

Karma and its Cousins  
Reverend Elizabeth Stevens  
Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
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### Chalice Lighting

Dorothy May Emerson

It is said: "Take from the past not its ashes, but its fire."  
Today we kindle this flame knowing that  
our presence forms a bridge between the past and the future.  
May the flame we light in our hearts today draw strength  
from the best of our liberal religious heritage.  
May it empower us to act boldly for justice  
in the present world.  
And may it shine brightly in our lives  
as a beacon for future generations.

**Readings:** from "Warning from the Steamship Authority" by the Rev. Robert Walsh

I emptied my pockets at the end of the day and found among the coins and keys a small piece of paper that read: "NOT VALID IF DETACHED." It was a stub from a ferry boat ticket.

Not valid if detached. Is it true? Maybe not. Detachment can be valuable. Sometimes it is important to get a detached view. A person who is detached, and therefore objective, is a more reliable witness in a court of law. A juror might say, "Not valid *unless* detached."

Still, I want to listen to the warning on the ticket stub, for being detached can also mean being indifferent. Being objective about another person may make it possible to treat that person as an object. Being detached from the world or any of its parts can make it easier for us to avoid our responsibility for it.

To strike a member of our family we must first be detached. To permit our teenage children to have unchaperoned drinking parties in our homes we must be detached. We must be detached if we are to paint a swastika on a synagogue, tell a disparaging joke about gay people, cut public health care and nutrition programs for poor children, or drop bombs on a civilian neighborhood.

Not valid if detached. Listen to the warning.

"The Importance of Being Good for Nothing" by the Rev. Richard Gilbert, excerpted from the reading for session 7 in Building Your Own Theology

I speak of ethics in terms of "the importance of being good for nothing." Our motivations for behavior depend neither on fear of hell nor promise of heaven, but on our inner convictions. Ethics are unenforceable obligations. If "laws are the wise restraints that make us free," James Conant says, then ethics are those inner imperatives that prompt us to care when we need not, to act when it may be controversial, to serve when we would rather indulge ourselves. The true test of character is to act when so doing will not do us any personal good.

## Sermon

This morning, I'll answer the third question posed by Zoë Sallis in her book,  
The Ten Eternal Questions...

Questions our chalice circles are discussing over the course of this year.

The question is, "Do you believe in the concept of Karma, as in cause and effect?"  
and I've had a lot of fun thinking about it,  
rummaging around in books and on the internet,  
finding out what other UU's have thought about and written about Karma.

I almost titled this sermon "Karma Chameleon"  
because I ran across so many different definitions and interpretations of the word.  
I've outed myself as a Boy George fan...or dated myself, anyway.

Karma comes from an ancient Sanskrit word that means "action,"  
and so is broadly interpreted as the spiritual equivalent of Newton's Third Law of Physics...  
For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.  
Since spiritual matters are harder to measure than force,  
The law of Karma is about cause and effect.  
What we do has an impact,  
and will come back to us.

The law of karma is central in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism,  
and is interpreted slightly differently in each.

For Hindus, Karma means we sow what we reap...  
sow goodness and kindness, and kindness and goodness will come back to us...  
sow evil, and evil will come back to us,  
in this lifetime or the next.

For Buddhists, there's an added dimension  
to karma that has to do with our response to the things that happen to us,  
good and bad.  
Skillful responses move a soul further toward enlightenment, and generate good karma.  
unskillful actions, actions which grow out of craving, resistance, or attachment,  
generate bad karma.

For Jains, all karma is bad karma.  
It's like fine particles of clay that accumulate whenever they act against their principles.

For Sikhs, karma accumulates over lifetimes.  
Bad karma, bad actions,  
must be paid for eventually,  
and the coin with which one pays is suffering.  
However, God has the power to pardon people through grace,  
and the road to forgiveness is meditation and acts of good karma.

