"Human Nature"

Rev. Scott W. Alexander

Unitarian Church North

Sunday, October 15, 2023

UUFVB

READING BEFORE THE SERMON

He was a beautiful baby, a studious and idealistic youth, an extraordinarily brave soldier – twice wounded and decorated for valor. He neither drank nor smoked, and his vegetarian diet was both an expression of self-esteem for his body and concern for the suffering of animals. He loved his country, was loyal to his friends,

and faithful to the woman he loved and married. He delighted in the company of children. He was highly intelligent, energetic and imaginative -- a painter, politician, writer and speaker of extraordinary ability. As an orator, he was inspiring, uplifting, ingratiating and charismatic. His birthday falls a few days before Shakespeare's…on April 20.

His name was Adolph Hitler. He conquered more territory than Alexander the Great and Napoleon combined…and he was personally responsible for the deaths (over 40 million) than any man who ever lived. His legacy is unsurpassed in permanent clawmarks on

the continent of Europe and on the grief of gravestones around the world.

Of all the titles he held and enjoyed, his favorite was "Oberster Gerichtsherr" [O-BER-STER GER-ISH-SHARE] – Supreme Law Lord. In gaining that title he legitimated the deepest longing of all sociopaths: to be master of laws and the subject of none.

If there is a Devil, Hitler has to be his incarnation. I think we sense this, which explains our continuing fascination with him and all the odious apparatus of the Nazis. We are fascinated by him because we carry the

dreadful knowledge that the Devil is not a supernatural figure, but a man, representing what is in <u>all</u> men and women.

It would be nice if we could believe Hitler was a metaphysical aberration -- a wicked avatar from another realm. But his very human birth (on April 20, 1889) reminds us that it isn't so. He lives on – in possibility and potentiality, if not in fact – the Devil in us all.

Author Unknown

THE SERMON

If you are like me, as a Unitarian Universalist, you have been shaken to the core (and profoundly heart-broken) by the unimaginably human cruelty that is now being perpetrated (by both sides) in Israel and Gaza. The slaughter of innocent civilians (which, yes, began in Israel, but is now being perpetrated by both sides) surely discourages all of us about what the shape of the human future on this planet is to be. This morning -- in this Unitarian Universalist context -- I will be posing (and

hopefully answering) a complicated, two-part question that is central to all of religion (and ethics):

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]

Our complicated, two-part question this morning is:

1) What is our theological assessment of human nature?
2) How does this assessment SHAPE our religious and moral/ethical response to both human individuals and human society?

In practical terms these two fundamental questions (I think) quickly gets focused down (really) to just ONE question:

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

The Big Question:

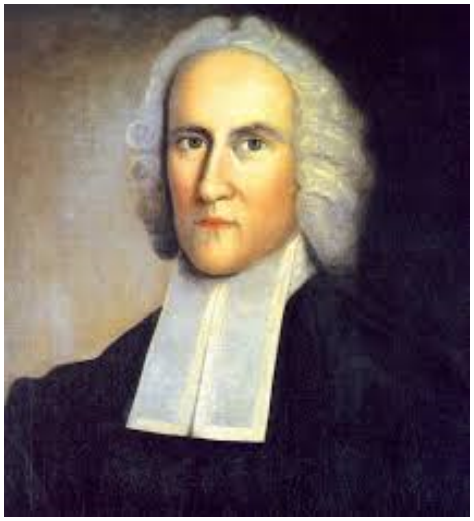
By their very nature as "homo sapiens," are human persons individually and human society collectively **CAPABLE** – either with or without the threat of external restraint, punishment and judgment -- of leading lives (and building communities/nations) of nobility, wisdom, goodness, and love?

This question (which has been variously answered by faith traditions across the religious spectrum) has been at the very center of American religious thought since the earliest days of our society. Indeed, the very foundations

of our Unitarian Universalist tradition rests upon the particular way we (as religious liberals) have (over the centuries) answered this challenging question for ourselves. In a nutshell (and anyone with more-than-a-passing-understanding of our Unitarian Universalist tradition understand this) as a decidedly liberal and progressive faith tradition, we have always been rather **UPBEAT and OPTIMIST**IC about human nature -- and confident of the natural human potential for goodness both on an individual and collective level)…whereas more traditional and conservative religions have been decidedly **PESSIMISTIC and SKEPTICAL** about those same realities.

