

***A Progressive's Survival Guide:***

***How to Save the World, and Your Own Ass Too***

A Sermon by Jerry Kerr

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The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Flint

Unitarian Universalists talk a lot about Henry David Thoreau, but I've discovered that when we stop thinking about him as Saint Thoreau, we find that at his core, he was just another complaining, understandably cranky progressive person, who wanted to save the world or at least a piece of it. And that makes him like most of us. In 1846 Henry David Thoreau, left his cabin in the woods and walked into his hometown of Concord, MA to run a few errands.

As fate would have it, he bumped into the town constable, Mr. Staples, who had evidently decided he had had enough of Henry ways. Constable Staples was tired of Henry protesting slavery, by not paying his taxes to a government that supported slavery. He hadn't paid his taxes for six years to be exact. Constable Sam Staples gave Henry a chance to pay up, Henry refused, and so he put him in jail. The constable actually arrested a seemingly harmless, former pencil maker, former school teacher, Harvard graduate, sometimes...surveyor, sometimes carpenter, and with that simple act, constable Staples, changed the course of history. Henry David owed the State of Massachusetts a total dollar amount of \$6.00, which would be \$145.00 in today's money.

He was just doing what he could to fight what he felt was immoral. On that day he was another sometimes-cranky, often complaining, Unitarian, who's soul, as Walt Whitman would say, "had been insulted." Henry's soul had been insulted by the horrors of slavery, and now he was in the process of doing something about it.

I should remind you that there was no great and noted predecessor who had also been jailed for disobeying an unjust law, that Henry could tout. Henry, was just an unemployed guy, a jack-of-all -trades, who lived in a cabin on someone else's land, who owned nothing except a row boat and 140 books, and now he was in jail. Of course we know, that Henry David ended up on the right side of history, but he had no assurance of that in 1846.

He just knew he **was doing the right thing**. He had no badge of authority like being a famous author, that would come later. I'm guessing many of the town's people just saw him as the hermit who squatted on someone else's property out by Walden pond.

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I hope I didn't miss mentioning your favorite cause in this morning's PowerPoint. Forgive me if I did, but as you might guess, the list just goes on and on.

Today I'd like to think about how the battle for progress and justice...dissenting against unjust laws, does go...on and on, and how we can maintain at least some of our sanity when we realize that fact. It is obvious it is never-ending battle. For example, if you research the words "the history of dissent" you will learn that 2 & 1/2 thousand years ago King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon decreed that every brick made, should have his name on it.

And, in the British museum is a brick from ancient Babylon, upon which a Babylonian worker, of long ago scratched out the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar's name...and wrote his own name. I know what many of you are thinking, "that sounds like something I would do." Tyrants still exist of course, and many of us look for the modern equivalent of scratching out their name from a brick and putting our own on top of it. We find some way, small or large to make our voice heard, or in simplest terms, we complain.

But even though we know the struggle for human freedom has been going on for a long, long time..., when we defeat some modern tyrant, we often act as though we have fought the final battle against evil. The legendary psychologist, Carl Gustave Jung, noted that after WWI, everyone thought there could never be another such war, and then 10 years after WWII ended, people said the same thing. Jung thought Human consciousness was progressing, but he also said, "nothing good can come into the world, without at once producing a corresponding evil."

In his opinion, there will always, always, be some evil to battle, and when it is defeated, some new evil will then arise in response to the momentary victory of the good. Jung spoke of this as if it were a mathematical certainty, and I think our experience proves him right. Consider how the internet is used for great good and when it first came into being many people thought it be an unqualified good thing for humanity, but now it is also used to perpetuate evil.

And think of how good it is to stay nice and warm by burning fossil fuels, but now that is bringing ruin to our entire planet. Yes, times are better than they used to be, but progress always seems to bring another way for humanity to mess up the world, and that is admittedly, a bit depressing.

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In 1846, Henry David Thoreau, had his own problems to fight, and the institution of slavery he fought against was just as urgent, just as evil as anything we deal with today. But you know Henry was nevertheless a happy warrior. He was excited to do battle against evil, even though he didn't have the advantage of being like a modern, social justice protester, who is happy to get jailed in the tradition of Gandhi or MLK, who were themselves happy to get jailed in the tradition of Thoreau.

There was no Thoreau-like hero of non-violent protest before Thoreau, but still, he was happy sitting in jail. A webpage commemorating his short time in jail explains it this way:

"Thoreau once wrote: "The best place for each...is where he stands." Henry stood in jail, and he took full advantage of the new experience. Fascinated, he "pumped" his cellmate for "the history of the various occupants of that room [and] found that even here, there was a history and a gossip which never circulated beyond the walls of the jail."

Henry used his jailtime, to think about the faults of the justice system and he relished his new insights. The next morning, his fellow-prisoner was sent "to work at haying in a neighboring field," and Henry became unhappy, only when he was told someone had paid his taxes, so he must leave the jail."

He was so mad, that someone had ended his protest...someone had stolen the \$6 dollars of leverage he had over the government. It was evidently his Aunt Marie who paid his taxes, but no matter, Henry still had some leverage...because he knew... how to write, and write he did.

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Two years following his one night in jail, HDT wrote an essay, inspired by his short time as a prisoner, and to say he got a lot of mileage out of his short incarceration, is a big understatement. Constable Staples, didn't torture or starve him, but through the power of Henry's writing...being jailed for just one night, for being disobedient to an immoral law, was all the inspiration he needed. Like the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah of ancient Israel, Henry loosed all of his anger on the immoral government of his country.

