



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

The Sin of Selfishness

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Speaker

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The most instructive part of any new job I've had isn't the formal training. It's all the stories that your new co-workers tell you about the job you're starting. When I began working at Walt Disney World -- many, many years ago -- one person told me what remains my favorite story about theme park visitors.

It's probably apocryphal, but I want it to be true, so I keep telling it. A group of employees are in the park on their day off, since they get in free. It's a busy day, and there are lines everywhere. As a joke, they decided to form a line in front of one of the fake doors on the colonial street facade around the corner from the Hall of Presidents show. Sure enough, within a minute, a family walks up to them.

"What are you in line for," the father asks.

"I don't know," the employee nearest the door responds. "But I'm first!"

So the family stops, and starts waiting behind them.

Now that the line is established, it grows quickly. Within five minutes, it snakes all the way across the street, almost to the riverboat landing on the far side of the Liberty Square Plaza. At this point, the employees decide to bail. One of the employees tells the father behind them that they're missing their lunch reservation and have to leave. The father shrugs, then steps forward with his family toward the door.

Suppressing their laughter, the employees walk over to the riverboat landing, where they see one of their friends, who is working the dock. "Hey," the lead employee tells him, "you'd better go see what's happening over by the Hall of Presidents. A whole bunch of people are queued up in front of one of the fake doors."

So the dockhand walks over to check it out. He sees the dad, waiting patiently by door, then asks him, "What do you think you're waiting for here?"

The dad responds: "I don't know. But I'm first!"

Evolution rewards those who run at the front of the pack, away from the predators. And when food runs scarce, we want to be first in line for it. But evolution also rewards those who can work together to the benefit of all. The civilizing forces of law, and, yes, sometimes religion, teach us to consider the needs of others, and to check our greed by respecting the rights, property and dignity of those around us.

But during my lifetime, I've watched the emergence of a broad political and cultural movement to redefine selfishness as virtue, not a vice. Politicians, business leaders and even educators use the language of economics to try to convince us that if we all simply act in our own selfish

interests, the invisible hand of the marketplace will sort everything out, creating an ideal society where everyone gets what they deserve.

I'm here to confess that I was once a true believer in that thought. Some of you might have been, too. Heck, some of you might still be.

When I was a teenager, I loved reading about economics. Milton Friedman's *Free to Choose* was my Bible. I loved his story about a common graphite pencil, and how "there's not a single person in the world who could make" it. The manufacture of a pencil results from the unknowing cooperation of potentially thousands of people from around the world, from loggers cutting wood, to steelworkers crafting the loggers' tools, to miners getting the graphite, to rubber workers who harvested the material for the eraser, and so on. The lesson? Every one of these people is out for himself, and we end up with nice things as the result.

But as I left my teen years behind, went to college and started working, I realized that Milton Friedman's libertarianism is a wonderful ideology for people too naive to have learned how the world really works.

Those loggers clear-cut a forest that's now a wasteland. The steelworkers lost their jobs to a Chinese factory that barely pays its employees. The miners' lives are at risk every day because there's no government powerful enough to enact and enforce workplace safety regulations. The rubber workers might be slaves, and the person selling you those pencils at the local big box store is on Medicaid and food stamps, because the store won't pay a living wage.

But I am sure that, all along that supply chain, the owners of all those companies are doing quite well. And they probably believe that their success is due entirely to their own hard work.

Many of us feel a selfish tendency to focus on our own work and to dismiss or devalue the work of those around us. I am reminded of an old line I first saw reading the late Molly Ivins, who was writing about George W. Bush: "He was born on third base and thought he'd hit a triple."

Milton Friedman turned me into a believer of libertarian economics. But it was another economist who first started turning me toward a different point of view.

There's a principle in theater called "Chekhov's gun," that says if you place a firearm over the mantelpiece on the stage, someone had better fire that gun by the end of the second act. A corollary to that says that if you place a mathematical formula next to a speaker in a pulpit, the speaker had better explain that formula at some point during the sermon.

This is the Prisoner's Dilemma, perhaps the most famous illustration in the branch of mathematics known as Game Theory. I learned the Prisoner's Dilemma in college at Northwestern University, in a Game Theory class taught by Roger Myerson, who years later won a Nobel Prize in Economics.

There are two players in this game, Prisoner A and Prisoner B, who are kept apart and cannot communicate with each other. Each prisoner has one choice: to rat out the other prisoner in an attempt to get a deal, or to keep quiet. There are four possible outcomes, which are displayed in the four quadrants of this illustration.

They're both facing time on minor charges, but prosecutors need them to talk to get a conviction on the major charge. If A talks and B keeps quiet, A walks and B gets five years. If B talks and A keeps quiet, B gets the deal and walks while A does five years. If both keep quiet, prosecutors are left with nothing but the secondary charges, and A and B both do one year. But if both snitch to get the deal, the prosecutors have their evidence and both get convicted on the major charge, doing three years each.

So what happens? Each prisoner weighs the potential outcomes, and acting rationally for his own best interest . . . they both snitch.

By trying to get the best deal for themselves, and not trusting the other, they ensure that both of them end worse off than if they had worked together.

