WHY WE LIVE IN THE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS

by Bill Becker, presented at
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READING

I have two short readings this morning, which together I call "point-counterpoint." They are from two of the world's great psychologists, each representing decidedly different views on the human condition. In the introduction to his book *To Have or To Be?* (Bantam New Age Books, 1981), Eric Fromm presents some facts and some eloquent commentary on our growing environmental and social problems. He then issues the following lament:

> All the data mentioned so far are published and well known. The almost unbelievable fact is that no serious effort is made to avert what looks like a final decree of fate. While in our private life nobody except a mad person would remain passive in view of a threat to his [or her] total existence, those who are in charge of public affairs do practically nothing, and those who have entrusted their fate to them continue to let them do nothing. (*Is There an Alternative to Catastrophe?* p. xxxi)

The other psychologist is, of course, Dostoevsky's Underground Man. For him, the state of the world is perfectly understandable:

> You see, gentlemen, reason, gentlemen, is an excellent thing, there is no disputing that. But reason is only reason and can only satisfy our rational faculty, while will is a manifestation of all life, that is, of all human life including reason as well as all our impulses ... . (Hazel Barnes, *An Existentialist Ethics,* University of Chicago Press, 1967, p.4)

He reckons:

> "always and everywhere, and no matter who we are, we want to act as we please, and decidedly not as ordered by reason and personal advantage; sometimes we should act contrary to our own advantage; to act upon our

own free desires, even upon our most primitive caprices—even upon the fantasies that drive us mad—this is the most advantageous of all advantages." (Feodor Dostoevsky, *Notes From the Underground*, Bradda Books, Ltd, Letchworth, Hertfordshire, 1963, p. 31. Freely translated by Bill Becker)

Let me begin with the episode in my own life that led me to agree with Voltaire's incorrigible optimist, Dr. Pangloss, and thus provided the inspiration for the title of today's talk. Pangloss was Voltaire's rude spoof of the 17th century philosopher Gottfreid Wilhelm Leibnitz, who held that since the world was a creation of God, it could not be inharmonious. In the novel Candide, Pangloss accompanies the hero of the same name on a series of adventures around the world. In the course of their travels, they find nothing but misery and disaster, yet through it all, Pangloss cheerfully asserts that this is "the best of all possible worlds." The novel ends with Candide and Pangloss completely worn out, tending their garden.

Contrary to Pangloss, who grounded his belief in theology, I concluded that this is the best of all possible worlds when I realized that almost everyone I meet, or have ever met, is actually a Unitarian Universalist at heart.

This conclusion came to me while I was musing over my search for a service station where I could dump the two gallons of oil I had accumulated from doing my own oil changes. I knew that service stations had large underground tanks for their own scrap oil, and that this oil was picked up later for reprocessing. As something of an ecologist, I didn't want to dump the oil into the vacant field near the house; thus I counted the benefit to environmental integrity to be well worth the effort it would take to find a like-minded entrepreneur.

The first reason the station operators usually gave me for <u>not</u> letting me dump my oil was that the recycling companies charge a fee to pick it up. One station owner said that she paid the recyling company $85 to have 1200 gallons carted away. Since I did not expect a free ride, I offered her 50 cents to dump my two gallons—a 253% profit on the transaction. Nevertheless, she still refused. "They test the oil now, and it could be contaminated," she said.

I assured her that my scrap was 100% clean--no used paint thinner or cleaning fluids here. Clearly annoyed that I was not getting the message, she finally said simply: "We don't do that anymore."

At the next station, the attendant gave me the same initial reason, but after conferring with the owner, he returned with an offer to let me dump my oil for $1 a gallon. I declined, partly because I thought my laudable motives were being taken advantage of, and partly because I was now curious as to what the response would be at other stations.

Another refused for the reason that they were required to log the amount dumped and the amount picked up, comparing the two figures as a check for tank leakage.

Finally, two young attendants let me dump my oil (no charge), and as I was pouring it into the tank, one of them threw me a rag to wipe my hands with. They didn't give any reasons for their decision.