Karma was incorporated into Christianity by some sects as the Law of Cause and Consequence, or Effect,  
but like the Sikhs,  
the emphasis is on the power of God's love to lighten the burden of accumulated Karma.

Popular understanding of karma is pretty simplistic.

If you do good things,  
    good things will happen to you.  
If you don't, they won't.

I once babysat for a friend's kids  
    while she got their house packed up and ready to move.  
I justified doing it by telling her  
    I'd be moving,  
so I needed "good childcare karma"  
    in a few months when we'd be moving, too.

I'm not sure whether or not it worked.  
    When it came time for us to move,  
I did find a babysitter...  
    but I had to pay her.

A close cousin of this popular version of karma is the "threefold law"  
    embraced by some...but not all...in the UU pagan community.  
This is karma, ramped up.

If you do good magic, it comes back to you threefold.  
    And should you use magic to harm,  
again, it comes back to you,  
    three times worse.

This may be related to the belief that bad things come in threes.

As for UU's, a surprising number of us have preached on the topic directly.  
    (I love the internet...type in a topic and "UU" and you get tons of hits.)

Of those that I read, many took issue with some part of one of the definition.  
    Many seem especially ambivalent about the whole notion of reincarnation.  
However many found the idea useful in some way.

Buddhist nun Pema Chodron inspired one of my colleagues,  
    the Rev. Mark Stringer,  
to understand karma as an opportunity for learning and growth.

He quotes her as saying:  
    "I saw a cartoon...{where} a head of iceberg lettuce is sitting in a garden saying,  
"Oh, no, how did I get in this vegetable garden again?  
    I wanted to be a wildflower!"  
The caption reads, "Oscar is born again as a head of iceberg lettuce  
    in order to overcome his fear of being eaten."<sup>1</sup>

For Stringer, a belief in karma is an openness to the possibility

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<sup>1</sup> : "In Search of Karma," Rev. Mark Stringer, UU Church of Des Moines.

that the universe sends us over and over again the lessons we need most to learn--  
the ones that are most important for us to teach.

However, the most popular use of karma  
was simply as an affirmation

that our actions have an effect,  
as reflected in the seventh principle...

We affirm and promote

respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part...

Though the web, our choices impact the world around us--  
like pebbles dropped in the water,  
ripples spread out from what we do.

Representative of this school is

The Rev. James Ishmael Ford, who, in an article in the UU Buddhist journal,  
"UU Sangha," writes,

"I see Karma as the term describing the mechanism of inter-relationship,  
of co-creation.

Everything we do has a consequence, or many.

This is the way the universe works."<sup>2</sup>

This is karma influenced by process theology...

by the belief that we are co-creators of the universe,  
a universe made up of free choosers.

Karma can also be understood as a historical phenomenon,  
an affirmation that

"We build on foundations we did not lay..."

our actions and choices in the present are influenced  
by innumerable actions and choices made by others in the past.

Our actions and choices will determine the shape of the future.

It behooves us to bear in mind, then,

that our actions will lead to consequences  
which must be borne by generations to come.

Whether we ourselves are reincarnated or not,  
we bear a responsibility to those generations.

Karma understood this way is in tune with the Native American practice

of considering each decision with attention to its effects on the seven generations preceding  
and the seven generations following the generation making the decision.

I also found writings by people who embrace a psycho-social understanding of karma...

They point out that when we are angry,

we are more likely to perceive hostility in others.

When we are grieving,

we notice and respond more intensely to loss.

When we approach life with a positive attitude,

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<sup>2</sup> : UU Sanga, Vol. 3, No. 3, Spring '99, p. 4.

we are more likely to notice and remember positive events,  
and to interpret experiences that might be neutral or even negative  
in a positive light,  
finding the silver lining in the cloud.  
When we make the effort to be kind,  
we not only inspire others to be kind to us,  
but we become more likely to see and appreciate acts of kindness.

Our attitude doesn't change what happens to us,  
but it changes our experience of it.

