

Conscience

What other people may think of the rightness or wrongness is nothing in comparison to my own deep knowledge, my innate conviction that it was wrong.

— Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 2 President's Message
- 2 Spiritual Practice
- 3 Religious Education
- 3 General News
- 4 Sacred Story for All Ages
- 5 Calendar

When I stood to prevent teenaged boys from killing seagulls with stones, I was driven to action by my conscience. When I overheard a man denouncing gays and lesbians as morally repugnant, my conscience drove me to speak. When I witnessed my grandmother's racism, my conscience pulled me in dual directions: to discredit her remarks or to preserve the relative innocence of our relationship. Conscience compels us and confounds us, but what is it?

Some argue that it is simply an emotive response, conditioned over time by genetic factors, environment, and social forces. Emotional conscience would most often manifest as guilt—a call to abide or overcome its burdensome nagging.

Others, including the philosopher Immanuel Kant, suggest that conscience is an innate moral guidance system. This sort of conscience can be depicted as the very voice of God within. If not so depicted, it is presented as a natural, innate resonance of moral authority, likened perhaps to a moral GPS: that which knows the roads to moral

deliverance better than our reason alone.

Still others consider conscience as kin to opinion—one's best judgement about what one or others ought to do.

The *idea* of conscience is complex. Determining its *nature* is nearly impossible. Yet conscience itself happens, regardless of our understanding.

Without its call, would we be able to comprehend civil or human rights? Without its call, would there be something like empathy? Without its call, would we ever have a cause to work past war for peace?

I personally imagine that conscience has a social as well as an individual nature. The communities within which we exist have consciences of their own. Throughout January, we will explore conscience—the kind we feel individually and the sort that is built within the communities

that nurture and support our growth. Perhaps no single definition will arise, but we will work to re-enliven our attention to the conscience that calls...no matter the name we give to its being.

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Conscience Challenges



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Conscience



Bob Brown,
Board President

Conscience is the magnet of the soul. It has a divine polarity. Amid the tempests of passion, in the dark hours of trial, that only lie just this side of despair, when a host of fierce temptations beleaguer, then consult this Divine Monitor; and though its tiny needle may tremble amid the attractions of earth, yet, if uncorrupted, its polestar will be the throne of God.

—Horace Mann

We make decisions each day and hopefully our conscience, our inner voice that tells us someone is watching, will guide us in the process.

The daily news does shock me at times, when I read about or see the actions that people take in defiance of the minimum of what I feel is a conscience. An example of recent news is the “knockout game.” This is a game in which one or more assailants attempt to knock out an unsuspecting victim, often with a single sucker punch, all for the amusement of the attackers and their accomplices. However, the discussion of a conscience gets a little more muddled when talking about wars in which people are fighting for what they believe is right. Or when a police officer shoots a suspect when a gun or other weapon is pointed at them or when others are in danger.

We all make mistakes, and each of us can have a guilty conscience or a clear conscience. What defines a clear conscience, in my opinion, is the intent behind our actions. Acting in malice should weigh on a person’s conscience, but making a mistake without malicious intent can be a learning opportunity that doesn’t keep a person awake at night.

A MONTH OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

January: Conscience

Members of our congregation are invited to engage the practice of *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio Divina* is Latin for divine reading, spiritual reading, or holy reading, and represents a traditional practice of scriptural reading intended to promote communion with that which is ultimately meaningful. It is a way of praying or meditating with sacred words that calls one to study, ponder, listen and, finally, rejoice within the soul. Unitarian Universalists embrace a wide-reaching definition of scripture, finding words of profound meaning in the works of the world religions, scientists, poets, and the experiences of our own lives.

Find the time in your day to read each piece every day. Read, pause, read again, pause, and then reflect. You may choose to write each quote in a journal and add notes from your reflections. You may choose to read each piece to your family at the dinner table. You may choose to read in the morning or before sleep. You may choose to use the piece to gather your spirit for prayer or meditation.

January 2–8

Cowardice asks the question, “Is it safe?” Expediency asks the question, “Is it politic?” Vanity asks the question, “Is it popular?” But conscience asks the question, “Is it right?” And there comes a time when one must take a position that

is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular but one must take it because one’s conscience tells one that it is right.

—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

January 9–15

He who sacrifices his conscience to ambition burns a picture to obtain the ashes.

—Chinese Proverb

January 16–22

“Seven Deadly Sins” by Mahatma Gandhi

*Wealth without work
Pleasure without conscience
Science without humanity
Knowledge without character
Politics without principle
Commerce without morality
Worship without sacrifice.*

January 23–29

Wrong does not cease to be wrong because the majority share in it.

—Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*

January 30–February 8

The one thing that doesn’t abide majority rule is a person’s conscience.

—Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The Developing Conscience



*Linda Weaver,
Director of Religious
Education*

We are not born with conscience naturally ingrained within us; instead, we must develop a sense of right and wrong. This makes conscience a difficult concept to explain to young children. In an attempt to make it more concrete, conscience has been depicted as a joyful cartoon cricket or, more commonly, as an angel on one shoulder and a devil tempting from

the opposite shoulder. Teens and young adults sometimes talk about it taking the clearly identifiable voice of their mother or father.

Rather than words, however, the example of parents or other primary caregivers is the most important factor in developing conscience. Young children learn by imitating the people who are important to them, and they learn from the actions and the responses of these individuals. In the UUCS nursery, we provide consistent and responsive care and we model kind interactions so that the youngest children experience an environment of love and trust. Fairly young children can begin to learn how other people feel and how their own actions affect others. As children at UUCS start to interact more closely, we encourage them to take turns and share, and we talk about feelings so that children begin to understand their own emotions and the feelings of others, helping them develop empathy and compassion.

