

Self-Reliance or Self-Sacrifice? The Troubled Marriage of American Individualism and Altruism.

One could argue that every choice a person makes is ultimately self-serving no matter how unselfish it may appear. Any benefit to society is just a happy coincidence. This is equivalent to saying we want what we want, which isn't very interesting. I'm more concerned with what makes us *want* to help others, even at a cost to our own comfort or security. This is the definition of altruism.

The notion of individualism is less clear. Some see it as self-sufficiency, the antithesis of socialism. Hence, every successful attempt to disparage socialism in America has glorified individualism. At the other extreme, individualism has been equated with egoism or self-absorption. This exaggeration ignores the basic drive for personal dignity and meaning. In the movie, *A Single Man*, Colin Firth plays a gay English professor who, after losing his partner of 16 years to a car accident, is excluded from the private funeral by his partner's family. With thoughts of suicide, he delivers his final classroom lecture on the subject of fear. He enumerates many of the fears that haunt human beings, culminating with the "fear that no one will care what you have to say." The need to feel that we matter as individuals can surpass even the survival instinct. This impulse hardly qualifies as self-absorption. I hope to show that viewed in proper perspective, individualism complements rather than competes with altruism.

Around the world Americans have a reputation for being self-centered and materialistic. Yet, we are more religious than other developed countries and we're known for being a generous people, especially in times of crisis. Is this a case of Jekyll and Hyde, or do these two aspects of our character somehow fit together? Can individualism and altruism coexist? Maybe self-interest is already aligned with the common good, as Ben Franklin believed. Utilitarian individualism postulates that in a society where each pursues her private interests the social good will automatically emerge. While it sounds simplistic, this mindset permeates American culture.

French historian Alexis de Tocqueville first described individualism in 19th century America, as the "feeling which deposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and to withdraw into the circle of family and friends ... [leaving] the greater society to look for itself." Although Tocqueville admired American self-reliance, he predicted that individualism would cause the American citizen to forget his ancestors and descendants, with the "danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart." Tocqueville also foresaw "the isolating tendency of private ambition" in the nation's gradual shift from cooperation to competition. Today, sociologists confirm that kinship through religious and civic traditions has become less central to American life. Shared commitment to the common good seems to be eroding, as volunteerism gives ground to consumerism.

In my view there is a hierarchy of private interests, the highest of which are consonant with public interests. Unitarian Universalism regards the autonomy, inherent worth, and intellectual integrity of each person as sacrosanct. In turn, belief in the nobility of the individual has inspired the UU traditions of social activism and covenanted community. Nonetheless, our program theme for this year, *Service as a Spiritual Path*, hints at a tension between altruism and individualism. Is service to society a selfless *end*, or is it really the *means* to self-fulfillment? The late sociologist Robert Bellah noted that today's Americans tend to approach commitments "as enhancements of the sense of individual well-being rather than as moral imperatives."

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister-turned-renegade, is considered by many to be America's premier exponent of liberal individualism. His landmark essay, *Self-Reliance* praised independence and solitude while it shunned both entitlement and obligation. He regarded society as the enemy, "in conspiracy" against self-reliance. In another essay, Emerson said justice happens naturally – not by force of will. Of the social obligation to help the poor, Emerson asked, "Are they my poor?" This seemingly cavalier idea of justice has earned him criticism for his apparent disregard for social responsibility.

I would respond that Emerson's commitment to truth as he saw it and his poetic portrayal of the human condition have withstood any attacks against his social conscience. Furthermore, he demonstrated a passion for social reform. One of his activist colleagues said that if Emerson went to Hell, as his critics surely hoped, he would reform the place and make it more habitable for the rest of us. Emerson advocated the abolition of slavery, protested the forcible removal of Cherokee's from their land, warned of the growing division of labor in modern society, and opposed the war against Mexico. He may not have marched in the streets, but his call for justice was a beacon to those who did.

