

## Words with Baggage: Unpacking “Obedience”

Amanda Udis-Kessler, Flame of Life Universalists, July 19, 2015

Driving in Colorado Springs is almost certainly evidence that there truly is hell on earth. Just getting around the potholes requires laser-like concentration and almost superhuman control over the steering wheel. In most states you can tell someone’s drunk because they weave around the road; in Colorado Springs only the sober people weave, so that we don’t damage an axle on a pothole the size of our dining room table.

But as bad as potholes are, the other drivers are even worse. Hardly a day goes by when someone is not weaving between lanes to outrace the rest of us, we who have committed the cardinal sin of driving only three miles over the speed limit. There are the drivers who delight in passing on the right if a left-lane car is going at or under the speed limit, say to avoid the potholes. Then there are the bicyclers, of whom I should approve but who mostly seem to think that a red light means go as long as there are no cars coming. I heard about defensive driving when I was first learning to drive but I never realized that in Colorado Springs I would spend so much time driving defensively that I might just as well become a linebacker for the Denver Broncos.

Why is driving so darn hard in Colorado Springs? Forget the potholes; what’s wrong with the people? It’s simple: drivers, motorcyclists, and bicyclers don’t obey the rules. They think the rules don’t apply to them and behave accordingly. And the roads are a little more dangerous and blood pressure goes up a little more and we make a little more hell on earth.

We are in a middle of a very long sermon series on words with baggage in which we unpack various religious terms that trouble us but that might still be redeemable if reinterpreted. Today’s word is “obedience.” This word may well make us defensive right up front. We are freethinking adults, not people who need to practice obedience. Two weeks ago we celebrated Independence Day, which is nothing if not a holiday appreciating our rejection of obedience to the Crown. Especially when it comes to the language of religious obedience – obedience to the Bible or to God or to the church – we likely seethe a little. We don’t need that manipulative stuff, do we? And as for women obeying men, don’t get me started.

And yet. If we take the word obedience out of its religious context we may find some occasions when obeying is quite reasonable. We obey traffic laws so we don’t wind up in jail or dead; more positively, we obey traffic laws to get where we are going safely and on time. We obey our bosses because our jobs depend on doing so and if we are lucky our bosses merit our obedience. We are disturbed when people fail to obey laws about treating people equally, such as the clerks who are refusing to marry same-sex couples because it is against their religion, even though the law of the land is now that all same-sex marriages must be honored. And if we reflect long enough on America’s independence from Great Britain, we probably will admit that the revolution was in fact an act of obedience – obedience to principles that superseded the prevailing political structure because that structure was unjust.

The reality is, sometimes we find obedience problematic and sometimes we find it reasonable or even necessary. Obedience ceases to be something we resent when we obey a rule or a law or

even our heart either out of a sense of duty or because we genuinely want to do so. So what we need to do today is to better understand these different circumstances so that we know when to reject the idea of obedience, when to obey however reluctantly, and when to obey with joy and gratitude.

You may be wondering where the idea of freedom comes into this discussion. After all, isn't obedience the polar opposite of freedom, as implied above? And here, I think, is the most important point about the idea of obedience, the claim that cuts through the question of when obedience is a good thing and when it is a bad thing. Obedience, when it is freely chosen, may still be problematic; I may freely choose to obey a church leader in believing disparaging things about certain groups. In this case, free choice merely means that no one is holding a gun to my head and forcing me to believe these things. So the mere freedom to obey doesn't necessarily make the obedience a morally appropriate decision. But I think we can safely say that obedience that is not freely chosen, obedience that is forced or coerced, is problematic. And I don't mean obeying traffic laws, which we may not want to obey but obey anyway. I mean obedience in the face of prison or torture or violence of any sort. And we can go further and say that obedience in the face of a deity who demands obedience or sends us to hell is not free obedience, it is obedience under duress.

Another situation in which we probably should push back against the idea of obedience is when obedience is an end in itself rather than a means to an end. When we obey traffic laws, the point is not to do the obeying; the point is to avoid an accident. This kind of obedience is a means to an end. And I suspect we all agree that getting home safely is a good outcome. In contrast, some conservative religions seem to make obedience the entire point. In these traditions the point of obeying God is to obey God and thus to show one's, uh, obedience to God. Similarly, such religions seem to expect women to obey men because, well, God said so. There may be a good reason to obey a law or follow a duty that one feels called to, such as political activism, but the obedience in this case is the road, not the destination. We obey the call to political activism to make a better world, not just in order to show how obedient we are, as though we were good dogs or something. I suspect that the idea of obeying simply in order to obey is one reason we liberal religionists so dislike the idea of obedience. And we are right to, at the least, be suspicious, and perhaps even reject this way of thinking. But as I've already suggested, it's not the only kind of obedience there is.

In both of these cases, our obedience is being used for someone else's benefit and we are either manipulated into obeying or made to obey. But we can choose obedience for our own benefit or, more often, for the benefit of many including ourselves, and we can feel a call to obedient duty that our hearts and souls confirm to be genuine and non-manipulative. Let's spend the rest of our time today thinking about what such positive and useful obedience might look like.

