“You, Me, and Everybody Else”

Rev. Michael McGee

Chautauqua UU Fellowship

Sunday, August 20, 2023

Reading “The Golden Buddha” by Jack Kornfield

“In a large temple north of Thailand's ancient capital, Sukotai, there once stood an enormous and ancient clay Buddha. Though not the most handsome or refined work of Thai Buddhist art, it had been cared for over a period of five hundred years and had become revered for its sheer longevity. Violent storms, changes of government, and invading armies had come and gone, but the Buddha endured.

“At one point, however, the monks who tended the temple noticed that the statue had begun to crack and would soon be in need of repair and repainting. After a stretch of particularly hot, dry weather, one of the cracks became so wide that a curious monk took his flashlight and peered inside. What shone back at him was a flash of brilliant gold! Inside this plain old statue, the temple residents discovered one of the largest and most luminous gold images of Buddha ever created in Southeast Asia. Now uncovered, the golden Buddha draws throngs of devoted pilgrims from all over Thailand.”

Sermon:

Last Thanksgiving my wife Terry and I drove from our home in Sarasota, Florida, to Charlottesville, Virginia, to be with family for the holidays.

On the way back we decided to try to find the long-lost McGee cemetery I heard existed in southwestern Virginia.

We got off the interstate in Wytheville and drove through the beautiful countryside, the roads getting narrower, hillier, and more windy.

The GPS coordinates led us to a place that seemed like it was in the middle of nowhere.

I pulled the car over to the side of the road where there was a gate with a big No Trespassing sign on it.

Hoping the owner wasn’t nearby with a shotgun, I scrambled over the fence, and I walked up the dirt road until it led into some trees, and there right in front of me was a small cemetery plot, overgrown, and surrounded by a dilapidated fence.

There were about a dozen headstones amidst the bushes and weeds, most of them with the last name McGee.

Hallelujah! I had found the long lost McGee cemetery.

After exploring for a while, trying not to step on any rattlesnakes or copperheads in the underbrush, I finally found the headstone I was looking for.

It was only about two feet high, very worn, with letters that were barely visible.

They read: “Richard McGee, Company C, 24th Virginia Infantry, CSA”

Confederate States of America.

Yes, my great grandfather fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War.

Talk about a skeleton in the closet!

Actually, several skeletons.

Records show that Richard enlisted in Galax, Virginia, at the beginning of the war with his two brothers, Christopher and Walter, all teenagers.

The three brothers fought side by side until the Second Battle of Manassas where Richard’s two brothers were shot.

Christopher is buried in a mass grave at the Manassas battleground and Walter recovered, only to be killed in the Battle of Richmond at the end of the war.

Richard somehow survived the entire war — or I wouldn’t be standing here today — fighting in many of the major battles, including Picket’s Charge at Gettysburg.

I’m so thankful that he was either very lucky or found some large wagons to hide behind.

So I had a little chat with Richard while standing there.

“What were you thinking fighting for four years in a war where you lost two brothers, and for what purpose?

From what I can tell you were dirt farmers with no slaves.

Did the Fox News of your day tell you that the woke Yankees were going to replace you?”

Richard had no answers to my questions, so I was left with the quandary I’ve had most of my life: what do I do with these rebel skeletons in my closet?

I know they were on the wrong side of history and the wrong side of morality.

And yet, can I dismiss them that easily?

Can I deny their humanity, their courage, their hopes and dreams?

Most of us have some skeletons in our closet, don’t we?

Do any of you have Confederate skeletons in your closet?

How about enslavers? Felons? Trumpers?

Having grown up in the American South and lived a good portion of my life there, I have a love/hate relationship with my homeland.

In fact, Terry and I recently sold our home in Sarasota, Florida, and we’re moving to Asheville, NC in two weeks, and one reason we’re leaving Florida is that it’s a very crazy state.

Do you know what I’m talking about?

There’s much I love about Florida, but it pains me to see the never-ending conspiracy theories, the book banning, the attacks on Blacks, immigrants, and LGBTQ people.

Unfortunately, these repressive Jim Crow type measures are becoming more prevalent in southern states, as well as some not so southern.

