

## **“Turning Points and Tipping Points”**

Little things can make a big difference. A smile or frown, a word of encouragement or a malicious remark can have consequences much larger than you might imagine.

That was the case, for example, with the playwright Oscar Wilde, an openly gay man living in a repressed Victorian world. His love affair with the son of an aristocrat, Lord Alfred Douglas, scandalized his contemporaries, so that in 1895 he was convicted on charges of sodomy and sentenced to two years of hard labor in the Redding Gaol.

As he left the courtroom after the verdict, a sizeable crowd had gathered to jeer and mock the disgraced man. But among that hostile throng, one of the onlookers managed to catch Wilde’s eye, then quietly tip the brim of his hat in a gesture of courtesy and respect. It was a small act, a simple acknowledgement of common humanity. But the impact was huge, and deeply moving. Writing of that sympathetic touch of the hat, Wilde later commented that “men have gone to heaven for less.”

Think of the times that your life has been changed for the better by small deeds of kindness, or perhaps just the opposite, taken a turn for the worse through everyday acts of omission or neglect. The commonest phrases, like “I love you,” or “I’m so sorry,” have untold power to hurt or heal our world, whether spoken or left unsaid.

Great events sometimes have inconspicuous beginnings. And if this is true on a personal level, it also pertains to the wider world, where we know that what seems like a small case of sniffles in a relatively obscure part of the American housing market can suddenly lead to predictions of double pneumonia for the entire global economy. A financial worry for a handful of investors can quickly become an alarm on Wall Street, which escalates almost overnight to a general panic in the money markets, spreading like the flu.

Indeed, the medical model of a contagion or epidemic can be useful in considering how economies go boom or bust, and how cultures can change, often quickly and dramatically.

If I decide to yawn, for instance, there is a very good chance that a sizeable number of you sitting in the pews may suddenly feel like yawning, too. Just talking about yawning, in fact, is probably giving some of you the urge to stretch your arms and take in a great big open-mouthed inhalation and exhalation of air. And the more people you see around you yawning, the stronger the pent-up urge becomes for you to join in. Laboratory studies show that 55% of human subjects will yawn within five minutes of watching another person yawn. So yawning is contagious, like a virus that spreads from person to person. It stimulates the neural pathways associated with mimicry and copycat behavior. And the other fact to notice is that yawning makes you feel different. Research suggests that yawning increases oxygen flow and cools the brain. While it seems like a reaction to drowsiness, the effect is actually to wake you up and make you more attentive. And if that is true, then just by the very elementary, seemingly

inconsequential act of yawning, I've managed to affect the inward mental and emotional state of a majority of the congregation this morning. Your serotonin levels have increased. The blood vessels in your nasal cavities have grown in diameter. The carbon dioxide levels in your blood have gone down.

The sense of power is overwhelming, for me at least. All you involuntary yawners out there may feel slightly less like the masters of your destiny.

In his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference*, the psychologist Malcolm Gladwell gives numerous illustrations of big trends that started out small. Fashion is like an epidemic, for example, where a few dozen teenagers deciding to wear a hip new brand of sneaker or a retro brand like Hush Puppies can trigger multi-million dollar changes in the shoe industry. Big city crime is like an epidemic, where a few easy preventive measures like cleaning up graffiti led in very short order to a massive drop in the murder rate in Manhattan. It's the nature of contagions to spread rapidly, at an exponential rate. And then, with the right vaccine, they can be brought under control just as fast.

Bing, bing.

We often think of social change as being slow and gradual, taking place in incremental stages. That's how it often seems in an organization like a church, which by its very nature tends to be conservative. Ask why any feature of the First Unitarian Universalist Society is organized the way it is—why our annual meeting is in June, for example, or why we sing hymns on Sunday morning instead of listening to electric guitars or Japanese flutes—and the answer is liable to be that “we've always done it that way.” Tradition is a stable guide in most circumstances.