For me, the most intriguing way to consider the concept of karma  
is as a system, a tool for encouraging good and moral behavior in society.  
Like its religious cousins-- hell and heaven, the ten commandments,  
the seven deadly sins, even the golden rule...  
"Do unto others as you would have done unto you,"  
and the platinum rule...  
"Do unto others 20% better than you would have done unto you,  
"20% to correct for subjective error."  
karma can be seen as a way of motivating people to "be good."

"Do good things and good things will happen to you.  
Do bad things and it will come back to bite you."<sup>3</sup>...

When we are victims of violence or injustice,  
our first instinct is to strike back—  
over time, you have an escalating cycle of violence and aggression.

One of the functions of religion can be to break the cycle.

Which is why it's so dreadfully sad and ironic when people twist religion  
and use it to justify violence against the "other", against "non-believers."

But back to karma...

Karma is an expression of the hope that somehow,  
someday,  
the scales will balance.

In Rethinking Rights and Responsibilities, an old professor of mine from Harvard Divinity School,  
Arthur Dyck, writes,

"Throughout history, religious thought has been aware that if individuals live only one life, a finite one on this earth, the cosmos is filled with injustices. Some die prematurely, some suffer greatly, and some are senselessly killed whether by someone's intentions or by accident. And so it is that various religions have, each in their own way, indicated how individuals can become in death a part of the life-affirming cosmic forces, part of God or Being, and participate in the life that is eternal, without beginning or end."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>: "Karma and Earl", by Rev. Dr. David A. Robins, UU Church of Bloomington-Normal.

<sup>4</sup>: Rights and Responsibilities, Arthur Dyck, p. 170.

I like coming at Karma from this direction,  
because it opens up the larger question of the function of religion in society,  
the foundations of ethical behavior,  
and the tension between the need for moral standards  
and the reality of free will.

Not coincidentally, addressing some of these issues will set the stage nicely  
for next month's discussions on personal ethics.

Let's start with a question about the fundamental nature of humanity.

Are we genetically pre-programmed to value our own ability to survive and thrive  
and so generate more descendents,  
or are we inherently social beings,  
pre-programmed to understand that our well being  
depends on the well being of others,  
on complex social networks?

Both.

Human beings aren't bees, pre-programmed to be part of a greater whole.

But neither can we exist in isolation.

At the very least, the social organization of the family is necessary  
because we are helpless for so long,  
as infants and children.

We are both autonomous beings  
and interdependent.

Our environment and culture determine  
which side predominates  
in our behavior and worldview.

Now, forgive me for making a sweeping generalization about an entire generation.

(I'm sure that any of you here are exceptions to the rule.)

but in general,

baby boomers have been socialized to be primarily self-focused.

The media and the advertising industry  
have targeted the boomers ruthlessly  
as they move through each developmental stage.

"Free Love" in the sixties when the boomers were teenagers.

"The Me Generation" in the seventies when they were in their young adult years.

Accumulation of wealth in the eighties, yuppies galore.

Soccer moms and Martha Stewart in the nineties,

and now the "sandwich generation,"

with kids in college or young adulthood

and parents in need of tending and care,

the whole country has reflected what the boomers are doing.

The boomers are the end result of a culture that values

individual autonomy, freedom of choice,  
above all.

I say all of this not to trash the boomers,  
but to point out that having gone to the extreme,  
the pendulum needed to swing back.

All of the talk about interdependence,  
the post-feminist emphasis of Carol Gilligan and others  
on relational ways of being,  
the eco-spirituality movement,  
all of these are signs of a growing push back  
from the part of us that knows and values our status as social beings.

So if it feels manipulative to make everything about self-interest,  
do good so that good things will happen to you.

It seems to me more noble  
to do good because we ARE good,  
to be considerate  
because we're aware of our connection to others  
and the impact we have.

I sense in many of the writings about karma and its cousins  
and in my own heart  
strong and clear rejection...  
and even some resentment...  
of the idea that we need incentives  
and disincentives  
rewards and punishments  
to hold together the fabric of society.

