

Jane Austen & Me

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Deborah Willoughby

I'm a fan of Jane Austen, the English writer born 250 years ago whose six novels engagingly focused on everyday life and, as one of today's readings calls it, the economic basis of society. Many of her observations remain relevant today.

Jane wrote about kindness, community, hypocrisy and injustice. She understood the compromises made by people seeking the protection of the aristocratic men who held all the power and wealth.

One character married a loathsome man because she felt he was her only option for having a comfortable life. Another character was portrayed less sympathetically: She wrote, "The whole of Lucy's behaviour...may be held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest, will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience."

Yes, that's relevant today—think of the president at a cabinet meeting, being fawned over by people who may have sacrificed time and conscience to secure their success.

During a conference I attended, I enjoyed a breakout session on an unpopular character in the book *Pride and Prejudice*. Mary Bennet's sisters were central to the plot, but Mary served mostly as comic relief. She was moralizing, unattractive and dull, often shown with her nose in a book. The speaker asked if anyone identified as the Mary Bennet in their families. A bookish teenager who was socially awkward? Gawky? Enthusiastically self righteous? (Raising my hand.)

Afterward, a few modern Marys stuck around to talk. My grandfather often referred to me as a bookworm, and not in a good way. A lawyer described being told to focus on her appearance, and to smile more. Another woman talked about a discussion group she was in. She often cited her favorite author. One evening she noticed that the men were taking a drink every time she mentioned Jane Austen. She was a drinking game! We had a good laugh—like Jane, we chose irony over outrage. I imagine the Olympic women's hockey team probably has a pretty good understanding of Mary Bennet.

Good literature is timeless. In Jane Austen's books I find a devotion to the values of kindness and community, and a recognition that resistance to injustice takes many forms.

Jane Austen & Me© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

It is truly coincidence that I chose to preach on Jane Austen on March 8th International Women's Day, though completely appropriate. Happy International Women's Day! International Women's Day celebrates the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. The day also promotes gender equality.

Gender inequality is a theme in the novels by Jane Austen, just as it was a fact of living in those times...well, these times, but to a much greater degree in those times. As Deborah reminded us, Austen was born 250 years ago. Women were entirely dependent upon men for survival in the English culture of that era. Her novels can't help but explore that fact. She was a woman writing female characters. In the novel, *Persuasion*, Anne Elliott observes

“Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.”

I'm not sure when I became so attracted to these novels. I don't actually remember reading them in school. But I have long loved the 1995 BBC television series, *Pride and Prejudice*, starring Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy, and the *Persuasion* film made in the same year, where the actors don't look like movie stars but just regular people. I guess 1995 was a banner year for Jane Austen, as the movie, *Sense and Sensibility*, with Emma Thompson, Kate Winslet, Hugh Grant, and Alan Rickman also came out that year. And these movies are good, but it's hard to appreciate the language of Jane Austen in movie or television form. The written word is where it's at. Sentences like the one I read for our meditation, or this one from *Pride and Prejudice*, when Elizabeth's sister Jane is ill and has to stay with the sisters of her love interest, Bingley. After declaring that Jane was no means better, writes Austen,

“The sisters, on hearing this, repeated three or four times how much they were grieved, how shocking it was to have a bad cold, and how excessively they disliked being ill themselves; and then thought no more of the matter: and their indifference towards Jane when not immediately before them, restored Elizabeth to the enjoyment of all her original dislike.”

Is it the language or the attention to human nature that I love? For isn't it true that we enjoy disliking some people?

This is why I am discomforted by my own enjoyment of Jane Austen. I don't think I can say that it is morally wrong to dislike people; it's human nature, but it is questionable theologically – because I believe we are all connected, that is – we are not discreet individuals– that what we often dislike in the other is a reflection of a trait in ourselves that we disavow.

I've been reflecting on my fascination with Jane Austen and have concluded that it is a bit of cultural self-exploration. These are my ancestors. My people came from England and Ireland, from early America about the time of Austen's birth – had I wanted, I could become a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. And even if these weren't my ancestors, this is my country and this culture permeates. As I've become more aware and critical of the culture of dominance and supremacy inherent in American culture (as gifted to us from Great Britain), I see it also in myself, in the minute detail of enjoying the dislike of someone because they don't meet whatever standard that is deemed worthy.

I chose the reading from *Mansfield Park* this morning not because I particularly enjoy that novel, but because that opening passage states so clearly the economic and class distinctions that dominated the times, and frankly, continue to impact our own. The visible striving for wealth and consequence makes me uncomfortable.