To make it perfectly clear how religious conservatives and religious liberals have long radically disagreed with one another on this central theological question, I want to go back to two early American religious leaders whose assessment of human nature stood in stark and absolute contrast to one another – Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

[PICTURES OF REV. JONATHAN EDWARDS AND RALPH WALDO EMERSON ARE PROJECTED UP]



Rev. Jonathan Edwards

1703-1758



Ralph Waldo Emerson

1802-1882

Jonathan Edwards -- like all the early American Calvinists and Puritans of his day -- understood human nature to be dominated – right to its core -- by weakness, sin, wickedness and depravity. A stern pulpit presence (just look at his scowling face!) Edwards would regularly bring his brow-beaten listeners all throughout New England to mournful sobbing and wailing by his ringing condemnations of their moral failures. In his most

famous sermon (aptly entitled ***"Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God"***) Edwards describes how Almighty God (justifiably disgusted with humanity's manifold weaknesses and moral failures) holds humanity over the pits of hell by the narrowest of threads…here are his "less-than-cheerful words::

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some [other] loathsome insect over the fire abhors you…his wrath towards you burns like fire…you are ten-thousand-times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him…O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in…You hand by a slender

thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it and burn it asunder…[and] nothing that you have ever done, nothing that you can do [will] induce God to spare you one moment.

Contrast that extremely pessimistic assessment of human nature with that of Unitarian bard Ralph Waldo Emerson: who, as a hopeful transcendentalist humanist writing in direct theological opposition to the Calvinist belief that ***"The Human Soul"*** is dominated by sin, depravity and wickedness wrote THIS in his famous essay ***"The Oversoul"*** where he sings praises the nearly boundless

divinity and potential he sees everywhere in human nature.

Let us learn the revelation of all nature and thought; that the Highest dwells within us, that the sources of nature are in our own minds. As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so there is no bar or wall in the soul where we, the effect, and God, the cause, begins. I am constrained every moment to acknowledge <u>a higher origin</u> for events that "the will" I call mine. There is deep power in which we exist and whose beatitude is accessible to us. Every moment when the individual feels invaded by it is

memorable. It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whosoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur. The soul's health consists in the fullness of its reception. For ever and ever the influx of this <u>better and more universal self</u> is new and unsearchable. Within us is <u>the soul of the whole</u>, <u>the wise silence</u>, <u>the universal beauty</u>, to which every part and particles is equally related; <u>the eternal One</u>. [And then Emerson ends on this high note] ***When it breaks through our intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through our will; it is virtue; when it flows through our affections, it is love.***

So…with this stark contrast drawn between Edwards and Emerson…it would be my observation that…

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Since the earliest days of this on-going American theological debate about human nature and the human potential:

- Conservative religionists (starting with the likes of Jonathan Edwards right up to conservative Christians today) have tended to pessimistically over-estimate **human depravity**…while…
- Liberal religionists (like Ralph Waldo Emerson right up to religious liberals from many traditions,

including our current day Unitarian Universalist tradition) have tended to optimistically over-estimate **human nobility.**

But to my **unflinchingly reality-tested 21st Century mind**, religionists on both extremes of this theological debate about human nature (both the die-hard conservatives with their extremely negative views…and the ever-cheerful progressives with their boundlessly optimistic views) have ***"missed the theological boat"*** and failed (each of them for different reasons) to make **a balanced, realistic and useful assessment of both human nature and the human potential.**

I believe -- and will spend much of the rest of my time this morning attempting to persuade you of **a more nuanced and (I hope) realistic perspective.**

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

This I Believe about human nature:

The truth is that "human nature" is ***NEITHER*** pre-dominantly devilish or pre-eminently divine…it's not trapped at neither extreme…but is rather **eternally suspended ambiguously SOMEWHERE IN-BETWEEN…**in a vexing dance along the eternal continuum of human good and evil.

