

“Moral Compass”

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A few weeks ago, many of us celebrated New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, perhaps gathering with others to count down to the new year or making new year's resolutions. This is a threshold holiday because it marks a transition from one year to the next, and we use these thresholds to acknowledge the opportunity for new beginnings.

Did any of you make new year's resolutions?

I am not a resolution maker, but I did use the holiday for reflection on the past year. It was a year of much transition for me and my family. While the new year is often about looking forward, I noticed that my reflection was more about looking back. While the new year holiday has an element of starting over, it also has an element of return. We reflect on what has happened and return to our core values as we resolve to live up to them more fully in the new year.

In this month of new beginnings, we have been exploring the spiritual theme of integrity, seeking to deepen our understanding of how integrity works in us and in our world, with the hope that this understanding will inform how we live. We began with the idea of integrity as personal wholeness, living in the world fully as we are, not leaving parts of ourselves behind. Then we moved into expanding integrity beyond the personal to the community. We considered inclusion as the spiritual practice of integrity, and explored beloved community as envisioned by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We were invited into the definition of integrity as wholeness.

The second definition of integrity has to do with the way we act, that our behavior is in alignment with our values. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines integrity as “the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; moral uprightness.” Living with integrity also means being honest and transparent about what we believe and acting in accord with those beliefs.

This type of integrity requires that we know what our values and beliefs are and that we use them to make decisions and take action. Questions about integrity are playing out right now on the national stage, integrity of people, integrity of process, integrity of our democracy.

One way to frame the definition of integrity as alignment is that we have a moral compass and we use it. A compass is a tool that helps us find our direction when we are on a journey. A moral compass is an internalized set of values that guide us with regard

to ethical behavior and decision-making. A moral compass helps us find our direction on the journey of life.

Family therapist Bryan Zitzman identifies five reasons to have a strong moral compass. The first is that having a moral compass grounds our identity, who we are. Zitzman writes:

If you don't know what you stand for and what your ethics and beliefs are, then it's very difficult to make any moral choices at all, much less good ones. By establishing and following a set of moral values, you provide both yourself and those around you with a sense of consistency.

I would call this spiritual grounding, when our core values and beliefs are the foundation for our actions. When I speak about spiritually grounded justice work, I mean working for justice based on our core values. What I know from my own experience and the experiences of others is that if our justice work is to be sustainable, it has to be grounded in our core values. It is those values that we return to when the work is hard and when we are tired. Without those core values to remind us of the “why”, we burnout and have no energy for the “what.” A moral compass is a touchstone we return to when we need it for the long haul.

Finding our moral compass means knowing what our core values are. Theologian Richard Rohr said, “When you get your, 'Who am I?' question right, all of your, 'What should I do?' questions tend to take care of themselves.”

One way to learn our core values is to work backward toward them from how we act. How do we spend our time, money, and other resources? Where do we turn our attention? What do we choose when we have to choose? Each of these actions can tell us what our core values are.

Of course, it is possible to say we hold values which are not reflected in our actions. This is not integrity because it's not honest, it's not walking our talk. An honest examination of our actions can tell us our values, at least the ones we are acting on now.

Perhaps one of the best ways to identify our values is to notice what makes us mad, what we get upset about, what we experience that motivates us to do something. When I was in seminary, I was challenged to explore my own core values in a different way than I ever had, in part because being a minister involves accompanying others on their own journey of exploration. While I had always been an animal lover and especially fond of cats, it was while in seminary that I fully embraced my identity as a cat lady. What that looked like was Salem neighborhood walks with kibble and treats in my pockets to share with the cats I met. Regulars that I visited, and strays that I sometimes brought home. I

became very familiar with the shelters in a 50-mile radius and local vets and emergency clinics. A blanket-covered heating pad in our garage was often a hospital or hospice for a cat.

This behavior didn't always sit well with my neighbors, let alone my very understanding husband, or the two cats who live in our home. There are many stories to tell; John might even tell you some. The gist is that the welfare of cats who I perceived as suffering prompted me to action. Animal cruelty and neglect makes me mad. Animal welfare is important to me; it is one of my core values. It informs my charitable giving, my volunteer activities, and my eating habits. It is one of the reasons that I eat an always vegetarian, mostly vegan diet.

Knowing our moral compass requires reflection and contemplation; thinking and observing, listening to our heart and spirit. This is where spiritual practice is important, whether it is sitting in meditation or walking in nature or writing in a journal or something else. Our values guide us toward what we ought to do in a given situation, not necessarily what we want to do in the moment or what others want us to do. No matter how we get to our core values, when we live in accordance with them, we are in alignment, authentic, living with integrity.

