

Bismarck Mandan Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Program for January 10, 2010 -- Tom Disselhorst

Thank you for permitting me to provide a program again, especially in the “This I Believe” series. From this series, I have learned that many of us have journeyed to this Fellowship from a variety of intellectual and physical paths, but that we share some common traits, some of which I am sure you will recognize today.

As the program says, I intend to be both serious and musical today, not that those ideas are necessarily mutually exclusive by any means. Music, I have found out, is my method of Zen meditation. If I am troubled, or angry, or frustrated, or overwhelmed, or excited and joyous, or even calm and reflective, or anywhere in between, playing music puts me in a different world. I provided one illustration already, in my musical meditation, an alternative to a reading.

This is something that we may be doing regularly in the fellowship (and not just using me as the performer, but other forms of meditations as well). The piece I played earlier is called “When Linus Tells Charlie”, by the jazz pianist David Benoit, the successor in the Charlie Brown animated features to Vince Guaraldi.

My mother introduced me to music when she became a single mom, in the early 1950’s, and I was at that point the only child. She was a nurse, and we lived in an apartment in Berkeley, California, where she was trying to juggle work, going to college at UC Berkeley, and taking care of a precocious three year old who was also sick a lot with asthma. She was, and is, an ambitious North Dakotan who grew up just 35 miles south of Betty Mills in Elgin, North Dakota.

My mom had been an army nurse in WWII, and when she became single again, she really liked the Rodgers and Hammerstein movie South Pacific that had just come out, not coincidentally about nurses in WWII. We had one of those box record players, and I literally wore that thing out playing the sound track from South Pacific, one of about three records we had to our name. I have always loved movie sound tracks since then.

Also not coincidentally in the movie South Pacific was a song called “I’m gonna wash that man right out of my hair”. But to set the stage musically for my talk today, I won’t play that one, but another one from that movie called “Bali Hai”. My wife said it is cruel to play that song because it has been so cold, but I use it to conjure up warm weather - in my mind, at least !!

Thanks. Since it is winter, I will undoubtedly play today another warm weather song.

So, you can already see three big influences on my life, my mother, music and World War II - World War II particularly because of the accident of my birthday, Pearl Harbor Day, December 7. There is not a day goes by that I do not think about the sacrifices my mother’s generation made for so many of us, including most of us in this Fellowship, and the sacrifices of all those who wear the uniforms of our armed services. I wonder what those who were born on September 11, 2001 will think about as they grow older?

A fourth big influence in my life is another one familiar to all of us - science and technology. But for me, that influence began in earnest when my mom remarried; I was 6. My stepdad, who became my Dad as much as my real father, was a scientist. He worked on projects involving nuclear weapons.

My Dad was very good at what he did. He witnessed some of the a-bomb and h-bomb tests in the South Pacific. On one of his first trips to the South Pacific, he brought me sea-shells he had collected from one of the islands where a test took place.

See how these things get all intertwined? WWII, travel, South Pacific, bombs, music, science and marriage. It is enough to make a person a bit schizophrenic. In fact, for several years while I was a youth, I had a poster of a night-time photo of an a-bomb test on the wall of my bedroom. Not a sports hero, not a rock star or movie star, or a peaceful scene, mind you, but the photo of an a-bomb blast. I had nightmares about nuclear warfare for years - knowing that where my Dad worked would obviously be a target in a nuclear exchange.

With science firmly in my family (my real father was teaching electrical engineering), I became, quite quickly, what would now be called a “nerd”, back then the term was slightly less pejorative, a “brain”. Envied, but no one exactly wanted to emulate me. But thankfully, my Dad’s focus on nuclear weapons shifted in the late 1950’s to the peaceful uses of nuclear energy. Of course, nuclear energy development is not exactly a non-controversial issue either, and certainly still a topic of concern today - (Iran, North Korea, Chernobyl and Three Mile Island come to mind). More about that in a moment.

So as a youth, the future seemed pretty well laid out for me, much like it must have seemed for Tim Hathaway when he was all set to join his father as a pentacostal preacher - I would become a scientist, studying physics or chemistry, working in a lab discovering wonderful or maybe not so wonderful things about the universe, or working for some big company developing products or weapons or useful sources of energy.