I theologically believe that we human beings are (because of **our very primordial essence as imperfect, physical creatures of this earth…**regardless of whatever progress we have made over the millennia as the most

highly-evolved species on the planet) are capable (and as regular observers of human behavior both on the micro and macro level of existence you certainly also know! this) we are capable of BOTH **great nobility *AND* stunning depravity**…and that it will be impossible for us (as a species) to ever transcend that natural duality (and permanent, polar predicament).

I resonate theologically here with poet Carl Sandburg Who – in his epic poem ***"The People, Yes"*** describes human nature this way:

[PICTURE AND POEM OF CARL SANDBURG GOES UP ON CHANCEL SCREENS]



Carl Sandburg 1878 - 1967

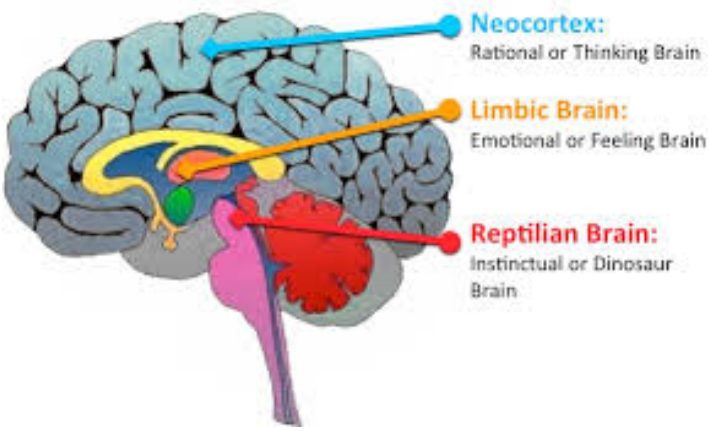
The people, yes – the tragic/comic two-face: hero and hoodlum…born with bones and heart fused in deep and violent secrets…mixed from a bowl of sky blue dreams and sea slime facts…a seething of saints and sinners, toilers, loafers, oxen, apes…in a womb of superstition, faith, genius, crime, sacrifice. The one and only source of armies, navies, work gangs…the living, flowing

breath of the history of nations…the little family of Man hugging close the little ball of earth.

But don't just take my theological word (or Sandburg's poetical muse) for it! Neuroscientists (and evolutionary psychologists) will tell you that we homo sapiens (as one evolved animal species among many) are "hard-wired" for **BOTH** noble and primitive instincts…we are indelibly capable of both great nobility and stunning depravity…and everything in between.

First let take a look at the primitive side of human nature. As Dr. Paul MacLean suggested in his classic study of human neurology:

[THE FOLLOWING PICTURE AND CAPTION IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREEN]



We homo sapiens all have (deep in our brains) an instinctual/dinosaur "Reptilian Brain"

human beings all come ***"hard-wired"*** with **REPTILIAN BRAINS**, the (so called) ***"R-Complex"*** located in the most ***"primitive and protected"*** (evolutionarily speaking) sphere of the brain (located at the very base) which is

responsible (in addition to controlling the elemental physical functions of heart rate, breathing, body temperature and balance) is also the home (and now I quote the neuroscientists) ***"for rage, xenophobia, basic survival fight-or-flight responses, territoriality, [tribalism], social hierarchy, along with the desire to submit to stronger Alpha Type members of one's own species."*** *[Wikipedia, August 2007].* What this science suggests is that many of the worst (and most destructive and violent) aspects of human behavior have their genesis in our instinctive, primitive (and largely unthinking) ***"Reptilian brains."*** Surely, right now you can see how THE REPTILIAN BRAIN IS RUNNING

UNRESTRAINED WILD IN THE MIDDLE EAST…with both sides in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict treating each other with cruel and savage human disregard.

