

New Safety Belts
Understanding Risk on the Highway of Spiritual Information
September 12th, 2021
Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley
North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Yesterday marked the 20th anniversary of the attacks of 9/11. Today is the 20th anniversary of the first day after. Last year, on the weekend of the 19th anniversary, we talked about falling into this beautiful life we live. I celebrated the idea by falling into Silver Lake, fully clothed. I hope that you will join me after this morning's service. The plunge will take place at about 12:00 noon.

Today is Sunday, September 12th and the title of this morning's reflection is Safety Belts—Understanding Risk on the New Highway of Spiritual Information. Good morning. It is good to be together.

I want to draw a picture but I don't have the skill that I need. I want to convey an image that tells a story in a single glance...and I have the image clearly in mind and my clear image conveys a story but I don't have the skill to bring it into being. The story is this:

There had been a great discovery in a mythical, seacoast town called Woodstock Cove. There, the Historical Society had found the nightly journal of a well-known pirate whose great ship had stolen treasure and buried it. The map leading to the site at which the treasure had been buried had long been available. It was on display. It was under glass. It was a popular attraction...but the map was old and tattered. The final destination was plainly visible but the starting point had long since been worn away. The great lore of the map was that it shows us the X-marks-the-spot but it doesn't tell us where we should begin. So, the map was useless...until now. The starting point was clearly stated in the pirate's nightly journal.

A date was chosen on which the contents of the pirate's journal would be released. The organizers chose the date knowing that there would be a mad rush to find the treasure...but a few of them were clever...and they were selfish and they were greedy. They wanted the pirate's treasure all for themselves.

They could not prevent the contents of the journal from being released but what they did was rather ingenious. They broke to rules. They snuck into the Historical Society and read the pirate's journal two weeks early. They identified the starting location and they followed the map to the buried treasure. They dug and dug and dug and dug until they discovered a gigantic treasure chest. It was huge. You could fit two cords of wood inside of it!!

They opened it up and there, they found more riches than they could have imagined. It was far too much for them to carry home. So, they made a plan. They found a much smaller treasure chest in an old, abandoned farmhouse

nearby and they filled the smaller chest with silver and gold. They closed up the gigantic one, sealed it up tight and buried it once again—this time, adding sharp stones and a thick layer of clay to deter the coming treasure-seekers.

They backfilled the hole significantly and then, they placed the smaller treasure chest in there. This way, when the contents of the pirate's journal were released, after the mad rush to discover the riches, the most ambitious seeker would discover only a fraction of the prize.

So, the image that I have in my head is simple. It's two-dimensional. It is a cross-section into the earth. And on the surface, there's a group of people digging a hole. They're about six feet deep at this point. In another three feet or so, they will come upon the smaller chest with great delight. They will open it, find the riches and feel joyful and victorious.

Another six feet beneath the smaller chest from the old farmhouse, beneath the deterrence layer of sharp stones and thick clay, is the pirate's much larger treasure chest, utterly intact. After the speeches of celebration that were held at the Historical Society, the clever the selfish and the greedy went back to the hole when no one was looking. And the good people of the mythical, seacoast town called Woodstock Cove, they never knew. They never knew until... Dant, dant, dahhhh! That part is "...to be continued."

But I'm not an artist, not a graphic artist. I don't draw or paint or anything. I never learned those rules at all...not like I learned the rules in music.

As I started reaching out to teachers to help me on my journey, I learned a lot. There is a rule prohibiting the use of parallel 5^{ths}, unless you are trying to write a new Gregorian chant...but Marvin Gaye did it at the beginning of I Heard It Through the Grapevine. In fact, rock and roll uses parallel 5^{ths} ALL of the time...and high school, garage bands mimic them with great accuracy, incessantly playing Smoke on the Water by Deep Purple as loudly as humanly possible. Well, ok. I did that—and I know I'm not alone—but maybe it isn't quite universal. There is a rule against using an interval called the triton. Traditional Western art music scholarship refers to the triton as the Devil's interval. It can feel a bit awkward to play or to sing...until you get the hang of it. It can also be quite beautiful...even though it's kind of against the law. But composer Leonard Bernstein did it in West Side Story, when Tony from a gang called The Jets encountered his beloved Maria for the very first time. Tony was breaking the rules, just by talking to her...because her brother was a leader in the rival gang. But that doesn't matter to lovers...and that didn't matter to Tony. Things like this don't matter to true Romeos and true Juliets. Tony was moved to his soul and he sang about the one who had moved him. He sang,

Maria!

I've just met a girl named Maria,
And suddenly that name
Will never be the same to me.

Maria!

I've just kissed a girl named Maria,

And suddenly I've found
How wonderful a sound can be

Maria!
Say it loud and there's music playing
Say it soft and it's almost like praying
Maria . . .
I'll never stop saying, "Maria!"

And the music is just so brilliant...and to have heard Leonard Bernstein conducting this himself... I can only imagine. It must have been wonderful!