I first drafted that last sentence as “The visible striving for wealth and consequence is uncomfortable to our modern sensibilities,” but then remembered the president that Deborah mentioned in her reflection, surrounding himself with a bunch of Mr. Collinses, or sycophants – a word I learned not from Jane Austen, but the nightly news. A sycophant is “a person who flatters another in order to get ahead.” Obsequious, that fawning behavior Deborah mentioned, is the term that Jane Austen uses to describe Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*. We watch daily politicians sacrificing their values and core beliefs to keep from getting on the bad side of a president who does not appreciate critique, but prefers that mixture of “pride and obsequiousness” that the character, Mr. Collins, exhibits so well. So it’s not true that the striving for wealth and consequence is peculiar to 250 years ago – we are daily witness to it. But it still makes me uncomfortable.

There is an open acknowledgement of the fact that because of our unequal society – because there are *haves* and *have nots* – people use the means they have at hand to promote their wealth and well-being. The heroines of these novels– Elizabeth and Jane in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elinor and Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, Anne Elliott in *Persuasion*, are firmly in that middle class – somewhere between the *haves* and the *have nots*, and always on the verge of falling into poverty if they don’t marry well. As the wealth gap in our country and in societies around the world widens, creating richer rich people and more poor people, and fewer in the middle, this jockeying for position resonates.

There’s a novel by Jo Baker, published 2013, called *Longbourn* which is a story of the Bennett’s servants in *Pride and Prejudice*.

I was always struck in the novels how close to the verge of poverty the Bennetts and Elliotts and Dashwoods were, but the truth is, they always had servants. The Dashwoods couldn’t keep horses. The Elliotts couldn’t keep their house, and the Bennett estate is entailed to Mr. Collins. But they all had servants, and this novel, *Longbourn*, explores what the lives of those servants would have been like. Austen’s keen attention to human behavior is quite biting and critical. Jo Baker captures the satire when she wrote, “If Elizabeth Bennet had the washing of her own petticoats, Sarah often thought, she’d most likely be a sight more careful with them.”

The main character, Emma, in the novel by that name is the exception to this middle-class location of our heroines. Emma is rich and not very likeable. She meddles in other people’s business. I don’t like this novel. I don’t like the movie with Gwyneth Paltrow. But I finally watched another movie based on that story that came out in – I bet you can guess the year – yes, 1995. *Clueless* was listed in the US National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being ‘culturally, historically or aesthetically significant. – when I heard that last year, I finally decided I had to watch it, and I’m glad I did because so much of the novel *Emma* made sense! *Clueless* is set in a high school in Beverly Hills and the Emma

character, named Cher, is beautiful, popular and wealthy and wants to do “good deeds” like making matches for her teachers and less fortunate friends. All the immature behavior in the novel that I didn’t find fun to read was made so much more poignant and believable set in a California high school.

Jane Austen is satire at its best, and I guess I’m uncomfortable with my love of her writings in part because I take my calling seriously. I’m a clergy person – and though I find her caricatures of clergy amusing – I’m embarrassed to admit I enjoy the open hostility toward other people’s stupidity or vices, or the foolish things people sometimes do and say. It does feel like, in this political climate, where hostility is open and celebrated – when our president enjoys ridiculing and belittling others, that someone has to try to be the adult in the room and not participate in the constant “set-downs.”

Set-down is another term I learned from Austen when she wrote Mrs. Bennet talking about Mr. Darcy to her husband:

“for he is a most disagreeable, horrid man, not at all worth pleasing. So high and so conceited that there was no enduring him! He walked here, and he walked there, fancying himself so very great! Not handsome enough to dance with! I wish you had been there, my dear, to have given him one of your set-downs. I quite detest the man.”

I admit to my discomfort, but obviously, I am not so discomforted by these novels that I have stopped enjoying them. There are incredibly redeeming qualities, too: **The language itself.** I love the word “obsequious” and being “eloquent on a point in which my own conduct would ill bear examination.”

This knowledge of human nature. **That people aren’t always what they seem to be.** That sometimes the handsome, eloquent stranger is also a cad, and the socially awkward person is the real gem. But also, **that people can change.** That is really the point of the novel, *Emma*, and I do appreciate that point. She is meddlesome and immature and headstrong, but through the guidance of Mr. Knightly, a family friend who becomes more, she learns to focus her improvement projects on herself, where she can actually affect some change.