But, mercifully on the other side of the neurological equation (AS I MENTIONED LAST WEEK DURING MY SERMON ON HUMAN EMPATHY) :

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Neuroscientists also tell us that the human brain is also "hard-wired" for generosity, compassion, and altruism.

it seems that we human beings are **ALSO** hard-wired (in other areas of the brain) for **generosity, compassion,**

kindness and altruism! In a recent ***Washington Post*** article entitled, ***"New Findings Suggest that Good Impulses are Basic to the Brain,"*** Drs. Jorge Moll and Jordan Grafman report that acts of human generosity ***"activate a primitive part of the brain that usually lights up in response to food and sex. Altruism [and compassionate concern for others],*** the study suggests ***was not a superior moral faculty that suppresses basic selfish urges, but rather was basic to the brain… hardwired and pleasurable."*** And then the article goes even further, and reports that several similar neurological and behavioral studies ***"are showing, unexpectedly, that many aspects of morality [and altruism] appear to be***

<u>hard-wired in the [human] brain</u>, most likely the result of evolutionary processes that began in other species."

Let me now give you a slightly different take on this balanced (and contradictory) take on human nature.



Dr. William Vandament

1931-2013

Dr. William Vandament (who was an evolutionary psychologist and – over the course of his distinguished academic career – a University Provost and President) was a very close friends of my family since the 1950's. Bill was a warm, wonderful and brilliant man whom I came to regard as a kind of "second father" and very dear friend. Over the last several decades of his life, he and I – who shared an interest in this topic -- regularly discussed human nature and the question of the potential for humanity to make moral and social progress…I even once persuaded him (and his wife Marge) to fly from his home in California to visit Collins and me in Bethesda, Maryland -- and share in a Sunday morning ***"Chancel***

Dialogue" (at the large church I served there) on this complicated subject. On that occasion – in a public conversation being taken in by about 500 listeners – I asked Bill if (as an evolutionary psychologist) he believed if human nature (and behavior) could evolve in ways that would "humanize" both individual persons and society as a whole…in other words, is real human progress every possible? Here is, in essence, what he said:

Scott, the problem with human <u>nature</u> (and so much of human behavior) is that <u>it is just that</u> –

<u>natural…instinctual, hard-wired and primordial</u>.

Neurologically speaking, we 21st Century human beings

– despite all our technological and intellectual advancements – are still primitively "hard-wired" (as meat-eating, tribal, territorial animals) pretty much exactly as we were when we jumped out of the Savannah trees in Africa and began our long evolutionary march toward life on this planet as we know it today. So If you are counting on human neurology (primarily the brain) to evolve in ways that will enable and empower human beings to live more nobly and compassionately, <u>then you are out of luck</u>! Like it or not…we human beings are stuck with our primitive "hard-wiring"…the fixed and instinctual "hardware" of the human brain.

[But then Dr. Vandament went on]

But I am <u>not</u> a total pessimist about the human future! I think there is real, feasible hope for individual human persons (and humanity as a whole) to make moral, ethical and behavioral progress. And that hope -- and now I will use modern-day "computer" language -- lies on the <u>cultural "software" side of the human equation</u>…the ethical and behavioral "programs"…rules and regulations…the agreed-upon moral standards… we can put in place to govern ourselves and shape society…our hope lies in all those

<u>powerful human software "value constructs" of human health and decency</u> that we can put in place to regulate, control and limit our primitive/instinctual brains. But again…any progress we make in terms of human morality and behavior will be CULTURAL not NEUROLOGICAL.

What Dr. Vandament was saying (and I think he was ***"spot on"*** here) is that due to the **ETERNALLY PRIMATIVE/REPTILIAN NEUROLOGY THAT SHAPES SO MUCH OF HUMAN NATURE**, we should **<u>NOT</u>** have much glib confidence that it will be easy for us to make progress -- with either the behavior of individual human

beings or the behavior of collective communities or nations. The **complicated and primitive construct** that is **"human nature"** will trip us up every time.

Let me quickly give you two examples – one on the "micro" (or individual) level and one on the "macro" (or societal) level of how difficult the vagaries of "human nature" make it for people to "do the right thing."

First the ***"Micro"*** level…of our individual behavior as persons…and this small/everyday example may seem trivial to some, but I think it nonetheless points clearly to the larger problem of the failings of our human nature.