I've already alluded to political activism as something people may do out of a sense of duty. One reason we know that at least some political activism comes from this source is that plenty of political activism is not actually all that much fun. I spent part of my birthday last year at a #blacklivesmatter protest. Which would be fine except that my birthday is in the middle of December and it was unusually cold and I was underdressed. I was willing enough to be there but I can't say the hour of standing in the cold was exactly pleasant. I could have gone home

except that I could not possibly have gone home. To do so would have been to say in the bluntest way that Black lives don't actually matter. I obeyed my conscience and stayed. It was the right thing to do. And it even warmed up eventually.

Then there's that internal wisdom that sometimes crops up when we want to do something really, really badly and that voice says, don't do it. Don't write that email. Don't tell that person what you really think of them. Don't finish the pint of ice cream right after eating the first half. Wait an hour. And we obey the voice of wisdom and avoid undesired consequences. Or we don't obey and we suffer the consequences. But when we do obey, it's not because someone made us; it's because we determined that the voice had the right idea.

Similarly, there are times we really, really, don't want to do something and the inner voice says to do it. This can range from forgiving someone who has wronged us to making ourselves go to work on a beautiful summer Monday morning when we are not ready for the weekend to be over. Visiting a sick friend when we feel overwhelmed with other tasks. Writing a letter to the editor about something that concerns us when we are not good at writing such letters. Sometimes we do these things and sometimes we don't. When we do them, it's usually reasonable to say that we are practicing obedience – to our consciences, to our better selves, to the Spirit of Life and Love within us.

I've mostly talked so far about obedience as an individual matter but in fact most obedience in society is collective, communal. I'm not the only driver obeying the speed limit; I wasn't the only person holding a #blacklivesmatter sign on Tejon Street in December. I'm not the only person who goes to work at the beginning of my workweek, and then for the rest of it. Society could not survive without the great majority of us practicing non-random acts of obedience almost all the time. In fact, the two types of situations that probably threaten society the most are obedience for the wrong reasons and failure to obey our duties or our consciences when we ought to do so. Obey for the wrong reasons and you might wind up with Nazi Germany. Fail to obey when you should and you might steal things, kill people, or destroy the global economy. So it's not enough to think of obedience as a private matter. It virtually always impacts other people, our society, and the planet. Good obedience, appropriate obedience, is often the obedience you do in tandem with millions of other people to co-create the world in which we live. If everyone around you is behaving in a certain way and you're not, it's worth asking: is the problem that I just don't want to do the right thing or is the problem that everyone else is practicing the wrong kind of obedience? In this situation, what would my best self, or the Great Mystery, want me to do?

Which, finally, brings us to religious and spiritual obedience. You might agree with a fair amount of what I've said today and nonetheless still feel resistance rising within you. Once we use words like "religious" or "spiritual" the whole game changes, right?

Well, maybe not. In general, obedience is bad when it's obedience to the wrong things or people and obedience is good when it's obedience to the right things or people. So perhaps the same is true of religious or spiritual obedience. Maybe it's like idolatry as I've previously defined that term: putting your trust in something that absolutely cannot save you. Maybe religious obedience

is only problematic when we obey our worst religious impulses or the most inhumane god we can imagine.

So what is good spiritual obedience? It's when we do the right thing because it will help us grow spiritually or because it is in keeping with our understanding of what the universe would want from us or because we know that once we've done it we will be filled with awe and humility and gratitude. Spiritual obedience is acting out of our sense of compassion even if we don't really want to. Spiritual obedience is our individual commitment to our best selves and to the Spirit of Life and Love that is within and among and around all people. What does that look like in practice? It can look like almost anything. A kind word. A hard task taken up during a busy season. A concerted effort to meditate or pray. Listening to someone who desperately needs to be heard. Standing in the cold for an hour to bear witness to the ultimate truth that Black lives matter, not because society currently treats Black lives as mattering – it doesn't – but because we know in our hearts that Black lives, and in fact all lives, matter. Spiritual obedience may look different for you than for me but it is still the same process, the same prioritizing of something over something else because duty demands or our heart calls.

What about good religious obedience? How is it different from spiritual obedience? For today's purposes, let's say that spiritual obedience is about individual practices and religious obedience is about collective practices. Recall our words of welcome:

“We come together today freely, seeking comfort, joy, wisdom, and commitment. We come as individuals and create among ourselves a community. May this community offer us that which we seek so that we may go back out into the world and offer these gifts to others.”

These words, I think, capture an aspect of religious obedience: we don't merely pray, meditate or ponder in private but do so as part of a collectivity, a liberal religious congregation. Our obedience is not merely to ourselves but, in a very real way, to Flame of Life Universalists, both to other individuals within it and to the community itself. Every hour of service, every dollar in the bowl, is religious obedience of the best possible kind because it is obedience to a non-manipulative religious setting in which we obey willingly, freely, and to the benefit of both ourselves and others. In this room we obey our hearts and we obey the agreed-upon rules of the group. And this kind of religious obedience is not an end, it's a means: to our own spiritual growth, to the well-being of the community, and to our ability to serve the world.

My friends, let us not be afraid to obey that which is worthy of obedience. Let us obey our hearts when they lead us aright. Let us obey our communities and society when doing so benefits us and others. Let us obey the callings of the Spirit of Life and Love, which we affirm is always made manifest in our best selves, and always invites us to do our very best. And may our obedience, chosen freely, lead to liberation for us, those we love, and the world. Amen and blessed be.