

Kindness

©Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

As you know, our theme for the month of October is Healing. Last week in all-ages worship we explored the idea of healing from a mostly pastoral perspective. We talked about broken bones and broken hearts, and what it means for something to be healed so it is 'as good as new.' We reflected on times of sadness and disappointment. We touched ugly broken bottles that had been healed by the forces of nature turning them into beautiful pieces of sea glass. Better than new! In that vein we also talked about things that don't heal. They are transformed and sometimes even sacrificed in the transformation. The cocoon that breaks open, allowing the butterfly to emerge. The avocado seed that splits open, allowing a new plant to grow.

Today I want to talk about prophetic healing. What our Jewish cousins call tikkun olam, the repair of the world. We are in the midst of the Jewish High Holy Days, the time between Rosh Hoshanah and Yom Kippur when Jews are expected to examine their lives over the past year, note the places where their words or deeds have missed the mark (which is the Hebrew understanding of the word sin), make amends, and resolve to do better. This is, according to UU minister Elizabeth Greene, the work of Teshuvah. Repentance. Or perhaps more accurately, turning around. Teshuva during the 10 Days of Awe prepares you for the work of the 355 days of the year. Tikkun Olam. We heal our own brokenness so that we can heal the world's brokenness. None of us can repair the world alone, but we are all required to do our small part, healing the broken pieces that are right in front of us. So the Jewish High Holy Days are one way for us to understand prophetic healing.

But they are not the only holidays in October that invite us to be reflective and repentant. There is also Columbus Day. Did you know that dozens of cities around the country have changed the holiday we celebrate tomorrow from Columbus Day to Indigenous People's Day? Why? To try to heal some of the pain that white European settlement imposed on the people who were already living here when Columbus 'discovered' America. Does changing the name of a holiday heal? Not by itself. But it's a start. At the very least it spares us from celebrating the exploits of a man who history had made into a hero when it could easily be argued that he was a racist, triumphalist, genocidal explorer with a really, really bad sense of direction. So prophetic healing might ask us to stop celebrating the myth of Columbus and instead begin to learn about what was really set in motion with his arrival, which some native peoples refer to simply with the ominous word contact. Before contact. After contact. The pain of all that happened after contact is still felt in indigenous populations today. Indigenous People's Day calls us to an appreciation of the cultures of those Native Americans who have for so long been ignored, exploited, and misunderstood. Great idea, right?

But it isn't that simple. I learned recently that Columbus Day originated in 1892, when President Benjamin Harrison decreed a day to celebrate the accomplishments of the Italian explorer as an antidote to the horrific lynching of 11 Sicilian immigrants in New Orleans. Columbus Day came into being to try to counter anti-immigrant sentiment directed against Italian immigrants. Prophetic healing can be a complicated thing.

So what are we to do, as principled and covenanted Unitarian Universalists, to help heal our piece of the world? Especially given that our piece of the world, our nation, is in a fractured, partisan mess! We have seen so much change in the past decade. Marriage equality became the law of the land, leading to a backlash

from the radical religious right whose darkest shadow side is the Westboro Baptist Church with their ‘God hates fags’ rhetoric. A black man has occupied the White House for the past eight years, leading to a backlash of racist sentiment that is frightening in intensity. Steady progress in gender equality has created an anti-woman backlash focused on such things as male control of reproduction. I could go on. And then there is the current election cycle – a fear-filled, fanatically partisan affair that makes those of us who hoped for an actual exploration of important issues tear our hair out.

So what are we to do if we feel called to the practice of prophetic healing in this cultural context? Part of the answer is to cultivate a practice of kindness. Kindness, you say? Are you kidding me? Kindness, like in being nice even when niceness is not an appropriate response? Kindness as in naïve and sentimental papering over of abuse and oppression? Kindness as in weakness and vulnerability? No! I don’t mean any of those things.

Let’s go back to some of the words Jan read to us earlier in the service. In response to the question, “What does it mean to be a community of healing?” Soul Matters authors argued that although healing certainly takes work, it also takes perception and sight. “Or,” they wrote, “to be more exact, what if we remembered that healing always *begins* with perception and sight? Would we more easily tell the story of when we first realized that we were part of propping up the system? The system that subtly and not so subtly gives some a hand while keeping the hands of others so securely tied behind their back?” For many of us, the exploration of our white privilege has been both painful and liberating. And it has made it harder to dismiss with contempt our white friends who are not quite there yet. Hearing out their pained cries of loss of power and privilege, with an attitude

of kindness, is far more likely to bring about the transformations we hope for than shaming and labeling and shutting down.

Another question posed in that reading: “Would we more easily call to mind those moments when we were able to see our “enemies” in their wholeness? Those moments when our frames of them as all bad and us as all good gave way to the truth that they are as complex, fragile and flawed as us.”

