

Spirituality of Responsibility
Sermon by Rev. Hannah Petrie
June 15, 2008

A few weeks ago I received an email from one of my Sociology professors from college, Dr. Kim Cummings, in Kalamazoo, MI. He wanted to let me know he's retiring from full-time teaching, and if I couldn't make the party in his honor, would I please write him a little note, telling him a bit of my current life and circumstances and, if moved to do so, add a remembrance or two from our time together. He wrote, "This is an occasion for me thankfully to remember the special students who have added joy to my teaching and enriched my life."

Wow, I was really flattered to be on his list. And while I had every intention of sending him a note in time for his celebrations, the busy week proved to be a poor one for correspondence, as most weeks seem to be these days. It reminded me of how I had a habit of turning many of my college papers in late, permitting myself to take a lower grade in order to learn more of the material – and I did learn more. This philosophy served me well, far as I know, and in ministry it's generally a moot point, since you cannot turn a sermon in late.

But Dr. Cummings is still waiting for my remembrances, and he probably has faith that they're still going to arrive. He had a quiet way of communicating that he believed in me.

It's Fathers' Day after all, and it's an appropriate day to be thinking of any of our fathers, biological or adoptive, dead or living. An 'adoptive father' could have many interpretations, and today I'm thinking of the people who teach us in ways that are so important, that naturally, a familial reverence is the result of the relationship. An 'adoptive father' is one of the many people who help you to grow up. Who are some of your adoptive fathers? Have you ever taken the opportunity to tell them in detail how they shaped you?

Kim Cummings shaped my life by planting one of the seeds that would later bloom into ministry. In an introductory course, he taught the sociological classic, Habits of the Heart, authored by Robert Bellah, and his cadre of researchers. It was published in 1985 in the midst of . . . well, you know, the 80's. Its main message, more relevant today than ever, is that American values of individualism impede on our commitment to public life, to civic duty, to being responsible citizens. One of the sub-messages was that our religious life influences this situation for better or for worse, depending on what our faith specifically demands of us.

If you're familiar with the work of Bellah, you know that his constructive criticism of liberal religion is hard-hitting. Like most students in the class, at first I reacted to this material with self-righteousness. I was confused by the critique of Emerson and Whitman, torch-bearers of what Bellah calls "expressive individualism." When it comes to our sources for defining our commitments, how could individual freedom be inferior to prescribed authority? How could cultural traditions, or institutional knowledge, have an edge over the free mind? In his chapter on the Ambiguities of Individualism, Habits of the Heart describes our fierce defense of individualism:

"Anything that would violate our right to think for ourselves, judge for ourselves, make our own decisions, live our lives as we see fit, is not only morally wrong, it is sacrilegious. Our highest and noblest aspirations, not only for ourselves, but for those we care about, for our society and for the world, are closely linked to our individualism. We do not argue that Americans should abandon their individualism – that would mean for us to abandon our deepest identity. But individualism has come to mean so many things and to contain such contradictions and paradoxes that even to defend it requires that we analyze it critically, that we consider especially those tendencies that would destroy it from within."¹

As I recall, many of the students dismissed the material as nerdy ideas from a nerdy teacher. Speaking for myself, it slowly dawned on me – thanks to Dr. Cumming's patient instruction - that I in fact

¹ Habits of the Heart by Robert Bellah et al., p. 142.

grew up in the church of expressive individualism, the Unitarian Universalist church, and I had to admit there were limitations to my understanding of self, society, and commitment.

Despite these limitations, there are multiple benefits to growing up UU, and one of them is that eventually you feel comfortable critiquing your own tradition. As a freshman in college, I had a shallow view of liberal religion: that it was about being content with – or even smug - about what *I think* is right. I credit my UU upbringing with the acceptance and compassion in human relations I learned from an early age, and knowing that justice has to do with equality and love. But my religion had never instilled a sense of duty, or obligation to certain responsibilities beyond these nice ideas. I understood the word responsibility, but I had no idea how nuanced responsibility is, and how important it is to be intimately aware of what I am responsible for and why.

I'm still learning about how nuanced responsibility is – this may be a lifelong endeavor. Learning from Habits of the Heart in Dr. Cummings' class nearly 20 years ago was one of the first lessons.

