

THE 8TH DEADLY SIN

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Some years ago I read that a sociologist at Ohio State University had determined that the more frequently people go to church, the more often they have sex. And then a few years later I learned that a government researcher had concluded that the more frequently you go to church, the lower your blood pressure – presumably because you are getting so much exercise having sex. Well, whatever the consequences, I'm glad to be here this morning and, given what I've just told you, I'll bet you are too!

And I'm especially glad to be here in Vero Beach at one of the very few congregations in the UUA that has 100% of its members enrolled in membership in the UUSC and had the good sense to call my friend Scott Alexander as its minister. Either one of those behaviors would be cause for applause but the combination ought to permanently inoculate the State of Florida from whatever ridicule it may occasionally be subjected to.

When I was running for President of the UUA at age 34, I used to quip that if I lost the election, people could say of me what Gladstone is reported to have said of Disraeli, "He is a young man with a brilliant future behind him." But now the question for me at age 61 is, "Why would an old man with a limited future in front of him take up a new Presidency, that of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee?" And the answer is because I believe that UUSC is quite literally the most effective way to put Unitarian Universalist values to work in the world, to make our faith shine, to make justice roll down like a righteous stream and to insure that we are in the vanguard of the torrent.

I'm going to tell you a bit about our work in a moment and then, because UUSC gets no money from the UUA – that's one point many people are confused about; UUSC gets no money from the UUA and is entirely dependent upon the generosity of Unitarian Universalists like you – I hope during the coffee hour you'll go to the table we have set up and if, by chance, you're not a member, join us for \$40, and if, like most of you, you already are, give us \$100 or more because that will be matched dollar for dollar by our congregation in Shelter Rock, NY. But first I want to tell you about the eighth deadly sin.

The seven deadly sins were first systematized in the year 590 by Pope Gregory I and are now part of the Catholic catechism. I'll bet that unless you are an ex-Catholic and were a very attentive and guilt-ridden student in catechism class, most of you can't name all seven – though perhaps, if I give you a hint, you can come up with one of them: it is associated with frequent church-going. Bingo: you got it – **lust!** Though, come to think of it, those of you who thought the sin I was thinking of was low blood pressure may not be so far off the mark because if you've got low blood pressure and it's making you feel sluggish, you might be guilty of another one of the sins, namely, **sloth**. And then there are **wrath, greed, pride, envy, and gluttony**. The seven deadly sins were the early Christian church's roadmap to Hell.

And by the way, it is not just Christians who worry about the afterlife. You may be familiar with the story of the devout Orthodox Jew who was close to death, his wife and daughter at his bedside. "Moishe," they said, "Is there anything we can get you?" "Yes," said Moishe, "get me a ham sandwich." Well, naturally the family was aghast but they ordered up a ham sandwich and, after Moishe had eaten it, his wife said to him, "But, Moishe, you've always been such a devout and pious man. How could you do this and on your death bed?" And Moishe said,

“Well, look, it’s like this. I’m about to die and when I get wherever I’m going, the Lord will say to me, ‘Moshe, all in all you’ve been a good man, but remember the time you stole an apple as a boy; remember the time you raised your voice to your wife; remember the time you were mean to that no-good son-in-law your daughter married against your advice, remember the time you...’ Well, as soon as He gets to the ham sandwich, I’ll know it’s almost over.” (Now that I’ve succeeded in offending virtually all of you, let’s get back to the sermon.)

What is interesting to me about the seven deadly sins is that I can well imagine circumstances in which every one of them could be construed as a virtue. Without *wrath* at the evils of the world, for example, there would be no social progress. Without *lust*, the human race could not procreate. Type A personalities could use a lot more *sloth*. If we feel insufficient *pride* in ourselves, we are said to suffer from low self-esteem. And if you are in a refugee camp with little food, no running water and a surfeit of hope, who would really begrudge you *greed*, *envy* or *gluttony*?

But there is one very common sin of which we all have probably been guilty at one time or another that in my book trumps them all—is worse than any of the others-- and that is *cruelty*. It is hard for me to think of any circumstance in which cruelty could be judged a virtue and yet it was not included in the seven deadly sins. Why is that?

Well, in the first place it is because the God whom the early Christian Church worshiped was unashamedly a cruel God. Telling Moses to slay all non-virginal women in Midian, for example, is but one of dozens of examples. Had cruelty been included in the seven deadly sins, God Himself might have had a lot of explaining to do. And though Jesus certainly repudiated cruelty, the early Church fathers believed that it was their duty to torture heretics for otherwise those heretics’ pernicious doctrines might spread and anyone coming under their influence would surely suffer the fires of Hell. Cruelty was a small price to pay for salvation.

And the other reason cruelty was not included in the Church’s official list of sins was because, as I say, virtually everybody does it. Not everyone could be accused of being angry or lustful or lazy or taking an extra flagon of mead but everybody knows in her or his heart that at some point in our lives we’ve done something mean. Even Jesus had an off-day every once in awhile. Remember the time he was hungry and, coming upon a fig tree that was out of season and therefore bore no fruit, had a bit of a temper tantrum and condemned the poor tree never to blossom again?

So cruelty is very common but that makes it no less despicable. And the reason true cruelty is despicable is not just because it causes suffering; it is because it makes the world less radiant. This is the connection that Buechner drew in our reading this morning between the beauty of the world and the imperative of justice, between the “stirring in the blood at the sound of rain” and the “sickening of the heart at the sight of misery.”

