

## **Who We Are and What We Need: A Trait-Based Ethic of Flourishing**

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I was in Boston at a professional development conference when I found out about Paris. I had had quite a productive educational day and wasn't thinking about much when I called home to find out how Phoebe and the animals were. When she answered the phone, her voice was agitated. She asked me whether I knew. I had no idea what she was talking about. After our call, I spent much of the rest of my free time at the conference reading Facebook posts and trying to understand, not just the violence in Paris but the anger, hatred, and fear that seemed to be filling so many hearts and Facebook posts. And grief. So much grief.

In this beautiful mess that we call our world, there are many reasons for the pain and suffering of which we are so aware right now. Most of them aren't really fit for a sermon, but I think one might be: given that some of our differences are killing us and damaging our souls, is there some way of thinking about humanity that might allow us to reclaim important similarities? It won't solve national and global political problems, but perhaps it could be part of a conversation that would move in that direction. What, at the end of the day, makes all of us human? Until we have some answer to this question we have no hope of singing a song of peace for all lands, not just our own and not just lands similar to our own.

There's a musician I work with who identifies as a right-wing Tea Party Republican. That is not my political identity, as I think you mostly know. We keep working together because we have a real musical connection that I can't explain but also because I understand that we share important aspects of our humanity that can, to some degree, override our very deep political differences. I once heard him talk at a gig about how important his father was in helping him come to see the world the way he does. My father played a similar role in my development, though Joe's father was very conservative and my father was very progressive. But I can appreciate our shared experiences of fathers who helped us become the people we are today as well as the fact that we need people in our lives, parents and others, who help us make sense of the world when we are too young to do this on our own. Ironically, it is this very commonality in the human need for meaning that has made Joe and me such different people. I won't talk politics with him but I recognize that we both have some common needs that must be met in order for us to have good lives.

Today I would like to talk about these common human needs in terms of traits. I've picked nine traits that I think are undeniably crucial to human beings and to human well-being. As I introduce each trait I'll say something about what it means for human flourishing. I'll close by considering briefly what these ideas have to do with the world we see around us today.

First, though we sometimes joke about Unitarian Universalists living in our heads, we are, of course, embodied beings. This makes us vulnerable to illness, injury, and death, along with the failure to thrive that comes of polluted living situations, inadequate nutrition, and other problems that may not always make us ill but that definitely limit our bodies. On the flip side, our embodiment allows us to experience great joy and a sense of agency in what we can do with our bodies, such as sensual and sexual pleasure, working our bodies in sports or exercise, using our

bodies to create, or putting our bodies to productive use in certain kinds of jobs. So, as embodied beings, we need certain things in order to get to have good lives. In order to even have the opportunity to flourish in the first place we need to be free of the risk of violence and an early death. We need access to good healthcare, nutritional food, and clean air. We need to be able to choose activities that allow us to enjoy and appreciate our bodies, so we need a certain degree of freedom. These are not necessarily simple needs. For example, living in an apartment with lead in the walls can greatly diminish flourishing, as can having no health insurance and relying on emergency rooms for basic medical care. Being in prison can similarly damage the ability to flourish, though I've been very impressed with the prisoner I've been writing to for 27 years, who finds ways to make original greeting cards for his friends and family. Somehow, however unfree he is, he is allowed to put his creativity to work and it clearly makes him very happy. Needless to say, war is about as contrary to physical flourishing as anything can be.

In addition to being embodied, we are emotional animals though this too is sometimes ignored by the more hyper-rational UUs among us. Our emotions are themselves embodied; when we need to laugh or cry or rage with anger the inability to do so can actually hurt our bodies. It's also, of course, important to be able to feel and express our emotions more generally, to have a sense of completion or closure, to know the fullness of profound joy, to be able to grieve when grief takes us, and to be moved to social justice work through feelings of righteous indignation. Also, as with embodiment, emotionality carries risks: we can be emotionally harmed. There's a reason emotional abuse and emotional violence are understood to be severely problematic, and a reason we treat post-traumatic stress disorder as a serious concern. Taking all of this into account, I think it's fair to say that in order to flourish we need to be just as free from emotional harm as we need to be from physical harm. At least as important, we need to be able to live our emotional lives fully, to feel what we feel, and to express what we feel. And, as with war and physical flourishing, there are all sorts of large-scale social patterns that can damage emotional flourishing, as we see in many responses to recent terrorism in Europe and Africa.

