READING FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Mark Twain has to be one of the premier students of human nature. In *Huckleberry Finn*, his protagonist Huck Finn says, "Bein' good is a whole lot of trouble, but bein' bad ain't no trouble at all." The default mode of human existence seems to be self-interest, while altruism—regard for and service to others—requires a special program.

It is a preoccupation of today's media moguls to remind us how horrible we are. Hardly a day goes by without reports of a tragic shooting in high school, at the post office, or in the streets; spousal abuse; pornography at every turn; the broken American family; terrorist activities worldwide; the Balkans; Africa; the Middle East—the litany goes on. Neighbor helps neighbor simply isn't news.

Robert Bellah, in his 1985 *Habits of the Heart,* pointed to a breakdown in moral responsibility—so necessary for a free society. Robert Putnam in his *Bowling Alone* thesis pointed out that Americans increasingly withdraw from civil society. Most recently the Institute for American Values cried an alarm in its "Call to Civil Society—Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths."

"Everything nailed down is coming loose," said the Angel Gabriel, looking down on humanity's moral confusion in Marc Connelly's 1930 play *The Green Pastures*. This charming American play translates biblical drama into very earthy terms. Gabriel's sad words are as accurate now as they were in 1930.

We live in an age of moral deconstructionism. We fearlessly critique and criticize, dissect and dismantle our culture's conventional wisdom. For example, one of the great running jokes about Unitarian Universalists is that we believe, not in the Ten Commandments, but the Ten Suggestions. Or, it has been asked, "Is it really true we accept the Ten Commandments provided they can be amended at the next annual meeting?" In a cartoon Moses says to God, "Maybe I'd better deliver just the first ten now and see how it goes down."

In a February 27, 1999, edition of the cartoon "Non Sequitur" by Wiley from the Internet, Moses is standing before the children of Israel with two stone tablets in hand. The caption reads "The Dawn of Middle Management." Moses tells the people, "OK, if it'll help you follow them any better, you can refer to them as the ten mission statements."

In another cartoon, Moses brings down the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai for two people who are waiting anxiously and says, "It's just a first draft, but it seems that no one is going to get away with anything!" Another caricature shows a man and a woman standing outside a church looking at its bulletin board that says, "Special this week: Observe any eight of the ten commandments." The man says to the woman, "There must be a limit to permissiveness." But my favorite is two ancient berobed wise men looking at the stone tablet bearing the Decalogue, one saying to the other, "'Comandments' is misspelled." On it goes.

Why do we today have such fun parodying this ancient ethical code? We do it partly because we find the Ten Commandments hard to live by. It is uncompromising. First, we have the so-called "spiritual commandments" dealing with humanity's relationship to God: have no other gods, do not use the Lord's name in vain, do not worship idols, keep the Sabbath holy. Then we have a transition, a positive commandment for a change: honor your father and your mother. Finally, we have five no-nonsense prohibitions: thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor; and thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's possessions, including thy neighbor's wife (evidently the commandments were primarily for men, not women).

The Tennessee state senate passed a resolution that prods local schools, homes, and businesses to post copies of the Ten Commandments in prominent places. Unfortunately, it seems that most people in one poll could name no more than two of the ten, and many weren't too happy when told about the others.

Are the Ten Commandments out of date? If so, how can we nail down some ethical con-

victions when, morally, "everything nailed down is coming loose"?

The Decalogue appears twice in the Hebrew Scriptures—Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5—the products of two different schools of thought. Ancient editors finessed this redundancy by having Moses break the first set of tablets in a fit of anger at the Israelites who were worshipping the golden calf. He had to go back for a second set. The Ten Commandments were a kind of constitutional law for a wandering people. Biblical scholars believe there were ten to correspond to the ten fingers, thus making them easier to memorize for public worship. They stand as a major ethical step forward in their time, some 3,000 years ago.

To what extent are the Ten Commandments still instructive? Most of us would reject a jealous god who equates blasphemy with murder. This Jehovah is not a user-friendly god, but often a vain and vengeful one who promises retribution for every violation of the commandments. This god is the Great Ethical Enforcer.

Nonetheless, the Decalogue stands as a monument in ethical history. In words the Unitarian poet James Russell Lowell used for the motto of the American Copyright League, "In vain we call old notions fudge, and bend our conscience to our dealing; the Ten Commandments will not budge, and stealing will continue stealing."

It is easy to caricature attempts to modernize the Ten Commandments: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, unless something comes up"; "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor—at least not on a regular basis"; "Honor thy father and thy mother, usually"; "Thou shalt not get caught"; "Thou shalt not get involved." And then, in our free society, some would argue for voluntary compliance, any other restriction on freedom being unseemly.

The moral of the story of the Ten Commandments is to understand it as an historical benchmark, setting forth fundamental, if sometimes abstract, rules for human conduct. The Decalogue, however, does not help us in getting from abstractions to the often ambiguous problems of every day.

While many long for the security of absolutes, others look more to inner values than external constraints to guide behavior. Character is what we are when no one is looking. Character is when we act, though it will not do us any particular good. Character is when we meet what Rushworth Kidder calls our "unenforceable obligations" to our neighbors.

