Going Pro

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I have a confession to make. I'm in a love/hate relationship with billboards. On the one hand I think they're eye sores. They do nothing to enhance or beautify their surroundings. And the light emitted by LED billboards is just obnoxious and can't be good for the environment and wildlife. In addition, they're distracting, maybe even as much as a smart phone or the infotainment screen that most newer cars feature. Their one redeeming quality perhaps, at least to me, is they sometimes provide inspiration for sermons. Such is the case with today's sermon.

Indeed, it was a billboard I sometimes pass on my way here that lit the spark for today's sermon. (Although it didn't go in the direction I expected.) The billboard, as you may have guessed from the sermon title, is an anti-abortion billboard. This one is emblazoned with large letters that read, "Protect Life" and features an adorable, smiling baby, who looks very happy to be alive. It also feature a statement concerning embryonic development that I'll generously characterize as misleading.

Now, sometimes when I pass a billboard like this, I'll get into an argument with it in my mind.

" 'Protect Life,' huh? Sure, show me a cute, cuddly baby and of course I'm going to want to protect that life. Who wouldn't? But then I think the misinformation the people behind this billboard chose to include which gets me thinking about the larger "pro-life" movement.

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And I wonder, do they or would they also support a suicide prevention hotline for LGBTQ youth? What about school-aged victims of gun violence? Or how about immigrant children in detention centers separated from their families or who go hungry because of benefit cuts in that flimflam marketed as the One Beautiful Bill Act? And how about children without access to affordable medical care?

Sometimes my rant goes on to include the mother's health and circumstances, capital punishment, war, and so on. My basic beef with these "pro-life" messages is: What about life on this side of the womb?

And so, usually I have my little internal rant and that's that until the next time. But recently, that rant felt unfinished and I wasn't sure why. Kind of like a sliver you can't see but you know is there and will take some work to get at.

Maybe it's the term "pro-life", which I admit irks me for reasons science writer Alex Berezow nails with his observation, "On its face, the term "pro-life" resembles a strawman argument. The not-so-subtle accusation is that the opposition is "pro-death" but — perhaps other than mafia hitmen and undertakers — very few people would call themselves "pro-death."

Berezow's observation gets us a little closer to what's gotten under my skin. After all aren't all those things I just listed also "pro-life" and perhaps even more so because they concern people all ready born?

Now, my personal view on abortion can be summarized as if you don't like it or are opposed to it don't have one. That doesn't necessarily mean I'm pro-abortion, and it certainly doesn't mean I'm pro-death. What it means is I'm anti-moralizing.

Ah, and there it is! That's the sliver.

Alex Berezow posits, "Most pro-lifers would probably agree that a pro-life philosophy is one that: Values the sanctity of human life and believes that it must be protected and cherished; and
Maximizes human potential and flourishing.", adding, "Perhaps importantly, even people who do not explicitly identify as "pro-life" would agree with those sentiments." I know I do. Indeed our UU values: Equity, Generosity, Interdependence, Justice, Pluralism, and Transformation, all centered around Love, are very much in line with these sentiments.

The thing is it is hard for me to square these sentiments with moralizing, which is different than cultivating and exercising our morality.

For one thing, moralizing focuses on and judges other people's perceived bad or improper behavior, which is whatever one believes is in opposition to what one proclaims to be proper or moral. Moralizing tends to sew division and increase polarization, often because it insists there's only one morally acceptable position and it's mine, not yours. Moralizing's devotion is to power and control not the sanctity of life nor its flourishing.

Religious and faith-aligned groups are notorious for moralizing. And the fact of the matter is I have little patience for people or organizations who insist the strictures of their religion somehow apply to people outside that religion, particularly in a secular society where freedom of religion is codified as freedom from religion as well…" Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

But moralizing is not a practice exclusive to religious people or faith based organizations. Plenty of non, even anti-religious people and organizations regularly engage in moralizing on their chosen issues. And the more I witness and experience it, the more I've come to see it

as antithetical to going pro, that is, to actually live a pro-life philosophy.
From the outside moralizing often appears convincingly rooted in sincere conviction. Yet, more often it points to a devotion to avoiding engagement with complexity, and serves as a cover for the emotional discomfort of being human….rather than say, a god. Not surprisingly moralism's champion is often the loudest person in the room (and their billboards, social media posts and so on) who "tells it like it is", but rarely asks or invites serious questions because they can't bear uncertainty.

Another of the moralizer's giveaway is hypocrisy.

"You will know them by their fruits."

The message is clear: actions speak louder than words. A message not unique to Christianity. Indeed Sikhism teaches "Truth is high, but higher still is truthful living." In Islam, a hadith of the prophet Muhammend states, "Allah does not look at your appearance or wealth, but rather he looks at your hearts and actions." And in Buddhism it is said, "If with a pure mind a person speaks or acts, happiness follows him like his never-departing shadow."