After hearing these various stories given to me by the station operators and attendants, you must surely agree that they are all UUs-in-spirit, if not by declaration. After all, from his or her own point-of-view, each of the station operators had perfectly good reasons for granting or denying my request—just as we UUs have good reasons for doing whatever we do. And so it is with everyone else, at least in my experience. How then can a world created by so many who are so much like us be anything less than the best?

"NOT SO, Bill!!! They didn't give you good reasons," some of you might be thinking here. Well, that's what I thought too—at first.

The operator who wanted $1/gallon either realized that I would not trick him with contaminated scrap, or he didn't care. What is clear is that a hefty profit, whether or not it also helped the environment, was his good reason for acceding to my request. Who am I to say that he shouldn't try for as much money as he can get.

The owner who was concerned about contaminated scrap oil was also on solid ground—she had no particular reason to trust me, and even if she did, she is justified in worrying about whether I would pass the word along to hundreds of others who might not be so concerned about what nasty substances they included with their oil.

It is likely that the young attendants who did let me dump my oil thought the benefit to the environment was a good reason, even without any direct benefit to themselves or their boss. Let's hope that they didn't get in trouble for their decision.

"Ok," you may grudgingly admit. "Maybe they did have good reasons, but <u>that</u>

is not a good reason to conclude that they are all UUs at heart." But, to risk even further heresy, let me suggest that all of the people I dealt with exhibited our most fundamental Unitarian Universalist precept.

As far as I could tell—and I observed them very closely—they all arrived at their conclusions absent coercion or appeal to any authority higher than their own sense of what was right. By all outward signs, their responses were grounded in nothing other than the free exercise of their rational faculties. Not one of them called their ministers or their legislators or their spouses to learn what their best response should be. Nor did I detect any of them glancing heavenward for a sign. So let's be honest here—do we ask more of ourselves?

Even where there might be a perfectly reasonable rebuttal, there was no point in arguing with the operators who did not want to take my scrap oil. There are unspoken rules about how far I could go in pressing my case. I cannot reasonably expect this small sector of the population to shoulder the burden of solving the scrap oil problem alone. I knew better than to push them to the point where they felt compelled to say "Look, pal, I care about the environment as much as anyone, but ... "

Nor is it different in the larger world, where everyone does what they do for their own good reasons. For example, a co-worker used to decide how to vote on an issue by asking me how I was going to vote. Then he would vote the opposite.

Legislators have good reasons for making laws that are later found to be ridden with so-called "loopholes"—after all, we can't change the system too quickly, can we, and won't only a few Americans take the trouble to find those "loopholes" and take advantage of them? Besides, allowing a few "loopholes" may be the only way to get the law passed. (I say so-called because I have serious doubts about the validity the term.)

During my visit to the Soviet Union in 1987, our Uzbeki tour guide expressed his amazement at earlier world-wide opposition to a Soviet plan to reverse the flow of the great rivers that empty into the Arctic ocean. He did grant that some serious ecological problems might arise from such a grand scheme, but since we didn't know that for sure, why not try it and see what happens?

Those who oppose a new idea always have good reasons for doing so, just as they often have equally good reasons for claiming credit for the idea when its general acceptance becomes a practical necessity. A while ago I read an article in the newsletter of the Arrowhead Drinking Water company headlined "Recycling: the new morality." I

was pleased to read it, but I nonetheless wondered whether Arrowhead's management had long promoted recycling as a moral good, or whether the headline was just an example of getting on a popular bandwagon.

Closer to the here and now, property owners who anticipated the drought had a good reason to use more water than they needed, so that when the percentage cuts in water allowance finally came through, they would not suffer. Those of us who were stingy with water because we were haunted by the specter of a vanishing Mono Lake also had a good reason for our decision.

In fact, the drought can serve to tie some of the above considerations together. Now that we face severe water shortages, water conservation is the watchword. We now see an increase in the design and production of the mechanisms to help us conserve water, as well as new information on drought-resistant landscaping. And has not the Department of Water and Power finally become a driving force for conservation?

