

Lively Virtues by Monica Hornyansky, January 2006

It's a bit of a challenge to be giving the first talk of the New Year. I offered to do it on the principle that if the weather was frightful, better a local person than an out of townner -- but I hadn't thought of it as the first of 2006. That's a bit of a responsibility. So I want to emphasize that this is not a sermon, and it's not a set of New Year resolutions -- perish the thought. It is more like an exploration or a meditation, on a question that occurred to me: if there are sins that are deadly (the famous seven -- anger, avarice, greed, gluttony, envy, sloth, and lust), are there likewise virtues that are lively? What would they be? Would they be exciting, or not? One of my teachers told me that philosophical training would enable me to concoct an argument for any point of view: so here goes.

Well, it is interesting that religions go in for a kind of number magic -- ten commandments, four noble truths, the eight-fold way, the four sublime moods. But seven deadly sins? I won't question the number -- they call it a lucky number; but how and why, are they deadly? When you trace them back to Latin, they are called "mortal", not "deadly". In priest-speak, "mortal" means the worst kind of dying: deserving eternal hell, unless confessed and forgiven by a religious agent. By way of contrast, there are venial sins, that can be forgiven and forgotten with confession and penance. But if you think about them, perhaps the deadly ones could be deadly in a less dramatic, everyday way. They are all desires, out of control: desires for food, idleness, drink and driving -- which are likely to put a speedy end to ordinary life, either physically or spiritually. So maybe, by contrast, the idea of lively virtues has some mileage.

For example, these seven sins could be summed up under the main sin of both Buddhists and ancient Greeks -- too much wanting according to the Buddha, or wanting too much according to the Greeks. And they both have the answer -- stop wanting things, and especially stop wanting them too much. Moderation is the central antidote to sin, and by the same token, the main virtue. So is there just one virtue, really? -- and is it lively, or is it just life-preserving? Well, perhaps just as there are lesser sins one can work off with penance, so perhaps there are virtues that preserve life, and none the worse for that. But somehow they're not positively lively.

And when we focus on the word, virtue, we discover that it has a kind of history: there have been successive sets of virtues, and at least as many virtues as there are sins. The "vir" bit means man, not merely human, in Latin. So virtue starts out as a male idea -- heroic virtues in an heroic age. Back then, courage was certainly the most important of the set of four so-called cardinal virtues: courage, justice, prudence, and temperance. Courage underlay all the other virtues, and in the 20th century the suddenly fashionable C.S. Lewis agrees.

Christianity added a new set of virtues to the old cardinal virtues. These were called supernatural or theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Join them to the cardinal virtues, and we are up to seven again. They might even be called the Biblical version of what it is to be human, involving original sin and hoping for another sphere in which things go better for sinful underdogs. And so we are enjoined to be meek on the understanding that we will inherit the earth, later. As Nietzsche would say, they are the virtues of the underdog. I am reminded of R.L. Stevenson's poem (*Virgin of the Snows*) about monks, in which he deplors them as mistaken versions of the virtuous life:

...And ye, O brethren, what if God
When from Heav'n's top He spies abroad,
And sees on this tormented stage
The noble war of mankind rage:
What if his vivifying eye
O monks, should pass your corner by?...

...Those He approves that ply the trade
That rock the child, that wed the maid,
That with weak virtues, weaker hands
Sow gladness on the peopled lands,
And still with laughter, song and shout,
Spin the great wheel of earth about...

As R.L.S. implies, monkish virtues are not lively virtues; and in one way they actually contradict Aristotle, who had nothing against pride -- in fact he describes the large-souled man as a proud, big, slow-moving, deep-voiced guy, preferring to confer favours, not receive them, to be superior to his fellow-man, not inferior. When I started teaching in my 50's, I thought what an advantage it would be to have a beard and a commanding voice; no such luck for a middle-aged female.

So -- to sum up so far, there do seem to be an impressive array of virtues : heroic virtues, redemptive virtues, virtues of people who think they are burdened with original sin. But the idea of lively virtues surely would go beyond those to some that might intensify life -- contributing an invigorating fizz and crackle : that word Stevenson uses for God, *vivifying* , is a very good start.

Now I want to move on from these older sets, to the virtues that emerged in the 17th and 18th centuries, when people once more, like the Greeks, rejoiced in the possession of reason: the definitive human quality. They had a bit more confidence in human nature. The philosopher David Hume went so far as to maintain that our principal human virtue was, precisely, humanity -- and by this he meant simply the fellow-feeling we have for one another. Humane, humanitarian, inhuman -- they all begin to be descriptions of the good and the bad. And then, moving on a couple of centuries, taking in the idea of evolution and progress on the way, we arrive at what is now the last century (the 20th), and a French thinker, not well enough known, Henri Bergson, who espouses evolutionary ideas in a book called *The Two Sources of Religion and Morality*.

