

Risky Business: Truth Telling and Heresy
(Abner Kneeland, Ellery Schempp, and the challenge of our times)
A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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In 1838, after five years of court battles in Massachusetts, the once Reverend, Universalist minister Abner Kneeland became the last man in the United States to be jailed for blasphemy. The Unitarians and many others had rallied around his cause – not, necessarily because they agreed with all his sentiments – but because they passionately believed in his right to hold and voice them. A petition was brought to the governor of Massachusetts signed by 168 clergy and laymen which read, in part: “the freedom of speech and the press. . .is never to be restrained by legislation” – but it did no good. In spite of all appeal in his defense, Kneeland was convicted of blasphemous libel on the grounds of a blasphemy law that had been passed in 1782.

In 1833 Kneeland had published an article in his paper, the Boston Investigator, that was called "scandalous, impious, obscene, blasphemous and profane libel" about God.

Kneeland was a preacher, a publisher, and a fierce defender of freedom of thought and the right to conscience – something that Unitarian Universalists today also defend with passion. He'd spent a lifetime growing in thought and spirit, taking none of his own beliefs for granted. Born two years before the revolutionary war that created this nation, he was a perfect example of what might have been called “generation P” – post-revolutionary young people who came of age as the new nation was establishing and defining itself.

He allied himself with abolitionists. He gave auditorium space to William Lloyd Garrison and Frances Wright for speeches when other spaces in Boston refused them. He was a feminist who advocated for women's rights. He published what was, perhaps, the first book guide to birth control published in the United States. He was passionate about language so much so that he created a new alphabet and published a lesson plan designed to eradicate silent letters from English in order to make the language easier to learn and read. It seemed that his distaste for silence extended even to the letters of the alphabet. The Investigator was an inexpensive paper and was widely read in the city's poorer neighborhoods. That may be what got him into so much trouble. At a time when Americans were becoming intoxicated with the spirit of freedom – for which Kneeland was an advocate -- this spirit was annoying and inconvenient to giants of business and industry – who were then, as so often now, more interested in their own ability to freely profit on the underpaid or unpaid labor of others than in the general or generous pursuit of happiness.

He found common cause with all sorts of doers and dreamers – and traveled with Robert Dale Owen – the founder of the utopian community at New Harmony, Indiana.

He was a disturber of the status quo – someone willing to raise any question to which the freedom of human life might be attached. The classic hierarchies of religious life were being questioned by more people than Kneeland – so he was in good company when he recognized that the fundamental hierarchy of God over Man over Woman over Nature was part of what propped up civil as well as religious institutions. Whether you were a questioner or defender of the status quo – it was clear then – as it is even now – that to question the one was to question the other.

Kneeland was brash – about that there is no doubt. He began to publish his critiques of his faith at a time when the Universalists suffered some prejudice at large. In 1828 a statute was

passed in Connecticut that stated that Universalists were not capable of giving reliable testimony under oath. Stephan Papa, one of Kneeland's biographers guessed that perhaps they were considered unreliable because they did not believe in eternal punishment. You know – until I heard of that statute – it hadn't occurred to me that “cross my heart and hope to die” was intended to bring the torments of hell upon the liar. Despite my own strained relationship with the Bible as a moral teacher, I'd always thought that one swore upon the Bible in court as an indication of moral standing – not a fear of damnation. So help me, God.

Abner Kneeland's legal ordeal dragged on for 5 years. And the Universalists were harder on him than anyone else. He pled for a hearing of his peers but never received it.

Kneeland was not an atheist – he questioned the *kind* of god, the sorts of miracles, and the ancient social values found in the bible. At the same time, his words regarding Christianity were strong – perhaps even deliberately aggressive.

“Universalists believe in a god which I do not; but believe that their god, with all his moral attributes (aside from nature itself) is nothing more than a chimera of their own imagination.

Universalists believe in the resurrection of the dead, in immortality... which I do not; but believe that all life is mortal...and that no ... life is, ever was, or ever will be eternal.”[15] The State of Massachusetts in language that is hauntingly contemporary claimed that these statements were proof that there were forces afoot arming for “an 'exterminating warfare' against Christianity”.