Eventually I came to understand that the self cannot be defined separately from one's community, that in fact we only become who we are in relation to our responsibility to others. I came to see that this is the greatest function of belonging to a healthy church community: people who have a smaller context to form these relationships might apply them to the extended purpose of participating in civic life. This understanding was one of the driving forces that encouraged me to ministry.

But it's only a blue-print. Many questions remain as to the best way to build. I want to build my ministry as responsibly as possible, and so I'm asking myself some tough questions about responsibility. What tough questions have you been asking yourself lately? Do they have to do with interpreting for what you are responsible? Do you ever question what responsibility really means to you? One of my favorite bumper stickers of all time is, "Don't believe everything you think."

Of late, I have found the tradition of Buddhism, Tibetan in particular, to be relevant to these questions. Its radical simplicity challenges my western notions of responsibility.

Some of you may know that the 17th Karmapa visited the US for the first time recently.² He is a lama, which means he was identified as the reincarnation of his predecessor. His specific lineage predates that of the Dalai Lama, which is very hopeful for the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, since he is so young – only 22 years old. He was born the same year that Habits of the Heart was published, 1985. The Chinese occupation and oppression of Tibet indicates that once the current Dalai Lama dies, it will be next to impossible to authentically identify the next one, because the Chinese have interceded and corrupted the process for doing so.³

But unless something happens to the 17th Karmapa, we will have an authentic Tibetan lama who can play a similar role to the Dalai Lama. He may even be more effective in his teaching, because he is able to shift easily between western and eastern mind-sets, and he is charismatic and eloquent. One observer says his most striking feature is that he is willing to be blunt. She says, "What's really quite wonderful, and what will appeal to younger people is that he's very honest and he's very direct. When there are faults, he just points them out . . . it's what Tibetans call *danzig*, or speaking the truth. In an age of double talk, cynicism, and spin, he's just totally the opposite, and I think that will really be a magnet for people."⁴

This is exciting news – perhaps the Karmapa is blunt because he knows there is no time to lose. Responsibility for the well-being of sentient beings is a primary Buddhist teaching. The 17th Karmapa says, "One must start by taking responsibility for oneself, then for those who are close to oneself, then for

² <http://www.karmapavisit.org/>

³ I highly recommend the article, *The end of Tibet*, by Joshua Kurlantizick, in Rolling Stone magazine, 2/8/07, which details the Chinese attempts (and successes) at destroying the Tibetan culture and religious traditions. Go to http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/13247913/the_end_of_tibet

⁴ *The Karmapa in America*, by Barry Boyce, from *Buddhadharma* magazine, Summer 2008, p. 65.

one's community."⁵ I believe that this simple prescription is at the heart of what it will take to heal the planet.

This order of responsibility may not seem that different from a western take on responsibility, but it comes down to the 'how' of it. How do we prioritize our attention to what really matters? What if all the things we strive to do each day, all the tiny accomplishments, miss the point? What if all our busyness, our hectic lives, turns out to be an idol we have placed on a pedestal? What if we are merely distracting ourselves from our most important responsibilities?

It comes down to how we interpret responsibility, and the framework of fatherhood is useful here. The archetype of fatherhood often gets lumped with the responsibility of bread-winning – success is defined by material results, by the quality of lifestyle that one can provide for the family. This is not right or wrong, but if this goal is over-emphasized it can have sad consequences. The bread-winner may become too busy and distracted to nurture meaningful relationships within the family, and even with the self. But Buddhism says the only *real* responsibility we have is to reduce suffering by preventing harm where possible. This interpretation of fatherhood emphasizes protection and nurture, rather than competing and winning and providing.

Let me try to illustrate this by sharing something personal with you. Like most fathers, *my* father drew on a combination of approaches to fatherhood. But I can see, from the parenting he received, how he developed an over-emphasized sense of responsibility that has led to sadness in his life. Now it might seem like I'm about to air some dirty laundry, but, I share this out of love, and to make my message authentic – something my Dad taught me is important to do. And I'd like to be blunt like the 17th Karmapa.

