

UU Wisdom from Middle Earth

Margaret Anderson (read 5/6/2007)

When I was young, I witnessed a lot of progress in a lot of areas. And I was naive enough to believe we'd only keep building on that progress. So I felt sort of blind-sided when I found myself, in mid-life, worrying that we're moving backward. We can find a lot of backsliding to worry about these days, and it seems to me that much of it has a common thread: control gone out of control; the drive for control and dominance reversing decades of progress.

Years ago, many of us watched on TV as ordinary folks hacked down the Berlin wall. We shared the exhilarating sense that "we" - meaning the free world - achieved something that day. Now, men who were once considered leaders of the free world countenance torture, even in the face of evidence that it's not a reliable way to get information. Torture is a particularly horrific exercise of control.

Which of us would have predicted, back then, that we would live to fear for the security of our freedoms of speech, press and religion right here in the United States of America? And what are the threats to these freedoms but efforts to control our very minds and hearts?

I was a youngster when reliable birth control became widely available. And it's no accident that those were also the days when women made great strides toward better positions in the workplace.

In my wildest nightmares, I never imagined I would live to see new kinds of impediments placed on access to birth control. What are these impediments but a way to control women? A very effective way.

Control. It's one thing to wish be autonomous, to be in control of one's own life. It's quite another thing to crave control of others. True, some people need to be controlled, sometimes, to some extent. But controlling others can become dangerously addictive.

There are people who don't believe equality or parity can ever exist. They see every relationship, every interaction, as having only two possible roles - controlling or being controlled - to their minds, winning or losing. The saying "Live and let live" can sound scary if you don't believe it's possible, if you don't believe anyone could actually want nothing more than to be left alone to live his own life, for then you must believe that not controlling others can only mean letting them control you. Fear of being controlled spurs such people to control. Social problems from political and religious polarization, to rapes and gay bashings, to abuse and family violence are fear-driven efforts to control and dominate.

We may burn with a desire to do something about all this, but feel too small to make a difference. I was feeling just such frustration when I found both comfort and direction in a source I didn't expect - the trilogy of Tolkien novels and movies that make up The Lord of the Rings. And I've come to think of Gandalf, Frodo, and other characters in Tolkien's work as some of the first Unitarian Universalists.

Like us, the "good guys" in this tale have a problem with control gone out of control. A big problem. The Dark Lord, embodied as a huge, flaming, lidless eye, lacks only one Ring to secure the control he craves, mastery over all the world of Middle Earth. The life force of this Dark Lord is essentially bound up with the Ring of power. Evil incarnate is essentially bound up with control.

To his horror, a hobbit named Frodo finds himself entrusted with this master Ring of power. Only the Dark Lord can wield the Ring. It destroys anyone else who tries, even a great king. And Frodo is neither great nor kingly. Hobbits, or "halflings" as they are sometimes called, are curly-headed, woolly-footed, peace-loving homebodies, only three or four feet tall. All they want is to be left alone to live their very ordinary lives. Frodo feels small and inadequate against the Ring of power and the Dark Lord who seeks it.

And who can blame him? How often have you dutifully dragged yourself to the polls or written a letter to the editor of a newspaper, all the while doubting that your voice would count?

Frodo confides in a wizard, an eccentric but impressive character with his flowing grey hair and beard, his grey robes and pointy grey hat - appropriately named Gandalf the Grey. Frodo bemoans the state of the world and his own lot in it, saying to Gandalf, "I wish it need not have happened in my time."

It was in Gandalf's reply that I found the comfort I mentioned earlier, "All we have to decide," he tells Frodo, "is what to do with the time that is given us."

So I began to look at what Frodo did do with the time that was given him, and there I found some direction to go with Gandalf's words of comfort. I found that Frodo did at least three things Unitarian Universalists do.

