

Free Will of Free Won't  
Presented by Rev. Margie King Saphier on January 2, 2005  
At United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA

Davidson Loehr, UU minister in Austin, TX recently delivered a sermon "Fascism in America." In the sermon, he stated, "It is both accurate and helpful for us to understand **fundamentalism as religious fascism**, and **fascism as political fundamentalism**. They both come from very primitive parts of us that have always been the default setting of our species: amity toward our in-group, enmity toward out-groups, hierarchial deference to alpha male figures, a powerful identification with our territory. And so forth. It is that brutal default setting that all civilizations, [and especially religion,] have tried to raise us above, but it is always a fragile thing, civilization [and religion], and has to be achieved over and over again."

William Butler Yeats says, "Free will is a terrible beauty," because too often our actions arise out of this default setting inflicting pain and suffering on ourselves and on others. This default setting is based on the mind's perception of who we are and how we relate to others and the world. All too often our perceptions have led to the horrors of racism and slavery, to the horrors of Nazism and the holocaust, just to mention two. When we believe our perceptions to be absolute truth, we become fearful when we think they are being challenged or are under attack. Fundamentalism, whether it is religious or political, espouses absolute truths about who we are and about the meaning of life.

In early December I attended a Buddhist workshop/retreat on The Essentials of Buddhist Psychology. The Buddha did not use the term "primitive parts;" instead he used the terms: delusion or ignorance, hatred and greed. The default setting that gives birth to these three states of mind is FEAR - Fear of impermanence.

Although the states of mind of fear, greed, hatred and ignorance are always with us, the Buddha says there is liberation when we awaken to their presence. With this new awareness, we no longer identify with them. This is the beginning of free won't. Awareness requires that we confront the harsh realities of our personal lives unflinchingly without innocent sentimentalism, narcissistic aggrandizement, or cold-hearted cynicism. In this awareness we cease to cling to our highly prized individualism; instead actions that invite mutuality, respect and equality present themselves as possibilities. This affords us the possibility of choice so that we can freely say "no" to fear, greed, hatred, and ignorance; and say "yes" to clarity, creativity, compassion, mutuality and wisdom that freely arise out of the knowledge that all existence is interdependent.

The Buddha taught that thoughts arise, but we are not the agent that makes them arise – they just arise. This is a contradiction to Western thinking. In Western thinking there is an agent: the permanent soul, or ego. What is so interesting is that science is beginning to prove that this is so. Through imagery of the brain, researchers can detect when brain activity [meaning thoughts arising] is occurring; but the individual being tested is not aware of the thought until moments later. His or her awareness of the thought occurs after the thought initially arises. If you doubt this finding, just think back to a time when you were surprised by a startling thought and you asked yourself "Where did that thought come from?"

If we, ourselves, are not the source of arising thoughts, who or what is? God? The Over Soul as suggested by Emerson in this morning's reading? The Buddha says the answer cannot be proven and therefore is irrelevant. In Buddhism, existence is fluid with thoughts rising and falling in the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Personally, I am beginning to think that the steady stream of thoughts is

part of the constant creative process of the Universe. Unto themselves thoughts are not bad or good; but thoughts that are not attended with awareness can lead to unskilled actions. On the other hand when we are awake and aware we are a part of the ever-evolving creative process.

How do unchecked stream of thoughts lead to the possibility of fascism? In the United States, democracy has always been a struggle between two opposing forces: the social movements of populism, progressivism and trade unionism versus the forces of corruption, graft and greed of plutocratic elites and corrupt politicians. This struggle is a reflection of the persistence of fear, greed, hatred and ignorance and how it can appear in many and diverse forms. Fascism is one of those forms. Loehr shows how this is so by drawing on "an essay titled 'Fascism Anyone?,' in which Dr. Lawrence Britt, a political scientist, identifies social and political agendas common to fascist regimes. His comparisons of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Suharto, and Pinochet yielded the following list of 14 'identifying characteristics of fascism.' (The following article is from Free Inquiry magazine, Volume 23, Number 2. Read at [www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/britt\\_23\\_2.htm](http://www.secularhumanism.org/library/fi/britt_23_2.htm))

See how familiar they sound.

**"1. Powerful and Continuing Nationalism:** Fascist regimes tend to make constant use of patriotic mottos, slogans, symbols, songs, and other paraphernalia. Flags are seen everywhere, as are flag symbols on clothing and in public displays.

### **2. Disdain for the Recognition of Human Rights**

Because of fear of enemies and the need for security, the people in fascist regimes are persuaded that human rights can be ignored in certain cases because of "need." The people tend to look the other way or even approve of torture, summary executions, assassinations, long incarcerations of prisoners, etc.

### **3. Identification of Enemies/Scapegoats as a Unifying Cause**

The people are rallied into a unifying patriotic frenzy over the need to eliminate a perceived common threat or foe: racial, ethnic or religious minorities; liberals; communists; socialists, terrorists, etc.

#### **4. Supremacy of the Military**

Even when there are widespread domestic problems, the military is given a disproportionate amount of government funding, and the domestic agenda is neglected. Soldiers and military service are glamorized.