But sometimes congregations change much more rapidly. This year, for example, our Sunday School enrollment shot up by over twenty percent, after being relatively flat for many, many years. The number of kids participating pretty much ballooned. And we think we know why that is. We made a strategic, deliberate decision to include children in the eleven o' clock worship service, in addition to the nine o' clock. Outwardly, the change didn't seem like much. But it was just enough—a friendly gesture, like a tip of the hat—to signal families that they were welcome here. It was what Malcolm Gladwell calls a tipping point, just enough to shift the balance of the entire system and create a cascade effect. So that we made going to Sunday School into a minor pandemic here in Burlington.

Now imagine what might happen if we could do the same with generosity, or honesty, or non-violence. Imagine an outbreak of idealism and service that could sweep and transform an entire city or civilization, the way the drop in crime transformed New York, made it safe to walk the streets again. It seems to me that the world needs those kinds of accelerated, geometrical changes. Because whether we're thinking about climate or biodiversity, or reining in population or consumption, we don't have time for the slow and gradual approach. The planet has reached a juncture, where unless we can

deliberately manufacture an epidemic of hope and goodwill, we're bound to endure a contagion of desolation and despair.

Congregations like this one, of course, are living proof that a single individual can have a saving influence on the world. The life and teachings of Jesus, or the Buddha, the example of political and spiritual leaders like Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama, are testimony to the fact that goodness and compassion can be every bit as contagious as selfishness and corruption. Religion spreads by word of mouth, by the power of example, "it's caught, not taught." It multiplies like the mustard seed, or like the leaven that travels from loaf to loaf. It becomes a wildfire when the word of a dreamer falls like a spark on the dry grass of people's imagination waiting to be set alight.

And yet religious institutions can also be a part of the problem. I suppose the crowd that jeered in scorn at Oscar Wilde included quite a few good Christians, maybe some deacons or elders of the church. Perhaps it even included a few Unitarians—there were a number of them around in London in those days. For if a single person can change the world for the better, it only takes one or two to set a tone that brings out the worst in other people. For every prophet there's a demagogue. For every Peter or James or Mary Magdalene there's also Judas Iscariot.

Almost every clergyperson, for example, knows about the Rule of Seventeen. I'm sure most of you have never heard of it. Lay people never have. But if we were in a room full of religious professionals, I can say with some certainty that almost every one would be familiar with this rule, which simply states that in any given congregation, at any given time, there are seventeen people who want to fire the minister. It really makes no difference if the church is large or small, a fellowship of thirty members or a mega-church of three thousand. And it really makes no difference whether the minister is a great preacher or a lousy one. He could be quite controversial, like Obama's pastor. Or very tame, like Hillary's. It could be me or Roddy, or our new assistant. It doesn't matter. There are always seventeen people who want him or her gone.

And if twelve disciples were enough to carry the gospel across the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago, seventeen people are almost always enough to create a ruckus. After all, it only takes a handful to start a rumor, to begin the snipping and sniping, just as it only takes a few folks yawning during the sermon to create a snowball that quickly becomes an avalanche. Fortunately, bad behavior of this kind is usually held in check. The social norms within the congregation are strong enough to make civility prevail. But there are times when outlaw behavior starts to run rampant, in times of transition and uncertainty. And people seem especially prone to getting infected with a bad case of church politics at the moment when one minister is leaving and another coming on board, as is the case now.

Be forewarned: people can be mean toward new ministers. Even nice people, gentle types, the kind who lift the brim of their cap to strangers, can be rather nasty. It's as though they've caught a bug that makes them suddenly rude and grumpy. And when that happens, otherwise healthy congregations can become diseased environments in

very short order.