But, were there not always reasons to conserve?—to landscape with drought-resistant plants, and to install toilets and shower heads that used less water. Was not the fact that L.A.'s growth depended on depriving others of water itself a good argument for conservation? Such a thought probably did occur to the residents and farmers of the Owens Valley, who were the ones so deprived. But, does anyone think that members of the Los Angeles City Council and the DWP Board of Directors would not have laughed themselves into hysterics had the idea of consideration-for-others been raised in their respective chambers?

Then there is the owner of a silver recovery company who was convicted of 2nd-degree murder after an employee died from the cumulative effects of contact with cyanide in an unsafe work environment. It was determined that the owner had continually and purposefully deceived the worker, who had suffered severe nausea and cramps, but who, as a Polish alien, did not know his rights, and was afraid to make trouble for fear of losing his job. The owner undoubtedly had his own good reasons for acting as he did, but I won't hazard a guess as to whether he presented them at his trial.

Probably my favorite example of a good reason for an action—here, in fact, a lack of action—was that given by former National Security advisor Robert MacFarlane. While he was in charge of the Iran/Contra caper, he decided not to share with President Reagan his personal belief that the whole operation was doomed to fail. "I was afraid that Cap Weinberger, Bill Casey, or Jeanne Kirkpatrick would call me some kind of

commie," he told the Iran/Contra investigating committee. I grant that MacFarlane was acting out of fear, but I also know for a fact that fear is not unknown to Unitarian Universalists as well.

Now, some might think to refute me here by arguing that most people act out of narrow, selfish motives, without concern for the general welfare. (You may not believe this, but I have actually heard UUs say that kind of thing about "most people.") Therefore, my comparing them to us UUs is an egregious error. Here I can only say that I know of no one who will admit to that. Nor am I am at all confident that even using my own considerable skills in rhetoric and logic, I could convince anyone that he or she was, in truth, a selfish wretch.

DOES ANYONE DO WRONG?

Certainly, we know that whenever those responsible for social ills are sought, there are few of us who cannot justify ourselves with unexpected eloquence. Those who saw the Stephen Sondheim musical "Into The Woods" will remember the sequence when each of the characters blamed the others when the dead giant's wife demanded revenge on Jack for robbery and the death of her husband. How many times do we read of corporations who agree to pay a penalty while at the same time not admitting to any wrongdoing.

In fact, I concluded long ago that no one ever does anything they believe to be wrong. Thus, you can imagine how pleased I was when your own Barbara Atlas proved this observation conclusively for me at the PSWD conference in Phoenix a few weeks ago. (Let me hasten to assure you that I cleared the following segment with Barbara.) She and I were talking about the sorry state of the world, and I suggested to her that no one ever does anything they believe to be wrong. She immediately and emphatically disagreed.

"Well," I said, "you don't do anything you believe to be wrong, do you, Barbara?"

"Of course I do," she said.

"But, if I were to ask you why you do such things, you would give me reasons, wouldn't you?"
"Yes," she said, "but they wouldn't be <u>good</u> reasons—they would be <u>rationalizations.</u>"

"Alright," I said, "let's assume that you tell me you did something wrong, and that I ask you 'Barbara, why did you do it?' You then search for reasons why you

did it, but because you are being ruthlessly honest with yourself here, you do not present any of these reasons to me, since each is a rationalization. Finally, after going through all these reasons, you are left with the only one that seems to be acceptable: 'I couldn't help myself,' you might say. Or, if you really want to be hard on yourself: 'I did it because I am weak.'"

But I am being honest here, too, so I say simply: "Rubbish, Barbara. You know perfectly well that you didn't have to do this particular thing."

As a Unitarian Universalist, believing in personal responsibility, Barbara had to admit that I was right.

"Furthermore," I said, "your earlier statement that what you did was wrong itself obscures a less palatable truth—namely that you don't really care as much about the issue as you say you do."

What could Barbara say here? Nothing, of course. Finally, I brought the discussion around full circle.