Moving from the physical and the emotional to the cognitive, we also need to be able to make sense of reality, meaning that we need to make meaning. To be unable to make sense of reality is to be literally insane and to be incompetent in the world. Now, making sense of reality is not a straightforward matter since the only way we can manage our experience of reality is by interpreting it. If we had to rely solely on the massive amounts of information that bombard our brain through our senses we'd never make sense of anything. But fortunately, our brains are capable of interpreting what we experience, much of which we learn how to do through being socialized as children. So as we grow up we get handed certain interpretations regarding what's good, what's bad, what to do, what not to do, who we should approve of and not approve of, and so on. We take this in along with addition and subtraction and reading and all the other formal learning we do. The important roles of socialization and interpretation in our lives mean that in order to flourish we need access to interpretations of reality in which we are valued and valuable people. A world in which we are viewed poorly and treated badly sends us a message of our unimportance, our lack of inherent worth and dignity, and can lead to us treating ourselves badly. The saddest thing about the experiences of people who are taught to devalue themselves is that, if these experiences are systematic enough and start early enough, they make sense. They are, in fact, the only interpretation of the world that does make sense. Trying to reject and unlearn them may be possible but it is profoundly challenging. Those who grow up with a way of

understanding life in which they are valued and valuable people avoid this challenge and are free to put their energy toward living a good life rather than struggling with messages that interfere with well-being.

Over the course of our lives, we also develop memories and our understanding of who we are is shaped by these memories. They help solidify our identities, our values, our interests; they literally remind us where we come from and who has been with us on the road. They ensconce us in communities, whether these are biological families, families of choice, work groups, religious organizations, or some other kind of collectivity. People with brain injuries who can't develop memories or who can't maintain them over time may come unmoored. But having memories is also tricky, since our former life experiences can be wonderful, horrifying, neither, or both. As odd as this may sound, in order to flourish we must be able to build lives that will not burden us with tortuous memories or involve trauma that causes our memories to shut down. Part of a good life is having good memories. Our lives must permit us to have good memories to offer the greatest fullness of flourishing.

The next two traits I'd like to consider involve our moral capacities. Some of you are familiar with the story of the two wolves, the evocative image of our good selves and bad selves doing battle in our hearts. Which wolf will win? The wolf that we feed. Or, as Solzhenitsyn has put it, the line between good and evil runs down the middle of every human heart. Some Unitarian Universalists like to talk about inherent goodness; I prefer to understand human beings as having a capacity for the greatest good and the most horrific evil since that makes more sense given the world I see around me. But making ethical choices is not merely an acontextual, individual decision. Our ability to feed the good wolf is impacted by the society we live in, by what that society rewards and what it ignores and what it mocks. It is very hard to be generous in a society that rewards greed, just as it is hard to be brave in a fearful society and peaceful in a warlike society. That said, we can strive to live ethical lives that enable us to feel that we choose integrity much of the time. And at some level, I think we can flourish better when we are free and able to choose to feed the good wolf. Maybe this is not true of everyone but I cannot help but believe that most of us would rather feed the good wolf than the bad wolf. Or, in plain English, most of us don't really want to be jerks or cause harm to others. All of this means that in order to flourish we need to live in a society where we are allowed to feed our good wolves, and ideally, where we are rewarded for doing so.

Beyond our general capacity to live morally, we are compassionate animals. This is not merely a social facet of who we are but is found in our neurobiology, specifically in the mirror neurons in our brains, which fire in response to our seeing the experiences of others. I've also read about a ten-section "empathy circuit" in our brains; if this part of the brain is damaged, the damage can curtail our ability to understand what other people are feeling. And if we have a drive toward empathy, I'd say a life of flourishing is the richer for the opportunity to experience and act on that empathy. It increases our connections with others, humanizes us, and may help us make good ethical decisions. If our lives are circumscribed in ways that limit our capacity for compassion, or if that capacity is damaged through emotional harm, something important is lost.

