

“Your Reason and Your Passion”

A Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, November 11, 2007

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough

“Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul,” said Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet*. We commonly think of them as opposites but Gibran considered them to be complementary elements in our “oneness and melody.” I think we need heart and vision too to know where we want to be.

Unitarian Universalists have always valued reason as our most precious tool, and we’ve been suspicious of emotion when it spills over. Still we know, as Gibran said, “reason, ruling alone, is a force confining.”

There are many things we are passionate about that are not simply the result of reason, starting with our families and extending to some of our most cherished beliefs. Reason alone would blow many families apart, and don’t you dare challenge our right to personal expression, even when we make fools of ourselves. We want that right, reasonable or not.

“Passion, unattended, is a flame that burns to its own destruction,” said Gibran. When people get into fights they seldom confine themselves to the use of reason alone. Still we avoid those we regard as passionless cold turkeys. They seem to be afflicted with terminal earnestness. “Get a life,” we say, and we don’t mean, “Reason more.”

Queen Victoria, not a person noted for tolerance of others, once wrote to a relative “I would earnestly warn you against trying to find out the reason and explanation for everything.... To try and find out the reason for everything is very dangerous and leads to nothing but disappointment and dissatisfaction, unsettling your mind and in the end making you miserable.” Of course if your word is law as hers was it really doesn’t matter too much what reason says about anything.

Her contemporary American leader Abraham Lincoln saw people making a mockery of reason. He was often called upon to use his vaunted reason to settle their disputes. Once two men who had been arguing for hours about the correct proportions of the length of a man’s legs to the size of his body asked Abe to settle the question. He listened to the points both made and then summed them up in a legal fashion.

“This is a question of the utmost significance” he said dryly, “and one that has caused much bloodshed in the past and will doubtless do so again in the future. So it is not without much mental anguish and exertion that I have reached an opinion: all side issues being swept aside it is my opinion that a man’s lower limbs, in order to preserve harmony of proportion, should be at least long enough to reach from his body to the ground.” Now that’s reasonable!

Said Gibran, “Your soul is oftentimes a battlefield, upon which your reason and your judgment wage war against your passion and your appetite. Would that I could be the peacemaker in your soul, that I might turn the discord and the rivalry of your elements into oneness and melody.” That sounds easy, as if discord were only too much percussion in a musical piece that could be resolved by a swelling of violins. In real life discord doesn’t get resolved so easily.

Over the years of my ministry, I have often seen UU’s get deeply involved in rancorous situations. Indeed, I have been in some of them myself. We are not a people given always to sweet gentleness in our relationships, experiences and opinions.

In the 60's the battle for Civil Rights and the Vietnam War stirred great discord in our churches and nation. Some people were caught in the middle, wanting to support the government but determined to protect our children from the consequences of an evil war. I wasn't in the middle.

I remember joining in a raucous gathering of young men and women protesting the war. I was as angry as they about the war and how I saw it threatening the young people in my church—and my own children. The meeting took place in a Los Angeles church. A half dozen draft resisters who had been hiding “underground” had announced that they would be there to make statements about their refusal to answer their draft notices.

Federal marshals were outside. We knew the young men would be arrested as soon as they identified themselves. They faced prison sentences they could have avoided by staying underground or by going to Canada, but these young men cared more about the righteousness of their nation than about the consequences to themselves of resisting the draft publicly.

I was one of several people too old to be drafted who chained ourselves to the young men to protect their opportunity to speak publicly. I was connected by a yard of heavy chain to a young man I didn't know, and he was linked by chain on to many others on the platform. As he began to speak federal agents stormed onto the stage and started ripping the chains off people, dragging them away. When they got to the young man and me they could see we were so tightly bound together the chains wouldn't slide off.

The officer picked up the resister, pulling on him as if he were trying to break his arms to get him out of the chains. I leaped on the officer to restrain him. He pushed me down and hollered for chain cutters. Moments later he hustled the young man off the stage. I never saw either one again.

My reason and passion were entwined as tightly as the chain, but not in harmony. I probably should have been arrested for interference with a federal agent. Would I do it again if a new draft were set in motion to support the Iraq War, and our young men and women were at risk? You bet I would! I wish we had an effective way to protest the obscene killings in Iraq today.

Another issue of passion and reason that stirred up UU's was the sexual revolution of the 70's. Contraceptives had made it possible for people to almost eliminate the risk of pregnancy, throwing open the question of responsibility in sexual relations. If two consenting adults choose to have sex, whose business is it but theirs? If they are married to partners who believe in “open marriage,” can they not responsibly share sexually with other partners? Where should the line be drawn?

Two hundred years earlier the philosopher Voltaire faced the same question when he was invited by a group of Parisians to take part in an orgy. He accepted, the story goes, giving such a satisfactory account of himself that the very next night he was asked to come again. “Ah no, my friends,” said Voltaire with a slight smile. “Once a philosopher; twice a pervert.”