Professor Myerson also taught us the other big, famous example of Game Theory -- something called the Nash Equilibrium. But he didn't restrict his lesson to mathematics. Professor Myerson took as much time telling us about the man who articulated the Equilibrium, John Nash. He told us about Nash's struggles with mental illness and closed the lecture that day with the wistful comment, "Someone ought to make a movie about him someday." A little over 10 years later, someone did, and "A Beautiful Mind" won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

So the other lesson I learned from Prof. Myerson was that behind every economic equation, there are people. And these people have stories to tell. No matter what you might think about a particular subject you take in school, no matter what you think about a particular client with whom you might work -- there are wonderful stories to be discovered there . . . wonderful stories to be heard, and then to be told. If you go through life selfishly, caring only about what you need, right now, you will miss those stories.

Prof. Myerson could have stuck with the mathematics of Game Theory in his time with us, and I wouldn't have heard the story of John Nash for another dozen years. But if no one had ever told author Sylvia Naser about John Nash, she wouldn't have written *A Beautiful Mind*, and I -- and most of us -- might not have ever heard Nash's story.

Unitarian Universalists aren't big on the idea of sin -- we're a "live and let live" type of crowd. Many of us do not believe in God, so it follows that we don't believe in a God's laws, either. For many of the rest of us, the "Universalism" in our name remains powerful -- the idea that we all await a common fate, that we all will enjoy ultimate salvation.

But whatever happens after we pass from this Earth, the fact remains that we can live in heaven or hell right now. And the actions we take, at this moment, can move us and those around us in one of those two directions.

I do not believe in God, but I do believe in sin. We sin when we damage the "interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." We sin when we choose to hurt instead of help. We sin when our actions bring more hell than heaven to our Earth.

Capitalists promised us that selfishness would deliver a better America. And it has . . . for them. For 40 years, we've seen immense economic growth coupled with stagnant wages for American workers, a sharp increase in the gap between the rich and everyone else, an eroding middle class, and a housing market that is completely inaccessible to working Americans.

So why do so many people around the country keep voting for these guys? John Steinbeck nailed this one decades ago when he noted that "the trouble was that we didn't have any self-admitted proletarians. Everyone was a temporarily embarrassed capitalist." So long as the millionaires and billionaires can entice us with the hope that maybe one day we will join them, we won't do anything against their wishes. After all, we wouldn't want to harm our future millionaire self with any laws that protect the working class, right?

But that hard truth is that we'll never hit that triple so long as we continue to let the capitalists rig the rules of the game to always deny us a real chance at bat.

Fortunately, we don't have to be the prisoners in this political dilemma. We have the opportunity to talk with one another, to work together and cooperate to make a better world for all of us.

Let's be clear. Selfishness is NOT the same as self-preservation. John Nash illustrated that life doesn't have to be a zero-sum gain, where my gain is your loss. We need to care for ourselves, but we must never become blind to the effect that our actions -- or inactions -- have on those around us, too. *That* is the sin of selfishness.

I started questioning the libertarians' obsession with fighting labor unions when I got that job at Disney World . . . and discovered that it was because of a union that I was getting paid more than minimum wage, got paid overtime for all hours worked on a sixth or seventh day in a week, and couldn't be fired on a manager's whim. It's probably not a coincidence that as union participation has declined over the past 40 years, so has the percentage of our national income going to workers. We earn more when we negotiate together.

Selfishness is the sin that leads us to redefine public education as a consumer good. Declining incomes have left our schools filled with children from families who can't make ends meet. More than half the public school children in America today qualify for the government's free and reduced price lunch program. But redefining public education as yet another consumer

choice allows many well-to-do Americans to say "not my problem" and encourages continued white flight from our public schools.

We're sending our daughter to college this fall. Thanks to years of declining public support for higher education, the days of students working their way through school are long gone. The average college graduate today has about \$30,000 in student loan debt. How would your life have been different if you had started your career owing more than you would make in a year, before you had bought a house, a car, or anything else? We all do better when we work together to support education as a right, and not dismiss it a product.

Selfishness pushes us to race to the front of the line, but blinds us to the recognition that we might be racing to wait in front of a fake door.

We started with that story, set outside the Hall of Presidents, so let's finish there, too. Here is my favorite line from the show, which was taken from Abraham Lincoln's address before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois:

All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined, with all the treasure of the earth in their military chest; with a Bonaparte for a commander, could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a trial of a thousand years.

At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of free people, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.

We are the author and finisher of our collective destruction when we are convinced to selfishly pursue our own desires at the expense of the needs of our communities and our nation. We fight a lot of good fights in this congregation: we are fighting for a living minimum wage in Pasadena; for the right to safe, affordable water for all people in the state; for the end of abuses in our criminal justice system. I hope that we will take up the fight against school "reform," too - one of the great anti-union Wall Street frauds in America today.

But we're fighting against symptoms in all those fights. The disease causing those symptoms -- the cancer attacking America today -- is the propaganda that selfishness is a virtue. If we can fight that idea -- if we convince our neighbors, our friends, and all our fellow Americans that selfishness is, indeed, a sin . . . and that good Americans have each other's backs -- we will find a much easier path to victory in every cause for which we fight.

It's up to us. So what are you going to do? Those who seek to profit at our expense have found great success in driving us apart -- by race, by gender, by orientation, by ethnicity, or by religion. If we are going to work together, we are going to have to reject those divisions. We fight back when we refuse to be divided. We fight back when whites, Asians and Latinos say that Black Lives Matter, too. We fight back when we stop spending money at stores, such as

Walmart, that attack workers' right to organize. And we fight back when we stop being afraid of schools and neighborhoods where people are of a different class or color.

Rank by rank, we must stand together. And standing together, we will build one nation, indivisible by greed, where liberty and justice are never for sale, but forever, freely available for all.

Let's do this.