

The Blue Pill or the Red Pill

Sunday, January 10, 2010

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In the movie "The Matrix", Neo is a seemingly ordinary computer programmer with a comfortable life. He has a job at a software firm, an apartment, friends - and yet, he feels unsettled by the sense there is something going on out there in the world, something he can't explain. He is kept up at night by his desire to know the truth. And during his awake hours, Neo uses the internet to search for the mystery, the meaning of which,] he senses is just beyond his grasp.

As it turns out, the truth finds him. Through a series of events reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland, Neo is brought to see Morpheus, who is a sort of truth teller. Upon meeting Neo, Morpheus presents him with two pills, a blue pill and a red pill. He tells Neo he is faced with a choice. Here is our reading. Morpheus' words to Neo:

"This is your last chance. After this, there is no going back. You take the blue pill and the story ends. You wake in your bed and you believe whatever you want to believe...

You take the red pill and you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes...

Remember, all I am offering you is the truth. Nothing more."

(here ends the reading)

"What is truth?" asks Pontius Pilate, going about the business of the Roman Empire. "The truth shall set you free," says Jesus, on his way to the cross. I'm not sure I know the whole truth, but can tell you this: Morpheus, though a fictional character, is completely truthful when he tells us that the truth is a dangerous undertaking.

Just look at what can happen to truth's heroes: Friedrich Nietzsche, the great truth-seeking philosopher, went crazy. Socrates was put on trial for corrupting the youth and was sentenced to death. Vincent Van Gogh, who sought the truth in art, cut off his own ear, and the great Sylvia Plath committed suicide. That's what happens to truth-seekers in the real world. In the sci-fi world of "The Matrix", Neo discovers that the human race is secretly controlled by machines, and what he thought was reality was a complete illusion, his comfortable memories and experiences are being spoon fed into his brain to mask a more frightening reality.

Now, I doubt that we're really secretly controlled by machines who are feeding us false consciousness while harvesting our vital organs () Just waiting to see if we get any signs here. () Nope, guess not. Nor will most of us end up crazy or sentenced to death as often happens, sadly, to the geniuses of truth . But even for us mere mortals, the search for truth is no picnic - or if it is a picnic it's one straight out of Alice in Wonderland, with Mad Hatters, vanishing Cheshire Cats, and rabbit holes to unknown destinations. When people hear about Unitarian Universalism, for the first time, hear about how we don't have a creed, believe many different things about God and the universe, how we embrace the free and responsible search for truth and meaning - when people hear all this, they will often say something like, "oh isn't that nice. You can believe anything you want." And it *is* nice. I'm sure many of us, upon first coming to a Unitarian Universalist congregation, thought, "oh this is great - there's actually room for my beliefs! Wonderful." Wonderful. But over time, as the beliefs we walked in the door with are tested, questioned, challenged, changed - not by others, necessarily, but by our our own truth-seeking - we come to realize that this free and responsible search for is pretty hard work.

The Rev. Frank Schulman, in his sermon, "The Price of Truth" says there are four costs to pursuing the truth. The first price is humility - to search for the truth, we must be willing to admit we may be wrong. Indeed, if we are honest searchers for truth we will discover that we are wrong many, many times in our life. After all, the truth is much larger than we are, or as Hamlet said, "there are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in our philosophy." Great scientists are wrong a hundred times before they are ever right - can we be as bold as they? It's not easy. Who knows when we may find out, like Neo, that what we once thought was reality is really illusion?

Which brings us to the second price of truth is pain. It can be quite painful to give up truths that we once cherished. Shulman writes, "we resent those who show us we are wrong, like the Athenian idiot who railed against the doctor for curing him of the insane delusion that he was rich." The truth is often painful. To live without seeking the truth is much more comfortable. The vision of reality portrayed in *The Matrix* struck a chord with so many of us because so much of life in 21st century America can seem a bit like a soulless mush. We *are* kind of spoon-fed by machines - only those machines are the internet and television, which give us little snippets of so-called "information" that we can nibble on, swallow, but never really digest, while we go on being "productive" members of society. According to this dystopia, we give the machine of world capitalism our lives and in return we are fed the illusion that we are comfortable. Am I being too cynical? Perhaps. But you gave me this pulpit to speak the truth, not to make you comfortable.

The third price of truth, says Schulman, is human opposition. When we pursue our own truth, it can affect those around us. We can alienate family or close friends, who take our search for truth as a personal affront, when we discard the beliefs we used to share with others. KathyAnn, a member here, and I were discussing Martin Luther King's "Beyond Vietnam" speech, in advance of our event the week after next. And she said she and Georgie her daughter were talking about how remarkable that speech was , because when King decided to bring his message of non-violence beyond the domestic civil rights

struggle to international issues of war and peace, he alienated many, probably most of his friends and key supporters in the civil rights movement. They didn't want King to expand the conversation to the war in Vietnam, because they'd lose the administration's support for the civil rights causes here at home. King couldn't *not* speak up against the war, though - the truth was too dear for him to compromise it, even for a worthy cause. As King said, "there comes a time when silence is betrayal." And so he had opposition not just from his enemies, but from his friends - that's a lot harder.

The fourth price of truth is I think the hardest price of all: responsibility. If we learn about what is happening in other's lives, we are morally obligated to do something about it. Once we see the beggar lying in the street, once we learn the calamity happening on the other side of the world, we are faced with a choice: walk on by, change the channel, or be the good Samaritan. Before we learn the truth, we are not faced with that choice. Once we do, we must respond, one way or the other. Our fourth principle is the free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning, and this responsibility is a considerable challenge.