[PICTURE MAN TEXTING WHILE DRIVING GOES UP ON CHANCEL SCREENS]



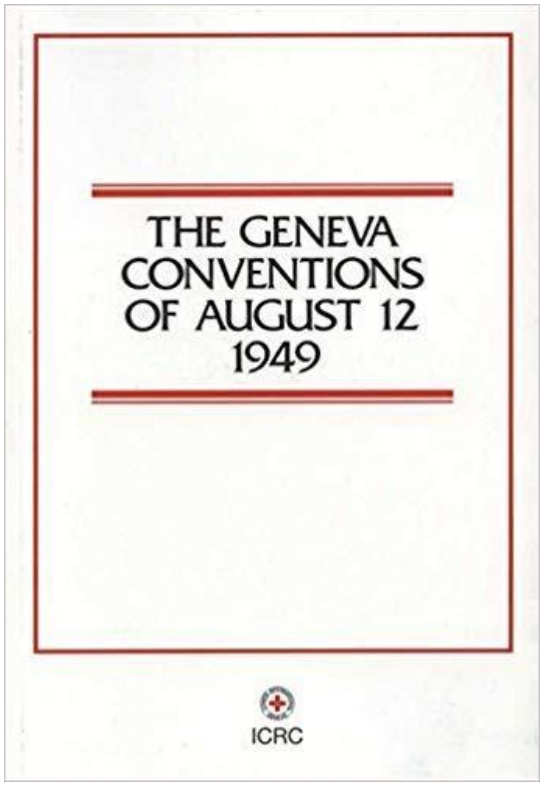
For years we have all been told by highway safety experts – again and again and again and again - that texting while driving is dangerous, irresponsible and wrong. The ***National Safety Council*** reports that cell phone use while

driving leads to **1.6 million crashes** each year…**1 out of every 4 car accidents** are caused by this…and nearly **390,000 injuries (and thousands of deaths)** occur each year from drivers texting-while-driving. Almost all 50 states have **OUTLAWED** this behavior…in many jurisdictions, stiff fines have been put in place…there is general social condemnation of it…**AND YET (as you all know) MILLIONS OF AMERICANS (including, no doubt many intelligent and otherwise responsible persons in this room…despite our awareness of the very real dangers and costs) still engage in this irrational and irresponsible behavior!** Why do we do this? Because our selfish instinct to multi-task while driving overpowers

our higher reasoning (and our moral duty to “the common good”)…pure and simple.

And this lack of human wisdom and responsibility also operates on the ***“macro”*** level of human existence…with human society as a whole

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF GENEVA CONVENTION IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]





196 countries signed the Geneva Convention document in 1949

After the deaths of some 50 million persons during World War II – including many civilians, prisoners, and the wounded who were supposed to be protected -- the

original Geneva convention of 1864 (that was supposed to establish, once-and-for-all humane rules of war…but had failed to do so in just about every armed global conflict since) was updated with "additional protocols" designed to oblige all the nations of the world to engage in warfare within reasonably humane boundaries. Now the very fact that nations regularly go to war against each is just another indication of some of the perpetual weaknesses of human nature…and that tragedy is compounded by the fact that many nations also then ignore the internationally-established rules of humane restraint and respect. Again, this can be seen (in heart-breaking levels) in the wonton and purposeful

slaughter (RIGHT NOW) of innocent men, women and children in both Israel and Gaza. Yet, despite this failure of humanity…as a global family of nations , we keep trying to establish agreed upon moral guidelines to protect the basic rights of civilians, prisoners, and the wounded. My point here is that – again – because of the primitive instincts and failures of human nature, humanity has not yet found a way to make humane international standards stick.

[PICTURE AND CAPTIONS OF GENEVA CONVENTION COME DOWN OFF CHANCEL SCREENS]

So…if I am theologically right…if our "human nature" is an eternally mixed bag of **nobility and depravity**…**kindness and cruelty…good news and bad**…and that human progress on both the micro and macro level will be halting at best…where does this all leave us as a people of faith in such violent times?

[THE FOLLOWING IS PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]

Well, as theologically (and ethically) savvy 21st Century Unitarian Universalists, I believe we must first and forthrightly back away intellectually from our tradition's

historically almost giddy optimism about the human potential…and be more realistic about the power and presence of error and evil in human affairs.

