

Environmental Action and Spiritual Discipline

A homily by Karl Perrin

April 26, 2015 at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver, BC.

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(Introducer: In 1993, Karl Perrin devoted himself to fighting Global Warming. He chaired our Environment Committee from 1995-2012, and has served on the Canadian Unitarian Council's Environment Monitoring Group since its inception. After years of co-chairing the Pilgrimage to Burns Bog, our church gave him the Distinguished Service award. Karl and his wife Ann, live on Burnaby Mountain.)

We are so lucky. We live in a heaven: a place of peace and beauty and kindness. We stand on the shoulders of giants: people of truth and service, people with the courage to speak truth to power. As Vancouver Unitarians, we are blessed with this musical architecture of Wolfgang Gerson, maintained by hundreds, enjoyed by thousands. We are blessed with the courageous wisdom, the intellectual and loving passion of our Minister Emeritus, Phillip Hewett: a humble man who walks among us. We are blessed.

In 1980 the Dalai Lama came to Vancouver. I'll never forget his simple message: "Let's all be a little kinder to each other." We could stop right here: "Be a little kinder." Amen. But I have more to say, in spite of the Tao Te Ching's warning: "He who speaks, doesn't know. And he who knows, doesn't speak." That's what it says. So judge me not by my words, but by my actions, and today I would ask, that you judge me by my environmental actions.

My inspiration

Words. I *must* use words to convey the inspiration offered to me, and to all of us, by men and women from our spiritual history. For example, Jesus of Nazareth, the abolitionist Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Rev. James Reeb, and an extraordinary Unitarian-Universalist from my home congregation in Detroit, Viola Liuzzo. What they had in common, was a willingness to listen. I'm not talking about listening to another person, as valuable as that kindness may be. I'm talking about listening for, and hearing, a call, a call from Truth, a call from Service, a call from the depths of Love. Can you hear it?

Be careful, it may be a very quiet voice, often drowned out by the demands of body, brain, and ego. You may need a certain peace in your soul to hear it. It is not the voice

of anger, or the voice of pain, although they may demand your attention. But this call is persistent. Like a very quiet telephone, it keeps ringing until you answer, or you choose to walk away from it.

My Call

I heard the call last fall on Burnaby Mountain. The call had been building up for two and a half years as I participated in BROKE: Burnaby Residents Opposing Kinder Morgan Expansion. The call asked me to commit civil disobedience: to disobey an unjust law. What law? The laws creating the National Energy Board. The laws creating its narrow scope, and its truncated process for considering the Kinder Morgan pipeline expansion. Mark Elieson, former head of BC Hydro, quit as an intervener with the NEB, calling the process a “sham” and a “farce”. I heard the call and I tried to apply reason. I asked myself, “What are the costs and benefits of participating in the protests against Kinder Morgan’s plans to build a second diluted bitumen pipeline from Edmonton to Burrard Inlet and the Salish Sea?” I asked myself, “Will the National Energy Board give a fair and complete hearing? Will it consider the Climate Change implications of tripling the delivery of dilbit from Burnaby-- to 890,000 barrels per day?”

Who am I kidding? How could I NOT participate, given my vow to my son in 1993? I vowed to do *everything* in my power, to prevent Global Warming from ending his life prematurely, in 2050, as civilization collapses. I vowed to stand before him in 2030, and honestly say to him “Ben, I did my best.” So obviously I was going to participate, but the question remained, “What *degree* of protest? And *how* could I participate? And was I ready to progress from foot soldier to leader, to take an extra step, to actually, creatively lead?” Could I answer the call, not with a “maybe” or an “I don’t know”, but with a clean, clear “yes”? My Reasoning For hundreds of years, we Unitarians have gained confidence in dispassionate reasoning as one path to Truth. So I had to calmly consider consequences. What *could* be the consequences of stepping across the police line enforcing the injunction, which gave Kinder Morgan the right to cut trees on city land, in fact, on Coast Salish land? What had been the consequences of similar actions? I know a woman who was arrested for protecting two rare eco-systems on Eagle Ridge Bluffs before the winter Olympics. No it wasn’t Unitarian Betty Krawczyk, who served seven months in the women’s prison. It wasn’t Harriet Nahanee of the Squamish Nation, who died soon after two weeks in jail. It was Val Lys, who was struggling with the

burden of 500 community hours, while making a meager living. I learned that she had had the option of a \$5,000 fine, although some others had only been fined \$250.