"Now, Barbara," I said, "what would you say if I said that you should care about this problem more than you do?"

"I'd tell you to stuff it," she shot back without an instant's hesitation.

So there you have it. As you can see, Barbara and I parted friends, and I expect that we will work together on future district events. But, her response reveals a profound truth: whatever the reasons we may give for our actions, whether good, bad, or "rationalizations," they are always good enough, and that is all that counts. Thus the world we face every morning has essentially been given to us—by ourselves and by others—so that at any given moment there is no other world possible than the one we inhabit.

SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

The whole point of my earlier remarks is that reason is generally inadequate to inspire us to care about something to which we are indifferent or hostile. In fact, just how we decide to do what we do remains a mystery to me. I have often been asked why I am a social activist. I don't know. So, let me suggest here that in the next phase of our search for the most ethically satisfying life we must go beyond reason—indeed,

perhaps even into the realm of magic. I say this because I have concluded that the really important decisions we make usually originate in what I now call "magic moments."

However, by magic moments I do not mean such as are shown in TV ads for a romantic get-away. You know: an upscale young couple sipping wine under gently swaying palm trees, silhouetted by a blazing red sun on the horizon.

The magic moments I mean are quite different. They are just those instants when we know, intuitively, instinctively, and without doubt, that the old reasons we have always given for our beliefs and actions no longer work. It is just in such moments that we feel called upon to make a new choice of being. This is not to say that we know just how to become a new person; that may well be a difficult and painful struggle. It means only this—that when we know that the old reasons no longer work, we can never again honestly appeal to them. Thus the magic moment places us at a critical juncture between two alternatives: to change, or to continue as we were on the basis of a lie.

WHO HAS NOT EXPERIENCED MAGIC MOMENTS?

Most of us have experienced such magic moments and no one can say that we should all experience them in the same way. Perhaps they occur most often when we experience directly, or at close hand, an event or circumstance that had previously engaged only our intellects. Thus did the chaplain in George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan experience his magic moment with terrifying clarity. He had argued with a passionate righteousness that the Maid should be burned to atone for her claim of direct communication with God. He had his reasons, and they were good ones, too, following flawlessly from the premises he had chosen freely to believe and support.

After seeing the Maid burned, however, the chaplain begs his superior to pray for his wretched guilty soul. "I am not a bad man, my lord. I meant no harm, I did not know what it would be like." I'll wager that if more of us exercised more imagination as to what the consequences of our actions and omissions "would be like," the world would be a better place.

I have some other examples—men whom I have been privileged to meet, and who all experienced their own magic moments. The first two were military men: ex-Air Force pilot and now medical doctor Charlie Clements, and ex-CIA officer and former head of the Angola covert action task force John Stockwell. Clements and Stockwell

each made a decision to stop supporting violence as a tool of U.S. foreign policy. Later, they also went so far as to actively oppose it.

One magic moment came for Clements when he realized that the managers of the Vietnam war were lying to everyone about everything. So, he decided to stop flying. Another came when the Air Force shrinks told him that they would release him from the psychiatric ward if he would just go back. He says that he knew then that if he was crazy, it was because he decided to be crazy. He refused, and spent another six months locked up. Stockwell's moment came when he saw that his bosses had decided to save only their own skins, and leave behind the Vietnamese who had worked side-by-side with them, and who were counting on their American patrons to get them out ahead of the advancing North Vietnamese army.

The third man, John Abbott, is a member of my own church—Emerson. John made a decision as a young man that he didn't need the opulence and wealth that he had been born into, and struck out on his own. Later, he became a conscientious objector, and, through his obdurate, but non-violent refusal to be coerced in any way, caused enough trouble for several federal prison wardens that the goverment finally just told him to go home and never darken their gates again. I don't know when John's magic moments came, but they clearly came early, and they sustained him all his life.

Most of us here can easily imagine that thousands of poor Central American men and women experienced their own magic moments—moments that led to such increased self-esteem that they abandoned their quietist interpretations of religion and duty, and decided to challenge together the military and economic oppression that provided food and medicine for the landowners' dogs, and little of either for their own children.