The judge stated that Kneeland's words were “It is a willful and malicious attempt to lessen men's reverence of God.”

Kneeland served a modest 60 days in jail – but his health never fully recovered. However, his trial and sentence inflamed the senses of a young country. There is a bulk of American legal history concerning freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that indicates that it was his case that turned the tide so that expressions of religious doubt or critique were no longer considered heresy or blasphemy. There were many who thought Abner Kneeland would never be sent to jail – including himself – that the right to freedom of speech and belief would guarantee his freedom. In fact, his willingness to take the risk and fight a battle for those freedoms ultimately resulted in expanding them after all.

Some of you may remember the story of Ellery Schempp? In November of 1956, Ellery was 16 in suburban Philadelphia. His school had the practice -- every morning -- of reading Bible verses, reciting the Lord's Prayer, and then saying the pledge of allegiance. On November 26, 1956 Ellery, inspired by an English teacher who had assigned Thoreau's *Walden* and also by everything that he'd learned at his Unitarian Church, brought a Qu'ran to school, sat, and silently read from that instead. He was immediately sent to the principal's office. That night he wrote a letter to the American Civil Liberties Union asking for help. So began a court case that his family waged for 7 years. His family faced harassment, Ellery's college recommendations were withdrawn by his teachers, and the court case lasted until he was out of college. In 1963 when his case emerged from the Supreme Court – along with two other cases – it brought forth a ruling that the reading of religious books and demanding prayer in public School was unconstitutional.

I'm proud of these two – and there are many other exemplars like them in our faith. They chose not to be invisible by asserting their rights to be who they, in fact, were. And, by doing that, they made room for others to be who they are as well.

It takes courage to step forward like Kneeland did or like Schempp did. Though sometimes it just takes a cussed stubborn spirit.

This year, we move from theme to theme, and our theme for the month of March is Risk. Risk can mean different things depending upon where, when, who, and how you are.

Two years ago I traveled to Selma, Alabama to commemorate the historic march across the Bridge there. Selma didn't look like it had changed much – it certainly hadn't improved since 1965. As I walked over the Edmund Pettus Bridge I was so aware of how safe I was – how there weren't going to be police dogs and night-sticks and beatings on the other side of the bridge. Even though I knew that racism was still boiling all around me – in Selma and everywhere in this nation – I knew I was safe as a white person of Jewish descent because of the people who had crossed the bridge in such danger 50 years before. When I reached the other side of the bridge and saw the giant billboard of the confederate general that stands there, I felt ill. I was going to leave Selma, travel back to Birmingham, fly home to Palatine and be none the worse for wear. But that town, surrounded by confederate flag waving bigots, was filled with people of color who were staying and living there.

So often, though, we have this notion of security versus risk. Like – we think that we are secure and we want this security. People always have. Security like a giant pyramid – with a powerful wide base going up to a small point and all of it protecting the dead remains of a man. I will admit that the pyramids still stand pretty firm. Four thousand years later you can see that they were built to last – they're dramatic and I'd love to see them one day. But they did not mean security – not in the way that the ancient pharaohs had meant. The contents have been mostly sacked and the once shining surface stolen over the millennia. The immortality the pharaohs hoped for was achieved by scribes who painted and etched the stories in hieroglyphs that have come down to us.

Ordinary people don't clamor after such monumental security. Quite often people defend their security the way that squirrels defend theirs. By nesting high up out of the perceived reach of predators, by rushing hastily from employment to nest and back, filling time, filling space, or by staying relatively quiet and softly out of sight. And, truly, we know on some primal level, that if we raise our voices or, as they say, object to the status quo – we may be noticed, even negatively – like Abner Kneeland or Ellery Schempp. But, in their willingness to risk, they each helped to shape some of the safeties and freedoms that I have enjoyed. Thinking about this all is a bit of luxury anyway. Like me going to Selma. The luxury to choose to risk.

