

Elbert Hill – August 2, 2009

MEDITATION:

Earth, teach us silence,
that we might hear the messages in the wind.

Earth, teach us caring,
that we might help those in need.

Earth, teach us forgetfulness,
that we might not harbor grudges.

Earth, teach us courage,
that we might change what needs changing.

READING (#496):

From arrogance, pompousness, and from thinking ourselves more important than we are, may some saving sense of humor liberate us. For allowing ourselves to ridicule the faith of others, may we be forgiven.

From making war and calling it peace, special privilege and calling it justice, indifference and calling it tolerance, pollution and calling it progress, may we be cured.

For telling ourselves and others that evil is inevitable while good is impossible, may we stand corrected.

God of our mixed up, tragic, aspiring, doubting, and insurgent lives, help us to be as good as in our hearts we have always wanted to be. Amen. --Harry Meserve

WISDOM: THE QUEST

He lived many centuries ago, and though he never wrote a word that we know of, many things have been written about him. So much so that his name is extremely well known

around the world, especially in Western cultures. He is considered by many to be one of the greatest teachers who ever lived. Yet his own society condemned him to death for those teachings. It is from Socrates and his student Plato that the tradition of reason comes down to us as paramount in the Western-culture way of thinking about wisdom. And though he was not interested in the physical world, our physical sciences could not exist if logic were not applicable to our environment. However, I believe there is something even more important in terms of human wisdom than reason.

When the Delphic Oracle was asked, "Is there anyone wiser than Socrates?"--and the Oracle replied that there was none wiser--Socrates finally concluded that if he was indeed wise, it was because he didn't know very much, and knew that he did not. So knowing when one doesn't know is itself a kind of wisdom.

When I was about five, like some of the children who just left, I knew I did not know a great deal about many things, but I wanted to know--and was confident I some day would, that my great curiosity would lead me to positive knowledge. I at least knew then that I didn't know, and I cared about knowing more. In early adolescence, most of my curiosity about the greater world was channeled only into wanting to know more about romance, sex, and my own sexual identity. My desire to know other things diminished, and not caring was a kind of ignorance. In late adolescence, like many young people, I thought I knew just about all there was that was important to know. Such arrogance may be the greatest ignorance of all.

It was in this state of mind that I entered Carson-Newman College, a small Baptist college in East Tennessee, as a pre-ministerial student in 1958. That first year of college did little to teach me I was wrong in my self-important view of my own knowledge. Later, as a third-semester freshman, I took an Introduction to Philosophy class, where my curiosity was once more challenged, and where I realized I didn't quite know everything. I met, in that class, many philosophers from the ancient Greeks to some sages of the Twentieth Century.

By the end of that semester, I didn't think I was wise, but on the contrary realized I knew very little. However, I did think that if I continued to study, to learn, and to investigate, that some day I might know something--even about wisdom.

At many stages of life, I've learned much from the study of literature and culture, and not just those of European origin. Although the individuals depicted on today's bulletin are all from Western thought, I've learned that wisdom knows no geographical or cultural boundaries. From the American Indian, for instance, I've learned to think of life as a continuing present, not being rigidly divided into past, present and future. Another example: In tribal stories of life beginning in the fourth world (the world we live in now), Firstborn (and the creator of much life) is the Trickster figure. Trickster is often identified with some animal: coyote, hare, beaver, or is the amorphous Wakdjunkaga of the Winnebago tribe, who changes into various animal shapes until he looks more or less human. Contrast that type of creator with the Judeo-Christian one--who is far above us, yet in whose image we were made--and think how our understanding of our origin might affect our world view. With the American Indian view, it's much easier to believe in some theory of evolution than it is when following the Judeo-Christian view.

Yet even with all that study, I didn't believe I was wise.

A few months ago, I turned seventy, and I'm still wondering when--if ever--I might find wisdom. Over the years, I have learned many things, even earning advanced degrees and instructing at the university level for forty years. But I don't feel any wiser than I did at the age of 20. Actually, I just continually learn about more that I don't know. There are, however, many things I've learned that I think are guides toward wisdom. For example, I think the seven principles of Unitarianism Universalism, that we read as a responsive reading, contain a great deal of wisdom. (Comment on what happened at GA.)

The past few weeks, we have been studying The Four Agreements: A Toltec Wisdom Book in Adult RE. Those four agreements are:

"Be impeccable with your word.

Don't take anything personally.

Don't make assumptions."

and my personal favorite:

"Always do your best." (We'll be discussing that fourth agreement next Sunday in RE.)

I have recently been reading about the Four Noble Truths of Buddha. I don't feel adequate in my understanding yet to go into any depth about those, but I think there is much wisdom there.

We live in a competitive society, constantly comparing ourselves to others, and to our images of others, and feeling bad about ourselves when we don't seem to measure up. I think it is great to sometimes compare ourselves to ourselves, and not to berate ourselves when we have done our best, though it might not be someone else's best.

I want to suggest that possibly our greatest wisdom comes not through reason, but from emotion. One major point of Existentialism is that Reason is not Enough. Our society generally puts down emotion, as if it were an enemy of reason. When one is said to be emotional, it usually means that the person is unstable--probably cries too much. By emotion, I'm not talking about one's feelings, or something that can be reduced to a physiological occurrence, or understood in terms of mere individual behavior. I'll illustrate: In the spring of 1961, I entered basic training at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. In my basic-training company, there were a number of us Appalachian hillbillies from east Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia. One of the recruits, George, was from a little farther back up in the mountains than the rest of us. On the first day, the Army issued us a comb. That afternoon, they marched us to the post barber, where all our heads were shaved. On the second morning, they issued each of us a toothbrush. That afternoon, they examined our teeth and pulled five of George's. The next morning, they issued us jockstraps. That was 43 years ago, and the Army hasn't heard from George since.