I recall one summer evening many years ago when a Roman Catholic visitor, learning I was a minister, asked about my religion. When he heard that I neither feared hell nor sought heaven, but believed in "the importance of being good for nothing," he was incredulous. He said that if he didn't fear eternal punishment or seek eternal reward there would be no telling what he would do. He was bound to the Great Enforcer, not the moral power of unenforceable obligations.

Why do we honor our marriage covenant even when we are at times unhappy? Why do we sacrifice to raise children when that seems hopelessly frustrating? Why do we keep promises even when we could get away with breaking them? Why do we obey the law even when there is little danger of being caught? The evangelist Dwight Moody defined character as "what you are in the dark."

Why do we involve ourselves in community service and social action when no one seems to notice and we often fail? And why have people done these things for centuries? No external power is forcing us to meet these obligations; we are truly on our own, not coerced by the "cudgel but an inward music: the irresistible power of unarmed truth, the powerful attraction of its example," in Boris Pasternak's words.

Ethicist Carol Gilligan, a student of the late Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, suggested that women and men understand ethics differently. For men, laws and rules are paramount. Ethics consists in obeying them. For women, she argues, it is the relationship between people that is crucial. Do we hurt or help one another is the ruling principle. Gilligan is closer to what I would call ethics as unenforceable obligations—our covenant to relate lovingly and compassionately to one another.

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.

Hosea Ballou, that nineteenth-century Universalist preacher of universal salvation, was riding the circuit in the New Hampshire hills with a Baptist minister one afternoon. They argued theology as they traveled. At one point, the Baptist looked over and said, "Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven." Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you."

One of our moral critics, educator Robert Coles of Harvard, writes, "Something is wrong with a society whose members are endlessly preoccupied with feeling better, rather than obsessed with making the world better." In his cross-cultural studies of children he finds the self-portraits of rich American children fill up the whole page, while in those of Hopi Indian children of the American southwest they are merely a dot in a rich landscape.

With that understanding then, here are ten considered convictions, or should we say habits, to be learned by highly ethical people. How do they stack up against the biblical commandments?

1. The cosmos does not make junk. Creation is fundamentally good. Walk gently upon the earth as you would be a good guest in a neighbor's house.

2. People are precious. Be gentle with your neighbor—none of us knows what it is like to be another. Walk a mile in their moccasins.

3. Our being here is both privilege and right. Be gentle with yourself—aspire to be more than you are—but accept your finitude and your contingency.

4. Love people, use things. Treat people as ends, not means. People must not be used for our ulterior purposes.

5. Doing good is not about keeping score. Affirm the importance of being good for nothing. Do good for its own sake.

6. Let the inner and the outer person be the same. Be honest with yourself.

7. Deeds are more important than creeds. So act that your behavior speaks louder than your words.

8. This world is a neighborhood. All people are our neighbors. We are here to share with our neighbors so that everyone has enough, no one has too much, and we share with maximum freedom and minimum coercion.

9. And to show a little more humor than the Ten Commandments: Always be a little kinder than necessary.

10. Finally, "Do unto others 20 percent better than you would have them do unto you—20 percent to correct for subjective error."

The Golden Ladder of Giving According to Maimonides

1. To give reluctantly, the gift of the hand, but not of the heart.

2. To give cheerfully, but not in proportion to need.

3. To give cheerfully and proportionately, but not until solicited.

4. To give cheerfully, proportionately, and unsolicited, but to put the gift into the poor [person's] hand, thus creating shame.

5. To give in such a way that the distressed may know their benefactor, without being known to him/her.

6. To know the objects of our bounty, but remain unknown to them.

7. To give so that the benefactor may not know those whom he/she has relieved, and they shall not know him/her.

8. To prevent poverty by teaching a trade, setting a man/woman up in business, or in some way preventing the need of charity. Giving is most blessed and most acceptable when the donor remains completely anonymous.

—*Quotations of Courage and Vision*, edited by Carl Hermann

Background Reading

Gilligan, Carol. "Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle," *In a Different Voice, Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. reprint ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Kohlberg, Lawrence. "Continuities in Childhood and Adult Moral Development Revisited," *Moralization, the Cognitive Developmental Approach*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1973.

SESSION PLAN

Ethical Ten Commandments — 45 minutes

Ask the group to share the ethical ten commandments that they prepared for today's session. You can break the ice by sharing your own commandments.

Record all statements on newsprint, taking care not to repeat any. When all commandments have been recorded, open a general discussion of what has been shared in the group so far.

A Moral Dilemma — 30 minutes

Now ask the group to apply these ethical commandments to moral dilemmas. Have participants form groups of five or six. Ask them to read the following moral dilemmas. Each group should take a separate case study.

Groups should come to a conclusion, stating reasons for consensus or dissensus. Have them answer the following questions:

- How did you come to your decision on each of the ethical problems?
- What ethical principles were involved in making your decision?
- How were these principles applied?

