

Commitment and Sacrifice
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
Sunday, May 27, 2012
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Revelations come from the oddest places sometimes, and a few years ago I had a revelation that had to do with the idea of tree-huggers. I had heard the term for a long time, and I knew it had to do with ecology and our natural resources, but if I gave it any thought at all, it seemed sort of warm and fuzzy to me. You know, I like trees, trees are my friends, I wrap my arms around them and snuggle with them sometimes, and the term tree-hugger sounds sort of snuggly and cozy. Perhaps a tree-hugger is like one of those fuzzy little koala bear clip-ons that people wore on their lapels some time back. I probably still have one of those in a drawer somewhere.

Then a few years ago I was teaching part time at Goddard College in Vermont, and one of my students was majoring in ecological studies. He decided to give up everything he owned, set aside all his plans for the immediate future, load up his car, drive across the country to the Pacific Northwest and chain himself to a tree to prevent the destruction of an old-growth forest. He was a tree-hugger. He was putting his entire life on hold, selling all his belongings, going out into unknown risks of weather and wild animals and angry logging companies; this young man was literally putting his life on the line, not knowing where his next meal or dry place to sleep would come from, but feeling that he must do something, and this was something he could do.

Not everyone would agree that he was making a wise choice, perhaps, but he was following his call of conscience, making a commitment, making a sacrifice. Hugging a tree. For me, the tree-hugger image was suddenly transformed from something snuggly to something radical, perhaps heroic.

So I got thinking – what difference am I really making in my life? If I believe, as I do, that trees are important and that we need to preserve what we have left of the old-growth forests, or that it is important to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or to restore the water quality of our great lakes and oceans – what am I doing about it really? Shouldn't I get out there and chain myself to a tree, or volunteer for Greenpeace, or join the Peace Corps, or something?

I mollified my conscience by reassuring myself then that what I do does make a difference – at that time, by teaching students so they are better equipped to make a difference, and now by working with congregations to help them organize and mobilize their own power to make a difference. Though my life may seem placid by comparison to a tree-hugger's, perhaps I am living out my commitment, though I may not be making much of a sacrifice – but still, sometimes I wonder.

The activists who were featured in today's video from the Heeding the Call class project clearly are making a difference. Their activities and sacrifices are unique to their commitments, and through those commitments they are transforming the place where they choose to stand, transforming their own small section of the world.

Sharon Welch, a Unitarian Universalist ethicist and theologian, argues that we need a new way of thinking about how to act on our commitments. She proposes that we move away from an ethic of control, in which we believe that in order to be effective we have to take radical action, solve problems, fix what is broken. There is a part of this model of control that tells us that our control must be absolute -- if we cannot do it all, it is not worth even trying. But then we discover the reality of this world. The war to end all wars doesn't. The perfect solution isn't. And failing the

success of our models of solution and conquest, our models of force, we often give up and figure we just need to let human nature take its course. When the model of force is the only model we have, we may find ourselves doomed to a future of struggle and loss, pitting good against evil, right against might, again and again, forever.

An alternate view is what Welch calls the ethic of risk, in which those seeking peace and sustainability invest in cultivating communities of common commitment, using "soft" power, cultural power, the ability to attract through cultural and ideological appeal. This would be an approach that changes hearts and minds by positive example rather than meeting force with force, and that rejects the violent means of resolving differences by the use of power over another.

As Welch says, "we have much to learn about the creation and maintenance of such communities of common commitment. It requires a leap of faith – a leap not only from military coercion to cultural, economic, and political power, but also a leap from the idea that "moralism justifies control" – the leap to an engagement with the world that accepts risk, ambiguity, and imperfection. And we might ask, is such a transformation even possible? Again and again, we have witnessed the devastation that results from the use of economic and military might to get our way. Those of us exploring the Doctrine of Discovery and its central role in the development of this nation find ourselves confronted with the fact that European nations since at least the mid-1400's have woven an explanation that assumes that the world's "other peoples," particularly the indigenous inhabitants of other continents, are inferior, and that justifies conquering and exploiting them those peoples by force.

The Doctrine claims – continues to claim in current law – that the Europeans' inherent superiority gave them the right to "discover" and appropriate lands that were already inhabited by others. It can be a shock fully to realize that our national culture in the United States was -- is -- founded on a premise that those of European descent had – have -- an inherent natural right to subjugate any peoples of non-European origin. Like the term "tree-hugger," the terms "manifest destiny" and "the doctrine of discovery" sound pretty harmless until you realize what they actually mean.

And then I look at the examples of communities of commitment we have seen here today: the revelatory power of the Occupation movement that swept this nation last summer, and the gentle hospitality of Family Promise; the persuasive power of ethical eating, the broad impact of environmental awareness and the subtle empowerment of sexuality education – and I see reason for hope.

Sharon Welch suggests that an ethic of risk entails a stance of what she calls "engaged goodness: there are no heroic pretensions, no grand narratives of certain triumph, but a life-affirming refusal to submit to cynicism, alienation, and despair. . . . [the transformational power of the ethic of risk rests in the] power of lives lived in connection, and from that connection, lives lived for justice, for beauty, for compassion."

These are the people around us, and our 7th graders this year helped us to know them in a new way. We asked the students who told us about this project, and one said, "It helped us get to know more about people in our church and how they are helping the world become a better place." Another said, "My favorite part is that we have known these people for years. They aren't strangers we see on TV, working for causes we have never heard of - not that there is anything wrong with that. These are people who we see every week, people who go out of their way to do something good for other people. When they take action, they set an example for all of us.

THAT is the best part of the class, telling, showing others that these people are the foundation of making life better." That is my favorite part as well.

Memorial Day is a time when we remember the young dead soldiers, a time we set aside that echoes with their commitment and sacrifice. A time when our thoughts resound with the words that Archibald McLeish wrote for those soldiers to say to us: "we have done what we could, but until it is finished, it is not done; . . . our deaths. . . will mean what you make them, . . . whether for peace and a new hope we cannot say. Only you can say." The soldiers have given us their deaths; it is up to us to give them their meaning.

As we celebrate this Memorial Day, as we acknowledge the great commitment and sacrifice in the losses that have been borne by those in military service and their loved ones, let us also celebrate and acknowledge the gentle commitments of those who work for peace and justice, in beauty and compassion. There is a level of trust involved – trust that as we show compassion, all who walk with us will learn to care; as we show acceptance, we all will learn to give; as we show commitment, we all will learn more and more to love. We will learn as we go, ever and ever more powerfully how to care, how to give, how to love, and together we will build a new way into the future. So may it be, and amen.

Sources:

Welch, Sharon, D. (2000) *A Feminist Ethic of RISK*(Other Feminist Voices). Kindle Edition.