#### **5. Rampant Sexism**

The governments of fascist nations tend to be almost exclusively male-dominated. Under fascist regimes, traditional gender roles are made more rigid. Opposition to abortion is high, as is homophobia and anti-gay legislation and national policy.

#### **6. Controlled Mass Media**

Sometimes the media is directly controlled by the government, but in other cases, the media is indirectly controlled by government regulation, or sympathetic media spokespeople and executives. Censorship, especially in wartime, is very common.

#### **7. Obsession with National Security**

Fear is used as a motivational tool by the government over the masses.

#### **8. Religion and Government are Intertwined**

Governments in fascist nations tend to use the most common religion in the nation as a tool to manipulate public opinion. Religious rhetoric and terminology is common from government leaders, even when the major tenets of the religion are diametrically opposed to the government's policies or actions.

#### **9. Corporate Power is Protected**

The industrial and business aristocracy of a fascist nation often are the ones who put the government leaders into power, creating a mutually beneficial business/government relationship and power elite.

#### **10. Labor Power is Suppressed**

Because the organizing power of labor is the only real threat to a fascist government, labor unions are either eliminated entirely, or are severely suppressed.

### **11. Disdain for Intellectuals and the Arts**

Fascist nations tend to promote and tolerate open hostility to higher education, and academia. It is not uncommon for professors and other academics to be censored or even arrested. Free expression in the arts is openly attacked, and governments often refuse to fund the arts.

### **12. Obsession with Crime and Punishment**

Under fascist regimes, the police are given almost limitless power to enforce laws. The people are often willing to overlook police abuses and even forego civil liberties in the name of patriotism. There is often a national police force with virtually unlimited power in fascist nations

### **13. Rampant Cronyism and Corruption**

Fascist regimes almost always are governed by groups of friends and associates who appoint each other to government positions and use governmental power and authority to protect their friends from accountability. It is not uncommon in fascist regimes for national resources and even treasures to be appropriated or even outright stolen by government leaders.

### **14. Fraudulent Elections**

Sometimes elections in fascist nations are a complete sham. Other times elections are manipulated by smear campaigns against or even assassination of opposition candidates, use of legislation to control voting numbers or political district boundaries, and manipulation of the media. Fascist nations also typically use their judiciaries to manipulate or control elections.”

I find this list frightening. These fourteen agendas have the smell of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – fear, greed, hatred and ignorance. When I first read the Fourteen Agendas of Fascism I saw them as a threat to all liberals – and

they are; but as I read them many times over I came to realize they are not new to this country. They have been extensively used in our history against African Americans, Native Americans, as well as other minorities.

So how are we to proceed? In Democracy Matters, Cornell West turns to the legacies of Socrates, the Jewish prophets, Jesus and Martin Luther King, Jr. for answers. West explains that “In Athenian democracy Socrates is a towering figure because it was his central mission to combat corruptions of elite power by questioning the narrow ideologies and prejudicial thinking of his day. The Socratic love of wisdom holds not only that the unexamined life is not worth living, but also that to be human and a democratic citizen requires that one muster the courage to think critically for oneself and ask questions like: What is justice? What is courage? What is piety?” As important as these questions are, in isolation they have their limits. Socrates profound rationalism refuses to connect this intellectual self-mastery to a heartfelt solidarity with the agony and anguish of the oppressed. So West turns to the Jewish prophetic tradition, which begins with the cries for help and tears of sorrow of the oppressed. This prophetic tradition draws its authority from Divine compassion, which undergirds the divine love of justice just as human compassion undergirds the prophetic love of justice. West looks to the Christian movement that emerged out of prophetic Judaism. It took the cries of the weak and oppressed and claimed that God suffered with the oppressed as witnessed in the crucifixion of Jesus. The ultimate Christian paradox of God crucified in history under the Roman empire is that the love and justice that appear so weak may be strong, that love and justice that seem so foolish may be wise, and that love and justice that strike imperial elites as easily disposable may be inescapably indispensable.

It was Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King, who understood that it would take tremendous Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope to

break the back of American apartheid – a form of fascism. “Yet he also realized it would take even more vision and courage to dismantle imperial dimensions of the American democratic experiment and to provide genuine equality of opportunity to all. When King said that bombs dropped on VietNam also landed in American ghettos – and in white Appalachia, on yellow street corners, in red lands, brown barrios, or black hoods – he was highlighting the close link between empire, class, and race; between imperial wars, wealth inequality, and racist practices. King truly understood the reverberations that are always present within the interdependent web of existence.

West draws on another source for the fight for democracy: it is the black American invention of the blues. West explains, “The blues is the most profound interpretation of tragicomic hope in America. The blues encourages us to confront the harsh realities of our political and personal lives unflinchingly without innocent sentimentalism or coldhearted cynicism. The blues forge a mature hope that fortifies us on the slippery tightrope of Socratic question and prophetic witness in imperial America.”

But all these approaches, including our understanding of Divine Love Incarnate and King’s compelling vision of compassionate justice and radically inclusive democracy, –can become distortions unless we free ourselves of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse – fear, ignorance, greed and hatred. So I leave you with this Buddhist teaching of liberation:

The thought manifests the word.

The word manifests the deed.

The deed deepens into habit, and the habit hardens into character.

So watch the thought and its way with care, and let it spring from love

Born out of concern for all beings.