How do sources of religion and morality connect with virtue? They are in fact virtues themselves, as we'll see. The first is myth-making, which we find in human groups marked by rigid traditions, binding obligations (taboos, in fact), and caste systems. Such groups of people, he said, are slow to change, so much so that he called them closed societies -- not as closed as a bee-hive or an anthill, based on instinct alone, but still, rather like them, stuck in the old ways as the only ways to be. Breaking with old ways they considered to be bad, risky and dangerous. But that is the road to the second source of morality and religion. It comes with conscious questioning of our own myth-making, and grows into more realistic or even experimental ways of thinking and learning. Like myth-making, this inventiveness needs imagination, but it's a different kind of imagination: more speculative and more idealistic-- because it comes of wondering if things could be better. People begin relaxing their own rules of life; dreams of freedom, of variety, Utopian visions, scientific inventions, begin to be written about, and discussed. In that kind of society, which Bergson called "open" as opposed to "closed", change is inevitable, and the cause of change is allowing ourselves to be attracted and energized by futuristic dreams

So here, I think, I may find a bit of a foothold for the idea that there are lively virtues, not only opposed to deadly sins, but also different from preservative or redemptive virtues. They would be in fact the virtues of an open society. I would suggest, just to limit discussion and follow tradition, only four such virtues. First of all, **generosity**, as the virtue which leaves others free to develop and change, rather than to be held to rigid castes and roles like the classes in a beehive -- or in Plato's Republic, for that matter. Next, a dangerous virtue : **idealism**, which jumps ahead of the here and now to something that exists only in imagination, imagining how things could be better. Third, and closely related to idealism through imagination, **creativity**, which seeks to put what has been imagined into reality. And fourth, **energy**, the **spiritual** energy we need to learn, explore and create. So this is my group of lively virtues: generosity, idealism, creativity, and energy.

Does this mean that the old virtues of temperance, prudence, courage are obsolete? And especially, is moderation superseded? Absolutely not. They apply at any time, and especially to excesses of ideal-ism, among the lively virtues, just because idealism is focussed on the future, not the past, and the future is extremely unpredictable, and dangerous. Excesses of idealism are scary -- read *Don Quixote*; Utopias can go wrong, and inventions can blow up in our faces.

Nevertheless, the fourth lively virtue I suggested was spiritual energy, so there's that word "spiritual" and I think it isn't fair to use it without explaining -- or trying to explain -- what I mean by it, because I think it is just as much part of our nature as ever original sin might be.

First, I separate it from the word "religious", which means to have a religious belief and practice. Spirituality, however, is just about being human, an essential aspect of our humanity as it reaches beyond itself into a non-material realm of ideas, imagination and creativity, all of which exist first in the head. Spirit, inspiration, aspiration, all these are related through the Latin word spiritus, breath. I don't know whether any of you have noticed that if

you practice deep breathing, or count breaths in meditation, at a certain point the corners of your mouth turn up into an involuntary smile? This is an indication of the non-material aspect of the benefit of oxygen; an aspect of energy which we express metaphorically in all the words that derive from spirit, like inspiration, aspiration. Somehow, when we breathe in we breathe in not only air, but something intangible -- head-food, you might say: which enables us to bring changes about in the world, by our own effort, diligence, and finally, will, the great intangible. This is the realm of spirit which is ours alone, as far as we know, on this earth. Here's where the meditation earlier in the service comes in. Anyone reading the news these days will be under no illusion that original virtue -- as opposed to original sin -- is universally on display in our world. So believing in it is not the same as having faith in it, although people often seem to think so. To have faith is to know the difference between the world of things as they are and the domain of the human spirit, and to live at least some of the time in the latter world of mind, value, virtue and beauty.

Now, I want to bring this close to home in both our congregation and our country. I said this wasn't a sermon, and it isn't. But: someone the other day said to me, I really enjoy the variety of talks we have in this congregation, but I do notice that we don't hear often about the reason for us being here together, that is, Unitarian Universalism -- so here goes a reminder for this morning. For us, as a specifically democratic community of 21st century people, Unitarians and citizens, the virtues of innovation and aspiration for something better are lively in the sense I want to endorse -- they require exertion and animation on our part. They are much more than mere moderation of desire or some sad ideal of self-denial, for here we are not looking at the cautious value of moderation, but rather into what R.L.S in one of his travelling poems called "the bright eyes of danger"; innovation is always dangerous, as I am about to point out.

Bergson's ideas about open and closed societies relate to us, now, as Unitarian Universalists, because I think we have to be aware that having lively virtues, that is, being open to change and invention and imagination -- to aspiration rather than obedience to tradition -- is dangerous. The dangers are these: first, that we lose sight of the set of values that hold a way of life together as an organic whole; and second, that we never coalesce long enough to form a community, as opposed to a motley crew.