If Unitarian Universalism teaches us anything, it teaches us that, despite all its carnage and privation and disaster and disease, the world is full of blessings – the warmth of the sun; the refulgence of the earth; the healing powers of our bodies; the companionship of animals; the complexity of our minds; the generosity of our hearts; the very breath of life itself. These are outright gifts that Creation presents to us for the taking. We did not earn them; we did nothing to deserve them; they just are – the radiant gifts of an ever-giving universe. They are what theologians call the manifestations of grace.

But if you have too little water to drink, the sun becomes not a blessing but a curse. If you

despoil the earth, you no longer have reach of its majesty. If you have too little to live on, your complex minds and generous hearts will shrivel. If you are stereotyped, harassed, tortured or raped, the very breath of life comes accompanied not by joy but by agony. The reason cruelty is despicable is not just because it causes suffering; it is because it erects roadblocks to blessings; turns the awesome to ashes; and makes what is gracious about life far harder to see.

So UUSC's job with your help and on your behalf is to combat cruelty in order to set radiance free. And how do we do that?

Women in refugee camps in Darfur, Sudan, should be protected by the UN police in the camps, not left on their own to risk assault when they venture outside to gather firewood. The UN has now adopted a training program devised by UUSC to train the police in how to protect women in the camps. You did that. You and UUSC.

Access to clean water is about a basic a need and a right as I can imagine. If anything is a gracious gift to be had by all, water is. But in too many places on this planet, including in this country, water is priced out of reach of the poor and people who can't pay for it don't get it. You and UUSC are working to insure that the human right to water applies to everyone.

Until we see the earth protected as readily as we protect our children, none of us will be safe from environmental degradation. UUSC and its partners in Ecuador have succeeded in convincing that country to adopt a new Constitution that – for the first time anywhere in the world – recognizes that the earth itself has rights that need protecting – a whole new concept in the struggle for earth justice. You did that. You and UUSC. You made justice roll.

Two hundred thousand people were massacred in Guatemala over the past forty years, most of them Mayan Indians. Few of their killers have been brought to justice. But UUSC and its partners in Guatemala are collecting forensic evidence to do just that.

No one should have to live on \$15,000 a year – that's what a worker earning the federal minimum wage makes but that's below the federal poverty line for a family of three. And consider this – it's less than what the average CEO at an S & P 500 company earns before lunchtime on any given day. UUSC is working to raise the wage of poultry workers in Arkansas and restaurant workers in Georgia, whose wages are set at \$2.13 cents an hour, so that their jobs will lift them out of poverty, not keep them in it.

In some Muslim countries, if you speak out for religious tolerance or the rights of women, you are harassed, arrested, tortured. Through our partners in the Muslim and Arab world, UUSC is working for a more tolerant, progressive Islam as well. Indeed, our partner in Egypt, HAMSA, has been instrumental in the recent amazing transformation there. Just last week I learned that a comic book that UUSC had had translated into Arabic to teach people in the Middle East about nonviolent action for change was being passed around Tahrir Square in the middle of the Egyptian revolution.

You are doing all this. You and UUSC. You are making justice roll.

And nowhere are you doing that on a larger scale or in more effective ways than in Haiti. In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, Unitarian Universalists gave \$1.9 million to put Haiti back together again. UUSC and its partners are focusing on the forgotten people whom the large aid agencies often overlook: children in relief camps, for example, who have no adult

family members to care for them, or who were sold into slavery before the earthquake and are now at the bottom of the food chain when it comes to aid and recovery. And, thanks to you, in May we will begin sending medical teams to Haiti followed by dozens of Unitarian Universalist volunteer missions – people who want to put their skills at the service of the Haitian people, just as hundreds of volunteers did in New Orleans – building skills; education skills; health skills; agricultural skills – unlike so many of the other governments and agencies in this world, UUSC simply will not forget Haiti. We will not forget.

In all these ways, then, UUSC is your vehicle for, as Reverend Ike used to say, “tangibilizing” your Unitarian Universalist values. And in the process of combating cruelty, you get two bonuses: first, a lot more radiance in the world, a lot more happiness, a lot more grace. And second, consider this: you’ve heard of carbon offsets in which people pay for the planting of trees, let’s say, in order to neutralize their own contributions to greenhouse gases. Well, I like to think of UUSC as my own personal cruelty offset. The next time you wither a fig tree, send a check to UUSC and you’ll feel just a bit less guilty – a cruelty offset. When you join UUSC, you not only save the world, you save your own soul.

I love the UUA. I worked for it for 15 years. It deserves your support, too. The UUA exists to serve the needs of our congregations; UUSC exists to help Unitarian Universalists serve the needs of the world. Because, you see, in the battle against anguish and despair, it’s not enough to wish. Not enough to talk. Not enough to worship. Not enough to hope. Not enough to pray. They’re all good but they’re not enough.

In the face of tyranny and repression and greed and fear, what is required is to join hands, to use our power, to combat the eighth deadly sin – to make your voice count, to join your brothers and sisters, to join the vanguard of the torrent, to make your values live, to make your faith shine, to join UUSC and together to let justice roll. To let justice roll.

Amen.