

Remember Jiminy Cricket?

Jiminy Cricket had the job of being Pinocchio's conscience in the Disney version of the classic Italian fairytale, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*.

Jiminy Cricket is adorable. He's cute. He's kind. He sings. He's the perfect embodiment of the Disneyfied version of conscience in American popular culture.

Conscience is the still, small voice that tells you right from wrong.

And we all know right from wrong, good from bad, cruel from kind, right?

Yet if we all know those things, why do we need a conscience at all?

We should note that in the original story, Pinocchio is not particularly bright. His head is made of wood, after all. He's not cute and cuddly. He's selfish and willful. The Talking Cricket is a constant nagging presence, and Pinocchio smashes him with a hammer pretty early in the story.

That's the way it was with the old teaching stories. They didn't pull any punches.

How many of us have squashed that little voice in our hearts?

Conscience is that still, small voice that people won't listen to, Jiminy tells Pinocchio.

The Talking Cricket comes back later in the original story... as a ghost. An insubstantial being incapable of enforcing its will.

We see this in all the images of people with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, whispering in their ears.

The angel is telling them to do good, or not to do something bad. The little devil is urging them to ignore the angel.

Let your conscience be your guide, sang Jiminy Cricket. But conscience is not always consistent or reliable, and certainly suffers from all kinds of biases.

Telling right from wrong, good from bad, cruelty from kindness, is not always easy. Between the two, in our heads and hearts, is that vast gray area of "it depends" and our desires, needs, and fears.

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So what is a conscience? Where does it come from? Why does it matter?

The very idea of conscience is somewhat amorphous. We could spend days delving into the history of the idea and its evolution as a concept, and still not arrive at a firm conclusion as to the origin and nature of conscience.

Socrates relied on an inner daemon that warned him when he was about to make a mistake. Christian Europe saw conscience as the voice of God within, a moral source inherent in all human beings as a result of their creation in God's image. Buddhism associates conscience with a pure heart and a calm, well-directed mind. It is regarded as a spiritual power, and one of the "Guardians of the World". The idea of conscience appears throughout the religions of the world, sourced from some greater power.

More secular schools of thought see conscience as arising from evolutionary pressures on group behavior. What is right and wrong is therefore shaped by our upbringing, by our religious and cultural mores. As children grow up, they are constantly bombarded with messages about how to behave, what is permitted and what is forbidden. Sometimes those messages are accompanied by threats of punishment from divine sources, or the withholding of love or affection, or being ostracized. Conscience can be an ugly business.

Whatever its source, it is conscience that helps keep us in line with the moral judgment of those around us.

Conscience is the inner voice which warns us that someone may be looking.

~H. L. Mencken

Conscience in most people, is but the anticipation of the opinions of others.

~Jeremy Taylor

Marilynne Robinson writes:

*I assume that conscience is a human trait widespread enough to be generally characteristic, not originating in culture though inevitably modified by it. Guilt and shame, and dread at the thought of incurring them, are clearly associated with conscience, which grants them legitimacy, and which they empower.*

She then goes on to say:

*Conversely, the belief that one's actions are endorsed by conscience can inspire a willingness to stand against custom or consensus in matters that might otherwise be considered wrong or shameful, for example rebellion against the existing order.*

A willingness to stand against custom or consensus. Rebellion against the existing order. Those are key phrases for us today.

Freedom of conscience and thought is at the root of our religious heritage as Unitarian Universalists. One of the great social struggles in the Middle Ages was between dissident religious movements and the established Church. At issue was whether people had a right to their own beliefs. Bloody wars and inquisitions that lasted for centuries were the result of that struggle, and eventually the people won – or rather, competing Church/State monopolies of power arose.

More recently, we spring from the Dissenting Tradition, which arose in England as a widespread movement against state involvement in religious matters. against the Church/State axis of power. This tradition had earlier roots in Puritan theology, which gave primacy to the internal authority of the self informed by reason.

Reason itself being a gift from God, for how else could we achieve salvation but through our own efforts? Unless our salvation was freely chosen, it was meaningless.

"For if men are to be freed from reliance on external authority they must be educated to be independent in judgment, and if men are to be responsible citizens they must be given knowledge." ~ These words come from *The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England*, written by Raymond Holt, published in London in 1938.

The Dissident struggle was also neither easy, nor bloodless. Men, women, and children were tortured and killed for their beliefs, maimed or mutilated, deported and sent into slavery. Many fled to America seeking the freedom to live in accordance with their beliefs.

English humanist lawyers in the 16th and 17th centuries interpreted conscience as a collection of universal principles given to man by god at creation to be applied by reason. And the dictates of one's conscience could thus be claimed as a mitigating factor for one's actions.

