

## **Mark Tuller on “Virtue”, September 21, 2025 at UUFSD**

Today I’m talking about virtue, because the qualities of virtue don’t figure much today. The president’s Big Beautiful Bill passed with hardly any dissenting Republican votes. Where was their backbone? Why did they cave in the face of a clearly immoral vote? Weren’t these virtuous people? Had they never been inspired by the Edward R. Murrow quote: “We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men.”

Virtue is character. It’s the constant struggle to be a better person. To live up to the standards of honesty, perseverance, compassion, respect, integrity, and humility, that a person of character aspires to. My message is that the language and instruction of virtue has fallen out of fashion, and I’d like to see it return—a clear and prescriptive and inspiring insistence upon developing virtuous character.

I.

This is my third annual humanist sermon. When Paul Palmer left us the funds that built Palmer Library, his only condition was that UUFSD should have an explicitly humanist service every year. So this is

my annual humanist sermon, which to be honest happens about every third year.

Do you remember we had a congregational self-evaluation survey earlier this year? The Board asked about community, Sunday services, outreach, and so forth. They also asked how important spiritual growth is to us, and how well we're meeting it.

The survey showed a 20-point gap between aspiration and reality on spiritual growth, with 80% saying it's important and only 57% saying it's true. So there's agreement we should work harder at whatever "spiritual growth" means. Since we're UUs, it means different things to different people. Believers may regard it as exploring religious belief in a higher power or the mystery of the human spirit; non-believers and humanists may regard it as the study of ethics and perfecting of virtue; but we seem to agree there's something ineffable or moral that needs more attention.

That's because spiritual growth is actually the intermediary between a well-meaning congregation and the social justice and other life-affirming activities the congregation does. UUFSD isn't a Political Action Committee or an NGO—a non-governmental organization—that has a secular goal in mind and can jump directly to acting upon it. We're

a religious organization, which implies that our outward actions must flow from, or be impelled by, some religious sentiment. So it's a more intensive development of that intervening religious sentiment that is wanting.

How to address that? We've got Sunday services, Sacred Circles, Sacred Texts, and other opportunities to explore and learn about spiritual growth so we're doing a lot already. But developing and internalizing that religious sentiment—who am I, what am I doing here, how can I be a better person?—is central to what a religion does so let's do more. Spiritual growth is the meaning that propels our action, and everyone craves meaning.

I suggest moral instruction.

I think we could use, and society could use, much more fire and prescriptiveness about moral character—more concrete spiritual insistence upon virtue.

II.

In a less ironic and self-indulgent time, the struggle for virtue was everywhere. People could proudly and unselfconsciously speak of developing virtue and persevering over life's challenges to maintain your honesty and integrity, to keep going in the face of failure, to

discipline yourself to stay prudent and moderate and compassionate and respectful—the idea that there are black and white character traits, and that we have an obligation to develop and embody the good ones. To develop your character through hard work, grit, and courage was not vaguely quaint or old fashioned or open to argument, it was settled good sense proven by experience over time.

Do children memorize poems anymore? Because I have this one graven on my heart:

if you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue; or walk with kings nor lose the common touch; if neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you; if all men count with you but none too much. If you can fill the unforgiving minute with 60 seconds worth of distance run, yours is the earth and everything that's in it and which is more you'll be a man my son.

Remember that genre of literature—the character-building, virtue-instilling, meant-to-inspire literature?

Here's one on grit:

If you strike a thorn or rose, keep a going!

If it hails or if it snows, keep a going!

Taint no use to sit and whine, when the fish ain't on your line

Bait your hook and keep a-trying, keep a going!

They used to call this the Protestant ethic—hard work, moderation, rigid honesty and responsibility, and obligation—the certainty that privilege brings with it clear duties.

And the opposite was true as well. Laziness, selfishness, pride, the seven deadly sins, were tangible things to be avoided in yourself and seen for what they are in others.

Ben Franklin's *Autobiography* is a good example of what I'm talking about. It was obvious to Ben that moral improvement was desirable and achievable, a skill to be mastered. He made a list of thirteen virtues, and tracked his daily progress, not to boast, but to stay accountable. His tone is practical and humble, rooted in the Enlightenment ideal that reason and discipline can elevate character. Franklin exemplifies unselfconscious virtue: striving without vanity, reforming without drama, and believing in moral progress as a real possibility.

Here are some of his virtues.

**Industry** – Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; cut off all unnecessary actions.

**Justice** – Wrong none by doing injuries or omitting the benefits that are your duty.

**Moderation** – Avoid extremes; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.

**Resolution** – Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.

**Sincerity** – Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly, and, if you speak, speak accordingly.

**Tranquillity** – Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.

**Humility** – Imitate Jesus and Socrates

This aura of dutiful and modest living was absorbed by people for generations. It created a **moral atmosphere** that infused ordinary life with an assumed sense of responsibility, discipline, and decency.

Books like McGuffey's Readers in the 1800s weren't just for teaching reading. They taught children how to be good. They shaped moral instincts. From the book:

*“George had promised to return the borrowed rake by sundown. Though it rained, he put on his cloak and walked the mile, for he knew a promise made was a debt unpaid.”*

These little parables were about frugality, punctuality, honesty, temperance, and industry—Franklin's ideals, in story form.