But where is the justice part in my talk you ask? It is coming. Despite majoring and graduating with a degree in Chemistry, something happened along the way. Travel was, and still is, something I love to do. So, my junior year in college, I spent a year in Europe, still studying chemistry, but learning about a much larger frame of reference, in which the USA was only one part of a tapestry of cultures.

In that year I had invaluable experiences as a part of a worldwide protest against the Viet Nam war - a chance to visit sites sacred to Christianity, Judaism and Islam - a chance to learn not one but several languages, and a chance to see the results of thousands of years of cultural interaction in cities both ancient and modern. As a traveler, I never felt myself a tourist, I was instead on a mission to learn all I could in this extraordinary period of world history when student ferment was at its zenith (1968-1969); all the while I was still studying Chemistry at a German university.

Until I was preparing for this talk, I don’t think I ever quite realized just how those experiences have shaped my thinking - I know the same has been true for many others of you in this fellowship who have traveled and worked abroad, and it is one of those commonalities about us in this

group that I spoke of earlier. But I like to think I had as perfect a set of travels as one can possibly wish for.

As an example, in just eight weeks, in a non-tourist period (February-April), instead of going skiing or to an English speaking country, or hanging out smoking pot in Amsterdam, I traveled from Berlin to Salzburg, Austria, to the glories of Venice and then through the abject poverty of what is now Croatia and Kosovo in the former Yugoslavia, through Macedonia to the Parthenon and Agora of Athens, to Delphi and the site of the Olympic games in antiquity, to the ruins of the ancient Minoan civilization on Crete, to the Hagia Sofia, Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque of Istanbul, to the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem, to Mesaba on the Dead Sea, to the Sea of Galilee, to kibbutzim (the communal farms of Israel), to the wailing wall in Jerusalem and the Temple Mount with the Dome of the Rock and the Al Aqsa Mosque, and then down the Mount of Olives in the Palm Sunday procession into old Jerusalem, then celebrating Passover with a Jewish family in Israel, and off to Rome on Good Friday where I saw the Pope on three straight days, including being part of the massive crowd at St. Peter's square on Easter Sunday, then seeing the Coliseum and ancient Forum of Rome before touring the medieval cathedral of Milan back through Switzerland to Germany. It was a religious and cultural odyssey that would be nearly impossible to duplicate today for any amount of money. And I did not think about nuclear bombs once during that entire journey. Well, maybe once when we toured East Berlin and then when I went alone to a remote area of the Berlin Wall that is another story.

One short piano piece, a theme from a movie that came out early in the 1960's, reminds me vividly of my adventures.

Thanks. The piece is the theme music from the Exodus - a movie about the founding of Israel.

The diversity I encountered in my travels was absolutely exhilarating - in languages, cultures, methods of transportation, religions, history, geography, weather, architecture and art, social structures and ways of

thinking about the world. Coming back to the U.S. was a real let down, with huge automobiles that fouled up the air and the incessant reference to self-indulgences that were, and are, the stuff of American culture. Oh, yes, I would tell Europeans, America has culture, it is expressed through McDonald's hamburger joints, shopping malls, surfboards, freeways, smog alerts and military might (my reference points coming from Southern California). Not that I wasn't proud of the U.S. getting to the moon while I was traveling in Europe, but the moon was definitely not uppermost in the minds of Europeans or those in the Middle East.

Yet, coming back state-side to finish college, I got involved with the moon project, helping as a lab technician to analyze moon rocks. I am one of a few hundred individuals in the world who can honestly say they have washed moon dust off their hands ! The very professor for whom I worked, who was in charge of part of this analysis at UC San Diego, later gave a speech that changed my life, saying that basic, or pure scientific research, in which he was engaged, was on the decline in the U.S. He may well have been a bit bitter, because Nixon cancelled the last seven planned moon missions that would have brought back enough moon rock samples to allow him to continue his research (research on the cycles of solar radiation over the past several million years through analysis of the distribution of radioisotopes in the moon's surface rocks).

As a result of that speech and other factors, I did not apply for graduate school, because I simply did not want to spend most of my time chasing after money to fund research that I hoped to do in the field of oceanography. Instead, I went to work as a technician at the company where my Dad worked developing nuclear reactors.

Despite my travels, I suppose that would have been the end of my story had I not talked to a fellow chemist where I worked who was also studying law at night at a local university.