How does one reconcile Emerson the solitary transcendentalist with Emerson the social activist? Never bothered by contradiction, he offered one possible answer: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." But his real genius was to expand the "self" to encompass all of humanity, thereby merging self-interest with the common good. "The heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of His and Mine ceases... Jesus and Shakespeare are fragments of the soul, and by love I conquer and incorporate them in my own conscious domain." Emerson's vision of the self even included God. "As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins." So for Emerson, justice was not an externally imposed duty, but a divinely infused quality of human nature to celebrate and nourish.

I will return to Emerson, but first I wish to probe the excesses of individualism in the context of public involvement in America. The nation has witnessed a steady decline in per capita volunteerism. Most community service organizations are shrinking (Lions Club membership is

down 30% since the mid 1980's). Those who still volunteer are less apt to join. They prefer occasional or episodic volunteering and short-term commitments. They want opportunities for personal growth. And they expect to make a difference as *individuals*. In this last trend we get a glimpse of self-interest joining with the public good.

Church attendance is also falling. Most Americans simply aren't buying what religion has to sell. Catholic churches lost 5 percent of their membership during the last decade, even with the influx of Catholic immigrants from Latin America. In the same period mainline Protestant denominations declined by an alarming 25%, while the American Baptists lost 14%. According to data supplied by churches across the country, less than 20% of Americans presently attend church on a regular basis. Public polls show 40%, reflecting our tendency to over-report socially desirable behavior. A University of Michigan study concludes, "American religiosity may be exceptional not in terms of actual behavior, but rather in terms of *identity*." So we're skipping church and lying about it, but still claiming moral superiority!

Many have suggested we need religion to moderate our selfish tendencies. The decline in volunteerism may stem from the drop in church attendance, but not because church-goers are inherently more charitable. Church attendance has actually dropped faster than volunteerism, according to the National Council of Churches and the U.S. Bureau of Labor. Since a third of the country's volunteers give most of their time to churches, the decline in church membership alone could account for the reduced volunteer hours.

Oddly, devotion to church can *interfere* with participation in civic and humanitarian organizations. Not only do secular and religious nonprofits compete for a limited pool of volunteers, but they sometimes appeal to dissimilar values. In a recent study by the University of Texas, people who placed top priority on moral obligation and social responsibility volunteered more than those who valued religious identification above all. The latter tended to have a more conservative and exclusionary religious orientation, which made them (in the authors' opinion) less open to helping people outside their own religious circle.

We know that religious observance doesn't ensure altruistic behavior. Most churches in colonial America turned a blind eye to slavery (Quakers were the first to speak out), and religion did virtually nothing to support women's suffrage. Today, only the marginalization of the Christian right has enabled gay marriage to overcome religious prejudice and gain mainstream favor.

In cases where religious commitment does enhance community service, I suspect the beliefs themselves matter less than the deliberate association with like-minded people. The Catholic sponsored Knights of Columbus has avoided the decline that afflicts other service organizations. Among the reasons given are their common faith, the feeling of brotherhood it produces, and

the sense that they are a vital part of something bigger than themselves. People need communion with others to awaken their altruistic urge and open pathways to service. By fostering a shared sense of the sacred, churches generally provide intimacy and cohesiveness more effectively than secular organizations.

But the temptation to revert to religion expressly to cure egoism is based on the false dichotomy that service to others must be either self-serving (as some behaviorists suggest) or rooted in religious traditions (as devout believers claim). In reality, a wide range of behavioral motivations exists, and religious teachings speak to the full spectrum. Christianity encourages individualism as surely as it inspires altruism. It declares the *individual* soul as the fundamental measure of success. The earthly reward for Christian devotion is not a utopian society, but a *personal* relationship with Jesus. *Private* stories of divine intervention abound, while the massive calamities that plague humankind go unexplained.

If religious tradition offered a framework for emerging behavioral norms in early America, *culture* was the guiding force. Religious diversity and the desire to be free from religious oppression moderated the role of church in setting moral standards. Colonists had no Church of England or Pope to tell them how to behave. Instead, they entered into a new republic that had to figure out how to govern its self. By intuition, by persuasion, by trial and error, they developed a collective conscience that was uniquely American.

