

FAITH AND IDENTITY

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)

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For the past two weeks, American news media and government leaders have been obsessing over the nearly successful attempt by a young Nigerian Muslim to blow up an airliner in flight near Detroit. If he had been successful, it would have killed nearly 300 people on the plane and perhaps others on the ground. How could he do such a thing? This young man, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, is the son of a wealthy banker and former finance minister of Nigeria. His parents sent him to “a British-style boarding school for the children of diplomats and rich West African businessmen, where Islamic boys were supposed to sing Christmas carols. Like most well-to-do teens, he worried about college admissions, fretting over a low score on his SAT. . . He also worried about girls. ‘Lowering his gaze’ like a proper Islamic boy didn’t seem to help, nor did fasting, he complained. By the winter of his senior year he was in a deep funk. ‘I have no one to speak to,’ he wrote in an Internet chat room. ‘No one to consult, no one to support me and I feel depressed and lonely. I do not know what to do. And I think loneliness leads me to other problems.’” He was so shy and pious that his schoolmates cruelly nicknamed him “Pope.” [*Newsweek* 1/11/10, pp. 38-39]

Within the next few years he became increasingly drawn to radical Islam, including communication with the same militant Muslim cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki, who had corresponded with the Army officer who killed 13 people at Fort Hood in November. After a stay in Yemen in 2009, the 23-year-old Abdulmutallab was ready for martyrdom—a single dramatic act that would end his private agony and enshrine him as a public hero among militant Muslims.

The sad case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab illustrates the pitfalls of forming a personal identity, a developmental task that begins in adolescence and often continues well into adulthood. The psychologist Erik Erikson considered identity formation the single most important issue in a person’s lifetime. “The young individual must learn to be most himself where he means the most to others—those others, to be sure, who have come to mean the most to him. The term *identity* . . . connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (**self**-sameness)

and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with **others**.” [Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, p. 102] “In the process of achieving personal identity, one must synthesize the private sense of self with the public self derived from the many roles and relationships in which one is embedded.” [Barbara M. Newman & Philip R. Newman, *Development Through Life* (7th ed.), p. 371] This juggling act is difficult under the best of circumstances, but it can be devastating if the young person is confronted with **conflicting** images of who they should become—especially if they lack a stable support system. This seems to have been true for the young Abdulmutallab, who was caught between the self-indulgence of his materialistic family and the self-denial demanded by his commitment to radical Islam. In spite of his family’s wealth, as the 16th and youngest of his father’s two wives, he may not have gotten much attention or emotional support from his family as he struggled with the challenges of adolescence.

“The cornerstone of identity, says Erikson, is the virtue of *fidelity*, ‘the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of the inevitable contradictions of value systems. . . . In devotion to some creed or doctrine, youth finds both inner cohesion and a definition of evil. Ritually confirmed as a member of some tribe or tradition, the adolescent pledges fidelity to a new, larger family. Tragically, such group identity fosters the conviction that otherness is harmful; outsiders may be defined and attacked as a dangerous enemy.” [David M. Wulff, *Psychology of Religion* (2nd ed.), p. 379] For Abdulmutallab, militant Islam offered a coherent value system and a clearly defined enemy, and martyrdom offered an end to his personal struggle. One of the sayings (*hadith*) attributed to the Prophet Muhammed “ranks the battle against evil within one’s own heart [which Muhammed calls the greater *jihad*] above the battles against external enemies [the lesser *jihad*].” [Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions*, p. 257] In his willingness to kill the enemy before dealing with his own inner conflicts, this young man equated the two forms of *jihad*. In the midst of all the controversy about Islam, it is fair to say that militant Muslims who recruit young suicide bombers violate both the letter and the spirit of the Islamic tradition.

The tragic case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab illustrates the **negative** impact that religious devotion can have on identity formation. **Is it possible for religion to play a positive role?** Erik Erikson offers a qualified **yes** in his detailed case studies of three famous religious figures: Martin Luther, Mohandas Gandhi, and Jesus of Nazareth. He argues that in all three of these remarkable individuals, the resolution of their own identity crisis provided an exemplary