Hmmm, I thought - a way to use my science background for a good cause. Environmental law was a brand new emerging field. So, without telling anyone, I took the law school aptitude test and scored very well, indeed, so well that my acquaintance going to law school at night asked me if I was applying to Harvard or Yale! Well, no one in my family had any

connection with the law in any manner whatsoever, so I had NO idea what I was getting into. I ended up back in Berkeley, at Boalt Hall School of Law, pretty much where I had grown up as a child.

Before graduating from law school in 1975, a VISTA (Volunteers in Service To America) recruiter from North Dakota, but originally from California, showed up at the law school. Not thinking he would ever recruit anyone from California, he dutifully asked if anyone wanted to work for United Tribes in Bismarck. Without any other good job on the horizon, and remembering the diversity I had encountered and enjoyed so much in my travels, I ended up volunteering.

That recruiter became my boss and mentor at United Tribes when I came here to work as an attorney for Indians and Indian tribes with \$20 in my pocket and all my worldly possessions stuffed in a Volkswagen. Not only that, the very first Native American I met was Russell Means, a major player in the American Indian Movement. The legal department at United Tribes was representing Russell in a half-dozen legal actions. This introduction to Indian country put me right at ground zero (pun intended) of the most important Native American movement since the Battle of the Little Big Horn almost exactly 100 years earlier.

Quite a turn around: from moon rocks to Indian tribes. It has been a dizzying ride.

As I quickly found out as an attorney in North Dakota representing Indians and Indian tribes, justice for American Indians has never been a popular topic. Even today, the most popular Native American authors write novels and short stories that have a dark comedy about them, illustrating obliquely the failure of the American government and its majority culture to make good on the promises made to the indigenous peoples of this country. Think, for example, of the opening scenes from the movie *Smoke Signals* (screenplay by Sherman Alexie), where a radio disc jockey at a reservation station somewhere in the west is commenting on the traffic at the intersection near the radio studio (actually, no traffic at all). Another scene shows a car driving in reverse along a deserted road on the same reservation. A friend stops her and asks why she is driving

in reverse. The driver laconically says, “Because it is the only gear that works”. What a metaphor for life on the reservation.

Sitting with an attorney friend from the Crow reservation watching that Smoke Signals movie in a nearly all-white audience in Washington, D.C. was a surreal experience. We were both laughing like crazy at all of the Sherman Alexie jokes in the movie - but we quickly realized that we were laughing alone. No one else seemed to appreciate the dark humor. You see, by that time, over 25 years after I arrived in North Dakota, I had experienced many of the problems of reservation life, having spent more of my time on the reservations than off during that period. I had learned that laughter and teasing each other about the difficult facets of life on the reservation are one of the principal ways that Native Americans use to cope with the dysfunctional situation in which they often find themselves - after centuries of mistreatment by the European immigrants to this continent.

Well, my coping mechanism is often music. So time for another interlude, another song about warm weather called “Summer Song”, by Dave Brubeck, as interpreted by Marian McPartland.

But I am getting WAY ahead of myself. What got me to this Fellowship was the peace movement and people working in it. One day in 1982 I found myself making posters for the nuclear freeze campaign right in this building. This effort was launched nationwide in the early 1980’s in reaction to Ronald Reagan and his nuclear saber rattling. I had long ago realized I was no nuclear scientist willing to sacrifice the environment for the sake of nuclear energy - this realization led to a long period of estrangement from my Dad, with whom I would have bitter arguments about the safety of nuclear energy. (Archie Bunker and Meathead from All in the Family fame had nothing on these arguments).

The people that were making posters that day were either members of this Fellowship (like Ron Staff), were friends of the church, (Brian Palecek), or associated with it in some way, (Larry Spears), or were soon to be associated with it (Louise Pare). It was a great bunch of people and

made me curious about what this church and the people in it were all about. When I started coming to Sunday services I knew immediately I was in the right place - no one tried to proselytize or make me feel guilty about having questions about the relevance of organized mainstream religions. I was raised and confirmed as a Lutheran, by the way, not surprising since I am a descendant of Germans from Russia immigrants.

