

Common Denominators
The Results of My Participation in the Faith Based Committee of Spokane
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
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On the afternoon of June 21st, 2019, I began giving away my book, *The Gadfly Papers*, to fellow Unitarians during the Unitarian Universalist Association's annual General Assembly taking place here in Spokane. Within just a few hours I was asked by its organizers not to return to the gathering, and within 24 hours I was publicly condemned by hundreds of my colleagues as "racist, homo- and transphobic, ableist, and classist," in response to a book none of them could have read, let alone fairly considered. Within a month, I was censured by the UU Minister's Association for no specific reason and fired as an adjunct professor without cause from Meadville-Lombard Theological School, the Unitarian seminary where I earned my Doctorate. By the end of the year my professional credentials were removed by the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee.

During the same year, the UUA sent two different teams to our church to "help" our congregation work through a crisis it had helped manufacture in its relentless drive to force me out of our church and out of ministry. Some of their staff and top executives were unethically and secretly working with a handful of our own members who wanted to do the same, no matter how much damage this did to our church. I was doing my best to hold myself and our congregation together at a time that was further complicated by the COVID lockdown, keeping us apart when we most needed to be together. Those seeking to force me out had been people I knew and loved for nearly a decade, yet they suddenly began demonizing and degrading me daily, tormenting me emotionally, psychologically, and verbally in ways contrary to what our tolerant religion is supposed to be about.

Little more than a week after all this began, I was scheduled to be the main speaker at the annual Freedom in the Arboretum event on July 4th. Spokane County Sheriff Ozzie Knezovich was also present and was invited to open with a few words of his own. He spoke about the importance of not demonizing the people we disagree with, "Because," he said, "once you demonize them, you think it's okay to dehumanize them, and when you dehumanize them, you feel justified in doing whatever you want to them." Given what I was experiencing at the time, no words could possibly have seemed truer. But Sheriff Ozzie continued, "For example, when I saw the name of a friend of mine in the paper last week being called a racist, I thought, 'Man, if this guy's a racist, there's no hope for any of us.'"

Is he talking about me? I wondered. He then turned to look me in the eyes, knowing right where I stood in the crowd of a few hundred. "You know who you are," he said. "You know what you're about. Don't let them stop you from being that person. You just keep doing what you know is right and being who you are." The first public support I received in the aftermath of the General Assembly—as one of our city's most liberal figures—was from one of its most conservative figures.

I was a little surprised to hear the Sheriff describe me as a friend. We had publicly been at odds on some issues, including my effort to make it more difficult for the railroad to transport fossil fuels through our community. But a year or so earlier I had traveled to Olympia in support of a young man, who is black, wishing to have his criminal record expunged. He committed a serious crime as a young adult while living in Chicago. But after serving his time he wisely moved to Spokane to get away from his former environment and to turn his life around. He married, had children, went to Eastern Washington University, and earned a PhD, but he couldn't get a job because of his record.

The first time he asked, the courts denied his request because he showed up without any support. They didn't believe him because it appeared that nobody believed *in* him. But this time was different. His parents and siblings flew in from Chicago, joining many of his friends, including me and Sheriff Ozzie. The matter was scheduled to be addressed first thing that morning, but we ended up waiting until the end of the day. We spent our entire day there, waiting to help him move on with his life. Ozzie and I spoke to each other a bit during our hours leaning against the courthouse walls. And we impressed each other with our mutual compassion for the young man. As you can imagine, being a top law enforcer, the Sheriff's words of support were the deciding factor in the court's decision to grant the man's request. "You know what you did that day. You know how far you traveled and the hours you spent to help that man," Ozzie said before the July 4th crowd (nobody knowing what he was referring to but me). "You know what you're about. You just keep being yourself and do what you do no matter what they say."

I knew and felt the personal pain behind his words. Although he and I may sometimes differ on what the right thing to do is, Ozzie is committed to doing what he believes is right and good, and he experienced constant criticism and demonization for it. That was our common denominator—being dehumanized by some in the communities we had devoted ourselves to serving.

More than two years later, in early November of 2022, I was contacted by Carl Tompkins who asked to meet with me over coffee to discuss the possibility of joining a group of interfaith leaders to work on issues of crime and homelessness in our community. Only two months earlier, Sheriff Ozzie had caused tremendous upset by announcing plans to raid and disperse Camp Hope, which had become the largest homeless tent city in the country. That plan got a lot of criticism and resistance from people on both sides of the political aisle and, in the end, is something he wisely didn't follow through on.

Instead, behind the scenes, he told the Citizens for a Safer Spokane (CSS) committee, a non-political group of civic leaders, that many of the systems which regulate crime, homelessness, and poverty in Spokane are ineffective and that it was time to turn our community's many faith leaders for suggestions and guidance. Carl Tompkins, who has since become a dear friend, was then tasked with forming FBCS, the Faith-Based Committee of Spokane. All faith organizations were invited, although only nine chose to participate.