And though I’m proud of many of the accomplishments of southerners, I’m most proud of those southerners who had the courage to stand up to the intolerance, ignorance, and cruelty of their brethren.

This struggle of mine has been part of a big question I’ve been wrestling with for most of my life, and that is: “When you look in the mirror, do you see an angel or a demon?”

Think about that.

Most of us have been taught all of our lives that there is something terribly wrong with humanity.

Christianity teaches that we are all born depraved sinners.

I became a Unitarian more than 50 years ago because it was a faith that rejected original sin and instead affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

That optimistic faith has been tested many times over the years by people who drive me absolutely nuts.

I sometimes sympathize with Linus in the old Peanuts cartoon when he exclaimed, “I love mankind… it’s people I can’t stand.”

So this is the challenge: How can we affirm the humanity of all people while struggling against those who are complete idiots — or even worse, brutes and bullies?

The best answer to that big question that I’ve found is in the amazing book titled Humankind: A Hopeful History by Rudger Bergman, which is one of the most inspiring books I’ve read in a long time.

Bergman points out that most people have a pessimistic view of humanity.

Whether traditional Christians or liberal progressives, we tend to accept that people are selfish, devious, and dangerous by nature.

When we look in the mirror, we see a demon instead of an angel.

But Bergman gives a convincing argument that the human race should get much more credit than we give ourselves, and he provides some inspiring examples to prove his point.

Do you remember reading the novel Lord of the Flies by William Golding?

It was required reading for most of us, and won the Nobel Prize in 1954, and then was made into a popular movie.

The setting was a deserted island in the Atlantic where a group of British boys were stranded after their plane crashed.

The boys attempt to govern themselves was utterly disastrous, with conflict and violence subverting all attempts at cooperation and community.

As you may remember, It did not end well.

This has been our model of human nature in modern times.

Without the boundaries and controls, the rules and regulations of civilization we would all go postal. Right?

But have you heard of the modern day version of Lord of the Flies?

In 1965 six Tongan teenaged boys ran away from their strict Catholic boarding school and stole a 24 foot fishing boat.

The boat was battered in a storm, and the boys shipwrecked on a small Pacific island where they survived for 15 months before being rescued.

Unlike the boys in Lord of the Flies, these managed to live with little conflict or drama in the most harsh conditions.

The captain who rescued them wrote that, “the boys had set up a small commune with food garden, hollowed-out tree trunks to store rainwater, a gymnasium with curious weights, a badminton court, chicken pens, and a permanent fire, all from handiwork, an old knife blade, and much determination.”

So this is the real Lord of the Flies, and yet the mythology that dominates our culture is that if left on their own, boys — and perhaps you, me, and everybody else — would revert to our savage selves.

There’s an abundance of other stories about the goodness, empathy, and kindness of people, but what we hear more often are stories about those who have raped, pillaged, and murdered.

The news we watch on television or see on our devices is enough to make any sane person go screaming into the night.

In my favorite cartoon, Pearls Before Swine, Piggy is watching TV, and the newscaster is saying, “In the news today…four muggings occurred in… A suspected terrorist has… A mysterious illness killed… War broke out in…”

Then there is a click as Piggy changes the channel: “In the news today… 9,673 people walked in the park without incident. 24,347 people enjoyed their trips to Europe. 2,114,250 people were happy and healthy. And 75 wars didn’t start.”

Piggy turns to Rat and says, “News that puts news in perspective.”

And Rat replies, “I’m saner already.”

The reality is that there are many terrible things going on in the world, and we need to be aware of them.

But do we need to know about everything, every minute of our lives?

And can’t we balance the gruesome with more stories of compassion, courage, and creativity?

We do need to understand why, if people are good at heart, they do such terrible things.

One of our speakers this season, Norm Ornstein told us that we are hardwired for tribalism, the belief that the people who matter most are those who are closest to us.

And those outside of this circle are not to be trusted or even tolerated.

We are all tribalist to one degree or another.

It can be as harmless as rooting for the Buffalo Bills or preferring grits over hash browns.