Do you know what your core values are?

Once we know our core values, activating or using our moral compass is the next step. When we don't, we may not act in alignment with our own values. Each time we don't act in alignment, we feel out of sync, we lose trust in ourselves, and over time, we lose ourselves. We become disconnected from our inner core.

Sometimes it is easy and clear to use our moral compass. And, sometimes it's challenging, like the circumstances in our story today. There are many reasons for the challenge: we may fear losing an opportunity, as in our story. We may suffer difficult short-term consequences, like going against our peers or friends, losing their friendship and support. Or going against our boss or a client, losing the source of our livelihood. We may disagree with our families and others we are close to. We may feel isolated and alone. It may require sacrifice on our part, like the people who have placed water in the desert for asylum seekers and who are being criminally prosecuted by the government. Sometimes living our core values can even mean risking our lives.

This is where the spiritual grounding is so important. When we return to the “why” of our actions, the values that are at our core, it allows us to be connected to what we hold most dear, and that can sustain us.

Developing our moral compass is a process of inner and outer (hand gesture), reflecting

on our values, acting in the world, reflecting on the actions to further inform our core values, reinforcing them, tweaking them, changing them. Inner and outer, both.

I believe that, at its best, a faith community helps us find and use our moral compass. It is on the journey of religious education that we identify our core values, no matter what age we are. It is the journey of working for justice that we put our values into action. It is the experience of being in community that helps us practice our values and learn to listen to and respect the values of others.

And, it is in a faith community that we have help remembering who we are and what we stand for. As Howard Thurman said in today's reading, we forget. The dust and grit of the journey creeps into our lives and we forget the values that we commit to, the moments of our high resolve. And, we forget that we forgot! It is in a faith community that we can remember most especially that we are not alone. It is also in community that we have support for our spiritual practices, such worship, Covenant Groups or other small group discussion. A supportive faith community helps us return to our core values again and again, helps us remember as many times as needed.

As we end of time exploring this theme of integrity, I invite you into a time of ritual and meditation. Feel free to settle into your seat, pay attention to your breathing. Breathe in. Breathe out. If you are comfortable, soften your gaze or close your eyes.

Let us return to the home of our body, mind and spirit. As we journey together, inward and outward, I offer you this blessing that we may go forth in integrity.

(Meditation: "Body Blessing" by Lisa Bovee-Kemper)

*[If it feels natural, touch your hand or hands to your own forehead]* May you be blessed with wisdom, knowledge and understanding. May your intellect take you far on your journey. You have been blessed with reason and free will, it is your call every day to use these gifts.

*[Touch your hand to your throat]* May you be blessed with voice. May you learn the complex nature of truth-telling. The ability to speak the truth in love is something that requires honesty, empathy and care. You are challenged every day to seek the joy that comes with sharing your truth compassionately, as well as listening to others.

*[Touch your hand to your heart]* May your heart be full and blessed with love. May you know the agony of heartbreak, as it is intertwined with the elation of true love. Your heart is a strong and resilient organ, one that will be with you until the end of your time on earth. May you heed the wisdom of your heart and always trust the truth it tells.

*[Touch your hand to your abdomen]* You are blessed with the gift of sexuality. May you always remember that you are a beloved child of god. Your body is sacred and belongs to you alone. May you live into the full expression of your identity as a human being, embracing your true sexual and gender identity. The gift of sexuality brings with it many rewards as well as great responsibility. May you always retain power over your own being, striving toward mutually fulfilling and just relationship.

*[Touch your hands together]* When you were a baby, your tiny hands were your first contact with the world. Before you could see more than a few feet in front of your face, you grasped the finger of your loved ones. You catch yourself with your hands when you fall, and you express love and comfort to others with them too. May your hands be gentle and strong. May you use them to carry light into the darkness and rest to the weary. May your hands always find the place of greatest need, beginning with your own, and may the creator of all things hold you in the palm of her hand wherever you go.

*[Wrap arms around whole body]* May you be blessed on your journey. May you remember that growth happens on the journey and that you are never alone. May you always remember that you are a whole person, that each of these parts work together. We offer our blessings upon you, body, mind and spirit. May you be guided by compassion and truth, justice and love. May you find rest on the journey, always remembering where you came from, being mindful that your ancestors stand behind you, whether they are present on earth or have gone back to the Soul of the World. May you be blessed in all things and carry blessings with you wherever you go.

Blessed Be and Amen.

Let us hold a moment of silence together.

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You can listen to previous sermons [here](#).

Article on developing a moral compass by Bryan Zitzman [here](#).

I didn't include the work of Jonathan Haidt on moral foundations in this sermon, but you may find his website of interest [here](#).