Now this seems strange on the face of it. Why would the good people of this congregation or any congregation ever act in ways that were anything but decent and loving and humane? It's a mystery until you recall the famous experiment that involved the story of the Good Samaritan. The research took place some years ago at Princeton Seminary, where students were preparing to enter the Presbyterian ministry. And the students in the study were told they were to deliver a short sermon on an assigned topic. One group was told they were to preach on church administration and finance, while the other group was told to speak on Jesus' parable of the man who had fallen among thieves, left to die on the Jericho Road, until he was rescued by a passerby. After being given a short time to prepare, students in each group were sent across campus to present their homily.

Along the way, the experimenters had placed an actor, a confederate, playing the part of a derelict man, apparently injured and badly hurt. Now you might be surprised to learn that some of the aspiring preachers passed right by the man; some actually stepped across his bedraggled body in their race to deliver their sermon, while a great many others stopped to actually talk to him and see if they could be of assistance. Some students were naughty, in other words, while some were nice. But it was hard to predict how any individual student would behave. Those who had just finished reading and pondering the parable of the Good Samaritan were just as likely to ignore the derelict as those focused on church fund raising. Only one variable seemed to make a difference in this situation: before setting out to give their sermon, some students had been told they were running late, while others were informed they had plenty of time for their assignment. And those who felt rushed, hurried, almost uniformly acted badly, forgetting their manners and morals, while those who believed they had ample time turned out to be good neighbors to the man in need. All the seminarians were presumably conscientious, caring people in most circumstances. But a very small, almost imperceptible difference—running ten minutes early or ten minutes late to an appointment—had a huge impact on how they each behaved. A matter of minutes, a quarter hour more or less, was enough to make everything tip.

As our own congregation reaches a turning point, celebrating Roddy's eleven years among us and readying to embrace a new pastor, we need to be prepared. We have to stay sharp to navigate the change that lies ahead. We of course need to realize that Elaine's personality and ministerial style will be different than the one we've grown to love. There will be moments of delighted discovery and moments of miscommunication as well. There will be moments when everything could tip one way or the other, very quickly devolve or evolve. And realistically, we need to be sure that this congregation doesn't tip into negativity or conflict.

We need to insure that the seventeen people who always want to fire the minister aren't allowed to determine the dynamic. Because really, too much is at stake. Too much hangs in the balance. Too much depends on the outcome to let this healthy, hopeful and lifegiving community tip into consuming its energies in angst over internal issues of staffing.

Because this Society is like the seed in Jesus' parable. It's like the match on dry tinder. It's a catalyst, like the yeast in the recipe. In a world consumed with warfare, congregations like this one are actively tipping the balance toward peace. In a society where the rich keep getting richer, congregations like this one can start conspiracies for change. In a time when religious extremists hold the stage, we can be the still, small voice of reason and humanity.

We here in Vermont have special reason to believe that even a small state can influence major events, as in our landmark legislation for Civil Unions, which broke ground for other larger states, as in the town meetings where citizen action often begins, as in the example of Jody Williams of Putney who won a Nobel Peace Prize ten years ago for initiating the international campaign against land mines.

It only takes one or two or a few, acting on the power of their convictions. Each of us here can make a difference in the world—maybe a bigger difference than we know. What we accomplish may never make the headlines. Our behind-the-scenes acts of compassion and decency may not be noticed in the world's eyes, but they do add up. As Oscar Wilde said about the man who gravely raised his hat as he marched by in handcuffs, "I have never said a single word to him about what he did."

I do not know to the present moment whether he is aware that I was even conscious of his action. It is not a thing for which one can render formal thanks in formal words. I keep it there as a secret debt that I am glad to think I can never possibly repay. When wisdom has been profitless to me, philosophy barren, and the proverbs and phrases of those who have sought to give me consolation as dust and ashes in my mouth, the memory of that little, lovely, silent act of love, has unsealed for me all the wells of pity; brought me ought of the bitterness of lonely exile into harmony with the wounded, broken, and great heart of the world.

For Oscar Wilde, a tip of the hat became a tipping point, a life transforming encounter. May we also find the grace to tip the world toward love.