So people's everyday correspondence often showed the same tone of modest certainty, self-restraint, and duty without drama. Here's one:

*"Your father has taken on extra work at the mill to send Harry to school. He says, 'We must do what we can, not what is easy.'"*

You can feel the culture of steadfast decency.

III.

I think there's been a collapse of virtue. A collapse of that sense that there are actual, known virtues, and that it is one's duty to strive for them. A collapse of putting your own well-being on the line to protect your commitment to doing the right thing.

Look, I don't know if people, on the whole and on the average, were actually more virtuous than now. Maybe there's a constant percentage of heroes and scoundrels and nothing can be done. But it does seem to me that that fixed, certain, and stable list of desirable character traits that make up virtue has been replaced by a grayer, fuzzier, more fluid and ultimately more narcissistic ethos.

One of my favorite writers, David Brooks, put it this way: "Today we live in a world in which many, or even most, people no longer have a sense that there is a permanent moral order to the universe." "People have been cut off from any vision of their ultimate purpose." "[They're]

unschooled in the virtues that are practical tools for leading a good life; honesty, fidelity, compassion, other-centeredness.”

It seems to me today’s zeitgeist is about moral relativism and “you do you” ethics. More stress on self-esteem than self-mastery. An ethos more therapeutic or even narcissistic, rather than a stern admonition to moral struggle. Feelings and self-expression rather than conduct. To quote David Brooks again, “many have come to regard the traditions of moral practice that were so central to the ancient worldview as too inhibiting—they get in the way of maximum individual freedom.”

Why is online behavior so reprehensible? Because it is anonymous, and these moral cowards have never been taught the obligation to say something directly to someone's face—or online, to say it with their name attached. They never learned Longfellow’s line: “Think not because no man sees, such things will remain unseen.”

How did we go from emphasizing moral formation to a world where promoting virtue seems almost quaint?

I don’t know the sociology of this, and I don’t want to go into it. It’s probably secularization and atomization and relaxed institutional norms. There are upsides to this change: Overall we’ve become more pluralistic, more tolerant, less dogmatic. But lost in the process has been

a common language for talking about character. Now, I'm not advocating for a return to rigid or authoritarian moral systems. But I do believe we've swung too far. We've moved from prescription to irony and mockery, from moral aspiration to moral indifference.

#### IV.

We see the result. Public service degraded and belittled, selflessness and accountability mocked and punished, cruelty and outrage as entertainment. And we feel it in ourselves, as the survey shows. The sense that there's more we could do. That something deeper and more binding is needed.

#### V.

I totally agree. And I think, for spiritual growth, the project is recentering virtue. Virtue, when cultivated, roots us. It helps us become the kind of people who can endure hardship without bitterness, wield power without corruption, love others without losing ourselves.

Traditionally, this is where religion came in. Whether it was a sermon, a parable, a sacred text, or a spiritual practice, religion helped provide the stories, metaphors, and communal inspiration that helped shape moral lives. Old-time religion, at its best, insisted on virtue. It

called people to righteousness. It challenged them: Don't lie. Don't be lazy. Don't ignore the poor. Control your appetites. Live in truth.

People respond to a good challenge. People are moved by an inspiring story. People like to keep it simple.

Of course, this moral insistence could be misused. It often was—weaponized to shame, control, or exclude. That's part of why many of us found our way to Unitarian Universalism in the first place: we wanted a faith that embraced diversity, encouraged questioning, and avoided moral authoritarianism.

Look, I know the poem I quoted was by Rudyard Kipling, who was an unabashed White Man's Burden apologist.

But here's a thought experiment. Suppose we had UU Saints—some sort of UU Pantheon of people to be looked up to, studied, and emulated, and not prayed to? It's part of human nature to be inspired by somebody else. Every single bit of human history that ever happened was done by some person.

George Washington and Martin Luther King would be on that list. They've been turned into secular saints already. And the interesting thing is that these people are exemplars not simply of virtue but the struggle to attain virtue. Did Martin Luther King write all of his thesis?

Was he loyal to Coretta? He still had a dream. I know George Washington never said I cannot tell a lie, and he permitted corporal punishment of his slaves. Yet he struggled with their bondage and freed them in his will. But that's part of my point—these were real people with faults and failings who are inspiring because they were trying their best to be good and honorable people. The good is morally instructive, as is the bad, as is the struggle.

You don't need to explain it too much or over-analyze it—these are self-evident virtues—just keep emphasizing it. I think kids should get same emphasis on moral education as everyone now puts on technical and career education. Restore the vocabulary that people can use to talk about their moral lives, and to distinguish a person with character from a person without it.

Here's what I think we should be. I think these are stable virtues:

Don't be a moral coward.

Show self-discipline.

Show moderation.

Be honest.

Don't ignore the vulnerable.

Show compassion.

Have integrity.

Be persistent.

Be courteous

Be responsible.

You'll notice I'm not far away from our 7 or 8 principles.

The inherent worth and dignity of every person?

Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations?

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning?

We're already nicely poised to renew conversation about virtue.

Let's talk louder about character, teach it, praise it, and expect it—from ourselves and from one another, and from other people . Let us make virtue visible again—not through shame or intimidation, but through encouragement and inspiration.

So, finally, do you want to know the purpose of life? I say the purpose is, in a world that's often cynical, distracted, and divided, to remember to live with integrity, responsibility, compassion, and courage.

Thank you.