When children enter school, it is good to talk about specific virtues that you value and help reinforce these through activities and conversations. At UUCS, children in the lower elementary grades learn about and practice values that will help them live well in the world. This year they are hearing moral tales from around the world, and they are collecting gems for each act of goodness or kindness they do. They have already collected a large number of gems for helping others at home, school, and church, and they are looking forward to celebrating these many acts soon.

Around age nine, people and environments outside the home become more important. As they approach adolescence, children begin to develop abstract thinking, allowing them

to see more sides of an issue and better predict how actions will affect others. The messages they receive from school, peers, and the media may reinforce what they have learned at home, but these often hold many contradictions. Discussing these contradictions reinforces values that are important to your family and helps children begin to develop their own values. At UUCS, children in the upper elementary group look at their own lives and the wider world as they consider what Unitarian Universalist values and their own conscience call them to do. This year they are concentrating especially on the calls of beloved community, service, justice, and the search for truth and meaning.

This process continues as middle school and high school students and adults more deeply consider their values and find support and encouragement in following their consciences. We invite you to join us in exploring ideas of right and wrong and finding ways to act on your beliefs.

The Children's Religious Exploration Calendar and a list of programs and events for children and families is at the end of the RE column on the UUCS website at www.uusterling.org.

OUR PARTNER SCHOOL: A RELATIONSHIP IN FLUX

Lindy Reeder, Rosalie Clavez, Rev. Anya, and Linda Weaver

Our congregation has a relationship with a Unitarian-based partner school in Uganda called the New Life School. Our children have exchanged letters with a class at the New Life School, and we have financially supported their program for nearly two years. At present our relationship with the New Life School is in flux. Although we feel that our relationship has been mutually beneficial in many ways, questions have arisen that require our consideration. Please join us after worship service on January 26 for a discussion forum at which we will present, listen, and deeply consider our future engagement with the New Life School.

SACRED STORY FOR ALL AGES

The Wooden Bowl: A Story From China



A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law, and a four-year-old grandson. The old man's hands trembled, eyesight was blurred, and his step faltered. The family ate together nightly at the dinner

table. But the elderly grandfather's shaky hands and failing sight made eating rather difficult. Peas rolled off his spoon onto the floor. When he grasped the glass, milk often spilled on the tablecloth.

The son and daughter-in-law became irritated with the mess. "We must do something about grandfather," said the son. "I've had enough of his spilled milk, noisy eating, and food on the floor." So the husband and wife set a small table in the corner. There, grandfather ate alone while the rest of the family enjoyed dinner at the dinner table. Since grandfather had broken a dish or two, his food was served in a wooden bowl. Sometimes when the family glanced in grandfather's direction, he had a tear in his eye as he ate alone. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food. The four-year-old watched it all in silence.

One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. He asked the child sweetly, "What are you making?" Just as sweetly, the boy responded, "Oh, I am making a little bowl for you and mama to eat your food from when I grow up." The four-year-old smiled and went back to work. The words so struck the parents that they were speechless. Then tears started to stream down their cheeks. Though no word was spoken, both knew what must be done. That evening the husband took grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table.

For the remainder of his days he ate every meal with the family. And for some reason, neither husband nor wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled, or the tablecloth was soiled.

Questions for Discussion

Two people may make the same decision for very different reasons. Why do you think the parents brought the grandfather back to the family table?

How do you decide the right way to treat another person?

What have you learned about choosing to do the right thing from someone younger than yourself?

By simply watching another person, what have you learned about choosing to act kindly or fairly?

Want to share something in the February newsletter?

- ✓ **Reflections or articles related to the February liturgical theme, *evil***
- ✓ **Announcements (including those related to events that will take place in February and the first two weeks of March)**
- ✓ **Group or committee updates (what you accomplished, what's planned for next month, etc.)**
- ✓ **Recent photos taken at UUCS or during UUCS events.**

Please send anything you'd like to include to newsletter@uusterling.org by January 15th.

CALENDAR

Stay Up to Date With UUCS Events

JANUARY	////////////////////////////////////
Thursday, 1/2	7:00 pm — UUCS Board of Trustees Meeting All UUCS Board meetings are open to observers.
Sunday, 1/5	10:30 am — Worship Service: “Arise—A New Year’s Celebration” We enter the new year exalting the dawn with world-renowned percussionist Tom Teasley and our annual Fire Communion. This all-ages service invites us to shed the old and assume a bold new beginning. Noon — Inquirer’s Class in Rev. Anya’s office All newcomers are welcome.
Sunday, 1/12	10:30 am — Worship Service: “The Age of Spirit” What does religious practice look like and feel like today? What calls us to gather in faithful communities? What are the mistakes of the past that we are repeating and what are the new promises that will move us forward? Teagan Kutz and Michelle Badwar will deepen our worship experience by sharing violin duets.
Sunday, 1/19	10:30 am — Worship Service Our choir will sing.
Sunday, 1/26	10:30 am — Worship Service: “Keep Calm and Let Conscience Be Your Guide” With all the noise of our daily lives, how can we hear the still, small voice that calls us to compassionate action? Our service explores the nature of conscience and the ways we avoid, fear, and respond to its call. Our choir will guide our reflection with their musical offerings. Noon — Discussion forum We will discuss our relationship with the New Life School in Uganda, hear one another’s thoughts, and deeply consider the future of our relationship with the school.
FEBRUARY	////////////////////////////////////
Saturday, 2/1	9:30 am–1:30 pm — New to UU” Class for Newcomers to UUCS All newcomers are strongly encouraged to attend this day of reflection, sharing, deepening, learning, and enjoying lunch with Rev. Anya and the leaders of UUCS. To RSVP and request childcare, contact Terry Dick at terryd147@comcast.net .
Sunday, 2/2	10:30 am — Worship Service