

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
"The Margins Hold the Center"

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore January 16, 2011

Spoken and Silent Meditation

On the cusp of tragedy,
Mourning unnecessary death and injury,
we sense the need to be together
For touch, comfort, and reassurance
That the Spirit of Life and Love
remains vibrantly present in our midst.

The violence last Saturday is but a snapshot
of the horror that haunts people all over the world
on a daily basis.

The victims of rage and hatred
leave a trail of grief behind them
as weapons of mass destruction rob them
of their lives, of the ones they love.

No universal law requires this to be so.
The bullet or the blade
are not the only way to respond to our passions.
Care-full speaking and listening
can overcome differences, bring people together
and make a lasting peace.

Love wells up eternally,
even in the driest desert,
on the coldest, bleakest night.

May we, as individuals and as a congregation,
rededicate ourselves to be a model of peacemaking.

May we commit ourselves to proving
by the way we live our lives
that there are effective alternatives to violence.

May this be a house of peace for all people.

Sermon

I refuse to be paranoid. Yes, I know there are terrorist groups out there that seek to harm us. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon almost ten years ago make that crystal clear. Yes, I also know American agents are actively up to no good plotting against foreign and domestic targets. There are real reasons to be paranoid. Yet the paranoid mind state drives me toward “us and them” thinking, with us in the center and them on the margins. Seeing those on the margins as “other” and dangerous to “us” in the center goes against the grain of the Unitarian Universalist approach to religion.

This came up for me this past week as the nation struggled with the horrific assassination attempt on Arizona representative Gabrielle Giffords by Jared Lee Loughner last Saturday. From what we know right now, it appears he acted alone, driven by paranoid, delusional fears of the government. We don't know if he was influenced, specifically, by militaristic language in the media, but we do know that the political tension in her district was very high, particularly after Giffords narrowly won her reelection bid.

While Loughner's mental state before the attack isn't clear right now, Byron Williams was. In the middle of July, the California Highway Patrol pulled him over for driving erratically. Armed with a handgun, rifle and shotgun, and wearing body armor, he fired at and injured two officers before being subdued. Williams told investigators that he wanted “to start a revolution” by “killing people of importance at the Tides Foundation and the ACLU.” His mother told police he had been watching television news and was upset by “the way Congress was railroading through all these left-wing agenda items.”

I'll bet many of you probably have never heard of the Tide's foundation. An NGO, their mission is:

... to partner with philanthropists, foundations, activists, and organizations across the country and across the globe to promote economic justice, robust democratic processes, and the opportunity to live in a healthy and sustainable environment where human rights are preserved and protected.

Sounds like a great mission to me, an organization we might want to work with. A careful search of media coverage for stories on the Tide's foundation found no stories about them, except from one source, Glenn Beck. Beck used his infamous blackboard to identify Tides as trying to seize power and destroy capitalism as part of a left-wing conspiracy. Then he relentlessly repeated his attack daily for two weeks using his show and his access to FOX news.

I'm certain that Beck, like Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage, sees himself as the defender of America against extremists at the margins. So does Sarah Palin as she passes out boxes of cookies to school children to resist "nanny state" school boards in Pennsylvania. Their rhetoric isn't a balanced or reasoned approach to the issue, weighing the pros and cons. They know emotional language whips up people's passions to stimulate writing letters to the editor and elected officials and showing up for protests and at the ballot box. And this fervor spills over on the margins to the mentally ill ... willing to take matters into their own hands.

Let me also point out that the left is hardly immune from these tactics. As we say in community organizing, reasoning doesn't get people out of their chairs to do anything, emotions do. I heard lots of offensive language and imagery directed at former President George Bush, particularly in the build up to the Iraq war.

What both sides are always trying to do is claim the center of American identity and marginalize those on the other side. The Tea Party advocates are the latest group to try to claim that ideological center by connecting it to the US Constitution. By identifying a text as the center of our national identity, they implicitly follow a Protestant religious approach to identity. That approach puts the literal interpretation of the Bible at the center. Many Tea Party adherents think the US Constitution, as originally written in 1787, should form the inerrant, divinely guided, foundation of our government.

Except ... when it isn't. When 100 Representatives read it at the beginning of Congress' 2011 term, they neglected to read all of it. They deleted the section from being read that says, "three fifths of all other Persons." By deleting it, they also denied the infallibility of the original document.

By deleting it, they also didn't acknowledge the struggle that went into changing that language, including the Civil War and the Civil Rights movement. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this weekend, eloquently spoke for the inclusion of those of non-European ancestry in the American center. Driven by their marginalization and many grievances, Dr. King could easily have felt justified to join Malcolm X using violent imagery and language of revolution. But he didn't. He took the high road of non-violence recognizing it as the better way. Rather than seeing his opponents as the other, he saw them as fellow human beings who were misguided by their heritage and prejudices. He understood that separating people into "us" and "them" interferes with progress, interferes with opening a gracious path for people to change their minds. The way to move from the margins to the center is to define a larger center that includes rather than excludes.

That marginalizing didn't just happen to people of African descent. It happened to many others at different points in American history. Native and Hispanic people were

marginalized from the beginning of European appearance here. Southern and Eastern Europeans, Irish, Cajan, Chinese, Japanese, and now Middle-Eastern peoples, Catholics, Jews, and now Muslims just to name a few, have struggled and, in some cases, continue to struggle with being marginalized. What happens in that marginalization process, is a denial of the value each marginalized group brings to the center. Missing in the picture of driving the gold spike at the meeting of the Union and Central Pacific Railroads in 1869, were all the Asian laborers who actually bored the tunnels through mountains and laid the track, often at the cost of their lives. The food and cotton grown and picked by slaves formed the foundation of Southern society. Today, we wouldn't be eating much without the willing Mexican and Latin American workers from south of the border. Many of the medical and scientific professionals we rely on come from Asia and the Middle-East.

