

## Sunday Service, June 7, 2009

### Bioethics and the Media

Marsha Diggs, Presenter

"Ethics, too, are nothing but reverence for life. This is what gives me the fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, promoting, and enhancing life, and that destroying, injuring, and limiting life are evil." ~Albert Schweitzer in *Civilization and Ethics*, 1949

*We dedicate our chalice with these words by Joy Atkinson:*

#### **The Womb of Stars**

The womb of stars embraces us; remnants of their fiery furnaces pulse through our veins.

We are the stars, the dust of explosions cast across space.

We are of the earth: we breathe and live in the breath of ancient plants and beasts.

Their cells nourish the soil: we build our communities on the harvest of their gifts. Our fingers trace the curves carved on clay and stone by forebears unknown to us.

We are a part of the great circle of humanity gathered around the fire, the hearth, the altar.

We gather anew this day to celebrate our common heritage.

*Our Opening Words are by Martha Kirby Capo:*

#### **Many Paths**

As we enter this sacred, welcoming space,  
Let us renew both our commitment and our covenant:

There are those among us who have struggled with hardship in the past week;  
May they find renewed strength in this community of faith.

There are those among us who have cherished an unexpected joy in the past week;  
May their rejoicing be celebrated in this community of faith.

There are those among us who have endured a loss in the past week;  
May their hope be uplifted again in this community of faith.

There are those among us who have wrestled with questions that seem to have no answer in the past week;  
May they find sanctuary during their search in this community of faith.

As we commit to continue our free and responsible search for Truth, may we covenant to honor the many paths that have led us to this community of faith.  
May it be so.

## Reading and Meditation

Our reading this morning is by Lois McMaster Bujold:

“All fiction is psychological allegory, myth, a morality play on some level. But Science Fiction deals with allegories of change. And change is the hallmark of our age. . . the problems that are now puzzling ethicists, lawyers, and legislators—and in a democracy, the public—have been discussed in an on-going forum for almost two hundred years. That dialogue is called science fiction. But the moral dilemmas of the new biotech are not to be resolved in fiction. Actual morality is solely the function of individuals possessed of free will and operating in the present reality. Fiction can talk, play, illuminate, spot traps, and suggest alternatives. It is not the arena of action.”

### Theme:

Because we are between ministers, we are currently lay lead. Our presenter today is Marsha Diggs, who is also the president of our congregation. Marsha has been fascinated by technology and the ethical issues it presents for over thirty years, since she was an EMT for Sedgwick County. As both a caregiver and a supportive family member, Marsha has observed and experienced bioethical choices in the field of medicine.

### Bioethics and the Media

Months ago the worship committee scheduled next week’s speaker, David Bailey, a survivor of cancer. I offered then to do today’s presentation as a companion piece, a different perspective on how modern medicine has improved our lives while challenging our thinking and pre-conceived notions.

This has been a rough week for me. This past week has made this topic more timely, and painfully more personal than it was originally planned to be. The deaths of Dr. George Tiller and Margaret Brandys, our office manager, have bioethical implications, which I will address today.

What do we mean when we say bioethics? According to The Principles of Biomedical Ethics, “the field of bioethics addresses a broad swath of human inquiry, ranging from debates over the boundaries of life (e.g. abortion, euthanasia) to the allocation of scarce health care resources (e.g. organ donation, health care rationing) to the right to turn down medical care for religious or

cultural reasons. Bioethicists often disagree among themselves over the precise limits of their discipline, debating whether the field should concern itself with the ethical evaluation of all questions involving biology and medicine, or only a subset of these questions. . . . However, most bioethicists share a commitment to discussing these complex issues in an honest, civil and intelligent way, using tools from the many different disciplines to produce meaningful frameworks for analysis.”

Originally, this presentation started with a simple question, “How do we make the ethical and personal choices that access to new technology has made available to us?”

First, I thought about the ways that I had confronted new ideas—Personally, I explored the idea of cloning with Huxley in *Brave New World*, which was written in 1932, long before a sheep named Dolly. I considered bioengineering of animals as I read the writings of H. G. Wells. I contemplated man’s drive to master creation in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I pondered the consequences of extending the human life span when I read *Time Enough for Love* by Robert Heinlein. Speculative fiction is literature; it’s story telling. And the stories that we tell are about ourselves.