Later, as some of you know, I had my own chance to talk in this church in a Sunday program about my views on most organized religions. This comes from someone who sees all too clearly the terrible impacts organized religion has had on the world and particularly on the indigenous cultures of the western hemisphere. Religion too often helps justify our lack of compassion for one another. Think of the “socialist” tags being placed on Obama because he has the audacity to want health care for all!

Whew. I get too wound up.

These experiences have been the pathways to what for me is a deeper understanding of our Unitarian Universalist principles. The heart of our Unitarian Universalist belief system is contained in the first two principles that are on the back of our bulletin. First, our commitment to recognizing the inherent worth and dignity of every human being. But this first principle is relatively meaningless unless it is coupled with the second principle, a belief in justice, equity and compassion in human relations. We cannot have one of these principles without the other.

William Schulz, a former President of this denomination, after his time as President, worked as the Executive Director of Amnesty International, USA. When he finished that work, he wrote a very disturbing article in our UU World magazine. He commented on the unbelievable cruelty of which some people are capable, and the things he had learned about these people while Executive Director of Amnesty. He concluded that he had doubts whether he could still accept as valid the first principle that EVERY human being is entitled to “inherent” worth and dignity. But when you couple the first principle with the second, that makes justice a cornerstone of human relations, I believe Rev. Schulz’s problem with the first principle can be resolved.

Justice, of course, is often in the eye of the beholder. It is not a concept about which there is anything approaching consensus among human societies. But when human beings act in depraved ways, or against social norms, societies and now international institutions have developed a variety of ways to deal with such individuals, even while still respecting their inherent worth and dignity, to the point of simply putting them away in a prison for the rest of their natural lives. This lets them be seen as objects of scorn and reminds us all of their reprehensible behavior. The demands of justice in the second principle remove from some the respect accorded to them under the first principle; put another way, the “worth and dignity” to which they were “inherently” entitled are taken away by their subsequent actions. It is not a perfect solution and it is not universally administered, but it is the best system developed so far regarding the need for this kind of justice.

But there is another form that justice takes that is not as well recognized or appreciated. Sometimes it is called “distributive justice”, that is, a system that allows the benefits of society and our collective efforts to be dispensed in an even way for most, if not all, of the individuals in society. This form of justice is often repressed politically, or used in twisted ways as a means of suppression, as we have seen in the political reaction to universal health care or in the old Soviet Union. To administer “distributive justice” requires an understanding of a social frame of reference that is simply not used very often in the United States.

How is the concept of justice MOST OFTEN pictured in our society? You all know what it is: justice is dispensed at the end of the barrel of a gun. It might be at the end of the barrel of a tank, or the a-bomb at the end of a missile, or a land mine, or a hangman’s noose, or an arrow in the case of Robin Hood, but it is still the same concept, the effort is made to destroy things or kill people by an individual or small group, or even a nation, all in the name of justice.

Even when we consider social injustice, (whether economic, racial or otherwise), where the distributive justice idea makes the most sense, our media present the effort to resolve the issue singularly, both in fictional and non-fictional accounts: it is the rugged individual who can stand up to social injustice, who we turn into a hero. Think John Wayne, or

Ronald Reagan as the resolute fighter against Communism, or Martin Luther King, Jr, as the hero of the civil rights movement, or the Clint Eastwood Dirty Harry movies, or the James Bond movies, or much more recently, Walt Kowalski in the movie Gran Torino who tries by himself to right the wrongs perpetrated on his Hmong neighbors. Even the politicians I like use the image of the anti-hero - for example, we do not seem to be trying to undo the social and economic conditions that create the possibility for Al Qaeda to exist, rather, according to our President, it is Osama Bin Laden we are after, the antagonist in this real-life drama.

Rarely is justice portrayed in our American culture as being ultimately obtained in a distributive manner. I think this is why it has been so hard for some people to understand and accept the idea of a public option for health care. Those in power want to obscure the frame of reference we need for understanding distributive justice by labeling it as “socialism.”

Distributive justice is the kind of justice that indigenous societies in some parts of the western hemisphere had developed to a high degree before Europeans came - the same Europeans who, at the time (1400's), were going through a highly selective process of justice called the “Inquisition”. Many indigenous cultures thought in terms of “relationships”; Europeans focused on the glorified individual.