Or it can be as devastating as the Holocaust.

It does seem that we are becoming more tribal, not less.

I was shocked when one of our speakers this summer referred to a poll that revealed 35% of young people believe there will be a civil war in their lifetime.

To be tribal doesn’t mean that we are bad people.

The problem is that the empathy, kindness, and trust we feel is limited to a specific group and not to others.

I’ve known people who are saints when it comes to helping others, as long as they are within their tribe.

If they’re outside the tribe, they may at best ignore and at worst demonize those they consider “other.”

When I was growing up in my tribal world of Jacksonville, Florida, I absorbed the racism and prejudice of those around me, and it was only after some caring people reached out and helped me face my own bigotry that I was able to begin the process of becoming a less racist person.

I was not a bad person when I was a bigot.

I thought I was doing good, that I was working for a better world, but I was terribly wrong.

I passionately believe that If we begin with the assumption that people are good at heart and they yearn to live out that goodness, then it can turn our lives and our world upside down.

Just imagine what life would be like if instead of fearing and distrusting those who are different we could see the golden Buddha within each.

The story of the golden Buddha gives us a metaphor for the essential nature of each one of us, that part of us that at times lies dormant beneath the layers of pretense and defensiveness.

When we're able to chip away at our selfishness and prejudice, our masks and addictions, we are stunned to find at our heart a genuine goodness, which some call our Buddha nature, others call Christ Consciousness, and still others call the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

This has been my biggest struggle in life — and perhaps it’s yours as well — to learn how to chip away those stubborn layers covering our sacred selves.

When we succeed, when we peel away the distractions and illusions, we see ourselves and the world anew.

We let go of our defensiveness, prejudices, anger, and we gain the ability to see the golden Buddha in you, me, and everybody else — including my great grandfather, and the governor of Florida, and all those who drive us completely nuts.

And we open ourselves to the healing, transforming, power of love.

Isn’t that what love is?

The ability to see each other’s souls, each other’s true nature beneath all the layers that blind us?

We peel away those layers when we try to understand what motivates people to diminish others.

One of my favorite quotes is by James Baldwin who wrote, “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”

To understand the pain, the grief, the sense of loss that another person may be experiencing can help us to better understand why they are the way they are — and why we are the way we are.

In the amazing conversation last week between David Axelrod and Karl Rove I was impressed that what brought them together was certainly not their politics, which were very different, but that they both had a family member who committed suicide.

Their shared grief and pain chipped away their differences.

We need to understand ourselves better by asking deep questions about what we see when we look in the mirror.

Why is it that we have so much trouble seeing the angel, the golden Buddha, in ourselves?

Perhaps the reason is that it gives us an excuse for not radically changing our life.

If we truly believed in our own dignity and the dignity of all people, that a golden Buddha resides within each one of us, just think of where that would lead us.

We would easily forgive each other and ourselves.

We would love each other from the depths of our hearts. We would work tirelessly to end war and injustice.

Marianne Williamson captured that dazzling possibility in her famous words: “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us…You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world... We are all meant to shine...”

This should be the true purpose of our lives: to go beyond the fears that paralyze us, to have the courage to release the vast resources of creativity, compassion, and love in you, me, and everybody else.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith does just that.

“We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

When we really believe that principle, when we hold it close to our hearts and try to live it out in all that we do, our lives are transformed.

And if we all live by that principle, then our world will be transformed as well.

I know it's not easy.

This is one of the hardest struggles in my life, and I fall short time after time.

But I’m inspired by these words from Anne Frank, the girl who was murdered along with her family by the Nazis:

“It's really a wonder that I haven't dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

“I still believe that people are really good at heart.”

If Anne Frank could believe in the essential goodness of humanity, then so can you, me, and everybody else.

Do I hear an Amen?

Closing Words:

I Walk in Beauty - Navajo prayer/song

I walk in beauty.

In the house of long life, there I wander.
In the house of happiness, there I wander.
Beauty before me,
Beauty behind me,
Beauty above me ,
Beauty below me,
Beauty all around me…

In beauty, it is begun,
In beauty, it is finished.