

WHERE'S YOUR BLIND SPOT? MAKING NEW YEARS RESOLUTIONS

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SERMON (Joel)

How many of you have made New Year's resolutions? How many of your resolutions are about losing weight, exercising more, reading more books or some other noble objective? Today, Josh and Chase and I developed a message about making resolutions that count.

A couple of months ago, I read a piece in the NY Times by Errol Morris titled "something is wrong, but you'll never know it". It was about Anosognosia, a medical condition in which people with a disability are unaware of or is unable to acknowledge that disability. The introduction to the story was about a guy in Pittsburg a few years ago who decided to be a bank robber. He walked into two major banks, with all the standard security systems, with no attempt at disguises or to evade security. Of course, the crimestoppers program ran a very clear picture of him on the evening news, he was identified and the police picked him up the next morning. When he was questioned by police, all he could offer was that he had used "the juice". Seems he heard somewhere that smearing lemon juice on your face rendered you invisible to modern security cameras. He even tested it at home with a small hand held camera. He never could figure out how it went wrong. He remains incarcerated today. A couple of academics at Cornell University noticed this story and embarked on a new research track. Their central premise was "when people are incompetent, they suffer the dual burden of not being able to do specific things, but they also suffer from the disability of not being able to recognize their incompetence" or stated a little closer to home "our incompetence masks our ability to recognize our incompetence". Unfortunately, there seems to be quite a lot of evidence to support their assertion.

As Unitarian Universalists our fourth principle is "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning". Today I would like to focus not so much on the free part of that search, but on the responsible part. If truth is what we are searching for, how can we do a better job of recognizing our shortcomings and overcoming them or how do we act more responsibly? In the opening I talked about making new year's resolutions and exercising and reading more are certainly desirable goals, but what about those deep down incompetencies that we all have? The ones where we don't give people or issues consideration because of something we think we know. How do we really conduct a responsible search for truth and meaning?

One way we can do it is to seek out new sources of information. But even that approach is fraught with difficulty. The University of Maryland study, called "Misinformation and the 2010 Election," looked at "variations in misinformation by exposure to news sources," among other things, and specifically newspapers and news magazines (in print and online), network TV news broadcasts, NPR and PBS, Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN.

The study found that daily Fox News viewers, regardless of political party, were "significantly" more likely than non-viewers to erroneously believe that:

- Most economists have estimated the health care law will worsen the deficit (31 points)
- The economy is getting worse (26 points)
- Most scientists do not agree that climate change is occurring (30 points)
- And that it is not clear that Obama was born in the United States (31 points)

The study also found that as exposure to Fox News increased, so did the misinformation.

But Fox News wasn't the only offender:

Daily consumers of MSNBC and public broadcasting (NPR and PBS) were higher (34 points and 25 points respectively) in believing that it was proven that the US Chamber of Commerce was spending money raised from foreign sources to support Republican candidates.

So, we can't trust these so-called 'fair and balanced' sources of information and apparently, we can't even trust ourselves to pick the information sources. Who can we trust? Maybe your best source of help is sitting right there beside you, or beside you on the bus or in class or in your social circle. But, these are not interchanges that can be treated lightly, our work is to develop a way to communicate what our beliefs are and why we have them. It's our responsibility to develop logical, coherent and INTERESTING explanations of your beliefs. Nobody wants to listen to a boring rant, no matter how logical or well-developed. Making our own beliefs interesting is part of the deal, and it gets you invited to lots of parties.

These academics at Cornell, Dunning and Krueger, actually applied their findings to our everyday behaviors and called it the Dunning-Krueger effect. Of course, this phenomenon has been around for some time. Charles Darwin said "Ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge" and Bertrand Russell said "One of the painful things about our time is that those who feel certainty are stupid, and those with any imagination and understanding are filled with doubt and indecision.". W.B. Yeats put it concisely thus: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity."

Nor is it specifically limited to the observation that ignorance of a topic is conducive to overconfident assertions about it, which is what Darwin was saying. Indeed, Dunning *et al.* cite a study saying that 94% of college professors rank their work as "above average" (relative to their peers), to underscore that the highly intelligent and informed are hardly exempt. Rather, the effect is about paradoxical defects in perception of skill, in oneself and others, regardless of the particular skill and its intellectual demands, whether it is chess, playing golf or driving a car.

We are still stuck at the question of how do we identify our own deeply held biases and more importantly, how do we change them—or at least come to grips with them and keep

them under control? Well, there is always 'faith', but then faith is defined as a belief in something without proof, so maybe that doesn't really get us there. Although there are certainly a lot of people will to put their faith in faith, and certainly a lot of people more than willing to tell them what to believe in.

About the only real means of addressing this comes in a technique called peer review. Peer review is the process of self regulation, not necessarily a process for identifying the truth. In our covenant we say 'the quest of truth is our sacrament' not 'truth is our sacrament'.

How many of you have been a victim of peer review? When you get your ideas rejected by peer review, after the requisite period of denial, anger, recrimination, bargaining and finally acceptance, you usually start to see that your ideas were flawed or, occasionally, that you failed to express them coherently.

Now, I have to admit, the people in this congregation are about as good at self reflection and dealing with the reality of any group I have ever encountered. But living up to our principles demand that we keep working at it. Peer review is not supposed to find the truth, just to work toward it.

So, let's make our resolutions to get our new year started and to improve our appearance or our bank account. But let's also spend a little more time reflecting on our beliefs and our values, where they come from and how we use them. And lets work at developing those values and beliefs into coherent, logical propositions so that we can communicate them to our peers and ask for their review and their discussion. Now those will be resolutions worth keeping.

REFLECTIONS (CHASE)

This year I was asked to come up with a New Year's resolution and talk about it. So this year my New Year's resolution is to get better grades in school and keeping up with school work.

I think it is important to get better grades so I'll have a better reputation with my teachers who think I can do a better job. It is important to get good grades so I stay in school and can choose what college I go to, and have more opportunities than I would if I didn't stay in school.

I think it is a good thing to have a family who wants me to succeed in school and life. Thinking about my future, my Mom and my teachers helped me to come up with my New Year's resolution.

CLOSING WORDS (JOSH)

As I thought of a new year's resolution this year, the one that stuck out to me the most was something I decided to make an important goal in my 8th grade year and my upcoming first year of high school.

I thought to myself that I needed to finish my 8th grade year strong and start my first year of high school stronger. This is important to me because in six and seventh grade, I did not apply my full potential to any of my work and I suffered in my grades.

I went into 8th grade with a mindset to put my academics ahead of mostly everything else. I do not want to go into high school and suffer as I did in 6th and 7th grade. I am choosing to take control of my destiny, my goal applies to my whole life.

I must go into everything with a mindset to apply my fullest potential to any project or goal I decide to complete. I am setting the standards of my adulthood.

William Jennings Brian said, "Destiny is not a matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved."

'I have done that,' says my memory. 'I cannot have done that' -- says my pride, and remains adamant. At last -- memory yields. Frederic Nietzsche