But it is not science. Science is something that mankind **does**. So today I propose that we look at several questions together: How are our actions influenced by our ethics? How do most people decide on the “right” and “wrong” of biotechnology? Where does our “moral majority” glean the information that informs their personal choices and decision making in the voting booth? And finally what is the role of religion in making information about ethical choices available?

Popular media often makes short shrift of complex ideas and moral deliberations, but it can also support bioethical conversations. Bioethics should

embrace the role of the media in bringing issues to public attention and in reinforcing bioethics as a field.

Please note that there is dissatisfaction with the media within the field of bioethics. Although the popular media has given bioethical issues considerable publicity over the past twenty-five years, scholars in bioethics have often been uneasy with the coverage and worried about its inadequacies. Perhaps these misgivings are inevitable. As a scholarly field, after all, bioethics is committed to serious deliberation about complex issues. The popular media appear to simplify the complex. "They" reduce deliberate and nuanced argument to sound bites while favoring the sensational over the carefully argued, and featuring the alluring, sensational image instead of the closely considered issue.

However, I believe that this is a partial and incomplete picture of mass media and other communication practices. In fact, far from being antagonistic, the popular media helps to define bioethics. Recognizing this, however, requires paying attention to an important distinction in media studies: namely, that communication is not simply a process of transmitting ideas and information, but is also a mode of enhancing the shared understandings within a group or society.

Recall "The medium is the message"; which was a phrase coined by Marshall McLuhan referring to the symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. [*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964].

Often the grumbling about the media is a form of distancing that helps scholarly bio-ethicists differentiate themselves. However, that distancing also undermines their effectiveness because media presentations of bioethics have in fact bestowed broader public legitimacy upon bioethical issues, institutions, and practitioners.

In *Bioethics and the Rituals of Media*, Peter Simonson states

“There are different perspectives from which to view any mode of communication, from a journal article to an ethics committee meeting, a white lab coat on a philosopher, a photograph on a desk, an e-mail message, or a Hollywood blockbuster. The Encyclopedia of Bioethics . . . calls news media “organizations that voluntarily take on the responsibility of providing needed information to the community” and asserts that “both journalists and bioethicists take their job to be informing public debate about important issues.” But when the NBC Nightly News runs a story on human cloning, its reporters are not using images and discourse just to impart facts and information. They are also reaffirming conventions of journalistic authority and re-legitimizing the expertise of those they interview. From all that is happening in the world, they are picking out this event as worthy of shared, public attention. And they are describing this event within a particular narrative frame, say the conflict of values or the triumphs of technology.

Like other acts of communication, news broadcasts do not simply link sender and receiver in networks of information exchange, but also enact and reaffirm the values, understandings, ideologies, and common practices of social groups.”

Wow. The media reaffirms values of our social groups. Without going into the extensive side issue of who controls the press and what their politics are—is this really a new idea for any of us? But we are used to considering and confronting media bias in news reporting. Do we recognize and internalize the impact of media entertainment on our ethical development?

Recall that in my personal analysis of pivotal influences during my young adulthood, in my consideration of bioethics, I used science fiction. So, even though it is not true of the people in this room, in 2007 statistics on reading, included these facts: 58% of the adult U.S. population never read a book after leaving school and 80% of U.S. families did not buy or read a book in the previous

year (2006). And a 2004 survey by the U.S. TV industry said the average adult spent 108 hours reading books that year (about 2 hours per week) while the same average adult spent 1546 hours watching TV in the same year (or about 30 hours weekly).

Therefore, while we may develop our viewpoints from reasoned examination of topical literature, like the Handbook of Bioethics and Religion that I read, our fellow Americans are influenced by the popular media and their pulpits. Could TV, movies, and the internet be that influential?

Let me tell you a story about my grandmother. She contended that the movie "Gone with the Wind" was the beginning of the end of civilization. It was the first time "strong language" was allowed in the movies, and thereafter profanity just proliferated in polite society – "Frankly my dear, I don't give damn" has lead down quite a slippery slope, according to my granny.