UUs EXPERIENCE A MAGIC MOMENT

One powerful account of a magic moment—actually a somewhat protracted moment—is presented in the UUA adult curriculum "How Open the Door." I am always in tears after reading it or hearing it read. The time was March, 1965; the occasion was the death of UU minister James Reeb in Selma, Alabama. Reeb had responded to Dr. Martin Luther KIng Jr.'s call for a civil rights march, and with 2 other UU ministers was beaten by white racists as they left a black-owned cafe after dinner. Reeb died of his wounds two days later.

Reeb's death so distressed the 20 or so members of the Savannah, Georgia fel-

lowship that they felt that they had to do something to show solidarity with those who struggled for civil rights. In fear and trembling at the potential danger to themselves, they invited blacks in their town to participate in a memorial service for James Reeb. Later that day, again in fear and trembling and for the first time in their lives, they themselves went to the black section of town, where they shared in a rally and memorial service for all of the people who had died in the civil rights struggle. We can be sure that they were never the same after their magic moment.

Just as this talk benefitted from my conversation with Barbara between its first and second presentations, so it has benefitted again. Thursday evening I read a section of *Our Chosen Faith,* by UU ministers John Buehrens and F. Forrester Church. In the chapter *Neighborhood,* Church quotes Paul's exhortations [in Romans 10:12-21, specifically those] which encourage us to be generous, forgiving, and to treat our enemies to kindness instead of retaliation.

Then Church makes perfectly clear what it means to operate out of a choice of being rather than as a slave to a logical precept. He tells us that he purposefully omitted Paul's quotes of those earlier Hebrew scriptures which assure the faithful that the Lord will exact vengeance for them, and that by being kind to one's enemies, one "heaps burning coals upon their heads." Church says simply "I mine the Bible for that which inspires me to be a better person, more loving, more neighborly." The logical precept I mentioned is, of course, the demand for consistency: if I choose to find inspiration in Paul's writings, then, by God, I had better be inspired by <u>all</u> of them.

Thus, purely out of a choice of being, Church rejects satisfaction-of-a-desire-for-vengeance as a reason for his behavior toward his enemies. He knows that such a hidden wellspring will not remain hidden long, and that sooner or later it will undermine his choice to be a kind and loving person.

Whether we resonate to the choices made by these people, or whether we lean toward the kind of choices an Oliver North or Henry Kissinger might make, the fact is that whenever we choose, we show what is possible for others. That is why I strongly recommend that anyone who is searching for a new choice of being get a few heroes. There are many out there, and by examining the lives of those we admire we can learn more about who we ultimately want to be. Then, if and when our own magic moment comes, we can contribute something new and unique to the list of human possilities. Let me suggest, too, that if we come up empty-handed in our search for heroes, we need to look into our own values very carefully.

HOW DO MAGIC MOMENTS COME ABOUT?

As I mentioned earlier, I don't know just how these magic moments come about, but I do suspect that we can prepare the way for them, and I believe that reason can play an important role here.

Let me suggest that the proper goal of a well-conducted rational inquiry into a subject is not to convince us that we should or should not change our behavior or beliefs, but rather to help us determine our bottom line. Sometimes—perhaps during a spirited discussion with someone of a contrary persuasion—we catch a glimpse of a bottom line we are not proud of. We might then take evasive action, either by changing the subject—or, perhaps, by feigning death—so as to avoid being caught in a snare of our own making. In fact, one sure-fire tactic for closing a discussion—and heard often among us Unitarians, I might add—is for someone to declare how wonderful it is that we are all so tolerant and open-minded.

Ideally, though, such experiences become magic moments in which we decide either to change our bottom line, or to accept it without flinching. While reason properly helps us to determine our options, the choice itself lies outside the sphere of reason. I suspect that most of us, like Dostoevsky's Underground Man—and Barbara, I'll bet—would not have it any other way.