There is a rule against doing what Bernstein did but he did it anyway...and he did it meaningfully...and just look at all of the beauty that came into being by breaking the law.

Breaking the law in society, however, is rarely beautiful, even when one does it as meaningfully. In other words, had Leonard Bernstein donned his best, freshly pressed tuxedo and used his conductor's baton to meaningfully steal my car, I would call the police and press charges of larceny. So, no. Breaking the law in society is hardly ever beautiful. And even when it is beautiful, it can promptly land you right in jail. So, if you're gonna break the law, you be prepared. Our courts can be very consistent. And if you're a theologian...

Mahatma Gandhi was prepared. He was sent to jail twelve different times. He was sent to jail in South Africa on the 10th of January of 1908 and then again on the 7th of October. He was sent in February of 1909 and twice in November of 1913 before he chose to leave South Africa. In India, he was sent to jail in April of 1919, in March of '22, in May of 1930, in January of '32 and in August of '33 when—at the age of 64—he fasted for seven days until he was released without condition. All told, Gandhi spent 2,338 days in jail. Six years, four months, three weeks and five days.

Following in Gandhi's footsteps, Martin Luther King was also prepared. He was sent to jail twenty-nine different times. Both of them believed that what they were doing was just—driven, as they were, by a faith and a force that was far beyond them both. It is my understanding that that same faith and that same force drove Henry David Thoreau when he wrote his essay, *Civil Disobedience*, in 1849. Of course, as we know, Henry David Thoreau was Unitarian. Originally entitled *Resistance to Civil Government*, Thoreau was trying to find an ethical way, a meaningful method of breaking the law. He began his essay as follows:

I heartily accept the motto, "That government is best which governs least"; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe—"That government is best which governs not at all"; and when [we] are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which [we] will have.

When we are ready, we will choose a more elegant form of government. This is what the artists have been telling us. They sing,

We shall be known by the company we keep

Safety Belts—1

by the ones who circle round to tend these fires...
It is time now and what a time to be alive
In this great turning we shall learn to lead in love

What would it be like if love were the law. If peaceful, human thriving were our first, best form of government. In *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau explains that “government [is] only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will.’ What if we were to chose a different mode?

Now, I’m not really a political revolutionary or anything. Like John Lennon, I’m just a dreamer imagining but it feels like a lot of folks are with me. I don’t believe that I’m the only one. I am willing to civilly disobey with love or God or the Spirit of Life as my noble guide. But I want to do that safely. I want my gesture to really matter. I don’t want to dig for only a fraction of the treasure...for the fraction that has been prepared for me...by the clever or by the selfish or by the greedy who take advantage. And out of fear and anxiety, I certainly don’t want to become one of them. In 1849, Thoreau said,

Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see...that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

And out of fear and anxiety, I certainly don’t want to become too righteous. Thoreau said,

Any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

I love the math of this. I love the inevitability. Thoreau asked,

Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men [we should be human beings] first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.

Mama taught me well. Dad, too. This was their steady refrain: “Do what you think is right.” They were inspired by King and Gandhi...and Henry David Thoreau.

This wisdom degrades when we let it. It degrades quite quickly these days... into a naïve sense of freedom and relational power. Civil disobedience breaks down too quickly into childishness...as if to say “you’re not the boss of me.” And I get that. In public life right now, we don’t always have the tools that we need.

It took me some time but I’m finally more comfortable just being myself in a mask. What I mean by that is that I am no longer personally uncomfortable in settings in which few people are masking up. I was in the store the other day. I was wearing my mask. And a gentleman who had just order a sandwich was picking chips—salt and vinegar or barbeque, ruffles, ranch... It’s pretty complicated. Our eyes met briefly as I was walking toward the bathroom. I ran into him again at the counter. He was right in front of me in line. I said, “Are you sure that you chose the right one?” He had two bags. Not the individual-size bags. The family-size ones. He

Safety Belts—1

was buying a lot of chips. One sandwich, one yellow mustard packet and chips enough for thirty!

It wasn't right but it was pretty funny both of us laughed. In guilty pleasure, he looked down at his chips and then up at me with the sweetest face. We laughed because he was breaking an unwritten rule about lunch and he was free to do so. So, we laughed at my joke together but he wasn't wearing a mask...and I didn't know why...and I didn't judge him...and I didn't bring it up. There was a sign on the door reading, "Masks Required." He was breaking an unwritten rule about life these and he wasn't really quite as free. And neither was I...because he's my brother and I am deeply tied to him. And he to me...and we haven't figured those parts out just yet.

There's a saying that goes: Your freedom to flail about your arms stops at my nose. I am convinced my maskless partner would agree. But what does that mean for us? That gets a bit contentious. This is the place at which we generally find ourselves arrested...and jailed...on the far side of compassion. Were working on it... and we'll get over this...but it will require a kind of courage. I will require bravery in ways that might push us a bit. We sing,

Though I may speak with bravest fire
And have the gift to all inspire
And have not love, my words are vain
As sounding brass and hopeless gain