During our coffee, Carl informed me that Sheriff Ozzie had told him, “You have to invite Todd Eklof.” I was excited about the idea but also wanted Carl to know exactly who he was asking by letting him know how extremely liberal I am and how different my religion is from most. Without hesitation, Carl, who is a conservative Christian, warmly responded, “Our group won’t be the same without you Todd.”

Again, try to imagine how this sentiment impacted me—to be welcomed and wanted by those of a different religion and political persuasion—after having been ostracized and treated so disdainfully by so many in my own liberal religion. Our first meeting took place at 6:00 PM on December 8th, 2022, during a snow and ice storm that made the roads treacherous. But everyone on the newly formed committee showed up—Viet Le of the Buddhist Faith, Father Lucas Tomson of the Catholic Faith, Vijay Anadani of the Hindu and Sikh faith, Jennifer Hicks and Steve Matthews of the LDS church, Carl Tompkins of the Protestant Christian faith, Ian and Linda Robertson of the Salvation Army, Patty Marsh and Gerald Haeger of the Seventh Day Adventist, Ivan Vrunchan of the Slavic faith, and yours truly of the Unitarian faith. Again, all faiths were invited, but these were the leaders who showed up.

Everyone involved almost immediately bonded and during our meetings, usually twice a month or more, our interchanges and differing viewpoints were always greeted with the deepest care and respect. Given our diversity, we often disagreed but never once were any of us disagreeable. For example, our very first task was to develop a code of life standards that every one of us and our various faith communities could agree upon. We ended up with a list of 32 standards. That might seem like a lot for such a diverse group, and it is, but we had over a hundred standards before whittling them down to just those we could agree upon. In other words, we disagreed about how life ought to be lived far more than we agreed. Yet, we never let our differences get in the way of accomplishing our common cause, nor prevent us from expressing the utmost respect for one another, nor from establishing the bonds of true friendship.

For example, Carl, the chair of the committee, listed “obedience” as a standard for life he felt sure we’d all agree on, and, indeed, nobody initially disputed it. He spoke eloquently of his reasons for including it, and it is a value that is clearly very dear to his heart. It was still early in our process, and I wasn’t sure how disagreements would be received, but I was not at all comfortable with “obedience” being listed as a standard for living, given what the word means to me. “One of the key figures in my religion, Henry David Thoreau, wrote the book on Civil Disobedience,” I said, “and Unitarians believe it’s sometimes necessary to disobey those in authority when confronting injustices.” To my surprise, others soon agreed, as if they merely hadn’t considered this point until I brought it up. “Not that I have to have everything my way,” I continued. “But when those in my congregation look at this list, I want to be able to let them know that I did speak to my concerns.”

“Nope, nope,” Carl interrupted. “It’s out of here. This list has to be based on complete consensus.” Just like that, despite his attachment to it, “obedience” was gone without the need for further discussion and no hurt feelings or anger from anyone. Again, given what I’ve experienced from so many Unitarians in recent years, who are supposed to be the most

openminded people of them all, I was not expecting to find that kind of acceptance from a conservative, Bible-believing Christian.

As the months proceeded, I was often surprised by how much I do have in common with the other faith leaders involved. For example, I asked Father Lucas, the Priest of Saint Peter Catholic Church, why working on such a committee was important to him. He immediately said, "Dignity. As Catholics, our first commitment is to human dignity." *Wow!* I thought. *Our first Unitarian principle is the inherent worth and dignity of every person.* "For us, when God became human through the incarnation of Christ," Father Lucas continued, "he elevated the dignity of every person. So, as Catholics, we serve our entire community, not just Catholics, because every person deserves a life of dignity." I was astonished to hear this and to realize that Father Lucas and I had joined the Faith Based Committee, with its focus on criminal justice and homelessness, for the same reason—because we both believe deeply that people should have dignity and be treated as such.

Our life standards are categorized into three areas of accountability: to self, family, and society. I'm not going to list all 32 here, because that would be boring and take up too much of our time. But I am going to make sure our office sends out a churchwide email this week with a digital copy of our final proposal to our civic and community leaders. Here, however, are just a few examples: justice, honesty, ethics and morality, generosity, humility, dignity, courage, peace, mercy, equality, respect, liberty, and so forth.

Nor do we have time for me to go into great detail about our proposals regarding crime and homelessness. Instead, I will focus on those ideas and items therein that are, at least in part, my contributions and representative of us as the UU church of Spokane. The section on Criminal Justice begins by pointing out that "nearly seventy percent of state tax dollars is allocated toward the criminal justice system, which involves between only five and eight percent of our state's population; reform is in order." This is a point some of you may recall me making frequently over the years when speaking on this topic. It also states that the goal of our proposal is to reduce "crime and have fewer incarcerations." Toward this end, I'm happy to have introduced the notion of restorative justice to the committee, the principles of which they eagerly embraced. It's comingled under the heading of "Loving Accountability," but remains embodied in statements like the following:

The criminal justice system should not only carry the appropriate degrees of retribution and punishment, but, in the largest sense, be restorative. Loving accountability provides the avenue of developing self-worth, and the spirit of loving accountability should exist within all legislative policies that pertain to criminal justice.