Phyllis Currott, well-known author,  
was interviewed in the CUUPs newsletter  
(CUUPs is the Covenant of UU Pagans) and is quoted as saying,

"...The number one example of dogma is that witches believe in the threefold law.  
...You'll hear people say, 'an it harm none, do what you will.'  
When you stop and ask, 'but why? Why not harm someone?' the answer most people will give you is  
because of the threefold law.  
And that is not ethics; and it's totally inappropriate to an...earth-based, pagan spirituality  
of immanent divinity.  
Because when you say "Witches believe in the threefold law"  
what you're really saying is I won't do harm to somebody  
because if I do it will come back to me three times over.  
That's expediency. That's a rule. It's a law.  
It's saying, "I'll behave, because if I don't something worse will happen to me."

...The biblical model that we've all grown up with is that God created the world, and human beings.  
We misbehaved, and got thrown out of paradise.  
And to keep us from going completely 'Lord of the Flies'

which is what you do when you get kicked out of paradise,  
God has given us a rulebook.  
Well, I live every day with the proof that those rules don't work.

To me, the three-fold law is a perfect example of how we've unconsciously carried over  
this erroneous worldview into contemporary Wicca.  
I'll know I've done my job when I hear someone say,  
"We seek to live in a sacred manner, because we live in a sacred world.  
It's what Native Americans refer to as 'right relationship.'"<sup>5</sup>

Were you to replace the phrase "three-fold law" with "law of karma,"  
and "Wicca" with Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, or Unitarian Universalism,  
you'd get to the heart of my objection to karma.

I don't think there are hard and fast rules.  
I don't believe that anyone is keeping score.  
I think good and evil are a heck of a lot more complicated  
than we're comfortable with.

I'm not denying the existence of greed,  
of feelings, actions, or choices we make that are self-serving.  
And there is a place for religious concepts which help us  
stay true to what is best in us  
and a need for religious rituals of forgiveness  
and recommitment.

But I choose not to believe that everything I do  
will somehow circle back and impact me directly,  
whether in this life or the next.

Because it's bigger than that.  
Bigger than me.  
I don't just reap what I have sown,  
I reap what I and everyone else has sown.  
I am not the only one who will reap what I am sowing.  
I and everyone else will reap what we are sowing together.

I don't believe in karma because it reduces complexity into simplicity,  
when what I want to do is get better at embracing complexity.

I strive to good and true to what is best in me  
because I believe in my own power to change the world for the better,  
for the sake of other people,  
rather than my own eternal score card.  
In the words of Dick Gilbert,  
I want to be good for nothing,  
good for no reason except that I am, as a human being, inherently good.

The drive to autonomy and the awareness of interdependence

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<sup>5</sup> : CUUPS News, winter 2002, p.3.

are both necessary for balance,  
for fulfillment,  
for peace.  
You can't fight mother nature,  
and you can't fight human nature,  
but by embracing both,  
you can live as part of that interdependent web,  
an active agent for health and wholeness.

Because the other danger of karma...  
or a belief in heaven and hell...  
is that it lets us off the hook.

We needn't respond to evil...in ourselves or in others...  
because somehow it's being taken care of by the powers that be.  
If someone is keeping score and will make sure it all comes out even in the end,  
we needn't accept responsibility for our mistakes,  
or do the hard work of holding ourselves and others accountable for their actions.

I believe that responsibility lives in us.  
We are the actors in this drama,  
not God or karma or anything else.  
We are the ones with the power  
and the desire  
to bend the world toward justice,  
to spread love and compassion,  
to care for the earth and all its inhabitants.

Not because we should,  
or because it feels good,  
but because it is who we are.

May we embrace our power.  
May we choose a future that holds hope,  
and health,  
and equality and justice,  
and beauty,  
and ever expanding love.

So be it, and blessed be.