He wrote: How does it become a man to behave towards his government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace, be associated with it." He wrote: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison."

The modern title of Henry's essay, which has never been out of print, is "Civil Disobedience" and it is a misnomer.

His essay "Civil Disobedience" is not about being civil, or polite, or non-violent when you protest...it is about disobeying immoral laws and the government that makes them. "Citizens being disobedient" would be a good translation. His own original title for the essay was "Resistance to Civil Government." And although Henry David never advocated violence, he would later write a whole essay praising the abolitionist John Brown who was very violent. We are often taught that Saint Thoreau was a total pacifist, but that is not really clear.

Henry's essay moved many famous leaders down through history to fight successfully for the good of humanity; Gandhi, Martin Luther King, John Lewis, and now Reverend Barber of the Moral Monday movement, and many many others.

From Henry they learned that you have to walk right up to the edge of violence, get the attention of the people in power, and hope you, and the people of your movement, don't go over that edge into violence.

Henry's battle was against slavery, our modern battle is against the slavery of racism, and against global warming, and for women's rights and many many other causes.

We have had many victories, but the question is, how do we save the world that is in bad need of saving, without accidentally killing ourselves with stress every time our soul is insulted. Or, as the inelegant title of my sermon puts it: "How do you save the world and your own...rear-end too."

Henry David the always-complaining Unitarian, taught us about being disobedient to unjust laws, but as a Transcendentalist Unitarian, he also taught people how to survive the wounds of always having your soul assaulted by the many injustices of the world.

"The best place for each ...is where he stands" said Thoreau. In less poetic words...you may be in jail, outraged that your tax dollars support slavery, or you may be outraged that your own federal government is purposefully slowing down the mail to influence the election in their favor, but whatever your problem, you treat it as your privilege, your happy lot to fight the good fight, even though it never ends.

So scratch out the name of the tyrant and write your own on top of it however you can. Cover the back of your car with liberal bumper stickers, and that will be your essay on civil disobedience. And as good Transcendentalists, when we protest, or just make our complaints heard however we can, we can't do it with the idea of winning. If we are to save ourselves for the next, inevitable confrontation, we must do our work just because it is the right thing to do.

If our primary reason for fighting injustice is to win, then we may be crushed at every defeat, crushed, for example...when our supreme court reversed voting rights protections for African Americans that were the hard-won victories of 50 years ago.

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To some people, this may sound like some...ethereal, esoteric, philosophy, but it is in fact a core belief of our old and proud tradition. It is best described in the Transcendentalist, Buddhist, and Taoist thought we hold dear, but it is also found in many other world religions as well. This wisdom reminds us that how we think about something changes the world, and that thinking, can save the world, and you along with it.

The wisdom reminds us to avoid getting attached to the desire to win a battle. Instead just act for the good of others because it is the right thing to do, and the victory will come as a pleasant, accidental side effect. And it remind us... that wherever you stand, it is the very best place for you to be.

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You probably never thought of it this way, but Henry David helped save a lot of people because he was another complaining progressive person. Yes he was an eloquent, original thinker, but first and foremost it was his complaining spirit that turned him into our Saint Henry David Thoreau. It led to his refusal to pay his taxes, which got him locked up, that led to his writing out his complaints in an essay, that led to other people seeing the wisdom of his ideas that they would use to save the world too.

It occurs to me though, that we don't fully appreciate that it is our role in this world to complain and not always politely. I guess we know "it is our duty to speak our truth," which sounds nicer than saying we are a bunch of whiners, but to those who oppose our ideas, we are just complaining. I suggest we wear that title proudly, but we often don't see our argumentative natures as something that is truly a holy part of this world that makes it better, even if the battles are never ending.

We talk about how all of humanity is of great worth, and how each life is precious, but we have no rituals, no liturgies that celebrate being liberal loud mouths who know how to create change, and such a ritual might actually have a saving effect.

With that in mind, I would like to do something a bit unusual for a UU minister, and administer a blessing on every one of you, and on every progressive person who is an honorary UU. Of course UU minister's seldom administer a blessing.

We might get away with blessing someone's dog, or house, or we can say some nice things about someone's new baby, but that's about it. Nevertheless, I'd like to give this a try within the recognized limits of my position because

a blessing says...you are going to be alright because you are on the side of the good... Even in the face of the never-ending battle against evil, and we are going to be alright. And like any blessing coming from a UU minister, it comes not from some god on high, but from careful, rational consideration of our principles, and from a concern for treating everyone with justice, and compassion.

And forgive me if I add some humor to this liturgy, it doesn't mean I'm not perfectly serious.

My Friends:

Blessed are you who moan and complain about the mistreatment of others. Your only reward may be that you are on the right side of history, but for you, that will satisfy.

Blessed are you who have the nerve to risk angry stares at stop lights when people read your 20, liberal bumper stickers.

Blessed are you who know for a fact that you are privileged because you are white. Your insight is food for your soul, and a blessing to the world.

Blessed are you few, you happy few, who are able to smile at defeat knowing that... the arc of the moral universe is long, but that it bends towards justice.

Blessed are you who give holy hell to big pharma, big oil, big bankers...big everything that makes their own, self-enriching rules, just because they can.

Blessed are you seekers of justice who take time to celebrate victories over evil. Your soul is often insulted when you see injustice, and you want to save the whole world at once, but even Henry David Thoreau often relaxed by a pond.