Bellah contends that a remnant of this older morality “provides much of what coherence our society still has.” Certainly, tradition contributes to America’s spiritual base, but part of that tradition also underlies the radical individualism that threatens our sense of unity and self-sacrifice. Although the emphasis on pleasure, money, status, and personal salvation emanates from the American Dream, it isolates the individual from society. This isolation is worsened by geographic mobility, ethnic diversity, and economic class disparity. One result is a detachment from civic involvement, forfeiting “consent of the governed” to the state. Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre warned of this kind of individualism, where freedom to make private decisions is bought at the cost of turning over public decisions to politicians and bureaucrats.

To reverse this trend we must restore the uneasy symbiosis between individualism and altruism; they require one another, yet either could devour the other. We’ve seen the consequences of excessive individualism. On the other hand, neglecting the self altogether could extinguish the fire that drives altruism. The key to this symbiosis is an enlightened understanding of one’s true self-interest. Our sense of personal dignity, worth, and moral autonomy has a distinctly social and cultural underpinning. Activist Parker Palmer said in a healthy society the private and the public “work together dialectically, helping to create and nurture one another.”

The word “volunteer” implies the exercise of free will, so freedom and service go hand in hand. Altruism would lose all meaning if it became compulsory. And in the long run, freedom would lose its meaning if not employed for the common good. John Winthrop, announcing the Puritan covenant centuries ago, said freedom should be used to choose an ethical life. As a *terminal* value freedom is pointless; only as an *instrumental* value does it take on purpose. Martin Buber called it “the run before the jump, the tuning of the violin, the possibility of communion.” We are free to choose, but we are not free to *not* choose. Janice Joplin sang, “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” but true freedom brings the inevitability of choice, with *everything* to lose including freedom itself.

Freedom of association is critical to sustaining individual freedom. Unlike the coercive power of the state, voluntary associations derive their power from persuasion. They are transformative, not conformative. Tocqueville thought that through the coming together of people for mutual purpose, Americans were able to overcome selfish desires and create a vibrant civil society that functioned independently from the state. With this independence, many of the attributes of self-reliance inhered to the social order of that time. The individual could identify strongly with the organization, adopt its objectives, and clearly perceive the potential to make a difference.

Most of the alliances formed by early Americans were of modest size. Our system of government was initially designed for a population about 1% of what it is today. Coupled with the absence of electronic media, this made it both feasible and necessary that elected representatives communicate face-to-face with their constituents. Direct communication invested citizens in their government and motivated them to organize. Thomas Jefferson recognized the central function of small groups in a democracy, when he contemplated dividing counties into wards of around 100 citizens that would act as small republics.

If America’s churches are to create this small-group atmosphere and once again become crucibles for public involvement, they will remember their roots without idolizing them. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan said, “Whereas tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.” The UU faith affirms a *living* tradition, which enables coherence, continuity and renewal. When most people witness tragedy, yesterday’s faith suddenly seems inadequate. It must be rekindled and refashioned to face tomorrow. After the Boston Marathon bombing, Michael Gerson wrote, “We turn to faith, not out of arrogant certainty, but out of fear of the alternative: that innocent people suffer and the universe is indifferent.”

I used to view the proliferation of religious sects as a menace to social harmony. But as much as we’d like everyone to agree on life’s important issues, churches have the same need that individuals have to stand apart. And they need it for many of the same reasons: autonomy of belief, a distinctive identity, and a special mission or destiny. Research by sociologist Rodney Stark clearly shows that people want their religious communities *narrowly focused, different,*

and *demanding*. They also want a unifying belief structure with compelling myths or narratives to breathe meaning into their faith.

What does this mean for UU? In a recent edition of *The Humanist*, Michael Werner bemoaned the UUA's shift toward "radical tolerance, indiscriminate humanism and fuzzy theology." A rather harsh assessment, but Werner is not alone. Robert Bellah maintains that by losing intellectual focus liberal religions have grown "too bland to compete with the more vigorous forms of radical religious individualism." You may be familiar with the analogy of the cathedral originated by the late UU minister Forrest Church. Summarized as "one light, many windows," it is a brilliant metaphor of religious pluralism that recognizes a single source of sacred truth while honoring a variety of interpretations. But today's truth seekers yearn for precision and passion. From the center of the cathedral they may see all the windows equally, but for the most light they need to *pick a window* and move as close to it as possible.