So there were my consequences. Breaking the injunction on Burnaby Mountain could result in a \$250 fine, or even a \$5,000 fine, if I appeared to be a leader. And then there was the big unknown: Would a U.S. border guard stop me from visiting my son, my sister, my friends, living in the States? But I heard the call. I had to listen. “What specifically was I called to do?” I knew from the movement to abolish slavery, and the movement to conscientiously object to the Viet Nam war, that Quakers were leaders, but Unitarians were quick to follow. I said to my Burnaby friend, Ruth, herself a Quaker, “Where Quakers lead, Unitarians are sure to follow”. I saw Kevin Washbrook, a climate activist friend, actively supporting those getting arrested. I took the next step. I started helping those arrested, to get home when they were released from jail. And guess what? They were pretty happy after 5 hours in jail. And then three of my heroes from 1993 Clayoquot Sound, Valerie Langer, Karen Mahon, and Tzeporah Berman started showing up each morning. They began pacifying the protesters, and then the police. After consulting my wife, and my boss, I looked at my calendar and decided that Tuesday would be a good day to peacefully cross the police line. It was a decision of heart and mind.

My wife and I live in a small condo next to SFU, on top of Burnaby Mountain. Through her inheritance we were lucky to semi-retire in a peaceful spot: So we thought. But as Kinder Morgan cut down healthy trees in our park, and our mayor cried “foul”, Burnaby Mountain was suddenly not so peaceful. Could Burnaby become an industrial sacrifice zone, like Detroit? Could our peaceful spot become a death trap, if an earthquake and fire in the nearby tank farm, sent toxic smoke up the mountain? Would the province protect us? The silence from Victoria was deafening, except for the comment that 11 year olds shouldn’t protest. 11 year olds, living below the oil tank farm, who had been well educated by their parents. 11 year olds, with no vote and no voice. 11 year olds, who will suffer the consequences of our oil addiction. 11 year olds, who will be 47 in 2050, 67 in 2070. And since the National Energy Board had ruled that the City could not protect its own park, could not oppose Climate Change, then, in my view, protection fell to the citizens. I heard the call, loud and clear, “Follow the Quaker! Speak truth to power! Oppose the unjust process which gives an *appointed* and *biased* energy board

authority over an *elected* city government, an energy board which can not consider cumulative, and major long term impacts.”

And from my vow to my son and his generation, I heard the call to STOP Kinder Morgan! Peacefully, non-violently, by appealing to voters through the media, to stop Kinder Morgan!

So that was my environmental action, and it's not over by a long shot, but what about “spiritual discipline”? There's no question that appearing to be spiritual is good PR from our side of the argument. I didn't shy away from using the media to counteract the millions of dollars Kinder Morgan could spend on buying influence. So I wore my black coat and necktie, my fedora and gum boots, when I got arrested. By the time I crossed the line, there was a ton of media covering every angle of the Battle for Burnaby Mountain. But such coverage has its dangers. It's really easy to get caught up in the media spotlight. The brotherhood and sisterhood of the movement, is fun to be part of, as the mutual support for creative expression takes over one's emotions. The group-think of the mob, the *self-righteous* mob, is difficult to walk away from, when all your new best-friends-forever are silently chanting, “Do it. Do it. Do it”, whatever “it” may be. But I also heard the call: “If not me, then who? If not now, then when? I escaped from Detroit, but there's no where else to run to. Sometimes, one has to take a stand.”

