

CREATING PERFECT PEOPLE

A sermon preached by the Reverend John H. Nichols to the Channing Memorial Church on February 6, 2011.

In 1935, a German high school textbook posed this math problem. "In one region of the German Reich, there are 4,400 mentally ill people in state institutions. There are 4,500 people receiving state support. There are 1,600 in local hospitals, 200 in homes for the epileptic and 1,500 in welfare homes. The state pays a minimum of 10 million Reich marks per year for these institutions." Here is the question.

1. What is the average cost of these disabled people to the state per inhabitant per year?
2. Using the result calculated from 1 how much does it cost the state if: A. 868 patients live longer than 10 years? B. 260 patients live longer than 20 years? C 112 patients live longer than two years."

In the event that a student may not have grasped the hidden meaning of the first problem, here is the second. "If the construction of an insane asylum requires 6 million Reich Marks, how many housing units for normal families could be built at 15,000 RM apiece if the state could use the 6 million for normal families that we now spend in insane asylums?"

This textbook was written two years after the Nazis came into power. Now we know where this kind of thinking about the high cost of the "unfit" ended. You might be surprised to know where it began, and who began it. It ended, of course, in the Nazi holocaust, but it was begun by religious and secular liberals – many of them Unitarians -- who were operating out of the best of intentions.

At first, it was an intellectual exercise on how to improve the human race. It was carried forward by humanitarian motives to relieve the suffering of the poor. And even as this new science – called eugenics – began to talk about sterilizing those thought to be "unfit" it was supported, nurtured and defended by the leading intellectuals of Britain and America.

We begin our story in Victorian England at a time when many people were living in desperate poverty. Unwilling to find the causes of poverty to be a fall out of their economic and political system, intellectuals had to find some way to believe that the poor were at fault for their poverty. Why else would they be poor if there were not something they did to cause their situation?

Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory suggested to them that perhaps evolution sorts out those who are unfit for survival economically as well as biologically. It was an easy leap to the idea that the poor were poor, because they were biologically inferior. Therefore the long-term solution to poverty was to

discourage the poor from having children and to encourage the children of the “well to do and able” to marry early and breed often. It was Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton, who came up with this idea and called it eugenics. His thinking was that if you know how to breed a better cow, why not learn how to breed a better human.

This seems foolish to us now and even dangerous, because the second half of the Twentieth Century taught us that scientific knowledge is only as good for humankind as the ethics of the people who employ it. But like many social reformers the early eugenicists assumed their own goodness, and never really checked that assumption.

Our story continues in America at the end of World War I. American soldiers returned from Europe, and found that recent European immigrants had taken their jobs. They had not expected this. Because of the rising tide of resentment against these immigrants, eugenics began to get a strong hearing here. Like the British, many Americans were beginning to think they were harboring too many people of inferior means and abilities. Perhaps it was time to shut down Ellis Island.

As it happened, the I.Q. test had just been developed, and eugenicists thought this test was a great way to differentiate between inferior and superior people. Why not take this test down to the docks and discover what sort of immigrant stock we were receiving.

Should it surprise anyone that the researchers concluded 80% of the recent Jewish, Polish, Italian and Russian immigrants tested mentally defective? How very convenient this was for local prejudice, since these were the most recent immigrants, who were competing with returning soldiers for a very few jobs! However since the researchers were still so convinced of their own objectivity and goodness, they never considered their findings might be tainted by the class bias they didn’t think they had.

America’s leading proponent of eugenics, Charles Davenport, published a 1921 study of the social traits of various races. Incredibly, he concluded that Germans ranked highest in traits like humor, generosity and sympathy while the Irish and Italians ranked lowest in these traits. Are you getting a picture here? The Germans were rated more respectable because, having immigrated 100 years earlier, they were established. The Irish and Italians were less well established and so less highly rated.

The study went on to elaborate essentially the prejudices and stereotypes of a generation as if they were established fact. In every instance the researchers assumed that ethnic identity was destiny, because they believed that we, human beings, are just biological machines, who behave according to the sum of our

working parts. If you are an Italian, for example, you just can't help yourself. You have certain Italian traits because you have Italian working parts.

It was a gentle hop, skip and jump from the idea that we are purely what biology makes us to the next idea. If we just eliminate the weak links of the biological chain so that the genetically inferior will not fall in love and reproduce we can eliminate poverty, war, maybe even human error. Why not! It makes sense. The reasons why tampering with an innocent person's life didn't make sense are ethical and religious, but in those days reverting to religion was considered to be the same as reverting to superstition.

At first sterilizing the mentally retarded didn't seem like much to worry about, but then it was just a baby step – intellectually or emotionally – from targeting the mentally retarded to also targeting the mentally ill and then to targeting people suffering from alcoholism or depression. And from there it was just another little step to targeting the rebellious and those deemed just undesirable.

In 1931, Vermont became the 24th state of eventually 30 to pass a sterilization law. At that time, Vermont operated two training schools for orphans or foster children of the Abenaki Indian tribe. The Abenakis believed and still believe they have a proper legal claim to large portions of Vermont.

According to some historians possibly hundreds of those Abenaki children were sterilized without their knowing it. Surely there was no clear eugenic reason for those hidden procedures. However the political reasons were not hard to figure out. The Abenakis are no longer a powerful force in Vermont. Across the country, more than 60,000 people were sterilized. Some had been coerced. Others may not have understood what was going to be done to them before it was too late.

