

# “Is Nothing Sacred?”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

**Reading** from Annie Dillard’s book *For the Time Being*

Are we ready to think of all humanity as a living tree,  
carrying on splendidly without us?

We easily regard a beehive or an ant colony as a single organism,  
and even a school of fish, a flock of birds, a herd of elk.  
And we easily and correctly regard an aggregate of individuals,  
a sponge or coral or lichen or slime mold, as one creature – but us?

Houston Smith suggests that our individuality resembles a snowflake’s: The  
seas evaporate water; clouds build and lose water in snowflakes, which dissolve  
and go to sea. The comparison galls.

What have I to do with the ocean, I with my unique hexagons and spikes? Is  
my very mind a wave in the ocean?

How can an individual count?

Of Allah, the Qu’ran says “Not so much as the weight of an ant in earth or  
heaven escapes from the Lord.”

That is touching – that Allah and God and their ilk care  
when one ant dies or a sparrow falls, but I strain to see the use of it.

We are civilization number 500 or so,  
counting from 10,000 years ago when we settled down.

We are *Homo sapiens* generation number 7,500,  
counting from 150,000 years ago, when our species presumably arose;  
and we are generation number 125,000,  
counting from the earliest forms of the *Homo* species.

We who are now alive, we [several] billion,  
are outnumbered by those 80 billion who have lived and died,  
by about 14 to 1. How can an individual count?

Every 100 hours a million more humans arrive on the planet  
than die into the planet.

One fifth of us are Muslims. One fifth of us live in China.  
Every seventh person on the planet is a Chinese peasant.  
Almost one tenth of us live within range of an active volcano.

We humans love tea; we drink more than a billion cups a day.  
Among us we speak ten thousand languages.  
A hundred million of us are children who live on the streets.  
Over a hundred million of us live in countries where we were not born.  
Twenty-three million of us are refugees.  
Sixteen million of us live in Cairo.  
Twelve million fish for a living from small boats.  
Our chickens outnumber us four to one.

On a shore, eight thousand waves break a day.  
At any one time, the foam from these breaking waves  
covers between 3 and 4 per cent of the earth's surface.  
This acreage of foam is equal to that of the entire continent of North America.

Our generations rise and break like foam on shores.  
Yet death, at least in the west,  
apparently astonishes and blindsides every [one] of us, every time.

Is it important that you have yet died your death, or I?  
It is only a matter of time, after all...

A rabbi says that God allots to everyone of us  
a little area to care for, a speck of the world in which we live,  
just as it is and not otherwise—a little area,  
a few years, and a small circle of people.

What to do then, what shall we do, for the time being?

## Sermon: “Is Nothing Sacred?”

I should warn you that I put a fair bit of thought on preaching a sermon this morning full of hellfire and damnation.

I thought of shaking my fists in the air and pounding the pulpit, of raising my voice and calling us all to account.

But, then I thought better of it. Even if it were only for fun—or even to make a point.

I thought better of it, because you’d wonder who I had become and never ever let me take time away for a summer study break again!

But the truth is that I have returned this morning to take up the topic of morality, which could and maybe should whip up a bit of emotion both within and among us.

Now, morality is not a word often uttered from Unitarian pulpits.

Not because we seek to promote immorality, but because so many of us have a deep and understandable aversion to the kind of moralism that too often comes wrapped in judgment and stinking of intolerance.

Because we often see more nuance where others seem to see things in stark categories of right and wrong, of yes or no, of either/or.

Because we tend to be suspicious of self-righteous finger-pointing, whether it comes from preachers or politicians, nosy neighbours or critical members of our own family.

But, I would argue that we need to make ourselves much more comfortable with the idea of rigorous moral examination—not only of the world around us, but even of ourselves.

At the top of my reading list this summer was the new book by the moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt called *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Random House.

The book is quite a tour de force,  
and though I hadn't planned it this way  
when I decided months ago  
on the topics I'd be preaching on over the next three weeks,  
his book will figure prominently into this short series of sermons  
that will seek to get at how we, as religious liberals,  
create and sustain the ethical framework that guides our lives.

Though it is a bit of a wonkish read,  
I would commend the book to anyone and everyone  
wanting to better understand  
how people can and do see the world in such different ways.