solution for millions of their followers. For Martin Luther, the struggle with his deep sense of personal unworthiness was resolved by his experience of **justification by faith alone**, which became the cornerstone of the Protestant faith tradition. For Gandhi, the use of nonviolent confrontation, which he developed within his own family, “requires an encounter that leads to change in both partners [in a conflict], a transformation that is possible only when one has learned nonviolence, toward oneself as well as toward others.” [Wulff, *Psychology of Religion*, p. 397] Gandhi’s nonviolent approach to social change had an enormous influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Erikson’s study of Jesus emphasizes his determination to transform the Jewish image of God. In stories such as that of the Prodigal Son “and in addressing God as ‘Abba,’ the Aramaic equivalent of daddy, Jesus rejects the threatening and vengeful patriarchal image of God, replacing it with one far more forgiving, loving, and caring. . . . If Jesus’ therapeutic sayings and his attitude of nonviolence offered healing for the malaise of his time, they may have something to teach us, says Erikson, about the evolution of human self-awareness. They represent, like the great sayings attributed to Lao Tse and others of the same millennium, a step forward in human consciousness: ‘a more aware *I* related to a more universal *We*, approaching the idea of one mankind.’ Living as we do in an age of perfected technological destruction, concludes Erikson, we can hardly afford to overlook such insights as these.” [Wulff, pp. 399-400] How unfortunate it is that some of Jesus’ contemporary followers emphasize sin, salvation, and **exclusion** rather than healing, wholeness, and **inclusion**.

And so I ask, why is the quest for personal **identity** so closely related to the search for a viable **faith**? Let me suggest two possible reasons. First, both personal identity and religious faith represent our attempts at resolving life’s paradoxes and contradictions. Scholars of religion have documented how religious myths and legends offer exemplary solutions to the great dilemmas of life: Why are we here? What happens when we die? Why do innocent people suffer? How responsible am I for balancing my personal wellbeing with the wellbeing of others? In his book *The Birth and Death of Meaning*, Ernest Becker says, “The ideal critique of a faith must always be whether it embodies within itself the fundamental contradictions of the human paradox and yet is able to support them without fanaticism, sadism, and narcissism, but with openness and trust. Religion itself is an ideal of strength and of potential for growth, of what

man might become by assuming the burden of his life, as well as by being partly relieved of it.” [p. 198]

The second area of overlap between faith and identity is in establishing a balance between self and other, the **I and the We**. We live in a society that glorifies **I** at the expense of the **We**, in which personal celebrity is glorified even if it destroys the lives of those who crave it (such as Michael Jackson) and competition rather than cooperation has been regarded as the ultimate achievement. Isn't it encouraging that we have finally begun to publicly recognize as **heroes** people who have devoted their lives to service for others, who view sacrifice in terms of living rather than dying? Neuroscientists have discovered that our brains hold the capacity for a profound sense of unity and compassion along with our well-developed capacity for separation and competition. Brick Johnstone, a neuropsychologist at the University of Missouri, says, “Humans have gone from being primarily loners and hunters to being more social and farmers. Some say the next step in brain evolution is to respond to the increasing need to get along with others. That may mean becoming more selfless. We all need to move beyond figuring out how to take care of ourselves and instead figure out how we are going to take care of each other, different species, the Earth.” [Dale Smith, “Less ‘Me’, More ‘We’ *Mizzou*, Winter 2010, p. 26]

How do we as Unitarian Universalists deal with the overlap between identity and faith? Not so long ago, some UUs thought that religious faith somehow threatened their personal freedom, because it meant believing in an external source of authority. As I have said here many times, beliefs (and disbeliefs) divide, faith unites. Our greatest asset as individuals and as a congregation is our **inclusiveness**—our willingness to not just tolerate but to learn from those who are different from us. We have faith in one another and the fragments of insight that we can offer to each other. In that spirit, let me promote the Heart to Heart group that will be meeting for the first time here at the Fellowship this Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. This small group will offer an opportunity for discussing significant life issues in a climate of mutual trust and support. We will meet for the first three sessions here at the Fellowship, and after that I am hopeful that the group will meet in the comfort and privacy of one another's homes. The size of this group is deliberately limited, so please sign up on the list at the rear table.

In our faith movement, diversity of experience and diversity of opinion are an asset, not a liability. In the words of my colleague Fred Muir, who is minister of the UU congregation in

Annapolis, “Diversity means embracing and, in so doing, becoming whole.” [quoted in Peter Tufts Richardson, *Exploring Our Unitarian Universalist Identity*, p. 108] As a counterbalance to my opening story, let me close with a quote from the Islamic Sufi poet we know as Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.

Ideas, language, even the phrase “each other” doesn’t make any sense.

[quoted in Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 167]

To which I would add: We hold in one another’s hands the potential for integrating our personal identity with our personal faith. But it takes work and sometimes difficult conversations. I look forward to seeing some of you on Wednesday evening.

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 298 “Wake, Now, My Senses”

CLOSING WORDS # 456 (led by Lay Leader)