On a more joyful note, creativity seems to be endemic to humanity; we have a wide variety of artistic abilities and an even wider range of ways to put them to practice. Many of us in this room

are artists of one sort or another and we know both the sweat and the joy of creating, bringing something new into the world. While I would not go so far as to say that a life lived without creating something is a life without thriving I certainly would say that a life lived in the appreciation of others' creations, and a life lived with the opportunity to create, enhance our flourishing and can do so substantially. Some time ago I bought a bunch of CDs of recent Broadway shows and am only now getting a chance to listen to them, now that we have a car with a working CD player. And while they are not all equally fabulous, my joy in getting to hear them and in identifying new songs that I really love is deep and wonderful. I have no doubt that it contributes to my flourishing just as much as writing a new song would. So what do we need to flourish on the creative and artistic front? For one thing, we need access to the creativity of others so that it might enrich our lives. Whether this is music, theater, writing, artwork, dance, or some other kind of creativity, the more of it most of us get the happier we are, within the bounds of our particular interests. And we need time, space, freedom, support, and access to the things that allow for the creative process so that we might be creative ourselves. This could be a piano or an easel, a canvas, brushes, and paint. It could be a blank piece of paper and a story idea. Whatever it is, it's part of the blessing of being a human being and it is better that we can practice our humanity in this way.

So far I've been listening rather serious human traits so let's be sure not to forget human playfulness, humor, and the capacity to laugh and simply enjoy things. There's a certain wisdom to the Genesis creation story that has God resting on the seventh day; it's a model for us to do the same. What do we need in order to relax, to be silly, to play? First, we need to be free enough from danger and risk that we can truly set our minds to joy. It's hard to be playful when you're frightened and perhaps even harder when you're at actual risk of violence. On the positive side, we need time, space, and opportunities to play, relax, and laugh, both alone and with others.

Finally, we have the capacity to hope and plan for the future, and in fact to work for a better future. We are able, in a way that other animals seem not to be, to organize our thoughts and intentions and goals around moral values or political sensibilities and then to act on these thoughts, intentions, and goals. That might mean community building or activism or educating ourselves about a social problem. But if the role of memory in our lives is about assimilating past to present, the process of working for a better world assimilates history, our current lives, and the world we seek, drawing on the first two of these to propel us toward the third. What do we need in order to be able to hope and dream, plan and act? The freedom to do so, the courage to do so, and the resources to do so, whether those resources are books, religious communities, social change organizations, or social media.

Here, then, are nine traits that are among the traits that make us human. I think it's safe to say that all human beings share these though they may take very different forms in different societies and cultural groups. Some of them might be thought of as more urgent than others; staying alive is a greater priority than composing a symphony. But taken together they suggest some of what a good life could look like.

And here, it's clear that the world is not flourishing right now. I started the sermon by mentioning Paris but terrorism is not the only threat to human well-being. Global climate change, xenophobic geopolitics, deregulated global capitalism, wars and other military actions, and more

local and regional ethnic tensions are interfering with physical and emotional well-being on a large scale. Competing meaning systems offer disillusioned young adults a way to participate in something they see as glorious and ultimately meaningful, even if it involves killing people and dying oneself. The traumas experienced by refugees and others caught in violent situations rob memory even among those whose lives are spared and may make it impossible to act morally and compassionately if one is to get through the situation alive. Creativity and playfulness are luxuries that may not survive social chaos and random violence; at the least, they will be heavily stressed by situations in which freedom cannot be taken for granted. Planning for the future is rendered that much more difficult for people whose fear overwhelms their rational capacities and who cannot take a deep breath and ask hard questions about what comes next.

If this way of thinking about the state of the world is correct it suggests a politics centered on the traits that enable people to thrive. Could enough of the world come to agree on the centrality of physical and emotional well-being to start resisting physically and emotionally violent political priorities? Could there be a concerted effort to promote meaning systems that lift up all people and don't privilege some over others? Could we agree that creativity and artistic values make the world beautiful and should be encouraged everywhere and for everyone? Other questions along these lines could be asked, most of them quite audacious but all of them entirely humane and in keeping with the kinds of values that most religious people espouse.

The violence and suffering we see around the world today is horrific and tempts many of us to despair and, worse, to separate ourselves even more from other human beings, those who we fear or loathe. Perhaps it's time to pay attention to what we all share in the hope that it can offer the prospect of healing where nothing else can. May it be so. Amen and blessed be.