The genius of America has been to put values at our center rather than people, or faith. Every marginalized group legitimately appeals for redress of grievances through our founding documents. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution lift up individual freedom and equality of opportunity as core values that organize our society. Though eroded by making corporations persons and accepting their political influence through unlimited campaign donations, still, power is shared by giving each person one vote. No aristocracy holds the reigns of power in the background. No military endorsement is required of our elected leaders. Core values hold the center.

The genius of America is also the organizing principle that shapes Unitarian Universalism. Starting out as a reaction against Calvinist protestantism, Unitarian and Universalism have both moved from being centered in a liberal Christianity, to being centered in a non-denominational theism, to being centered in a Humanism that rejected God, to today being centered in a pluralistic approach to religion. Rather than identifying a theological center and excluding heterodox theologies, we welcome the affirmation of our core values from many different sources, outlined in our Purposes and Principles. And critical to those sources are the ones that come from the margins.

One of the groups marginalized in our congregations during the 1960's and 1970's were those who believed in God and followed Christianity as their source. I remember congregations during that time where the mention of God was not permitted. Some members kept careful watch on ministers and counted the number of times words like God, faith, prayer, and grace were used. Those members saw our congregations as a refuge for atheists and Humanists in a sea of irrational faith. That marginalization began to change, starting in the 1980's when women began exploring and claiming pre-Christian religious traditions that honored the Goddess. Today, in my ministry, I strive to be intentionally inclusive of the diversity of sources of people's faith, including, specifically, both Judaism and Christianity, neither putting nor excluding any one of them in the center.

Starting with women rejecting patriarchy in the 1970's, We've seen the emergence of an Earth-Centered spirituality in our midst. These sources honor the planet's claim on our reverence, respect and worship. Our bodies intimately connect to the cycles of the moon and the seasons. The extinctions of species and the degradation of the environment due to our disrespect and objectification of our planet threatens its ability to support us as a species. Reversing those trends will have enormous impacts on how we live our lives as we move, or are driven, toward living sustainably in harmony with Mother Earth. And Earth-Centered spirituality can help awaken and stimulate the emotional energy this transition will require.

As important as theological diversity, has been the social diversity we welcome here. Of the major religious traditions, we are one of the very few that give full recognition and inclusion to the wide range of sexual diversity including lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, queer, intersex, asexual, gender bending, the whole spectrum. Not that we're all perfectly accepting as individuals, that is part of each person's process of growth and development. While we say we are racially inclusive, as an institution, this is a continuing work in progress. As we live in a society struggling to grow beyond its racist past, we must acknowledge that we all carry, white, black, brown, yellow, red or green, we all carry, often unrecognized, racial beliefs, assumptions, values and prejudice. May this be a safe place for us to discover and heal those inner exclusions.

The hardest for us to include will always be people who want to kill us and eliminate us, people like Jared Lee Loughner and Byron Williams. Yet, deluded as they may be with anger and mental illness, they have a message for us too. Driving them to the margins ignores what they may have to tell us about ourselves, in the rawness of their reactivity.

The message I'm receiving from these disturbed men is the importance of the words and metaphors I choose or don't choose when I speak. They have sent me a powerful message about the temptation to marginalize anyone and deny their humanity. I would be devastated if someone used one of my sermons as an inspiration or a motivation to do harm to anyone. Each one of us, through the words we use and the values we promote, can have a significant impact on each other. How respectful we are of each other here, how carefully we listen and honor each other, can have consequences, sometimes really big consequences.

I'm saddened both Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin aren't taking this approach, at least publicly. Yet I know Palin got a message from the shootings when she took down the web page putting districts in the cross-hairs. Actions sometimes speak much louder than words. If she was proud of that graphic and stood behind it the way her most recent video suggested she did, she would have left it up and linked to it. I hope one result of these shootings will be less violent political language on both sides of the aisle.

Again, remembering the inspiration of Dr. King is especially instructive. If anyone was justified in being paranoid it was Dr. King. They were out to kill him. He could have advocated violence in Selma in March of 1965 in response to Bloody Sunday. He chose the better way. Two days later when he led people across the Pettus Bridge and was stopped by the police, he asked people to kneel and pray for their change of heart. He chose the better way of non-violence. He waited for the judge to sanction the march to Montgomery. The third time, the people peacefully crossed the bridge, marched to Montgomery, and changed history.

I heard echoes of Dr. King as our President, Barack Obama, spoke Wednesday evening at the memorial event in Tucson, Arizona. I close with some of those words:

The loss of these wonderful people should make every one of us strive to be better. To be better in our private lives, to be better friends and neighbors and coworkers and parents. And if, as has been discussed in recent days, their death helps usher in more civility in our public discourse, let us remember it is not because a simple lack of civility caused this tragedy -- it did not -- but rather because only a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to the challenges of our nation in a way that would make them proud.

We should be civil because we want to live up to the example of public servants like John Roll and Gabby Giffords, who knew first and foremost that we are all Americans, and that we can question each other's ideas without questioning each other's love of country and that our task, working together, is to constantly widen the circle of our concern so that we bequeath the American Dream to future generations.

Benediction

President Obama also said in his speech:

I believe that, for all our imperfections, we are full of decency and goodness, and that the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us.

That Spirit, Obama mentions, is the deep river of life and love that flows through all of us, whether in the center or on the margins.

May we make that river the center of our lives.

May we offer a wide welcome to the marginalized whatever their social position.

May we make this a house of peace for all people.