

SAYS WHO?

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
BUC, March 27, 2011

A history of the human race is told through statements of schoolchildren across the United States in Richard Lederer's book, *The World Circus*. Spanning the centuries, these chronicles provide us with the following facts:

Ancient Egypt had many large cities inhabited by mummies. The Egyptian people wrote in hydraulics and built pyramids in the shape of huge triangular cubes. Pharaoh forced the slaves to make bread without straw. Jacob, son of Isaac, stole his brother's birthmark. Moses went up Mount Cyanide to get the 10 commandments and died before he reached Canada. The Hebrew King David fought the Finkelsteins and had 300 wives and 700 porcupines.

In Grecian times, we are told that the Greeks were a highly sculptured people. They held Olympic games in which competitors hurled the biscuit and threw the java. Homer wrote *The Oddity*, which reveals that Penelope was the last hardship Odysseus endured on his journey home. Actually, Homer was not written by Homer, but by another man with that name.

The Romans, so called because they never stayed in one place for long, conquered the Greeks. Julius Caesar extinguished himself on the battlefield

of Gaul. He was murdered by the Ides of March. As he lay dying, he gasped, “Tee hee, Brutus?”

In the Renaissance era, we learn that Shakespeare lived at Windsor with his merry wives and wrote tragedies, comedies, and errors. *Romeo and Juliet* are an example of a heroic couplet. And all the while Shakespeare was writing, the great explorer Sir Francis Drake circumcised the world in a 100-foot clipper.

Keeping the story straight, knowing who said what, is a tricky business. Religions rise and fall on precisely that issue: who said it, and what did they say?

Unhappy with what is being said, no longer certain who was speaking, the Old Testament prophet Elijah turns to flee to a distant and deserted mountain. Elijah has been on what he thought was a divinely ordained mission, boldly proclaiming the judgment of God and calling the people to repentance. In the course of this prophetic work, he had not really depended on any faith or faith community to support his spiritual needs. A spokesperson for a power beyond himself, bringing that power to bear on a wayward people, Elijah was personally unacquainted with the power for which he spoke; that is, he participated in a religious tradition of authority,

based on an external source, with insight and power coming to the followers of the tradition indirectly.

Acting in response to the word from on high, Elijah had assumed that he was safe, directed and protected by the remote power at the top of his religious hierarchy. Contrary to his complacent assumptions, however, Elijah learns one day that the rulers of his country intend to kill him. So much for his divinely ordained mission. His life endangered, Elijah is forced to go into hiding.

Perhaps the flight will save more than his life; perhaps his soul will be saved as well. Perhaps in the solitude of his cave retreat, Elijah can make contact with the power which seems to have abandoned him. Now that the old religious order has fallen apart and the familiar center has been lost, Elijah must construct a new order, one capable of revealing who or what it is that ultimately supports him, his source of authority and authenticity. Such an urgent question as Elijah's, the question of a life's ultimate meaning, cannot be addressed by a tradition of authority, in which all answers derive from an external source; rather, it is only dealt with in traditions of experience, where answers arise internally, from the innermost recesses of the human heart.

Fundamentalist religion in its various sacred and secular forms has developed a set of structures and propositions which look very attractive to someone who feels a need for authority. In a fundamentalist system, everything is clear, straightforward, and (best of all) guaranteed. If I assent to these claims and perform those actions, then I will receive the peace and assurance that I desire. God is available on demand, say the fundamentalists; simply cast your demand in the right language, and God comes. For a person desiring relief from the rough-and-tumble of life, such a surefire religion of order and instant gratification exerts a tremendous appeal. How marvelous it would be to feel so absolutely certain.

As a former subscriber to fundamentalist religion, I have known the pleasures of that certainty. I have known the satisfaction of always having the answer in hand, of responding to challenges with “the Bible says,” of being able to call on God at any time and have God come in a prompt and predictable fashion. And I have also known, as an ex-fundamentalist, the anxiety and disillusion that come when my experiences and my religion’s official interpretation of those experiences do not, cannot possibly match. Life often departs from the given pattern, and a God may choose to wear a different face than that described by the fundamentalist—or any—religious system. Then what?

