

## **Reaching Out in Love**

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Well I hope it has been as good a summer for you as it has been for me. It has been a summer of looking forward. The staff and I have been putting together our plans for classes and programs for this year; some new, some old favorites returning. I have had the privilege of working with a new lay member on the Executive Team who brings new energy and ideas to that work. The Board has been engaging our new strategic plan with gusto and has been working with me on how to bring those dreams to life. For much of the summer I had the opportunity to meet with some of our long established members, make phone calls, send cards, and even a pastoral house call or two.

Even at home it is has been a busy summer. We took our annual trip to Michigan to see family. Most mornings we awoke to a gorgeous view of Lake Michigan as we camped near its shores. And when we returned we had the excitement of a new school year and a new church year to look forward to. Meeting teachers, greeting friends, and reconnecting to our lives after a much

needed break. It was a happy summer that we enjoyed a great deal.

Unfortunately I can't say the same for the world outside of home and church. A friend of mine, who had taken his family on vacation to Israel, got out of that country just days before the latest round of fighting broke out with Syria. It seems the past few months have been filled with wars and near wars. Russia, the Middle East, and numerous other places have experienced unspeakable violence and treated human life with a casual disrespect that is typical of tyrants. And then, just when you think it can't happen here, the events of Ferguson Missouri grip and shock the nation.

For me that was the last straw. Sadly violence in the Middle East and insane dictators in Russia have been around quite literally my entire life. But a police force in the United States of America killing an unarmed man and then militarizing itself is too much to take. I felt heartbroken over what I saw. Heartbroken for the death of a young man, Michael Brown who died so young and seemingly for no reason. I was also heartbroken for the city of St. Louis, a city I travel to every fall for an annual ministers' conference, and I have gotten to know a bit over the years. It is heartbreaking that fear and mistrust can so quickly and thoroughly take over a community.

At one point, I felt that the events of Ferguson make a mockery out of our First Principle, that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. But then I thought, no. It just means the world needs to hear it all the more. It is natural when we feel pain or suffering to want to pull back from it; to shrink away. Anyone who has touched a hot pan on the stove knows the common wisdom of removing yourself from a painful situation. But sometimes that first reaction is not the best one. Sometimes we are called to engage, to move closer, to jump into situations that are filled with suffering.

There is an image of the Buddha that is popular in Indonesia. It is called the Weeping Buddha. Perhaps you have seen it; it's considered the pinnacle of wood carving I am told. It is an image of the Buddha ostensibly seated in meditation, but instead of sitting up straight, as we so often see, this Buddha is folded over with his head in his hands. The story behind the image is that this Buddha is so overwhelmed by the suffering of the world, that he weeps in sympathetic sorrow. This image isn't based on any particular text that I know of – it is a symbol all to itself. So often we think of enlightenment as this grand mystical experience in which we hold the universe in a grand of sand and eternity in an hour. It might be that I guess. But if you were really a Buddha, and you really did feel and experience your

interconnection to all beings throughout the entire universe, you would experience a near-infinite amount of suffering. Every person's insecurities, their hopes dashed, their loved ones lost, their grief, their sorrow, their physical pain, their fears and worries about the future. It is no wonder that the Buddha, in that moment of enlightenment, might weep.

It reminds me of a famous quip by Shunryu Suzuki, the great Zen Master who brought Zen Buddhism to America. Suzuki was teaching a group of Americans early in his time in San Francisco. He saw all of these Americans meditating so earnestly. When the question and answer period came up, Suzuki asked a question of his own, "Why do you meditate?" One young man, the most earnest of the bunch, raised his hand and said, "I meditate in order to become enlightened!" Suzuki raised his eyebrow, one of his most famous expressions, and replied, "Why do you want to become enlightened? You might not like it." Just ask the Weeping Buddha who intensely feels the suffering of the world.

I thought of that Weeping Buddha a lot this summer while I was watching the news about Europe and ISIS and Israel and Ferguson. It is very easy for all of us to get caught up in our lives, our own dramas. Things like the first day of school or vacation or the start of the football season can loom large in our personal consciousness. It is hard to feel the suffering of others so far

away. It can seem so remote. Who wants to focus on the negative anyway? We can of course ignore the world's suffering and just worry about the soap opera that is happening in our immediate slice of the world. Most people do. But it seems to me that makes the world we experience smaller and smaller. It is the opposite of the Weeping Buddha who is connected to everything and everyone. As we continually narrow our vision and area of concern, our lives become more ego-centric. Soon we find ourselves caring only about a handful of people. We are insulated from the world and from feeling anything. We have abandoned compassion altogether.

I dare say, that is how most people cope with the bad news in our world. Insulate themselves with material goods, food, drugs and alcohol, until they don't feel anything in particular anymore. Now I am not suggesting we literally weep for all of the world's suffering, but I would urge us to be slow to give in to fear and simply remove ourselves from those who experience pain. Religion is at its best when it urges us to reengage the world of suffering. Not all religions do of course, but when they are at their best, religion is a wake up call that says, "That person over there is connected to you despite outward differences of race, class, age or geography. Their suffering affects you. Wake up. Do

something about it.” After all, the word Buddha means, “The one who woke up.”