We can overcome our prejudices. The plot of every romantic comedy, it seems, is based on the fact that Elizabeth dislikes Mr. Darcy at first – so that as soon as you know which character the hero or heroine dislikes in a rom com on the Hallmark Channel, we know that will turn out to be their love interest in the end. *You’ve Got Mail*, I think being the classic that comes to mind. In fact, the book, *Pride and Prejudice*, creates a sub-plot within that movie.

So, obviously, I’m not the only one obsessed with her writings. Our culture is. Deborah had to arm wrestle another worship associate to be able to assist with this service – though I think her regular attendance at Jane Austen conferences earned her that honor.

I wonder if we’re obsessed with these stories for the same reasons I’m obsessed with them – we are trying to figure ourselves out. We are trying to figure out the culture that surrounds us and informs us, the society that constrains us, and how we can as humans, change for the better.

And if this feels trivial or light, let me try to do a better job of explaining why it is not. Deborah had a sentence in her reflection that really says it all, she said that Jane Austen “understood the compromises made by people seeking the protection of the aristocratic men who held all the power and wealth.” Aristocratic men like Jeffrey Epstein...Elon Musk, Donald Trump, Steven Tisch, Bill Clinton, Howard Lutnick, Steve Bannon, the man formerly known as Britain's Prince Andrew. That’s just a list of some of the names in the Trump Epstein files. I find the story so disturbing, I can’t bear to look at it too closely. And though I call it a story, I must remind you it is not fiction, but news. These men hold power and wealth and people make compromises to seek their protection. It was true 250 years ago, and it’s true today. That women, that people were abused and raped and sold and bought was true 250 years ago, and it’s true today.

That wars are started because powerful people can, was true 250 years ago and it’s true today. The stakes are high. The power is real. People aren’t always what they seem to be. But that people can change is our greatest promise and hope. We can overcome our prejudices.

I don’t think I can finish this sermon without mentioning the popular television series, *Bridgerton*, which is called an “alternative history regency romance series” - alternative because racial equality has been established in this fictional world, though the gender hierarchy remains – well, there is a Queen in power, but women still need to the protection of aristocratic men and eligible singles are vying for matches that improve their wealth and consequence, participating in the “marriage mart.” But the popularity of this Netflix series reminds us that we are still grappling with this culture of dominance and supremacy, and we still enjoy the satire of a good “set-down” which is the role of the mysterious – not so mysterious in later seasons – Lady Whistledown, the author of a scandalous society newsletter, voiced by Dame Julie Andrews. “Clever Jane was always watching and listening, and smiling to herself at the foolish things people sometimes did and said.”

There is a movie of *Mansfield Park* which I love very much, though it is not true to the novel – except in the way it portrays poverty and landed gentry and the points between. You could call it an alternative *Mansfield Park*. It elaborates implied details about the slave trade that Austen does not write about but are plausible, given her family’s opposition to slavery that we do know about.

That people were abused and raped and sold and bought was true 250 years ago, and it’s true today. The stakes are high. The power is real. People aren’t always what they seem to be. But that people can change is our greatest promise and hope. We can overcome our prejudices.

Englishman John Newton was contemporaneous with Jane Austen. He worked in the slave trade like the fictional Sir Thomas Bertram of *Mansfield Park*. Unlike Sir Thomas Bertram, John Newton underwent a now famous change of heart after becoming violently ill on one such sea voyage. He repented his life as a slave trader. He went on to work with William Wilberforce, leader of the parliamentary campaign to abolish the African slave trade. In a tract he wrote supporting the campaign, Newton described the horrors of the slave trade. He lived to see the British passage of the Slave Trade Act 1807, as did Jane

Austen. Newton went on to become an Anglican priest and hymn writer. He wrote the hymn I will next ask you to sing.

But before we go there, I want to comment on the language in the hymn. Our hymnal provides alternate wording to the phrase “to save a wretch like me.” I think this is because many UU’s have left faith traditions that told them they were wretched and unworthy. The alternate language is “to save a soul like me.” I prefer the wretch language myself, but then I was raised Unitarian Universalist and was never told by my church that I was wretched or sinful or depraved. So, feel free to sing *wretch* with me if you like, or change the word to *soul* if you prefer. I sing *wretch* not because I have been a slave trader, but I have unwittingly and sometimes knowingly supported causes I abhor and have failed to live my values as I wish. But Grace is amazing and I celebrate the fact that I can change and do better. Will you please rise in body or voice to sing with me hymn #206, *Amazing Grace*?