I remember UU conferences in the 70's that seemed to be rutting rituals more than philosophical explorations. Some of my ministerial colleagues acquired reputations as Casanovas on the prowl. I heard one young minister tell a group of people, some of them strangers to him, that he'd gone into the ministry because it permitted him to have ready access to many consenting women who found him attractive.

Why not? He wasn't married. He was ugly but that wasn't a logical reason to stop him from being “a natural man.” “Reason, ruling alone, is a force confining,” said Gibran. We knew that. We weren't sure that “passion, unattended, is a flame that [must burn] to its own destruction.” Who would be hurt?

Wasn't everyone free to choose? Weren't we free to live our lives as we chose if no one else were involved?

When AIDS forced us to recognize how dangerous this release of passion could be, the sexual revolution was already starting to subside. People had discovered that not even consenting adults could give themselves to the free expression of sexual passion without endangering other values they cared about—the integrity of married or committed gay partners to one another, the right of children to stability with caring parents; the expectation of safety in professional relationships between professionals and clients they serve.

Unitarian Universalist ministers now have the strictest code of ethics for clergy of any religious movement. We decided that reason and passion require caring responsibility to all those we serve. It wasn't enough when reason and passion seemed to make a melody of oneness.

In the 80's a new challenge to our reason and passion appeared. We started the decade with the risk of an impending nuclear war. We had reached such a point of preparedness that we could kill all the people on earth several times over. So could our enemies whom Reagan called "The Evil Empire."

I thought we had only a 50-50 chance of surviving another decade. Where had our use of reason led us? Our technology lacked a conscience. Our leaders spoke of the possible loss of lives in terms of how many million survivors would make a civilization survivable. How many could die and leave us with sufficient technology and resources to rebuild our culture?

Our leaders insisted we would passionately defend our freedom against the Soviets and that our superior use of reasoning would permit our culture to prevail. What insanity! How MAD—Mutually Assured Destruction! By the time the so-called Evil Empire had collapsed of its own weight near the end of the 80's, America had discovered another way to destroy itself.

In the 90's America's economy surged until it reached a level where some people thought it would go onward and upward forever. "Our wealth will sustain us," they said. It mattered not that public services deteriorated, that a huge percentage of young Americans were being shut out, that we were putting more people in prison than any other developed nation, both in numbers and percentage of our people.

"We will build more prisons to keep the losers incarcerated, and gate our neighborhoods to keep the poor out when they aren't in prison," was the unspoken policy America followed. "Our reason has served us so well! Forget the heart!"

Then the millennium came. Economics sagged and sagged. Many of us lost a lot of money. Still Americans were sure we would emerge whole. Then the terrorists welcomed us all into a new world of fear. Only fundamentalists who await with eagerness the apocalypse and the Rapture could look to the awful terror with positive expectations. They elected a President who was reported to agree with them. We swept across Iraq and he proclaimed "Mission Accomplished," a bit too soon.

Passions once again overwhelmed America. The rest of the world could see that the man with his hand on the rudder was unable to steer reasonably. We could see that we were going where the winds of passion were blowing him—towards Chaos.

The sixth statement of our UU principles reminds us that we commit ourselves to "the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." It's past time to bring reason and passion together with heart and vision. When we emerge from the war in Iraq, we will still be beset by the greatest

challenge our world has ever encountered, global warming and degradation of the planet's environment. The world will survive, but in what condition?

There is no safe place. The last forty years should have taught us that each new decade brings a huge, unforeseeable challenge. The answers are unknowable until the challenges are upon us. "Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul," said Gibran. But they are not enough. Heart and vision must be there too.

Once filmmaker Sam Goldwyn was caught up in a heated argument over a script. Voices rose with passion and flowed, sometimes with reason. One of the arguers glanced out the window and then called out to the others, "Come look. Here we are fighting and this marvelous peaceful event is taking place in nature right under our noses. We should be ashamed of ourselves."

The others, Goldwyn last, trooped over. Parading across the lawn were a mother quail and her five chicks. The moviemakers stood there silently for a long time watching them.

Finally the unappeasable Goldwyn broke the silence: "They don't belong here," he growled.

Oh yes they do. When reason and passion aren't enough, look about you. Take a deep breath. There will be something more that you haven't noticed to put everything that's surging through you in proper perspective. Look more. Look enough. You will see it finally. It's always here even if shortsighted folks like Sam Goldwyn don't think it belongs here.

What is it? I don't know what to call it. But I know it's there and here and it may be the only thing left to put our world back together when reason and passion are not enough. I think it may be a glimpse of heart and vision.

Dick Weston-Jones @2007

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

1710 Old NC 10, Hillsborough, NC 27278 (919, 644-0567), www.uuchnc.org

Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, Minister; phone 919, 932-7447, dwj@wuurld.org