As religious liberals, we can talk all we want (as our first principle does) about ***"The inherent worth and dignity of every person"…***but we must also acknowledge (and morally respond to) the darker, crueler, and more irrational dimensions of human nature. For many generations now, thoughtful religious conservatives have criticized Unitarian Universalism for not having ***"a sufficient doctrine of Sin."*** What they meant was our optimistic theology of persons lacks the ***"moral***

authority" to acknowledge, reprimand and correct human failure…and they have a point. The 21st Century – with all its painfully-obvious human failures -- is no time to be a cheerful ***"Emersonian Unitarian"*** singing sweet odes to the unbounded nobility of persons and the broader human enterprise.

If Unitarian Universalism are to be a wise, mature and effective spiritual tradition in our time, we simply must accept the **complex-and-often-polar realities of human nature** – and speak to the human condition (with moral and ethical rigor) accordingly. Now to some Unitarian Universalists, this might seem **an unnecessary**

concession to pessimism. But to me it seems an absolute theological necessity… precursor to our finding realistic hope in the face of human frailty and failure.

[THE FOLLOWING LOGO AND CAPTION ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE CHANCEL SCREENS]



The Official (16th Century) Crest of the Unitarian Churches in Transylvania

"Let us be wise as serpents…gentle as doves"

When the very first Unitarian churches were founded (in 16th Century Transylvania…where we still have some 140 active congregations today) **THIS** ***[SCOTT TURNS TO SCREEN]*** was the official crest (and motto) they adopted for their faith. You will notice that surrounding and protecting ***"the gentle dove"*** [which represents the peace and love and hope of their liberal faith] is ***"a serpent"*** [wise to the ways of evil and the dangers of the world]. What I am suggesting to you this morning is that

as 21st Century American Unitarian Universalists, we need a **WORLD-WISE AND REALISTIC THEOLOGY OF HUMAN NATURE** that (in addition to celebrating **the indelible goodness** that lies at the center of what it means to be human…AND LET US NEVER FORSKE THAT HOLY PART OF THE HUMAN EQUASION) also INTELLECTUALLY ACKNOWLEDGES and MORALLY CONFRONTS **the sinister side** of what it means (and will always mean) to be human. Only then will we, as a religious tradition, be able to contribute to real human progress toward a better world for all.

And let me end this morning with one, terribly important (and I believe "saving") observation. No matter all the

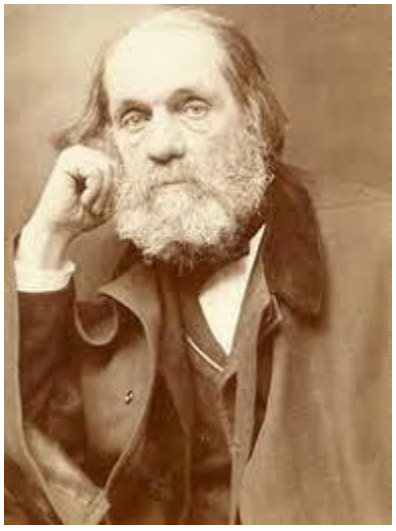
contradictions and ambivalences of HUMAN NATURE in general…please trust that (as an individual person on this troubled planet) YOU HAVE MORAL AGENCY…you are always free…always free…to live your life (as I said last Sunday) with greater empathy, grater compassion, greater kindness and humanity.

As Abraham Lincoln observed in his first inaugural address in 1861…as human beings we are all free to always head the call of ***"The better angels of our nature."*** Let us then, as Unitarian Universalists in these dangerous and discouraging times, always strive to lend (as one author puts it) ***"Our few stubborn ounces of***

humanity" to making this world a better, more-humane place.

May these words of Unitarian minister Edward Everitt Hale serve as our benediction today:

[PICTURE AND CAPTION OF EDWARD EVERITT HALE ARE PROJECTED UP ON THE SCREEN]



REV. EDWARD EVERITT HALE 1822-1909

"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do."

Amen.