

What Are We Fighting For?

November 11, 2018

Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane

REFLECTION, by David Boose

In an essay in 1936, writer F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.”¹ This is a test that we, as Unitarian Universalists, face pretty frequently. Our faith and our communities are built around principles that sometimes call us to do things that seem not just counterintuitive but actually contradictory. “Love your enemies,” for example.

Indeed, every Sunday morning we say and we hear that all are welcome here. That means we don't just *accept* everyone, we *value* everyone. And we value you not *despite* your differences, but *because of* your differences—because of the unique experiences and perspectives and values that make you different from me and from everyone else in our community. We say this every Sunday. But if we are really *doing it*, that's hard. And as an evolutionary biologist, I can tell you that it isn't natural.

Humans are and have always been a tribal species. Through our evolutionary history we have found safety and success by being part of small, cohesive groups. Being able to determine who is like us and who is not like us could be a matter of life and death. As a result, we've evolved to be suspicious, and even fearful, of those who seem to be different from us in some way. And those decisions about who is like us and who is not like us are made almost instantaneously, on an emotional and subconscious level in one of the oldest parts of our brains.

So this seems to present us with the situation Fitzgerald talks about—how do I value and welcome someone whom my evolutionary history says may be a threat? Fitzgerald presents this as a test of the intellect, and I think that as long as we are just thinking about it, that's true. We can use the more recent, more rational, more intentional parts

¹ [1] F. Scott Fitzgerald, "[The Crack-Up](#)", *Esquire Magazine* (February 1936).

of our brains to counter that ancient, subconscious emotional reaction. We can *know* that someone is not a threat, just because they are different from us.

But welcoming is an action, valuing is an action, loving is an action. So living out what we say when we say all are welcome here takes more than the intellectual test of holding two opposed ideas in our minds at the same time. Welcoming is a test of the heart. It requires intentionally opening ourselves to the possibility of being challenged, surprised, hurt; to the possible realization that the way we have been seeing the world and living in the world up to now has been limited, limiting, maybe even hurtful to others, without our knowing it. It's uncomfortable. It's hard.

I'm not very good at this yet. But when I think about the challenge of truly opening myself to the experiences and perspectives of others, I get inspiration from something that my friend Paul Susac, one of our members here, called his "reflection from an awkward yoga pose." Paul is a little younger than I am, which is to say, not all that young, and he described being in a particularly challenging position in a yoga class, limbs all splayed out in different directions, face squished against his mat, and trying to focus on "breathing into the stretch." As he did he realized, "Okay, this is kind of uncomfortable, unnatural, even. But the stretching comes from the discomfort. If I can get into this awkward, uncomfortable position intentionally and thoughtfully, I grow a little bit. That seems like a metaphor for something." Indeed.

So I think about Paul when I think about getting into other awkward, uncomfortable, maybe even unnatural situations, like loving my enemy, or seeing hope in hopeless situations, or opening myself to those who are different from me. I remind myself that the stretching comes from the discomfort. That doesn't mean it's suddenly going to be easy the next time I do it. But at least it might be a little bit easier. And I might be at least a little bit better at it.

This morning I invite you to think about where the awkward poses are in your life; what opposing ideas are you balancing? Where you are cautious about opening your heart? And I encourage you to breathe into the stretch.

READING

Our two readings come from the General Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches which met in Montreal, Canada, September 1917, to discuss the US's recent entry into war.

First, the words of Rev. John Haynes Holmes:

“No statement on this occasion would be useful, much less generous or just, which did not at least attempt an adequate interpretation of the varying attitudes maintained by Unitarians toward this war.” Many of us believe that “The Allies are battling... to ‘make the world safe for democracy.’ ... And for such a work on such an empire no weapon is fit except for the sword.” Others are in various ways “lovers of peace, and have long served its interests; but they do not see how the present conflict could have been avoided, and now that it has come, see no way out except to fight through it.” A third group of Unitarians “see the war as the consequence... of a general condition of international anarchy... fostered by the nations as furnishing an open field for... imperialistic ambition by which the autocratic classes in control of all modern countries prosper in wealth and power at the expense of the people... They therefore seek [an end to this war] now on any terms of ‘peace without victory’...” Finally there are “the non-resistants... / [They] are unmoved by a plea for war on grounds of self-defense, liberty, or honor... They... refuse to recognize the proposition that the end justifies the means... [and believe] The law of love can no more be repealed than the law of gravitation.”

“our division of opinion... only unites us the more heartily and firmly in the judgement that, above and beyond this horrid business of warfare, there are other tasks to be achieved if peace is to be established, and that these tasks belong distinctively to the churches.”