After a seemingly interminable wait, Elijah notices a stirring within and feels moved to step out of his cave and survey the mountain landscape. Then strangely, disturbingly, his spiritual questions begin to be answered, though not in the manner he had expected. As the Biblical author tells the story: “God passed by, and a strong wind blew over the mountains, and broke the rocks in pieces, but God was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but God was not in the fire; and after the fire a still, small voice” (I Kings 19:11-12).

Who said it, and what did they say: as we grow to maturity, we return to this issue again and again, deciding who to trust, what authority to accept. Typically we shift our reliance increasingly from an external focus to an internal focus, from locating authority outside the self and depending on others, to locating authority within the self and becoming independent of others. Instead of searching for wisdom elsewhere, I search my own heart, my own experience.

Once having become my own authority, I am likely to come up with answers quite different from those found anywhere else. Whatever God I might acknowledge, whatever worldview I affirm, will not be the same as that of others. Such differences in perspective, and having the locus of

authority in the individual person, can pose complex issues for the creation of a spiritual community. How is it ever possible to speak for the whole without compromising the authority of the individual?

As the minister newly called to serve this congregation, I discover questions of authority around every corner. Because you and I are still learning about one another, still figuring out how we will work together, we cannot yet invest much trust in one another, the trust that is needed in order to successfully balance individual authority with the good of the whole. Trust has to be earned over time, and even then often challenges us to give one another the benefit of the doubt, to assume the best of intentions without always having all the facts of a situation or a decision before us. In the same fashion, whoever or whatever we ascribe ultimate meaning to, whether God or a set of values or a web of relationships, is granted that ultimate meaning as a result of having earned our trust, of having shown over time, through experience, that it can be counted on to support us, to guide us well, to forgive us when we fail.

So I ask you: where do you locate your trust these days, and how was your trust earned? What might cause you to doubt that trust, to re-examine it, to set it aside or invest it elsewhere? In our Unitarian Universalist system, where respect for individual autonomy is held sacred, do we ever

acknowledge any authority outside the individual self? To function as a viable community, it is necessary at times to look to some kind of collective wisdom—but if I personally am the final authority in all matters, how do I trust you to make decisions that affect me? It is possible for fundamentalism to infect liberal groups as well, so that absolute power is invested not in a deity or a set of scriptures but in a way of thinking and operating that becomes rigid, unalterable, controlling, life-denying.

After Elijah watches a great wind, an earthquake, and a fire pass with no evidence of God, he begins to hear the sound of the sacred as a still, small voice, a whisper inside his heart. Elijah had expected his God, his authority, to vindicate him, to praise his courageous preaching, to cheer his efforts, to affirm him and denounce his opponents, to promise his success and their downfall. But to his consternation, Elijah hears not what he expected, but a simple, obvious question: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

We acknowledge authority not only on the basis of who is speaking, but also on the basis of what is said. *Being* alone does not suffice to make anyone an authority; one must also demonstrate authority in the wisdom and insight of *what* one says. For many of us, especially if we come from traditional religious backgrounds, any authority other than the self is suspect,

and authority comes with a host of unpleasant associations with intolerance and capriciousness and bossiness.

But the story of Elijah suggests that real authority does not speak in overbearing tones, does not boss, does not confirm the status quo does not stonewall or deceive. And real authority does not focus outside, concern itself with challenging others, but looks inside and challenges the self. “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Not what are *you* doing, *you* over there, not what have *you* done, not what are *you* going to do; what am *I* doing, right now, right here? That precious authority of the self, affirmed without fail in our liberal spiritual tradition, established in my heart of hearts, confronts me, moment by moment, asking what I am doing, challenging me to be mindful, to be compassionate, to be aware of all my motives, positive as well as negative, to not grow complacent or self-satisfied. And if I heed that authority, rather than fretting over the authority (or lack thereof) that may be claimed by another, I am less likely to boss or make demands of others and more likely to act with integrity, kindness, even humility. Chances are I will, ultimately, find myself acting in accordance with the requirements of our first principle, not trampling another’s dignity because my own authority will not let me get away with disrespectful behavior.

Sir Francis Drake circumcised the world, Home wrote *The Oddity*, and King David fought the Finkelsteins: authority is a complex matter, requiring of us a lifetime of discernment that we may know who said it, and what they said. I suspect issues of authority do not get easier with time, but rather become ever more subtle and perplexing. For there can be no more difficult question to answer than the challenge of authority that rises every moment inside each of us when we listen carefully: “What are you doing here?” “What are you doing here?” “What are you doing here?”