The telling of that joke caused (I hope) a feeling of humor in my listeners, and it created a physiological response in laughter. But this is not what I'm talking about in terms of the wisdom found in emotion. According to Plato, Socrates believed we have certain a priori knowledge. He thought our views concerning large, somewhat abstract, ideas--such as love, honor, and justice--we had from before birth. He also thought these ideas were based on reason. Though I think reason is involved, I think that, to a large extent, they are emotions--both emotions and spiritual virtues.

The first of the emotions mentioned by Socrates is love. Most religions teach that love, especially agape, is one of the greatest virtues we can have, and I agree. Agape is usually thought of as being selfless emotion toward one's fellow humans and as probably the highest emotion we have. Each of you can think of many instances or situations in which people give of themselves to help others, so I won't offer examples. I'll only comment that one can see how this can fit my earlier definition: The emotion of agape is not just a feeling, a physiological occurrence, or mere individual behavior. It's larger and more spiritual. I would suggest that eros could be considered the same. Too many people think of eros, or sexual love, as being selfish. But I think it can be as spiritual and as selfless as agape, since complete fulfillment for oneself also involves considering his or her partner's happiness as well.

The second emotion Socrates mentions is justice. Though we sometimes feel that we don't see much justice in action in our contemporary world community, it is an emotion we desire. In fact, one of the early concepts young children internalize is fairness. "That's not fair!" we hear children shout at each other on the playground. Each of our seven principles of Unitarian Universalism is bound up in a concept of justice which involves freedom for all, not just political freedom but intellectual, economic and religious as well, in fact, any kind of freedom we can think of. Though we may sometimes disagree on what course of action might result in justice, we all feel that justice should be done. In our church, we work for social

justice in several areas, including the Green Team's efforts on behalf of our planet and all those who live on it.

The desire for justice is in part about reconciliation and resentment. Generally, we think resentments are base, petty, and self-serving. That's because many of our resentments are small-minded, and are base, petty and self-serving. They can be downright mean. Yet shouldn't we have resentment when we see injustice, whether it be on a large or a small scale? When some corporation steals from its employees and from the taxpayers, shouldn't we feel resentment? When companies pollute and destroy the environment for all of us, shouldn't we have resentment? When we see people acting out of bigotry and racism, shouldn't we feel resentment? I would say that in these, and thousands of other situations, we should be resentful, and we should do what we can--however small--to work toward justice.

The third emotion Socrates identified is honor. We're taught to honor, or respect, our mother and our father. In school, we're taught to honor our teachers, administrators and other people in positions of authority. But what do we do when these people are not honorable? How do we react when people in positions of trust create injustice? Do we honor them? Should we?

In the early 1980's, I met and spent a few hours with Joseph Campbell. It was one of the highlights of my professional life. Though I learned a number of things from Joe that day in our one-on-one conversations, the point that has stuck with me the most over the years was his respect for the inner spirit of the individual--no matter what that person might be like outwardly, or what actions that person might take. Joe had gotten this idea primarily from his study of Eastern mythology, though a similar idea is found in other cultures around the world. The Eastern idea of bowing to those one meets does not mean bowing to the way they act. They may be pretty bad people. But it means bowing to the spirit that is within the individual, the spirit all of us have, the spirit that is above our daily actions.

I'm still not wise, but in the spirit of this bit of wisdom I learned from a wise man, I bow to the spirit within each of you.

READING from George Carlin:

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT IN YOUR LIFE

The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints. We spend more, but have less.

We buy more, but enjoy less. We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences, but less time.

We have more degrees but less sense, more knowledge, but less judgment, more experts, yet more problems, more medicine, but less wellness.

We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get too angry, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too little, watch TV too much, and pray too seldom.

We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often. We've learned how to make a living, but not a life. We've added years to life, not life to years.

We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbor. We conquered outer space but not inner space. We've done larger things, but not better things.

We've cleaned up the air but polluted the soul. We've conquered the atom, but not our prejudice. We write more, but learn less. We plan more, but accomplish less. We've learned to rush, but not to wait.

We build more computers to hold more information, to produce more copies than ever, but we communicate less and less.

These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion, big men and small character,

steep profits and shallow relationships. These are the days of two incomes but more divorce, fancier houses, but broken homes.

These are days of quick trips, disposable diapers, throwaway morality, one-night stands, overweight bodies, and pills that do everything from cheer, to quiet, to kill.

It is a time when there is much in the showroom window and nothing in the stockroom. A time when technology can bring this letter to you, and a time when you can choose either to share this insight, or just hit delete.

Remember, spend some time with your loved ones, because they are not going to be around forever.

Remember, say a kind word to someone who looks up to you in awe, because that little person soon will grow up and leave your side. Remember, to give a warm hug to the one next to you, because that is the only treasure you can give with your heart and it doesn't cost a cent.

Remember, to say, "I love you" to your partner and your loved ones, but most of all mean it. A kiss and an embrace will mend hurt when it comes from deep inside of you.

Remember to hold hands and cherish the moment, for some day that person will not be there again. Give time to love, give time to speak and give time to share the precious thoughts in your mind.