All of this was done in the name of economy, efficiency, kindness and concern for the quality of all life. It was also in the name of efficiency and kindness that Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, writing for the Supreme Court in 1927, explained why it would be better to sterilize a mental patient against her will. He said this would save the state the trouble of having to execute her degenerate offspring for crimes they might later commit or the trouble of having to pay them because they would be unable to earn a living. Holmes was nominally a Unitarian. Many of the other eugenicists were liberal intellectuals and a fair number of them were Unitarians. Our kind of people we might say: smart people with the best intentions.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, German ears were flapping over American strides in the field of Eugenics. The Germans began their own experiments based on models the Americans had already written up. In 1936, the Germans even invited a leading American eugenicist to Heidelberg University,

where he received an honorary Doctor of Medicine. At about the same time, other American eugenicists were flocking to German “eugenics courts” to see how their own theories were put into practice. These visitors included the secretary of the American Public Health Association.

In 1937, the Secretary of the American Eugenics Society summarized the Nazi sterilization this way, “Germany’s rapidity of change with respect to eugenics was possibly only under a dictator... The German sterilization program is apparently an excellent one... recent developments in Germany constitute perhaps the most important experiment that has ever been tried.”

The Swedish welfare system had been considered one of the most progressive in the world, but in 1934 they enacted a law allowing the sterilization of the mentally ill. In 1941, they began sterilizing people who displayed what they deemed “antisocial behavior.” By the 1950s more than 2000 people were sterilized every year. When the program was finally stopped more than 62,000 people had been sterilized. Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, who wrote a pioneering critique of racism in America, were leading supporters of this sterilization program in Sweden.

So, what have we learned? Even the best-intentioned, best-educated people can have their judgments clouded by assumptions that remain hidden to them – assumptions of race, class, religion or ethnicity. These hidden views affect all of the information we take in and all that we dismiss.

Because the early advocates of eugenics were from the rising Middle and Upper Middle classes they believed that intellectual advancement was more important than the right of any individual to lead an uncomplicated (and maybe even an unsuccessful) but happy and unmolested life. High on the optimism that science would eventually find a way to alleviate all human misery, they disdained Western religion’s insistence that each individual had rights as a child of God. They said God and any rights derived from God was a silly myth, soon to be replaced.

What followed were the most abusive regimes of modern history – fascism and communism – begun in the name of science and progress. Under that banner they contended that the advancement of knowledge would replace religious faith. In the end they demonstrated what happens when there is nothing that can be called sacred.

We need to be able to describe what is sacred in human life. Why use a word which is freighted with so many different meanings. Because all of the meanings of “sacred” say “Stop right here. This further you shall not go!”

Let me make it clear that I am not talking about sacred relics, sacred images, sacred buildings, sacred places or sacred books. Sacred means

something about you or me that cannot be interfered with for any reason whatsoever. Sacred is that about our fellow men and women upon which we fear to trespass. Sacred is our right to make choices. It is protected by commitments that are much more than our intellectual convenience. It is protected by our realization that absent some sense of sacredness in human life, the powerful – no matter how nice they are -- will always be tempted to use their power to “improve” or control our lives.

Our second lesson is that we should be wary of paternalism in any form. Those of us who are parents can test this thought against our own lives and practice. We know very well that we try to make the best decisions for our children, who we love deeply, but often enough we catch ourselves wanting to make the decision for them that is really the most comfortable choice for us. If that is true in the most intimate and tender bond of the family, imagine how much more tempting it is for those who hold what is presumed to be benevolent power over people they do not know.

Finally we need to look again at what Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory did or did not do. Many interpret the idea of evolution to eliminate any hope of God or any belief that individuals have God given inalienable rights. But if God, or something greater than we are, is taken out of the equation, then our UU First principle concerning the inherent dignity and worth of every human being becomes a convenient vanity – our assumption at best -- since there would be no God to confer that dignity and worth upon us.

Darwin, himself, struggled with this question, and his biographers differ as to how he resolved it. In any event, he is dead, and each individual must decide where his/her faith lies.

Why should we hold something as sacred? My own conviction is that whatever is creating the world exercises a great deal of freedom in its creation. Some power beyond human imagining is still creating the strength that all of us have to survive even the most destructive circumstances.

The deep power that fashions our bodies and our world is incredible. It is not a biological machine. It renews itself, changes itself and exercises freedom in ways that are both surprising, and, I would almost say, loving. It is also creating our notion that we are intended to be free. This is an idea we get from the sacred source of life itself.

Still, keeping that freedom requires our vigilance and our willingness to support communities that cherish diversity and nurture respect. It is so, so tempting for many people some of the time to believe that if the freedoms of those who trouble them most could be curtailed – oh maybe just a little bit – the world would be a better place.

In 1733, James Alexander wrote in a New York newspaper, "Liberty and slavery! How amiable is one! How odious and abominable is the other!" Of course he was talking about liberty of the press and freedom from censorship. It never for a moment occurred to him that freedom might be the desire of the five Africans who lived as slaves in his own house or the one other African who escaped. Our noble ideas and grand designs are sometimes very deceptive.

And this is why we need the liberal church, which is dedicated to preserving as sacred a reverence for the freedom and dignity of every individual. You may take what you do here at Channing Memorial for granted, but by showing up and worshipping here for lo these many years you are preserving and defending human dignity and therefore human freedom. It is an idea that is so easily bartered away.