... the pertinent penalties prescribed by the law must be enforced, absent any favoritism or unequal scales of measure. All people should be met with equal concern, respect, and treatment when encountering law enforcement and the judicial system, regardless of race, gender, economic status, religion, age, military service, or any other qualities of individual identity.

It also states:

As incarceration may play a necessary role in the rehabilitation process, the criminal justice system must undertake all necessary procedures to protect the quality of life conducive to people's health and wholeness as dignified human beings while in custody.

And, while expressing the need to support law enforcement, especially police officers called upon to respond to crimes, the proposal also recognizes that, "such support includes the fair assessment of law enforcement practices, holding all officers responsible for legal and appropriate behavior." I cannot personally claim the authorship of these statements because, again, the proposal is a work of consensus, but I can take much credit for bringing these sentiments up for all of us to have considered.

Homelessness is, of course, a difficult matter to address, albeit one of the most serious issues of the day. It is as much a problem of scarce resources as anything else. Our committee agreed that the state of homelessness ought to be considered and treated as an "intolerable condition." This doesn't mean criminalizing it, nor does it mean giving away free houses. What it does mean is that no compassionate society can tolerate hundreds of thousands living without adequate shelter. I tried to use my voice, in particular, to get us away from the false narrative that homelessness is mainly caused by mental illness and drug addiction. I worked to remind the committee that there is a global housing shortage due to the rapid mass migration into the world's cities, which has caused a housing shortage and rising prices that keep many hardworking and well-educated people out of the housing market and, increasingly, sleeping in their cars or living on the streets.

The committee agreed that a great slogan should be, "Welcome to Spokane, a Safe and Clean Community where everyone can Live in Dignity!" Even if the city can't provide enough housing, having people sleep on the streets cannot be tolerated, which means it is up to officials to establish locations away from populated neighborhoods and businesses that can be utilized as homeless shelters. I brought up the idea that wherever they are established, it is also necessary to provide basic needs like water, restrooms, showers, beds and security. In addition, the committee agreed that we must have adequate programs in place to help as many people as we can become self-reliant. The proposal states, "FBCS recommends that our community leaders develop and deliver a plan that makes affordable housing available that helps to meet the limited financial capability of retirees, the elderly, and low-income people." It is easier said than done, but we all agreed, no matter what our religion, that our common code of life standards cannot allow people to suffer from the impacts and indignity of homelessness.

Without going further into the proposal, which you can soon see for yourself, I want to close by returning to the real theme of today's message, the importance of finding our common denominators. When I lived in Louisville, Interfaith Paths to Peace was the official interfaith organization. It is one of the most successful such organizations I know of because, instead of spending its time trying to educate people about the many different religions—educating them, that is, about our differences, it brings people of various religions together to work on common issues and challenges regardless of their differences. When I came to Spokane, this was not how the local interfaith organization worked. It was much more about bringing us

together to hear about and talk about our different beliefs. This, to me, is as boring as it is pointless, and, I believe, is why Spokane's interfaith community has never been very successful.

Most of us are satisfied with our chosen religions, whether we inherit them from our families or choose them as adults. We are already aware of the many other faiths that abound and are free to further explore them anytime we wish. What we cannot do, however, is resolve our common challenges alone. No matter our differences, many of our problems are the same, and none of them can be resolved unless we're all working together. There's a great verse in the Hebrew scriptures, "Can two people walk together without agreeing on the direction?" [Amos 3:3] The gridlock in our government today is caused by the almost absolute unwillingness of some very extreme republicans to "walk together" with democrats. As a result, neither party can get much done because they cannot agree upon the direction to take.

The success of the Faith Based Committee of Spokane, by contrast, is because this diverse group of people came together to help resolve some of our community's common challenges, regardless of our individual beliefs. Some of our civic leaders were astonished by what we accomplished in just a few months, especially given our diversity of beliefs. Sadly, when we publicly shared our final proposal with our civic leaders, only the republicans showed up, including our former Mayor, Nadine Woodward, but no officials from the progressive side of things came—no City Council members—although all were invited.

Until our leaders understand that the only way to move forward is by working together, genuinely listening to each other with compassion and respect, then the challenges before us all will remain unresolved. This is true of City Hall, the United States Congress and Senate, and the United Nations. We have so many grand challenges before us all, including global challenges, that cannot be overcome if we're cloistered into our own small religions, identity groups, and nationalities. We cannot make America great again without working to make the whole world great for the first time, because today, our greatest challenges are global.

Whether the recommendations of the Faith Based Committee of Spokane are followed or not, if nothing else it has proven how much we can accomplish, no matter our differences, when we are willing to come together to focus on all that we do share in common; our common denominators, our common challenges, our common values, and our common humanity.