And now words of William Howard Taft, president of the Conference and former president of the United States:

“We represent not a large body, but a very important body, of Americans and Canadians. The question is now whether, when there are four hundred thousand Canadians on the front being killed and wounded and captured, and suffering in a cause that the great majority of both countries believed to be just, believes to be necessary in order to stamp out the evil of militarism, in order to stamp down a militaristic dynasty that looks forward to conquering the destinies of the world -- the question is, I say, whether we, as Americans, are to divide ourselves into four different parts on this report and say some of us believe this or that or the other or the last part, or whether we are going to act like Americans and Canadians, responding to the demands of the great issue that is being fought for, for which

the blood of our dearest is being shed or to be shed, or are we going to occupy a high transcendental position of not deciding anything? That is the question.

“... As a Unitarian I want no doubt about it. I am not a pacifist. I have struggled during my career to do as much for international peace as I could, but the way to international peace now is to win this war.”

SERMON, by Isabel Call

The War to End All Wars ended a hundred years ago today. Its legacies are many, but the end of war is not one of them. All of us are shaped by this history, in ways we can only try to explore.

I think of my mother's father, born 96 years ago to a family working hard to make **do** outside New York City. One legacy of the Great War was, no doubt, the attraction my grandfather felt to the victorious US Navy. He lied about his age and found himself a sailor, studying between shifts to test into the Naval Academy. Amazingly, he succeeded. He spent the Second World War in school and served as an engineer and aviator during the post-war peace time (aka the Cold War) throughout my mother's childhood, surviving at least one very close call. He did well. The family moved every few years to new assignments, and the houses they bought kept growing. Our family was no longer struggling hard to make ends meet. It had become part of the post-war economic boom. My mom was able to go to college. Once I came along, there was no question about whether I'd go to college. I was in grad school by the time grandpa died. He was proud of me.

I think of my grandmother's brother Willis, who also used the Navy to get out of the life he was leading. He never came home from World War II, and my grandmother never stopped grieving.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of African Americans enlisted, along with native Americans and indigenous Canadians. Their economic motivations were no doubt even stronger than my white ancestors', and the rewards of service less generous. They were denied housing and education benefits of the GI Bill, and as the great generation came to an end, many were still fighting for their pensions.

The outcomes for many veterans are troubling. For those of us not intimately connected to the military, it's easy to forget our responsibility to reclaim veterans as members of

our community, and it's hard to understand what they need. I invite you to join me to hear some of their stories at an event here at the church, Saturday evening December 1st, Warriors Heart to Art: A Creative Arts Healing Project for Veterans with PTSD.

Veterans are our ancestors, friends, family, and neighbors. On this day, I open my heart to these people who have borne great cost and great risk for the sake of democracy, approached danger with fear and courage, and been forever changed. I pray that they may know that they are loved.

As we come back to our routines after the upheaval of practicing democracy this week, I pray that we can remember, again, our fundamental values.

As war continues, I pray for peace.

We are a nation at war; have been my entire life, yours too no doubt, whether or not it's been official. This is the backdrop for the election this week, and I knew that no matter what the outcome of our collected ballots, we would still be facing war.

And yet fewer Americans are serving in active duty. Fewer and fewer of us are on the frontlines, fewer and fewer of us are killed fighting war. The devastation waged now across the globe is organized differently. Our global economy is partitioned by a global network of walls, policed by a global network of guns, accelerated by global climate disruption. People are still attacked and driven from their homes by greed, justified by organized hate of their heritage, their gender, their god, or the people they love.

We resolutely condemn hate and violence, and yet we know we are a part of this system. Any prosperity we enjoy is connected to someone else's suffering. If we have money in a bank, or are paying interest on loans held by a bank, then we're a part of this devastation. If we fill up our gas tanks, or buy anything that traveled any distance, then we're a part of the global extractive economy. If we own land in this country, then we're a part of its history. In our different ways, for many good reasons, we are each the universal soldier.

We are all fighting to survive in this world.

I can't preach us a way out of that.

But I can remember, and hold space for us **all** to remember,
that we do it
for love.

It is possible to be grateful for people who are fighting for what and who they believe in, even as we grieve the casualties. We must do both: grieve and thank. Digging down into the truth of our complicated reality is the only way we can imagine justice, and then build it. This is difficult work. It is spiritual work. It's what we were made for.

This week I read some reflections on the value of spiritual practice in healing from, and preventing, burnout. It was good timing for me, because I was feeling a lot of anxiety and powerlessness over our political situation, I'd committed to preach a sermon about *war*, of all topics, and I'd just come down with a vicious head cold. I was ripe for burnout. But then I encountered words by the Quaker David Shelly, who encourages us each to claim "a few central tasks as **emphatic responsibilities**. [He continues,] For each of us these special undertakings are **our** share in the joyous burdens of love." The idea here is to clarify: what are we actually made to do in this life, as the unique individuals that we are? What are the basic tasks that bring us meaning?