Still, in Matthew we're offered more than a reminder that actions speak louder than words. We're offered a warning as well: To beware of those who routinely preach one thing and do another. These he calls, "false prophets." Teachers who appear legit, but bear, in the language of the gospels, bad fruit.

It is widely held that in his day Jesus was one of several prophets or teachers roaming around, some of whom undoubtedly fit the bill of a false prophet. Today's "false prophets" appear in many guises. These are people we look to or are influenced by, knowingly and unknowingly and who shape our understanding and opinions on various issues great and small. Some, even today, are religious figures

and faith-based organizations, many more, it seems, are politicians. There's no shortage among the super rich or celebrities of various sorts either. Not to mention a significant share of self-help gurus, authors, podcasters, influencers and the like who package and sell how others should think and live. I should note here that they exist across the political, theological, and other spectrums we recognize and position ourselves on. No one is inherently immune from being, becoming, or following a moralizer.

Still, false prophets don't necessarily intend to deceive or set out to be hypocrites. Indeed, a lot of moralizing is mindless grandstanding or virtue signaling where the concern to appear moral or on the "right side" of an issue overrides and even inhibits a deeper engagement with it. The problem is absent any real interest or effort to deeply reflect on what one preaches, it's pretty easy to slip into hypocrisy, unawares.

As Alex Berezow again notes, "Regardless of political ideology, one of the few things that many people seem to have in common is a moral hypocrisy that arises from a fundamental lack of self-reflection." Indeed, truth's task of countering falsehood, as our story for all ages urges, means not just countering purposeful lies, but, as importantly, our own self-deceptions.

This is in part why I've never quite gotten the What Would Jesus Do? thing.

I can't tell you how many times I have seen people with a WWJD bumpersticker on their car cut people off, run red lights, and even give me the finger. I mean, it's kinda funny, definitely hypocritical, and yet it also makes total sense because…wait for it…they're not Jesus!

Self-reflection is not asking what someone else, even Jesus, would do. That's just you trying to be someone you're not, an action also antithetical to going pro.

Going pro is about going deep.

And so a better question than asking what Jesus or if you prefer, the Buddha, would do is asking how did they develop their moral grounding? What seeming contradictions or paradoxes did they face. How did they navigate these and yet remain largely consistent in living what they preached? Clearly I'd never make it as a bumper sticker writer. Indeed, this is an entirely different exercise than simply deciding to superficially mimmic another's behavior and then tell everyone else to do so as well via a strip of paper stuck on the back of your car.

Jesus, we know, was Jewish. (Christians don't always remember this). The gospels tell us he knew the teachings of his faith inside and out and, in essence, reimagined them. So we know that Jesus devoted time to study and reflection.

The gospels also tell us Jesus wrestled with being true to what he felt called to do with his life versus what others around him thought he should do. How did he handle that? Again, significantly, the gospels note he engaged in practices like prayer, contemplation, and sacrifice. What he didn't do was go around asking himself "What Would Moses do?

Likewise, the Buddha, it is said, was born a prince insulated from "real life." At some point he ventured outside his palace and discovered what Buddhists call "the four sights", which acquainted him with the reality of suffering. He then embarked on a spiritual quest to find a way to alleviate suffering, trying a variety of practices along the way that forced him to confront all manner of obstacles, particularly mental obstacles.

So again, we have a person who adopted not a slogan, but chose a path, a course of action that included study, struggle, contemplative practice, reimagining the wisdom of existing traditions and in the process making it his own.

Now, in going pro we need not limit our teachers or guides to the founders of major religions, nor do we have to limit them to one person or tradition.

Thomas Moore, author of Care of The Soul counts among his teachers, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Emily Dickinson as well as writers from antiquity and Renaissance philosophers like Marsilio Ficino. In these he seeks not a perfection to imitate, but insight into how each related to the world, addressed questions of being human, and managed to create and follow a life affirming philosophy with integrity.

To my knowledge, Moore doesn't have a What Would Thoreau Do bumpersticker on his car, but he has made a study of and learned from Thoreau's poetic approach to life and to nature. Speaking of nature, our teachers need not be exclusively human. There is much nonhumans and the earth itself can teach us about going pro.

Moralizers tell us what to think. Moral teachers invite us to explore and refine what we think.

Every week, during my welcoming remarks, I remind everyone gathered that "Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religion that encourages everyone to freely and responsibly search for truth and meaning."

And what I take that to mean is we are a faith that (in principle) isn't going to tell you what to believe but will support your effort toward discerning truth and meaning and its implications for how you live your life. And to me that's what going pro…pro life, that is…is all about.

For in the end, it is not enough to simply have a conviction, nor, as the hymn, "Thou I May Speak With Bravest Fire" warns, a talent for communicating it…Our commitment must also be to take, in words

attributed to Mark Twain, “opportunities to shut up”, to listen to, reflect upon, learn from, and reimagine the deep wisdom of the world and our hearts that our lives may bear witness, as another hymn points, to the “deep assurance of the flame that burns within,”; truth the most strident moralizers comprehendth not.

Amen and Blessed Be