At the same time, religious denominations must find common ground between the internal interests of the institution – refining its specific beliefs, practices, and traditions – and the external interests of society. Gandhi's Hindu faith did not lessen his regard for Muslims or Christians; it intensified his loyalty to *humanity*. Conversely, his political fight only strengthened his devotion to Hinduism. This mutual reinforcement mirrors the symbiosis sought between individualism and altruism. Today, America's religious and cultural systems are both out of balance. Even as individuals have abandoned *external* concerns, liberal religion has neglected *internal* qualities like imagination and creativity.

I conclude with some recommendations that might combat radical self-interest. We must not suppress individualism, but understand it more deeply and extend its power to close-knit religious communities. We must answer Bellah's plea to "rescue myth from the realm of unconscious fantasy to its creative role in human consciousness." Emerson alluded to this unconscious fantasy. "People are wiser than they know...Pieties heard from the pulpit and greeted by automatic, unthinking acceptance are, when repeated on the street, met with silent disbelief."

A simple example may illustrate the contrasting directions mythology can take. Jesus said, "I am one with the Father." Christian institutions took this literally, leading to the incomprehensible doctrines of the Trinity and the Virgin Birth. Emerson mythologized about the expanded self, declaring, "I am my brother and my brother is me." Like Jesus, his choice of language communicates the image of unity more forcefully than any statement of fact ever could. But no one took Emerson literally. Creative myth imparts meaning to reality, whereas myth masquerading as fact confuses or contradicts reality. I respect those who still find sustenance in literal versions of mystical doctrines (transubstantiation, for example). It works for them. But for a majority of Americans the modern era has reduced such doctrines to mere fantasy, sadly

rendering religion powerless to shape their lives. To paraphrase Rousseau, if you take away the miracles the world will flock to the feet of Jesus Christ.

Where is *our* myth, *our* narrative? UU tradition may be short on magic, but it has its martyrs, mystics, and sages. It may lack in the priestly functions of liturgy and theology, but it excels at combining the prophetic, the poetic, and the philosophical dimensions of religion. The prophetic tradition calls us to a higher standard of goodness; the poetic tradition alerts us to beauty, mystery and misery; the philosophical tradition disciplines our reasoning faculties in the quest for truth. I believe any present attempt to diminish one of these traditions impoverishes all three. They are like seasonings, each adding its own flavor while accentuating the others.

UU mythology conveys inherent human goodness, transcendent mystery, and intellectual integrity – all espoused by Emerson. He held that human beings are “the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide.” He envisioned an innate moral sentiment in humans – a sort of predisposition toward kindness. While his view is supported by recent scientific evidence, we still accept *on faith* that the sympathetic instinct, freely cultivated in the company of other people, will develop into a mature conscience. In my experience, if presented with a clear need and a tangible opportunity to help, most people will rise above self-interest.

Pondering the future of a young nation, Samuel Adams remarked, “We may look up to armies for our defense, but virtue is our best security.” Emerson’s concept of natural justice distilled virtue to “easy, spontaneous, simple action.” According to English professor Kerry Larson, Emerson’s appeal to a universal, unconditional justice was intended to “engage the needs and forestall the seductions of individualism. [He] wants us to see that virtuous conduct follows from human flourishing and not the other way around.” Emerson resisted, not virtue, but the *pursuit* of it. “What is done for effect is seen to be done for effect; what was done for love, is felt to be done for love.” Divorced from guilt and praise, Emerson’s morality seeks that state of being where altruism erupts from the heart. Personal satisfaction and honor, if unsolicited, will follow. I think he would counsel us to serve according to our individual talents rather than the expectations of society, and when possible, to enjoy it. A Persian mystic once said, “Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground.”

By Ronn Smith, October 6, 2013