First, like any good UU, Frodo continually sought more knowledge. He persisted in questioning Gandalf until he understood that the Ring, the power to control everyone, wasn't safe with anyone. So Frodo set a goal: destroy the Ring. Frodo continued learning, he remained flexible and willing to rethink his decisions, but he didn't let a desire for perfect understanding immobilize him, either. When the representatives of all the peoples of Middle Earth began to argue over who should carry the Ring to the fiery mountain that could destroy it, little Frodo ended the conflict by stepping forward. "I will take it," he said, "though I do not know the way."

Each step Frodo took in his journey taught him a little more. He put one foot in front of the other, took one day at a time, and kept learning as he went. He may have felt small and inadequate, but it was precisely because he was so small, such an unlikely candidate for controller of the world, who didn't even want the Ring, that the three-foot-tall hobbit had a fighting chance of carrying that Ring without falling under its destructive spell.

The second point of direction I found is something Frodo didn't do, and I've seen that many Unitarians don't do. Frodo didn't try and go it alone. When you light your candles of concern, you are reminded to ask for the help you need. UUs do that. So did Frodo. He was only one member of a diverse fellowship of hobbits, men, a wizard, a dwarf and an elf.

Each member of the fellowship saw the others as imperfect. Even Gandalf the good grey wizard could be short-tempered and sarcastic. Yet all members of that fellowship served the goal, in their different ways.

Like good Unitarians, the members of the fellowship accepted one another, faults and all, and valued one another's unique gifts, that is to say, they valued their differences. That sometimes took time and effort. At the beginning of the quest, the dwarf and the elf, traditional enemies, can't resist sniping at each other. But their mission forces them to interact, to talk to each other, and even to visit each others' ancient homelands. In the end, they are proud to contemplate dying side by side as friends in the last great battle.

Our generation did not invent diversity training.

The fellowship also welcomed help from outside their own ranks, from other people, yes, but also from what you might call the divine, or simply the full spectrum of wisdom, depending on your point of view. Some interpreters see Gandalf the Grey as a godlike symbol - a wise counselor, protector and guide with magic powers. And if ever there was an icon of the goddess, or the feminine side of wisdom, it was the queen of the elves. She was called "The Lady of Light" and she enlightened people's minds. She literally glowed with a beautiful, loving, and very powerful light, and she lent the fellowship her own forms of wisdom and magic.

Though all the members of the fellowship were male, in a sort of Jungian fashion, they assimilated and used the full spectrum of wisdom, both masculine and feminine. These men talk about what they feel in their hearts. Not just any men, mind you, but the alpha males of the fellowship - Gandalf, resurrected from the grey as a resplendent white wizard; and Aragorn, the valiant king. These alpha males dedicate themselves to destroying the very source of ultimate power - the Ring. Imagine that! These guys had to be Unitarians, whether they realized it or not.

Conversely, in the movie versions, at least, we see beautiful, womanly characters who can ride hard and wield a sword, when need be, to protect themselves and those they love. The fellowship gladly accepts these women as comrades and their talents as gifts.

As I said, these people invented diversity training.

The fellowship and their allies also demonstrated the full spectrum of wisdom in the way they treated those who wronged them. They balanced controlling with letting be. They defended themselves from violence, but were merciful where they could afford to be.

In an incident found in the novel *The Two Towers*, though not in the movie version, the good guys win a major battle against an army of goblins, or “orcs,” as well as men. All the orcs are killed, but the victors release the men. These men were not intractably violent. They could see that they had been duped into fighting for the Dark Lord.

As a trainer of ways to deal with differences, I can tell you that releasing those men was a smart move from the winners’ own perspective. If, instead, they had humiliated, or even brutalized, them, those men’s survivors would have sought revenge, and the cycle of violence would have continued. But as it was, the men they released were amazed at their merciful treatment, because the Dark Lord’s henchman had told them that their opponents would burn them alive. By passing up an opportunity to control others who really didn’t need to be controlled, the winners actually made future violence less likely.