The one warning that I would offer up, though,  
is that Haidt makes a compelling but pretty uncomfortable case  
for how easily we humans are prone to self-righteousness,  
for how easily we are convinced of our own rightness and are masters  
at discarding or discrediting anything that might tell us otherwise.

Needless to say,  
the book serves up a wallop of humility.

Given the dire and politically polarized times in which we live,  
it's good medicine, even if it tastes more than a wee bit bitter going down.

Indeed, how things taste is one of the key concepts in the book.  
Because, as it turns out, we all have a set of what Haidt calls  
our moral taste buds.

In the same way that our tongues are designed with tiny receptors  
to distinguish between what is sweet or savoury, bitter, salty or sour,  
he says we possess built-in moral receptors  
that help us to suss out and avoid what is morally dangerous—  
receptors that help us distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong.

After some two decades of interviews around the globe,  
Haidt has found that there are six of these taste buds  
that prompt our moral decision-making:  
Caring, Fairness, Liberty, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity.

Each one has emerged in the course of our evolutionary journey.

And each one represents a critical challenge  
that our ancient ancestors faced and had to find ways to adapt to.

How they met those challenges resulted in a moral code  
that ensured their well-being and survival.

The lessons learned in the process built up the foundations  
upon which any of us constructs our own moral framework.

Now, the first of these foundational taste buds is Caring,  
which arose from that most primal human need  
to protect one's children from harm.  
Caring is what compels us toward kindness and compassion  
in the face of suffering.

The second taste bud, Fairness, grew out of the need  
to foster cooperation and reciprocity with others—  
to make sure everyone contributed their fair share  
or pulled their own weight.  
Fairness calls for justice and requires and builds trust.

Liberty, the third taste bud, is similar to fairness.  
It emerged from the need in small groupings of people  
to ensure there was at least some measure of freedom and protection  
from the domination of bullies.  
Liberty is what inspires anger and resistance in the face of oppression.

The fourth taste bud, Loyalty, comes from the need for group cohesion,  
and it conjures feelings of pride and patriotism,  
and sometimes even self-sacrifice for the greater good of our team or tribe.

Authority, the fifth taste bud,  
was a response to the emergence of human hierarchies.  
It is sometimes driven by fear and sometimes by respect,  
but always results in obedience and deference  
to someone or something higher.

The final taste bud is Sanctity.  
This one has its earliest roots in the prohibitions put in place long ago

to avoid contamination, disease, and death.

It's the source of what we consider to be taboo  
and often triggers feelings of deep disgust.  
It celebrates the virtues of temperance, cleanliness, and chastity.

So, six taste buds: Caring, Fairness, Liberty, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity.

Now, what's most fascinating about Jonathan Haidt's research  
is his finding that different people have different sets of taste buds.  
Or at least place greater emphasis on some moral receptors over others.

So, which ones do you have?

Take a moment to consider, as I call them out, which taste buds are in your  
moral palate: Caring, Fairness, Liberty, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity.

Though it's obvious that we all operate with very different moral tastes,  
what was a surprise was learning that while conservatives draw on all six  
of these moral taste buds, liberals typically draw on only three.

People who are at the more liberal end of the political spectrum  
(and, just to be clear, that's liberal with a lower-case 'l')  
tend to draw on the first three: Caring, Fairness, and Liberty.

That's not really earth-shattering news.  
Liberals tend to be profoundly concerned, of course,  
about caring for the weak and the oppressed,  
about working for justice and preventing harm to society.

What may be news to the liberals in the room  
is that conservatives (with a little 'c') also have these same taste buds,  
though they don't always embrace them  
with quite the same intensity as liberals.

But, what's more, conservatives draw on the three other receptors, as well—  
Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity—  
the three receptors liberals tend to feel, at best, ambivalent about.

Haidt, who is himself a liberal, says this creates “The Conservative Advantage.”

Conservatives have a fuller palate, and with it a broader range of moral language upon which they can draw—and which they can use to appeal to their cause or case in the public square.

In fact, looking at this question of language, one of his researchers compiled and compared dozens of sermons by Unitarian ministers and Southern Baptist ministers to test the theory.