My father's parents were . . . crazy. They both had southern gothic roots akin to the writings of Flannery O'Connor. My grandmother was loving, but she suffered from bi-polar disorder; my grandfather was loving but had no capacity to express it; he was emotionally abusive and perhaps had a narcissistic personality disorder. My father, the only child, grew up in an unstable environment. By the time he was ten, he realized his emotional maturity had already surpassed that of his parents. He identified himself as the most responsible person in his family, and has carried this heightened sense of responsibility ever since.

I believe that he himself has suffered the most for this, because he was an amazing father to me as I grew up. But I believe that the natural response to a ceaseless and over-whelming sense of responsibility is anger. My father, who – like so many of us - never learned to express anger in a healthy way, has, for all these decades, internalized his anger, which eventually causes depression. And, like so many of us, he is fighting that good fight.

My father's identity has always been heavily reliant on his achievements, especially in his career. He is currently the CEO of a 10 million dollar social service agency, that provides after-school programming for the poorest children of inner city Chicago. Talk about fathering! But he fixates on the acquisition of funding, and as any of you in the non-profit world know, that is a depressing enterprise at this time, and only so much can be done. But he is attached to this definition of personal success. He does not view his incredible capacity for loving-kindness, for all the good he does for people, to be success enough.

In Buddhism, to take responsibility for one's self, paradoxically, means to become less of a self, less of anyone. While the western mind is attached to personal recognition and measurable achievement, the masters of the east say, 'let go of all this grasping, let go of this ceaseless chasing after becoming and acquiring and proving your worth.' The contemporary mystic Osho has this to say about 'worth':

Don't be bothered too much about utilitarian ends. Rather, constantly remember that you are not here in life to become a commodity. You are not here to become a utility – that is below dignity. You are not here just to become more and more efficient – you are here to become more and more alive; you are

⁵ *On Becoming Karmapa*, by Melvin McLeod, same, p. 33.

here to become more and more intelligent; you are here to become more and more happy, ecstatically happy."⁶

It would seem that such a statement has brought us full circle, back to 'expressive individualism', but not so fast. To become more alive, paradoxically, means to discover that the un-encumbered self is more of a hindrance than something that keeps us free. I don't want to be kept free. *I don't want to be kept "free."* I want to understand my full responsibility as a human being in this world, and how my being fully alive makes a difference for good in the lives of others. I want to be enlightened. And I have lifetimes of learning to do.

I am reading The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, by Sogyal Rinpoche, and that is a start. Robert Bellah, in a 2008 article, confirms that "All religions involve bodily enactment . . . Even reading, when done as a spiritual practice, is a form of embodiment."⁷ Reading seems to be the religious liberal's spiritual practice of choice.

In his chapter on Reflection and Change, Rinpoche says,

True spirituality is . . . to be aware that if we are interdependent with everything and everyone else, even our smallest, least significant thought, word, and action have real consequences throughout the universe . . . everything is inextricably interrelated: We come to realize we are responsible for everything we do, say, or think, responsible in fact for ourselves, everyone and everything else, and the entire universe. The Dalai Lama has said,

*In today's highly interdependent world, individuals and nations can no longer resolve many of their problems by themselves. We need one another. We must therefore develop a sense of universal responsibility . . . It is our collective and individual responsibility to protect and nurture the global family, to support its weaker members, and to preserve and tend to the environment in which we all live.*⁸

AND SO, what are the habits of your heart? Do they honor your highest definition of responsibility, or do you have some re-evaluating to do? Summer is a good time to meditate and reflect – or at least, it should be.

I know that when people retire, they often worry that they will lose such a big piece of their identity, that they won't know who they are anymore, or, they might worry that they *will* have the time to learn who they are. I have a feeling my old Sociology professor Dr. Cummings isn't too worried about any of this. I don't think Kim Cummings is the type of person to think too much about who he is. He knows full well that even after retirement, there will still be plenty of work to do.

⁶ Osho Transformation: insights and parables for everyday renewal, St. Martin's Press, 1999, p.32.

⁷ *the R WORD*, by Robert Bellah, from Tricycle magazine, Spring 2008, p.55.

⁸ The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, Sogyal Rinpoche, 1993, p.39