Today I must share that I am proud of our Board of Trustees. On January 18, the Unitarian Universalist Association published a Declaration of Conscience and Mike Gilley, who serves as one of our Representatives to the Chicago area Council of UU Congregations, sent the Declaration to me to take to the Board of Trustees. This week, after study and discussion, the Board voted unanimously to join the hundreds of other Boards, ministers, congregations, and individuals and sign the Declaration as a Board and as individuals. Because of our principle of democratic process, the Board did not sign on behalf of the congregation as a whole – instead they are making a large print copy of the Declaration will be available next week, for all who are interested to sign.

The Declaration reads in part:

At this extraordinary time in our nation's history, we are called to affirm our profound commitment to the fundamental principles of justice, equity and compassion, to truth and core values of American society.

.....

As people of conscience, we declare our commitment to translate our values into action as we stand on the side of love with the most vulnerable among us.

We welcome and invite all to join in this commitment for justice.
The time is now.

I signed with the Board.

And I know that raising our voices – or answering the call of love – is the only real security that we have. All the freedoms that I have enjoyed in my lifetime are the fruit of someone else's willingness to answer the call of love.

Three years ago I traveled to Phoenix to protest Arizona House Bill 1070 that gave police even freer license to stop anyone they chose and check for papers. I went into neighborhoods where the police often strike without warning, invading homes and businesses detaining people without papers. I stood outside the huge tent prison in Phoenix where prisoners live in boiling heat. It was terrible to think that in Arizona and in so many places, people are apprehended as though they were murderers or rapists, imprisoned as though they'd robbed banks, and deported as criminals because they had passed into this country for work, for family, for safety, for asylum. They couldn't choose to take a risk – merely being in their skin, at home in their bedrooms, they were at risk. That picture stayed with me as we marched downtown to the county jail in that awful heat. I stood outside the jail and sang and chanted with others and greeted my colleague, the Reverend Susan Frederick Gray as she sat on the ground in protest. People brought the sitters water as they could not use their hands to drink – you can see the tubes they used to link their arms. The look on Susan's face was one of real peace. Her body, seated on the pavement, was grounded, firm and centered.

It was more than answering the call to love. It was finding the center of her values and living from them. That's what it is.

Exploring for this sermon I discovered an amazing place in Australia that I'd love to visit – probably in another lifetime. Anyway – it's called the Devil's Marbles. At first glance it looks sort of like those little stacks of delicately balanced pebbles that people sometimes make. Turns out these stacks are an obsession for some people. But anyway – the Devil's Marbles are huge – they are the remarkable result of eons of sand and wind eroding them away until some of them stand as though as tiptoe or on edge. Improbably giant, they have been worn until they stand on their perfect center of gravity and on that perfect center they can balance for eons more.

In 1955 the American Friends Service Committee published a study on engaging in peaceful responses to violence anywhere in the world. It was in that study that the phrase, Speaking Truth to Power, was coined and used. In the Conclusion, the study read:
... we would speak now, finally, of the politics of eternity which has undergirded the whole. Men strive for security in a world where security cannot exist. The more we cling to security the less secure we feel.... To risk all may be to gain all... Each man has the source of freedom within himself... it will be his own inner sense of integrity that impels him to say, "Here I stand. Regardless of relevance or consequence."

It isn't just stones that find their centers of gravity – all the finest accomplishments of humanity have been achieved by people who found their centers of gravity – their politics of eternity or ethics of love and justice -- and spoke truth to power – too many to name.

In 1939, looking at the unfolding of history around the world, W. H. Auden wrote

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority

Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

So wrote the poet. All I have is a voice. All you have -- what we each have is a voice -- just as Abner Kneeland and Ellery Schempp had and Susan Gray and our Board of Trustees, and our Association have -- we have a voice to speak what others call heresy one day and truth the next, what others call lies one day and flee from the next; we have a voice to speak out of the depths of our values, our principles, and our hearts. And when our voices shake -- as indeed they will, as we feel shaky, as indeed we might -- we only need to remember our center of gravity -- a center found here in this faith and its noble aspirations, in our principles, in this community of kindred souls, and in our clear and steady recognition of the deep connection held with all life that sustains and supports us. Remembering these realities, reclaiming our center of gravity we will stand in the present with all who have stood throughout time and lay the foundations of the freedoms of the future.