This laid the legal and moral groundwork for conscientious objectors, civil disobedience, and conscientious noncompliance to customs, laws, and policies that individuals consider to be unjust. Conscience has always been the driver of human rights activism—from the abolition of slavery to the condemnation of genocide.

Ultimately, conscience became enshrined in international law.

The United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights which is part of international customary law specifically refers to conscience in Articles 1 and 18.

*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*

— United Nations, Universal Declaration on Human Rights Article 1

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*

— United Nations, Universal Declaration on Human Rights Article 18

I relate this history for several reasons. One is to illustrate how deeply grounded in the past our faith is, and to show the sources for several of our principles, most notably the first and the fifth. Another is that we may look to that past as a guide as we navigate the present.

Another is to acknowledge that this process, this long and difficult flowering of freedom of thought, belief, and conscience is in trouble.

I think this freedom is in trouble because the competing interest groups in our society no longer seem to be able to grant other groups the authenticity of their beliefs, to engage in reasoned discourse concerning their differences, to find the compromises that living in a complex and diverse society demands.

I must confess that I don't feel much joy, or any thrill of victory, when I hear that the Oregon couple who declined to bake a wedding cake for a lesbian wedding had to close their business because of the \$135,000 judgment levied against them. Their bank accounts were seized. They've been targeted with hate mail and social media messages wishing "your children get sick and die" to death threats of someone "sneaking in their back door with a gun drawn to take you out of this world." The state threatened to take their children away until the parents were "rehabilitated".

Oh, I'm quite sure that they were utterly insufferable when they declined to bake the cake, quoting scripture and being righteously judgmental about the lives of the lesbian couple to their very faces. And the hurt feelings that resulted were more significant than simply not being able to purchase a cake.

I don't condone their act of discrimination. But neither do I condone the storm that rained down on them.

It feels disproportionate, it feels unreasonable that their business has been destroyed, that their lives are stalked by fear, because they chose not to bake a cake for something they don't support. The scale of the response feels biblical. Really old school - burn the village and salt the earth as a warning to others.

And for what? I see no winners. And certainly nothing resembling restorative justice.

Such actions turn our society into a battleground. They admit no nuance, no complexity, no multiplicity of views. They harden hearts and positions, making the way forward more difficult, a zero-sum game where everyone loses. It creates enemies of the secular humanism that has brought us so much in the way of a free and open society.

Our religious heritage stood with the common people against too much involvement of the state in religious matters, against its power to compel obedience, to forbid or endorse our beliefs or actions. So for us, to invoke the terrible power of the state is fraught with moral peril. For us, the danger is that we become that which we fought against all these years.

Our 5th Principle commits us to the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

The Rev. Parisa Parsa, executive director of the Public Conversations Project, wrote this about the 5th Principle:

"In our religious lives, the democratic process requires trust in the development of each individual conscience—a belief that such development is possible for each of us, as well as a commitment to cultivate our own conscience. We could call it a commitment to the value of each person. In the words of Theodore Parker, 'Democracy means not "I am as good as you are," but "You are as good as I am."' My connection with the sacred is only as precious as my willingness to acknowledge the same connection in others."

Can we truly allow that those we disagree with, even those we consider un-evolved, un-woken, fundamentalist, conservative, even those we consider ignorant and uninformed, can we truly allow that they too have a right to freedom of conscience? To freedom from coercion?

Our sense of conscience demands that we acknowledge that other people have consciences too. That whether we agree with them or not, they have a right to their positions and a right to their lives.

That is what makes us different, and I believe it makes our way a better way.

For our faith to be meaningful, we must persuade and not compel. To trust that we can awaken conscience in others through connection with the sacred, however they may conceive that.

Persuading other people, and arriving at compromises when persuasion fails, has long been one of the hallmarks of democracy. Balancing competing rights is a long and sometimes excruciating process, whose outcomes we may not always like or agree with. We may not always get our way.

Creating the world our conscience envisions requires us to get power, and wield power gracefully and democratically, causing as little harm as possible, even if we have been harmed.

This is the difficult work of our democracy and our liberal heritage. To abandon it is to risk the return to the bloody days of religious wars.

And there are those who would like nothing better, and we cannot play into their hands.

There are difficult days of struggle before us, and how we struggle matters.

We must show grace, even when none is revealed to us.

We must show mercy, even when none is given to us.

We must be compassionate, even when hearts are hardened against us.

We must be generous, whether in defeat or in victory.

Some will see this as weakness, but we will know it as strength, and carry on.