One of the saddest things I have ever heard is the remark of an aboriginal person commenting on the impact of the European invasion on his people. He said: "our cup of life is broken". Let's think about that phrase -- "our cup of life". People who inherit such a cup of life in a cohesive and undamaged form, are in a way, lucky and happy. They are some of the closed societies Bergson describes in his book. However, the more it is an adaptation of a small group to a particular ecosystem and way of life, the more easily it is destroyed by change, intruding into it from outside. That is what has happened to some groups among our aboriginal people, or indeed any other aboriginal population. But I believe that four hundred years after the enlightenment, with its aftermath of dependence on reason and science, we are all still struggling to recreate a cup of life to sustain us through eras of change and disillusionment with the universe and its meaning. Here's Wordsworth on the subject, a shortened version of one of his sonnets:

The world is too much with us: late and soon,
 Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers
 Little we see in nature that is ours...
It moves us not -- great God! I'd rather be
 A pagan suckled in a creed outworn,
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea
 O hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn.

In modern secular life with its mass production of both things and people, we are hard put to it to say that we have a cup of life. This is a strength in a way, because if you don't have it, it can't be broken. But then, instead of a cup of life we have a kind of drinks cabinet, or a pop machine -- you put your money in and you take your choice. But there is no communal consensus; a cup must hold its contents together. So we pine for a cup, and we want to drink from it. Without it, we lack sustenance, and the sustenance we lack is spiritual sustenance. I would call such a cup and its contents spiritual, because ideals of unity combined with blessedness exist for us as yet only in imagination, and can be brought into being only by aspiration and will. They are not facts or protocols we can follow. The whole realm of virtue -- or value of any kind -- belongs to the domain of spirit; but for people subject to change, virtues are spiritual in the special sense that as objects of will, they can be made real only if they have

been previously imagined and acted upon by us, as people who search and aspire.

How does this apply to us as Unitarian Universalists? Wouldn't we all agree that openness to change is one of our communal qualities, in the sense that it contributes to our flourishing far more than rigid values and rigid rules of behaviour would? Well, for one thing I think we would have to change the metaphor from a cup, which suggests the closed society, to a fountain -- a fountain of life that suggests change, flow, and constant renewal.

As a religion and a congregation, we have to accept consciously the reality of difference, difference of temperament, difference of belief. The biggest split we have is between what might be called spiritual Unitarians who use the word spiritual, and humanist Unitarians, who tend not to. One lot likes ritual, another resents ritual. One thinks being spiritual involves believing in superior beings in an other-worldly realm, one thinks being spiritual is incomprehensible, and so on. I have given you my definition of spirituality -- it is the realm of aspiration and idealism -- and we all inhabit such a realm whether we are humanists or not: it is natural to human beings to aspire to be better in every sense -- so we really don't need to quarrel over that word (better) at all. Some philosopher or other said the primary ethical term is not the good, but the better -- and this is the realm of the future, the not-yet-existing, the spiritual which we work to bring into being.

So the ways in which we indulge our spiritual nature must be mutually understood. If some of us are pedestrian our feet are on earth, and some of us are mystical and we are up in some stratosphere, possibly with angels; and some are in the middle of the web of life -- nevertheless we agree on the fourth principle of the seven principles, which says that we should encourage each other in our search for truth and meaning, and not rain on each other's parades. And here we engage with the lively virtues that are by implication required by an open society because they are generous and flow like a fountain. The fact that Unitarians and Universalists buried their differences sufficiently to come together is part of what makes the fountain flow too. We can be especially glad that universalism, with its generous view of human nature, spreads its benevolence to the idea of an entire web of life - in which we humans are not superior, but simply a part of the whole.

Now I want to go on very briefly to the larger picture: our Canadian community. We have a charter of rights, the product of the vision and energy of a particular Prime Minister; and it has come to define Canada in a quite new way in our lifetimes, an impressive achievement. Some people think its openness is dangerous, as is typical of lively virtues. This shows in the recent judgment of the Supreme Court on the subject of so-called swingers clubs, in which wife-swapping occurs (and also, by definition, husband-swapping; although for some reason you never hear that phrase). The judgment was made on the principle of no harm done -- the most basic moral principle we have -- to legalize these clubs. Leader articles were written, community standards were cited. It remains to be seen whether squads of swinging couples may bring the whole institution of marriage into disrepute -- yes, we do look into the bright eyes of danger in an open society; but I have a feeling when the swingers have children, they'll settle down, and anyway, orgies have been going on for a long, long time.

But on the other hand, lively virtues are typical of this country because it is both open and generous in its democracy, as the recent Clarity Act judgment, which is so marvellously simple and at the same time eloquent, shows. To quote it in two contexts, first: "democracy is a continuous process of discussion, and evolution"; and second, the Charter "guarantees a constitutional right for each participant in federation (i.e. each province) to initiate constitutional change." As you can see, these two provisions alone would define Canada as an open society, according to the Bergsonian description.

So here's my conclusion on lively virtues, for your comment: the deadly sins are still the same old lot, and so are many of the virtues, but virtues are lively when they lead to change for the better, a more potent ethical term than the good. And because we are creatures of spirit, we inherently aspire to change for the better. This is an aspect of our humanity, not just of the manly man in us. To be humane, to be humanitarian, even to be wrongfully inhuman-- all these words imply original virtue at least as much as original sin. Looking around the world, we may well be discouraged; and yet -- it would be a good thing, I think, to have a faith, if that faith is faith in ourselves and for the better, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen", the spiritual in us.

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