In that last question is the key to how to practice kindness that comes out of strength rather than weakness, determination rather than sentimentality, courage rather than niceness. To see our enemies (and it hurts even to acknowledge that I have enemies, that there are some people with whom I disagree so profoundly that I think of them as enemies) in their wholeness, we need to first see ourselves in our wholeness. Firm in our own integrity, we can then engage the partisan divide with a strong, non-violent and prophetic kindness. And I will confess that for me personally, it is harder to say that today than it was four days ago. So let me give you some examples of prophetic kindness. And as an aside, if we had a really good digital projector, this would be the perfect sermon to illustrate with great visuals. Just saying. So, to the examples, the first two from my own experience.

May Day 1971 – protestors from around the nation converged on Washington DC to demand an end to the Viet Nam war. Mass civil disobedience was planned. The intent was to disrupt business as usual as much as possible. I was there with Barry. We were part of a not-so-carefully planned non-violent protest called the Donut Conspiracy. It consisted of purchasing lots of big boxes of donuts and handing them out to commuters stuck in traffic due to street shut downs. We hoped that it would give us opportunities to engage one-on-one with people about why we were there. We ran out of donuts pretty quickly. The next thing I remember is tear gas. To this day I am glad that I was able to be part of a protest

that tried to humanize the cause and engage with those who disagreed with us.

General Assembly 2016 – delegates to GA learned a few days before the meeting began that the Westboro Baptist Church, fresh from picketing at the funerals of some of those killed in the Pulse night club shooting in Orlando, would be visiting us in Columbus to protest our stand on GLBTQ issues. Although the UUA decreed that there would be no counter-protest, hundreds of us felt that we could not stand idly by. So we gathered on the street corner where the very small handful of Westboro folks were spewing their toxic brand of homophobia, and we just tried to love the hell out of them. And the rest of the world going by on that busy street. We waved rainbow flags and sang songs of love and chanted of love and justice. A select few got to wear the angel costumes that were created in Orlando. Eight feet high, they were designed to create a loving but impenetrable shield between the survivors of the shooting and the Westboro protestors who were picketing their funerals. The angel costumes came to General Assembly and allowed us to engage in prophetic kindness.

Dallas 2016 – I wasn't there, but I saw the pictures. As shots ring out from a sniper, the shots that killed 5 police officers, people rush to surround a mother with a baby in a stroller, escorting them to safety by using their own bodies as shields.

Now a couple more examples found on the Kindness Blog, from a photo array called "Kindness Found Within Conflict".

Pakistan October 2013 – Two weeks after a deadly suicide bomb attack on St. Anthony's church in Lahore, Pakistan, Muslims joined hands with Christians to form a human chain to protect worshippers as mass was celebrated once again. "Well the terrorists showed us what they do on Sundays. Here we are showing them what we do on Sundays. We unite," said Mohammad Jibrán Nasir, the organizer who made the calls for the event on social media.

Egypt 2011 – In and around Tahrir Square, Christians join hands and create a huge human barrier around their Muslim friends when the call to prayer sounds, protecting them and allowing them to pray in peace in the midst of the chaotic protests. During the same time period, Egyptian soldiers in armored tanks refuse an order to fire on pro-democracy protestors. They are embraced in gratitude by the protestors.

Prophetic kindness can mean taking a huge risk. It can mean putting your body between harm and somebody vulnerable to harm. My clergy colleagues in Charlotte described what it was like last month to go out into the streets several nights in a row after the police killing of Keith Scott and form a clerical chain between protestors and police, trying to keep the protests non-violent from both sides. Prophetic kindness can mean taking a huge leap of faith. Can I really bring myself to a place of empathy for people who represent and embrace things that I have spent my whole life fighting against? Can I practice kindness in the face of the Ku Klux Klan? Angry men defiantly carrying automatic weapons into stores and coffee shops? Will there be a need for prophetically kind election observers to counter the election observers being recruited to suppress minority voting? Will I go if asked? Will you?

There is plenty of October left for us to talk together and think together and act together around the theme of healing. Join me at noon today in Brunner Chapel for a sermon discussion. I will be happy to talk not just about today's sermon, but about your experiences with the Soul Matters materials that you have read or interacted with. Remember, it is not too late to sign up for a Soul Matters small group. And even if you can't commit to a monthly group, you can review the materials on our web site and experiment with the Spiritual Exercises on your own. I will be hosting a monthly post-worship discussion group on the theme.

I close with an invitation to one of the Spiritual Exercises from the Soul Matters materials this month. “We (also) need to widen our view of kindness. Too often we think of it as ‘sweet.’ Sometimes we even give in to our culture’s tendency to mock and make light of it. But there is nothing sentimental or silly about remembering that most pain is hidden. Everyone walks around with wounds we are unable to see. Thus kindness isn’t helpful here and there; it’s needed everywhere we look. It’s not “good to remember” every once in a while; it is necessary all the time. In fact, if everyone is walking around with invisible wounds, we actually allow and cause great damage when we forget to be kind. So this month, here’s your assignment: Remember that kindness is needed everywhere you look. Make yourself walk around with new eyes. Commit to taking kindness a bit more seriously than you have in the past. Remind yourself regularly that it’s not about being polite or sweet; it’s about healing unseen wounds – maybe even yours.”