This brings me to my final points. In all of my travels, and with all of the wonderful Native American leaders and citizens I have come to know, and with all of the many cultures with which I have come in contact, I believe it is an appreciation of the diversity in our world that can create the potential for realizing a just society, a society that truly provides justice for all in the distributive sense. An example of this approach is occurring right now, not in the United States but in Afghanistan and Pakistan through the efforts of Greg Mortenson, the author of two wildly popular books, “Three Cups of Tea” and “Stones into Schools”, describing his experiences and the lessons he has learned.

I know that many in this fellowship have learned these lessons well; we've also heard David Pearce in the past talk about similar lessons he has learned in his work in Uzbekistan in the same part of the world. But what is interesting about the Mortenson books is that their popularity is

crossing all party and religious lines - for many, it seems, these are new ideas. So I think they bear repeating, and they are very analogous to the work I have been doing for more than 35 years with Native Americans and Indian Tribes.

The first lesson Mortenson learned is to listen carefully to what the cultures he encountered actually need and want. We (and by “we” I mean the dominant cultures, whoever they might be) always want to impose what we think is needed, before really listening to any other culture’s wishes, hence the title of his first book “Three Cups of Tea”, the social precursor to effective communication and action in the part of the world where he is working. What we often find, when we listen, are desires that are aligned well with the universal kinds of values found in the Declaration of Human Rights as approved by the UN in 1948.

Second, he learned that each culture has its own ways of getting things done. When we work with different cultures, we all can contribute to making our world a better place by recognizing universal values and putting those values into practice as best as we are able, using the cultural and social mechanisms for change in that culture that are already in place. Every culture has such mechanisms for change - that is how cultures adapt. This may mean that we must accept working with a political system that may not be like ours, which is what Mortenson has done. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, Mortenson works with a vastly different culture than his own on their terms and at their pace, to help to provide institutions most of their citizens want, namely schools for girls and women.

The third lesson he has learned is to ensure that local leaders and local citizens are the ones that make the efforts to build the schools happen. Without active local participation and assistance, you can build the best schools around, but, will anyone use them?

The fourth lesson Mortenson has learned is similar to this last lesson. It is, in my estimation, the most difficult one for us westerners to absorb. It is expressed in his latest book, *Stones into Schools*, which he finished in October of 2009. I smiled as I read the ending to the book, because I realized he was stating conclusions that I have reached in my own work.

His group had sponsored the construction of a school for girls in a valley in the far eastern portion of Afghanistan, deep in the mountains, a place largely inaccessible for six months of the year because of the weather. He was not there when the school was completed, although he wanted to be, to share in this very difficult accomplishment.

He realized, albeit belatedly, that it was better that he did not get there, so that he would not be given, or be able to claim, any credit in the construction of the school. He understood that it was much more meaningful for the people who built the school to recognize and appreciate their own accomplishments. What a lesson !

Of course, the local people were only able to build the school because the resources were available to them for this task, resources they would not have had without the assistance of others, particularly Mortenson. But who provided the resources was not the important point.

I see a final, deeper lesson in Mortenson's efforts in strange foreign lands, which is exactly what I have learned in my 35 years of work with Indian Tribes. After hundreds of years of decimation and efforts at assimilation by Europeans, the cultures and the social values of indigenous peoples in this hemisphere that existed for thousands of years before Europeans came are near extinction, and many of these peoples are without adequate resources to be a viable society. They need, in many cases, the very kind of help that Mortenson is offering half a world away. But why, you might ask, is it worthwhile to help them at all?

Because, as Mortenson has learned, we have a lot to learn from each other. Methods for using distributive justice are just one example of what we can learn. By assuming we know all the answers we miss the answers that other cultures and societies may provide, answers that enrich our world and that ultimately will enable us to achieve, collectively, a world that exists at peace.

That, to me is the true meaning of justice, an acceptance and willingness to listen to the points of views of others, enhancing our understanding of each other and of our place in the world. It is why a search for justice

has led me to an appreciation of how valuable diversity is, in all its glorious imperfections. We must constantly learn and relearn to listen to each other, and how to listen to each other, to dialogue and never assume we know what is best for others. Only then can we understand a more universal meaning for the term “justice”.

My journey is not yet over. I will continue the work for justice for diverse cultures as long as I am able and am welcome.

Thank you so much for your attention; time for discussion I hope !