When I worked at a charter school in Boston, one of my teens had a dear friend who just couldn’t seem to stay out of trouble. He was never up to anything particularly egregious or dangerous, but he kept breaking some of the basic school rules: not using foul language, treating the staff with respect, saving socializing for after class… He was a sweet and smart kid, but was really struggling with his behavior.

I remember at one point we were talking about how he could remember to choose appropriate behavior on a day-to-day basis, and I ended up printing him a small picture of the Walt Disney character, Jiminy Cricket — a cartoon insect from the movie *Pinocchio* who is assigned with the task of acting as the titular character’s conscience. I hoped the Jiminy Cricket would help his own inner voice of conscience become a little louder at times when he might want to say or do something inappropriate.

You may recall from the Disney story that Jiminy Cricket is needed because Pinocchio isn’t a “real boy” — he’s a wooden marionette puppet — and thus he doesn’t have a conscience of his own. Even though my student and all of us here are “real kids,” we still sometimes need the Jiminy Crickets of our lives to help us as we discern what’s right and what’s wrong; we’ll get a little more into that concept next Sunday when we talk about prophets, trust, and conscience.

The importance of the *individual* conscience is a key theological concept in Unitarian Universalism — reaching back to our heretical Christian history, wherein our Unitarian ancestors believed in salvation by character and works… Back to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Divinity School Address,” telling 1838 Harvard graduates to not let authority figures drown out their own conscience and experiences: “Let me admonish you,” Emerson said, “first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of [humanity], and dare to love God without mediator or veil… Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator [is] doom[ed] to hopeless mediocrity”… And then even today, we Unitarian Universalists say in our Fourth and Fifth Principles that we encourage every person to embark on “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” and for our faith communities to use “the right of conscience” within our democratic processes.

Modern Italian philosopher of bioethics Dr. Alberto Giubilini writes, “Through our individual conscience, we become aware of our deeply held moral
principles; we are motivated to act upon them; and, we assess our character, our behavior, and ultimately our self against those principles… This reference to the self does not rule out that the source of the morality in question [could] be external to the self. For example, it might be God, as in the Christian tradition, or the influence of one’s culture or of one’s upbringing, as in the Freudian theory of the Super-Ego. Reference to the self indicates that, from a psychological point of view, conscience involves introspection, awareness of one’s behavior, and self-assessment.” As Unitarian Universalists, we may not agree whence our conscience comes — purely from within, from a divine source, from the wider culture — but I think we can agree that part of our work as human beings is to “become more aware of our deeply held moral principles” and “act upon them.”

In the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, such self-awareness and self-reflection is part of “third eye clarity.” Unlike the condition of our physical eyes or other senses, a clear “third eye” can be honed through disciplined spiritual practice and can be used to understand ourselves, the world, and morality with crystal clarity. A clear third eye, a clear conscience, is part of the path toward enlightenment. I had a Hindu friend in college who would relate this Eastern religious concept to a phrase from the prophet Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount: “The eye [— singular —] is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light” [Matthew 6].

I can’t tell you what your conscience is calling you to believe or do, but there are many common spiritual practices that help us make our third eyes healthy, help us hear our conscience more clearly. Such self-reflection can happen in a daily meditation practice, letting our thoughts and feelings bubble up so we may observe them and let them pass with mindfulness. It can happen through more structured prayer or journaling, with reiterating our most closely held values and reflecting on our behavior. It can happen on a quiet journey or rest in nature, reconnecting with ourselves and the Earth that sustains us. It can happen while creating art. These kinds of quieting spiritual exercises help us practice listening to the voice within.

And, for some of us, the spiritual practice of a sacred dialogue — deep and trusting conversation with family or friends — can act like Pinocchio and Jiminy Cricket, during times when our inner voices get lost in the din of day-to-day life. First Parish is one place where many of us gather to reflect on our values, and on our past conduct and our hopes for the future. We’re not telling each other what our individual consciences are saying, but offering ideas based on the call of our inner voices and the ethics of our faith tradition —
First Parish’s former intern, modern UU minister Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh, writes about one cornerstone of our faith’s ethics: “We are immersed in a culture that’s deeply corrupted by selfishness, greed, and oppression-borne privilege and fear. It’s all too easy for us to justify the dehumanization, ostracization, suffering, and death of others. It’s all too easy for us to devalue some humans’ [or beings’] lives, and feel, somehow, like we’re still good upstanding moral people… Religion at its best — and our Unitarian Universalist faith — calls us to honor that which is sacred in each person… This can sound mundane but it’s very radical — revolutionary even. Each person, sacred. Each person, worthy. Accepting this, on faith, changes how we live.”