What are the *basic* tasks that bring you meaning? Reflect for a moment.

[Pause]

I'll share mine. They're particular to this body, this mind and heart, this week.

Care for myself.

Connect to others.

Study liberation.

My emphatic responsibilities are not the same thing as priorities. I need to do all of them to be me. I *definitely* can't do anything if I don't care for myself. This is more clear to me **now** that my body moves slower than the rest of the world expects. And in a world that doesn't always value disabled bodies, learning how to care for myself *is* studying liberation.

Connecting to other people grows out of this, because my self-love is my model of how I want to love others. And sometimes (often, really) I need help from others in order to care for myself. The interdependent web of all existence strikes again! We actually need each other.

Studying liberation comes out of my connection and love. I want to be free to connect to people on the other side of the walls. And I'm not free. We're not free. I *have* to study liberation. I have to know how we can be free.

Our church has a set of emphatic responsibilities. Will you say them with me?

Create community,
find meaning,
and work for justice.

One hundred and one years ago, the Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes outlined the emphatic responsibilities he believed belonged to the General Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches. This organization, one of the predecessors to our current Unitarian Universalist Association, was gathering to learn with each other, much like the four thousand UUs we expect to join us for General Assembly here in Spokane next June. They were gathering in a time of war.

As Chair of the Planning Council of Ministers, a group charged to “present the position of the Unitarian Churches” on the newly entered war to the Conference, Holmes listened carefully to the diversity of beliefs around him, and looked for the things the church *should* be organized for:

the things they all agreed upon,
the tasks that held solid regardless of one's opinion about the validity of the war,
the outcomes that mattered whether or not the Allies won the war,
the *emphatic responsibilities* of the church.

They emerged as:

The ministry of reconciliation
The preparation of peace
The establishment of social justice
The proclamation of God's law, the law of love

I want to highlight the establishment of social justice. We have this same emphatic responsibility here at our church. For Holmes, it was the development and practice of cooperation. He wrote “This war is a part of our world. It belongs to our breed... The war of the battlefield is **only** the magnified reflection of the war of the factory, the slum, and the foreign market.” We are all the universal soldier; to end war, we must end the practices at all levels of human relations that create disharmony and violence.

Holmes was more than aware that as a pacifist, he held a minority position. He represented his position about the war alongside other positions, with respect, and advocated *not choosing* among them. Democracy is great, but sometimes we can do better. Sometimes we can disagree on some things and still work together.

William Howard Taft disagreed. The *New York Times* “described the scene as ‘unprecedented in dramatic power in the annals of religious conventions.’” (Carpenter, p. 83). Taft’s face reddened throughout Holmes’ presentation, and when it was his turn, he took it, loudly and angrily, and persuasively advocated full, unmitigated support for war. His motion passed, 236 to 9, including a statement of implicit support of limitations on free speech.

This was part of a greater environment of censorship. The American Unitarian Association magazine had denounced pacifist ministers as treasonous, the Association president advocated that churches dismiss them, and the board agreed to withdraw financial aid to any church whose minister was not “a willing, earnest, and outspoken supporter of the United States in a vigorous and resolute prosecution of the war.” But Holmes’ church stood by him, **and** even though only one of their board members agreed with his stance on the war, they agreed unanimously to uphold his freedom of the pulpit. In 1936, the American Unitarian Association General Assembly repudiated the 1918 denial of aid. Since then, we have been more intentional in our support of free speech and conscientious objectors.

A couple years later, the US belatedly joined European countries in observing Armistice Day. We began ringing a bell 11 times at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. This tradition lasted only 16 years, before being replaced with Veterans Day. In the words of Rusty Nelson, President of Spokane chapter of Veterans for Peace, “We want to reclaim Armistice Day, not to deprecate any veteran’s sacrifice or efforts to defend home and hearth, but to shine a light upon the more constructive, less costly, nonviolent methods of conflict resolution validated over the last century.”

Minority voices, like Rusty Nelson’s and John Haynes Holmes’, often have the wisdom we need. But it takes a community committed to something stronger than winning, deeper than democracy, to be able to hear this wisdom. **This** is work for justice. Let us study liberation, by listening.

[Ring bell 11 times]

BENEDICTION

Let us join hands, hearts, and minds in
the ministry of reconciliation
the preparation of peace
the establishment of social justice
and the proclamation of love.

Amen, Blessed Be, Salaam Alaikum, and Shalom.

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