Before scanning the sermons, his team identified hundreds of words that were related to each taste bud—words like “peace, care, and compassion on the positive side of Care, and suffer, cruel, and brutal on the negative side; obey, duty, and honour on the positive side of Authority, and defy, disrespect, and rebel on the negative side.”

Not surprisingly, when they tallied up the number of times each word appeared in the two sets of sermons, they found that Unitarian preachers talk a lot about Care and Fairness while Southern Baptist preachers talk up Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity.

Haidt says that the limited language of liberals is a disadvantage that we see playing out on the political level—so often leaving liberals scratching their heads wondering why so many people vote again and again against their own self-interests and what is “clearly” the greater good of society.

Haidt says that conservatives understand moral psychology and liberals simply don't.

His advice is that liberals need to “stop dismissing conservatism as a pathology and start thinking about morality beyond [the categories of ] Care and Fairness.”

He says progressives need to close the “sacredness gap” by finding ways to speak to Authority, Loyalty, and Sanctity in more liberal language.

Now, I realise this is a great deal of dense detail to absorb in one sitting.

And I also recognise that it would be very easy

to hear this as a sermon about politics.

While there are certainly political ramifications to all of this, my burning question is ultimately a spiritual one—of how all of this relates to our identity as religious liberals.

Unitarians have long been stalwart guardians of the religious left. And much of what Haidt has to say about the political left applies to us, as well.

While there are certainly conservatives (with both a little ‘c’ and a big ‘C’) happily here among us at First Unitarian, there is obviously quite a bit of overlap between the political left and religious left to be found in this very room.

When you look at our Seven Principles, (and if you actually want to look, turn to Hymn #1 in the hymnal and then flip back one page) what you find is language very much grounded in a morality of care and compassion, justice and equity.

There’s not a lot there that resonates with the moral motivators of Loyalty or Authority.

Given that Unitarians are often described as being a bunch of porcupines trying to cuddle together for warmth—or that Unitarian ministry is like pushing a wheelbarrow of restless frogs up a hill—there’s probably not much hope for the language of either Loyalty or Authority easily entering our lexicon anytime soon. . .

But, I do think a case can be made for Sanctity.

As I said earlier, this moral receptor emerged out of an early recognition that certain rules needed to be in place to protect people from harm—prohibitions against eating certain foods or engaging in certain sexual practices that would lead to problems down the road.

In time, these were frequently codified under the rubrics of religion. The Book of Leviticus, with all of its do’s and don’ts, is one of our most enduring examples from antiquity.

While some of its rules are baffling or downright cruel, others like the rules against eating foods that might carry disease not easily treated in the ancient world or prohibitions against incest make perfect moral sense.

So much sense that people's very visceral response to violations of these rules was, and in many cases still is, one of utter disgust.

It has long been the domain of religion to play an outsized part in naming what is sanctified, what is sacred, what cannot and what must not be violated.

The question we must consider is whether this a part we're willing to play.

As religious liberals, can we find within ourselves the strength and courage required to say that there are things that are inviolable, lines so sacred they should not and must not be crossed?

Can we overcome our aversion to causing offence to articulate with real moral force that there are, indeed, some things that we see clearly as violations of our covenant with each other, with all of life, and with the earth itself?

I believe we can and must,  
and I believe it's easier than we might think, or fear.

This past week, in the wake of the horrific shootings at the Sikh gurdwara in Wisconsin, there has been a poignant message posted and reposted all over facebook.

Maybe you've seen it.

It reads:

I was going to post something that would tell you the difference between Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims, but then I realized that you don't need to know anything about somebody's religion to know that you shouldn't shoot them.

There's no controversy here, of course.

It's moral clarity comes, though, from stating the perfectly obvious with such a straight-forward commitment to the sanctity of life and the dignity deserved by all.

The moral language that speaks to what is most sacred in this world  
should and can come as naturally to each of us.

Our principles can point the way: through our covenant to affirm and promote  
the inherent worth and dignity of every person,  
and the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Upholding these principles in word and deed,  
through the actions of our hands and our hearts,  
is a doorway into a life lived with moral force.

My hope, my fervent prayer this day,  
is that we can and will  
summon the power to live so boldly  
in the sight of all that is sacred on this good green earth.

Amen.