It is one of the purposes of our religion to remind us, contrary to dominant cultural narratives, that every person has inherent worth and dignity and that our Earth is interdependent and precious. When we struggle to hear our inner voices, friendships in our faith community can remind us of such essential values. It can be so difficult to filter out cultural messages that are counter to our consciences and our religion’s ethics.

And, we need ethical clarity to be confident in our conduct and bold in our public actions. In a speech against the war in Vietnam, black Baptist minister and Civil Rights leader Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reflected, “Someone said to me not long ago, it was a member of the press, ‘Dr. King… Aren’t you hurting the Civil Rights Movement… because you’re involved in this controversial issue in taking the stand against the war?’ And I had to look with a deep understanding of why he raised the question, and with no bitterness in my heart, and say to that man, ‘I’m sorry sir, but you don’t know me. I’m not a consensus leader. I don’t determine what is right and wrong by looking at the budget of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference… Nor do I determine what is right and wrong by taking a Gallup poll of the majority opinion’… On some positions, cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And, there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but [one] must take it because conscience [says] it is right.” We’ve wrestled here, together, with such public issues of conscience, in the distant past and today: our spiritual ancestors voted to defy the Fugitive Slave Act; our twentieth-century members worked to dismantle legal housing discrimination; we worked to become and now behave as a Welcoming Congregation; we decided to act as a Level-2 Sanctuary Congregation.
And unless we have really deluded ourselves or muffled our inner voices, our conscience lets us know when we’re not doing the right thing, which can both be doing something wrong and doing something not all the way right. We know that collection of feelings: regret, guilt, remorse, unease: “It left a bad taste in my mouth.” These are unpleasant feelings, but very useful if we give them the amount of attention they deserve — long enough to determine if they’re communicating to us that we are out of alignment… or if those feelings are rising out of peer pressure to do something we know isn’t right for us. As one church member described it to me from a Small Group meeting, the negative feelings of conscience are “guardrails” for our behavior.

And because today is the kick-off of our pledge drive, I must make a brief remark about the inner voice and guilt and guardrails and how it might all apply to money.

In the latest edition of the *UU World*, UU lay leader Rachel Burlock wrote, “The culture of shame and silence surrounding money extends to our spiritual spaces. Money is not something that we often discuss in church, except during pledge season or when we’re fundraising for a specific goal. But as people of faith who believe in justice, and fair dealing, and empowerment for those disempowered by unjust systems, if we can get over our shame and silence about money, what kinds of change can we manifest in the world? If we can reframe our perception of money and see it as a tool to help us build a just society, what more can we accomplish?… Money is a tool (and managing it is a skill that you learn, like cooking or gardening). Since money is a tool, shouldn’t we use it to live out and embody our deepest values?”

I grew up entirely on the East Coast, and have spent over a decade in Greater Boston, and Burlock’s words ring true to me: there is a culture of shame and silence around money, and it’s harder to use money as the tool it is if we feel badly any time it’s brought up. David Minard and the rest of the Budget Drive team aren’t trying to shame us when they talk to us about how the church requires money to be run. I’m happy to dream with all you other nerds about a *Star Trek*-style future wherein capitalism has ended and there is literally no money any more. But, for now… Making an annual pledge commitment supports this congregation live into its mission and covenant, which of course benefits every single one of us and, we hope, our neighbors both near and far. The Budget Drive is not an invitation to shame, but an invitation to demonstrate generosity to an institution and community that we are grateful for. Nor is pledge a tax; it is not an obligation — a pledge is a gift, and, as we know from the holiday season, giving and receiving gifts feels good. Our
conscience helps us feel good when we do the right thing by our church, our family, our friends, and our neighbors, those close to us and strangers, through kindness, charity, and activism. How and where we give our money is one avenue for exercising the call of our conscience to support a faith community that strives not to rely on popular opinion and Gallup polls, but on what our collective conscience tell us is right.

Modern multiracial UU minister and military chaplain Rev. Rebekah Savage writes, “Spirit of Life and Love, may we perceive the needs that arise around us like a clarion call of love. May we recall with audacious hope the words of [sixteenth-century German theologian] Martin Luther: ‘Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.’”

The world does feel like it’s going to pieces, and has felt that way for a long time — yet we still plant ourselves here at First Parish, with branches and fruits extending out into the wider community, because our inner voices tell us to be stewards of hope, peace, and love. May we each practice listening carefully to our consciences, and may First Parish remain a community where we find courage and companions on the journey. Blessed be, and amen.