Another factor was the story Ben West told me last August, knowing a Kinder Morgan confrontation was coming. I have worked with Ben West on several pilgrimages to Burns Bog. [And by the way, the 8th Annual Pilgrimage to Burns Bog will start at 1:30 today at the usual spot under the overpass by the Delta Nature Reserve. And you're all invited.] I knew that Ben West had been adopted into the Tsleil-Waututh First Nation, where the Lakota spiritual leader Phil Lane is revered. The Lakota followed the buffalo herds, and knew their survival strategies. Ben knew I was a Unitarian and a council member of the Suzuki Elders. So he told me Phil Lane's Lakota story: “When the buffalo herd is attacked by a pack of wolves, they form a circle with the young ones in the middle, and the elders on the outside front line.” Why are the elders on the outside, facing the wolves? Well, they have survived previous attacks. Being older, they have previous experience of wolf attacks, and so, they don't panic so easily at the sight of blood. And they have less to lose. This is the way of nature, the elders step to the front. The elders must lead when sacrifice is called for. The elders, more than any, can

distinguish the genuine call to courage, versus the push of the mob, or the pull of ego gratification.

“Be a little kinder” is the call. But also, “Speak truth to power.” And sometimes the call is, “Take the lead. If not me, then who? If not now, then when?” If rationality requires skepticism, it also requires listening to one’s heart. The head and heart working together are stronger, more reliable, than either working alone. Listen to your head and your heart. And when they agree, then go ahead.

(Spiritual Discipline: Truth and Service) So again, where does spiritual discipline come into the picture? My spiritual path is only mine, so it may not suit you, just as your spiritual paths may not be right for me. I am all for meditation, fasting, silent walking, prayer, kindness, music, the arts, pilgrimage: all the traditional spiritual disciplines of the humble seekers of the Way. Recently, I’ve added a daily practice of writing 3 gratitudes, and then, writing down the best thing that’s happened to me in the last 24 hours. That makes me happier, and more generous. But my faith, my long term spiritual discipline, is in seeking truth and offering service. Truth and service. Where did that come from? When I was a teenager at the First Unitarian-Universalist Church of Detroit in 1962, I realized that my meaning in life would depend on my choosing a meaning for my life. It wasn’t going to fall out of the sky. My meaning for my life was my choice. And so I chose truth and service. Seeking truth led me to find inspiration in the lives of Jesus, Gandhi, and very much in 1962, Dr. Martin Luther King, and the martyrs, the children, beaten and dying in the Civil Rights struggles of Alabama and Mississippi.

And there were Unitarians in the front lines as well. There was Rev. James Reeb, who went early to Selma, Alabama. His murder led to over a hundred Unitarian ministers descending on Selma. And there were many Unitarian lay-people, like Detroit’s Viola Liuzzo, who heard the call, and in spite of great sacrifices and even greater consequences, (she was murdered, too) decided that they had to serve. They HAD to serve. In ’93, when I made my vow to my son and his generation, I thought it might take ten years to stop Climate Change. I’m still at it. I HAD to serve. But I have learned to pace myself. I know when I can leave my comfort zone, and when I can’t. And I love the joy of using my gifts, returning a little of what I have been given. But loving service doesn’t mean it’s always a bed of roses. Ask our Refugee Committee. To serve with all your heart, and all your mind, and all your soul, when one *could* stay home and just

watch TV, is not so easy. Ask our librarians, our board members, our farmers' market volunteers. Ask them why they do it. They do it because they love it. But it ain't easy, it means leaving your comfort zone. On the other hand, "Action is the antidote to despair" (Joan Baez) So many others in this church, and the wider Unitarian movement, will not only speak truth to power. They LIVE truth. They LIVE love and service. Truth disciplines the mind. Service disciplines the heart. And Love ensures that we are all connected. Because loving service, grounded in truth, serves all of us. We are one body, not only as Unitarians, but we are one with all we touch as individuals, as a community, as a church community within this nation.

And if we can see beyond the artifacts, of our urban existence, we will see that we are connected fundamentally to the inter-dependent web of all existence, life and death together in an eternal spiral of being and non-being. Our existence is supported by all the nested eco-systems of this Earth, our only home.

We are not only seekers of the Way, we are potentially, a powerful force for good. Which reminds me of a quote often attributed to Nelson Mandela, but he was quoting from Marianne Williamson's book *A Return to Love*. Listen.

The Call: from *A Return to Love* by Marianne Williamson

"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. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others." Let Truth discipline your mind. Let Service discipline your heart. Then, when you hear the call, your mind and heart will work together. And they will answer "No." "Maybe." "I don't know" or "Yes! This time our answer is Yes!" So be it, and Amen!