the five old monks. They began to come more frequently, bringing their friends, and their friends brought friends. Within a few years, the*

*monastery became once again a thriving order, and-thanks to the Rabbi's gift-a vibrant, authentic community of light and love for the whole realm.*

The only grace you can have is the grace you can imagine