Heinz's Dilemma

In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The medicine was expensive to manufacture, and the druggist was charging ten times what it cost him to make. He paid $200 for the radium and charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug.

The sick woman's husband, Heinz, could not afford that amount and went to everyone he knew to borrow the money. But he could raise only $1,000, half of what the drug cost. Heinz told the druggist that his wife was dying. He asked the druggist if he could buy the medicine at a cheaper price or pay him later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz became desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the medicine for his wife. He was caught.

- Should Heinz have stolen the drug? Why?
- Which is worse, letting someone die or stealing? Why?
- What does the "value of life" mean to you? Why?
- Is there a good reason for Heinz to steal if he doesn't love his wife?
- Would it be right to steal for a stranger if it is right to steal for a wife? Why?
- Would it be right to steal for a beloved pet? Why or why not?
- Should the judge sentence Heinz or should he let him free? Why?

To Conceive or Not to Conceive

A couple conceives a child in the hope that the baby's bone marrow cells can save the life of their teenage daughter Anissa, who is dying of cancer. It turns out that the baby's bone marrow will be compatible for their 17-year-old daughter, who has been diagnosed with leukemia.

"We've been searching for a donor for almost two years and we haven't been able to find anybody, so this is the only alternative," Abe Ayala said. "We can't just stand idly by and do nothing."

The Ayalas live in a Los Angeles suburb with Anissa and son Arron, 19. They were told that Anissa has a 70 percent to 80 percent chance of surviving if she received a transplant of stem cells—bone marrow cells that help produce various blood cells—but no chance if she doesn't. None of the Alayas have compatible marrow. So against the advice of Anissa's doctor and after years of resisting his wife's wish to have another child, Abe Ayala,

45, had his vasectomy reversed. Mary Alaya delivered in April of 1990. One medical expert said, "It is troublesome to say the least. . . . The Alaya's decision means we're willing to treat people like objects, and I don't think we ought to do that."

—*The Associated Press*, February 17, 1990

- Should the Ayalas have conceived a child for the sole purpose of saving their grown daughter's life?
- Is the medical ethicist right that their decision treats the baby as an object—a means to an end?
- Does the end of hoping to save their daughter justify the means of having a baby that one parent does not want?
- If you were their doctor, what would you have said?
- How do your ethical commandments relate to this case study?
- The Ayalas's solution worked. How does this affect your view?

Conscientious Objector Status

Tell the group that people throughout history have objected to war because of their religious beliefs. Explain the definition of conscientious objection and why people file for conscientious objector status.

Have the group complete a mock application for conscientious objector status by answering the following questions:

- Describe the nature of your belief, which is the basis of your claim, and state why you consider it to be based on religious training and belief.
- Explain how, when, or from what source you received the religious training and acquired the religious belief that is the basis of your claim.
- Have you ever expressed the views herein stated as the basis of your claim in a public, private, written, or oral way? Give examples.

The Golden Ladder of Giving — 15 minutes

Read aloud the following passage and ask participants to rearrange the rungs in the golden ladder of giving:

> Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1135–1204) was a rabbi, physician, and philosopher—one of the greatest Hebrew scholars. He compiled a considerable body of Jewish oral law into the Mishna Torah, also called the "Strong Hand."

The "rungs" of that ladder are listed on Worksheet 4, but out of order. Rearrange these rungs into what you believe is the proper order. Use 1 to indicate the lowest level of giving and 8 for the highest level of giving. When you have completed the ranking, discuss your choices and compare them with Maimonides', which are listed at the end of the reading for this session.

Homework and Preparation for Session 8

- Have participants continue their credo writing. If the word "commandments" puts them off, what other term or terms would they use? Why? Are their "commandments" more like principles or guidelines than commandments? What is the relevance of the biblical Ten Commandments today? Which ones should not be there? Ask participants to distinguish the difference in style and substance between their list and that from Exodus. It is said we are in a post-modern age in which there are no absolutes. Do they agree? Can a society exist without absolutes? Can it exist without some consensus on ethical behavior? How do they feel about the joke cited in the Introductory Essay that says Unitarian Universalists believe in the Ten Suggestions, but not the Ten Commandments? Why?
- Ask participants to do the reading for the next session.

WORKSHEET 4

THE GOLDEN LADDER OF GIVING

Cite the rungs in the golden ladder of giving:

___ to know the objects of our bounty, but remain unknown to them.

___ to prevent poverty by teaching a trade, setting a man/woman up in business, or in some other way preventing the need of charity.

___ to give reluctantly, the gift of the hand, but not of the heart.

___ to give in such a way that the distressed may know their benefactor, without being known to him/her.

___ to give cheerfully, but not in proportion to need.

___ to give so that the benefactor may not know those whom he/she has relieved, and they shall not know him/her.

___ to give cheerfully and proportionately, but not until solicited.

___ to give cheerfully, proportionately, and unsolicited, but to put the gift into the poor [person's] hand, thus creating shame.

After you have finished rearranging the items, answer the following discussion questions.

- What is charity?
- What is love?
- Are charity and love identical?
- Why did you rank the "rungs" as you did?
- What insights did you gain from this exercise?