But what about all those orcs who were killed? The orcs were not simply misguided. They were violent on autopilot, even among themselves - not the sort to give you a chance to have a reasonable chat before they lopped off your head. They would literally rather die than listen or change their minds.

When such orcs are bearing down on you, it is simply not prudent to let them be. It was not prudent for the fellowship to hope that, if they refused to fight them, the orcs would eventually learn by example after enough of the good guys had sacrificed themselves on the altar of demonstrating nonviolence. With the orcs threatening not only the fellowship and their army, but also people who depended on that army’s protection, it would have been more than imprudent to let the orcs be; it would have been wrong. And there’s a lesson here, too, for gentle UU souls, about not going off balance in the non-controlling, or letting be, direction.

The problem, of course, is that everyone thinks he strikes the balance between controlling and letting be smack in the middle. Moreover, in our own real lives, it's harder to separate the orcs from the merely misguided, especially when they're family members or co-workers. Some of our orcs are not so intractably evil, and our misguided are not so quick to change their minds. That's another good reason to keep doing that first thing I mentioned - continually seeking additional knowledge. Because we're only human, and we can't get it perfect. But we're ahead of the game if we at least realize that it's just as wrong to treat all who oppose us like orcs as it is to let all of them be.

The third UU thing the fellowship did might be the most important of all. In the bleakest of circumstances, where some would have wallowed in depression, they seized every opportunity to enjoy those gifts that renewed them and kept them going. They maintained their sense of humor, sometimes even in the heat of a losing battle. When Frodo and his companion were living on the elven version of hardtack, and lucked into a couple of rabbits, they didn't just throw them on the fire and gobble them down. Rather, they stewed them slowly with seasonings carried all the way from home, making the best-tasting meal they could.

These charming people pause in the most unlikely of circumstances to sing or recite poetry, just as I've heard Unitarian Universalists do. When a thing of beauty appears, whether an ancient statue or a faint glimpse of sunlight through a dark and threatening sky, they embrace it and love it. Then when all about them is foul and filthy, they can call up beauty in their minds' eyes.

One scene from the movie *The Return of the King* sticks with me in particular. In the lair of a giant spider, a cave where everything appears in shades of gray and black, Frodo collapses, hurt and exhausted, onto the stony ground, sticky with spider webs. But Frodo fancies himself on a bright green lawn. He sees the lovely face of the elf queen. And most interestingly to me, her smile is almost playful as she extends her hand and pulls Frodo to his feet.

Well, so what? How can this fairy tale help us deal with all the backsliding we find to worry about in a very real here and now?

When I say we can find comfort in this tale, I mean that we can let go of our visceral, hand-wringing grief over the fact that no one of us can devise a grand plan to save the world. We can let go of that because, as Gandalf said, all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us. Yes, The Lord of the Rings is a fairy tale. But when you think about it, accepting Gandalf's advice seems the only sensible decision.

When I say we can find direction for turning that decision into action, I mean that we can do three things. First, we can educate ourselves, set some goals, then put one foot in front of the other and let our steps teach us more as we go, remaining flexible and open-minded. Each of us may touch relatively few people. We don't know how much impact that will have. But we can keep moving and keep learning. And if we don't save the world, well maybe we'll make it a little better place to live in meanwhile. It seems to me that there's no other sensible way to choose to spend our time.

For one person, this might mean some type of volunteer work or activism. For another, it could mean modeling tolerance and balance in the workplace. Still others may create the art that keeps the rest of us going.

Secondly, we don't need to go it alone. We can get help and support within and outside the fellowship of our shared faith, accepting others and valuing their differences. We can accept the full spectrum of wisdom, trying to strike appropriate balances between controlling and letting be.

And finally, we won't pursue our goals wallowing in depression. We can, and should, embrace and love every bit of sustaining beauty and humor we may find in this world - whether in outdoor nature, a symphony, or maybe even curled up with a bowl of popcorn watching The Lord of the Rings.

This is my wish for all of you.

Amen.