"What is truth?" asks Pontius Pilate, going about the business of the Roman Empire. "The truth shall set you free," said Jesus, on his way to the cross. I'm not sure I know the whole truth, but can tell you this: the truth is dangerous to anyone who's even close to it. When I see a public library, to paraphrase Nietzsche, I see a room filled with dynamite. Here, assembled under one humble roof, are hundreds of dangerous ideas: existentialism, transcendentalism, anarchy, capitalism, Christianity, Buddhism - these are ideas that can transform a life, and not just that, but transform a society.

Many today are worried about relativism - this idea that there are many truths out there, and each of our truths varies according to our perspective. On the other hand, many - including most of us in this room - remain wary of absolutism, the idea that there is one truth out there, and it's mine. We've seen enough religious wars and conflicts to remain wary for the rest of our lives, at least. But what of relativism? Is it not true that there is one truth out there, as hard as it is for us to discover? This is a fascinating question, and maybe we'll cover it in our discussion, either today or on the _____, with Joanna Lovell. If you're as interested in this question as I am, may I suggest you might want to someday study the philosophy, theology and ethics of the Jain people, a centuries old tradition practiced by a few million people, mainly in India. Jain thought on truth is amazing for its care and subtlety. Most Jains do hold that there is one truth out there but that the universe is so complicated we cannot ordinarily grasp it in its entirety. Hence they hold to *Anekāntavāda*, the idea of harnessing multiple viewpoints. Since human beings are limited creatures, our version of the truth is both true and the opposite of our version of truth is true. For every answer we have, writes the Jains, a few centuries before Hegel, we can be sure that it is both true and false.

Here is a dialogue that is said to have taken place between Mahavira, the founder of Jainism and Gautama, the founder of Buddhism:

Are the souls O Lord, eternal, or non-eternal ?

They are eternal, O Gautama,

from the view-point of substance,
and non-eternal from the view-point of modes."

"Is the body, O Lord, identical with the soul or different ?

The body, O Gautama, is identical
with the soul as well as different from it."

It goes on like that for a long while. Mahavira recognized the truth is complicated, and his followers, who revere truth, carefully cultivate this awareness of the manifoldness of truth. Now, to counter another claim made about relativism and pluralism, if you think this would lead to an "anything goes" lifestyle, you could not be more mistaken. Jains practice non-violence, and go out of their way not to harm other living creatures. To fulfill this vow of non-violence, they eat a strict vegetarian diet and live a very ascetic lifestyle. I saw a Jain website for Jains living in the USA where they had charts to help Jains see how well they were doing in not harming other creatures - including the things we own, the things we eat, and the clothes we wear. I found the charts very helpful and, though I am not a Jain, I wish I was living a more Jain lifestyle. I may look at those charts again.

"What is truth?" asks Pontius Pilate, going about the business of the Roman Empire. "The truth shall set you free," said Jesus, on his way to the cross. I'm not sure I know the whole truth, but can tell you this: living the truth means more than speaking it. It's hard to speak the truth. We tell lies all the time, and some of them are meaningful, and not all of them are terrible. We tell our children that everything will be alright, when we don't really know if that's true. We tell our friends that we'll always be there for them, when, even if we mean it, life doesn't always work out that way. But spoken truth is only a tiny fraction of what is out there. Like Neo, the brave adventurer in a movie, it is only through living that we can get at the greater truths in this world.

About two years ago, a collection of correspondence from the great Catholic charity worker of Calcutta, Mother Theresa, was published. This collection got a lot of attention because it revealed that Mother Theresa had doubts about her faith, doubts about God. Here is a letter of an excerpt from a letter she addressed to Jesus, and sent to a colleague: "Where is my Faith — even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness — My God — how painful is this unknown pain — I have no Faith — I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart — & make me suffer untold agony...If there be God — please forgive me — When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven — there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul. — I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the Call of the Sacred Heart?"

These lines of Mother Theresa's I hesitated to include today - they are so close to a diary entry I'm not sure it is fair to her, public figure or not, to discuss them like this. And yet I do so knowing that she has a powerful lesson for us. Some seized upon these words and others like them, as proof of her weakness, that she was not the perfect person she was

portrayed to be. But for me, these words are proof of her strength. She was willing to pursue the truth, explore her doubts - *and yet live her truth anyway*. She was willing to go out there, day after day, and do heartbreaking, awful, important work, even while she questioned whether it was all meaningful at all. That, to my mind, is much more heroic than certainty.

Mother Theresa is a great example for me. Her faith is not my faith. I am not a Catholic. If the Catholic version of God were to not exist, it would not shake me to my foundations. And yet, she has something to teach me: that it is not enough to think the truth, to seek it with our minds - we have to live into it. So often, so often, I wonder if this world is random, careless, unloving, I wonder if the arc of the universe really does bend towards justice, if human life on a grand scale has any meaning worth celebrating. I do not fear these doubts, as a philosophic animal - as Thoreau said, if life be mean, I want to give the whole and genuine meanness of it. And yet, as a justice-seeking animal, as a meaning-seeking animal, I know I have to seek to live a little bit better than the world I know. For my knowledge is always incomplete, but love can go with my incompleteness begins. On the days the universe seems dark and cold and soulless to me, let me be a light. On the days the universe seems capricious and arbitrary to me, let me be a force of consciousness, planting a garden, sowing a seed, cultivating a better world. Perhaps it is just us here. I keep hoping for extraterrestrial life to show up, I'd love to have company, but maybe it's just us human beings and are cousins the animals and plants, and maybe we have to make this universe what it is. I don't know much about God, but I know if we are to seek the truth fully, it will be with our lives, not just our mind. We have to live into the universe we hope to see, only by living the truth we hope to find can we actually achieve it. For once we chose to go down the rabbit hole of truth, there's no telling where we might end up.