Daily I see the influences of mass media in my student's attire, vocabulary, and attitudes. I don't think that it is a stretch at all to believe that their ethical values are also being shaped by the morass of information that they take in. In the absence of strong parental influences or a positive religious input, such as our children received during the OWL program, youth today default to information gleaned from entertainment and the internet.

What messages about reproductive choices are popular TV shows such as *John and Kate plus Eight*, *The Duggars: Eighteen and Counting* or *Twelve for Dinner* giving to the American population? Has the feeding frenzy of news services about the octuplets lead to informed decision making on the part of the American public? In an age when there are questions about the allocation of resources, where zero population growth is a burgeoning topic in ecological and green conversations, what message do multiple entertainment programs about ginormous families give to the viewing public? And yet the ethics of the insurance

companies who refuse coverage for infertility treatments that would reduce the risk of multiple births are also never mentioned.

For me, all bioethical decisions that I make, have to be my decisions, based on my beliefs and my personal system of values. I do not want, nor do I have faith in governmental or religious organizations dictating how I live my life. Another bioethical issue regarding reproductive choices is that of abortion. Few other bioethical decisions are as hotly debated. But from my point of view, Dr. Tiller lived a highly ethical life. He made an ethical decision to meet the needs of women, and additionally, he did not attempt to make their choices for them. Dr. Tiller trusted women to make the right choice for themselves.

Dr. George Tiller once said his "gifts of understanding" helped him bring a service to women that aided them in fulfilling their dreams of a happy, healthy family. It was important, he said, that women have a choice when dealing with technology that can diagnose severe fetal abnormalities before a baby is born. "Prenatal testing without prenatal choices is medical fraud," he declared. A fraud he did not condone nor stand silently by and allow to occur.

Last week, his ethical voice was silenced. I am reminded of the writings of John Donne ". . . *No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. . .*". I was diminished last week, with the assassination of Dr. Tiller. And as a faith community, we were further diminished with the death of our Office Manager, Margaret.

The bell tolled for Margaret last week when her family had to face and make tough bioethical decisions. After careful consideration, prayer and thoughtful contemplation, Margaret was removed from the respirator. Her passing was peaceful, and their faith lead Margaret's son, Erick, and brother, Bill, to believe that the spark of life that they called mother and sister had already fled this plane of existence.

The medical choices and actions that Erick and Bill made were influenced by their faith, with careful moral and ethical consideration for their actions and the possible consequences of those choices. Bill and Erick took time to think and make a reasoned decision. They had a foundation of faith that supported them in their choices.

When does life begin and when does it end? These are the questions at the very heart of bioethics. I submit that the answer is as individual as each of us. Often religious institutions try to dictate a moral code, instead of helping the individual develop their own code of ethics within the framework of their faith.

As Unitarian Universalist, we are rugged individualists—and our free and responsible search for truth and meaning does not include looking to any institution to tell us what to believe. But we might choose to look at any reasoned and rational discussion as part of our responsible search for truth.

Nonetheless, you still might be surprised to find that most major religions have some repository of bioethical research: The National Catholic Bioethics Center, The Academic Coalition for Jewish Bioethics, and Bioethics International are just a few resources that try to answer those questions created by the advent of modern technology. Christian (both Catholic and Protestant), Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Unitarian Universalist and Buddhist viewpoints are divergent on the topics of assisted suicide, stem cell research, cloning, reproductive health, and alternative medicine.

Today, I leave you with more questions—to reflect upon during your individual searches for truth:

What role should religion play in ethical policymaking in a religiously pluralistic society? How is the public informed about bioethical conflicts and issues? Who legitimately speaks for religion in public bioethics? What can religion contribute to our understanding of ethics? Is there value in faith-based contributions to healthcare issues?

As a mathematician, let me conclude with this thought from Aristotle: "We do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but rather we have virtue or excellence because we have acted rightly."

### Closing Words

Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. Those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act-- they will be blessed in their doing.

~James 1. Amen, Ashay, Namasté, Shalom, and Blessed Be.