Waking up to the world’s suffering is a good first step, but it isn’t quite enough on its own. Not only do you have to wake up, but you also have to respond – to do something very practical that helps to alleviate that suffering. Otherwise, what was the point of engaging the world? I happened to know Rev. Susan Fredrick-Gray because she and I were in a ministers’ group together about five or six years ago. In our story this morning, she describes a pivotal moment in her ministry. There she is sitting in front of the statue of the four girls who died in the bombing of a Baptist church in 1964. Back then Unitarian Universalists, including our own Rev. Bob Doss, saw suffering in Selma Alabama and joined Dr. King in his march. There was fear and suffering in the world, and Unitarian Universalists responded with love. In the course of her own reflection, Susan realized that she was facing a similar challenge. This time it was discrimination against illegal immigrants in Arizona. But the circumstances were not dissimilar: politicians, and a whole state, was acting out of fear. Unitarian Universalists responded to fear with love.

Fear divides people in so many ways. There is something inherently human, unfortunately, that deals with fear by casting it out on to other people. People who are different than the one’s I

love and care about. If my focus of concern is narrow, just aimed at immediate friends and family, than when I am afraid it can be tempting to blame someone else. Someone who doesn't look like me, or act like me or the few people I care about. That is what that narrow sphere of concern gets us: fear turns into hate and distrust. But if our concern is wider than that, if we can care about people beyond just the here and now, then there is a greater chance that when pain and suffering comes our way than we will respond with love. Our first theme for the year this month is unity. Nothing brings about unity better than love.

In 2011, President Barack Obama said, "In the fleeting time we have on this earth, what matters is not wealth, or status, or power, or fame—but rather, how well we have loved, and what small part we have played in bettering the lives of others." As a church, we find our unity through our common mission. Part of the mission of First Unitarian Church calls us to "transform the world through loving action." Our mission is our shared purpose – it is how we hold our programs together, our committees together, our Board and our Executive Team together. Our mission gets us rowing in the same direction. For all of the meta conversations we have had in the past year about budgets and staffing plans and strategic plans, it is easy to forget that simple call to

transform the world through loving action. That is where we find our unity.

Of course it is an intentionally general statement, “transform the world through loving action.” So let’s break it down. My friend and colleague Rev. Eric Kaminetzky stated it as plainly as one can. He writes, “The purposes of the church are too help us love ourselves, to help us to learn to love each other, and to help us practice living in the world as if we loved everybody else.”

I think these three points build on each other. The first purpose of the church is to help us to love ourselves. I think this is a great point, because we cannot hope to love someone else if we are in a constant struggle to love ourselves. Much of the work that we do under the heading of religious education, small group ministry, and spiritual practice are ways in which our church helps people to develop their spiritual lives. Loving yourself is the fruit of a healthy and mature inner life.

The second purpose of the church is to learn to love each other. I think the word “learn” is key there. The church is not meant to be a perfect utopian community. We learn to love each other. It is a place where we make mistakes, but ultimately are committed to the community and world to heal and forgive each other. Love has to be directed outwardly. The purpose of the

church is to be that safe haven where we learn to expand our sphere of concern to other people; maybe people who are different than us in some ways. But forgiving each other and trying again recommitted to our covenant are qualities that define a Beloved Community.

Finally, Eric says that the purpose of the church is to help us to practice living in a world as if we loved everybody else. Again, I love the subtlety of Kamentzky's words. (He was a lawyer before becoming a UU minister by the way.) "Practice living as if we loved everybody else." If you wait until we all love everyone, then we will never take any action beyond our narrow sphere of concern. No if we are to transform the world through loving action, then we need to act as if we loved the world. It may sound odd at first, given that we Unitarian Universalists are so fond of authenticity. But there is a saying in the self-help movement that sometimes you have to "fake it to make it." Act as if you loved the world, and pretty soon over time your sphere of concern widens. Your world gets larger. Maybe not Weeping Buddha large, but bigger than it was before. Actually Thich Nhat Hanh encourages fake-it-to-make-it practices. He tells people who are suffering from depression to practice smiling when they are at their lowest. Because sometimes love works from the outside in, rather than

the inside out. We practice loving the world until we actually love the world.

There are huge implications for our social justice ministry here. It means that social action is not something to be left up to a handful of activists. Social Action is an integral part of our mission to transform the world through loving action. Act as if you love people you have never seen or met. Engage the world as if their suffering were the suffering of your best friend. Ferguson is everywhere. Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown are part of us. That is what our Unitarian Universalist faith calls us to understand. And the mission of our particular Unitarian Universalist church calls us to not only wake up to that reality, but to respond with loving action to that injustice. For it is in that action around our shared mission that we build our unity as a church.

This year expect to hear a great deal more about the mission and vision of our church. Amidst the numbers and benchmarks and metrics it is easy to lose sight of what is really important. Namely to meet fear and hate with hope and love. That is where we need to keep our focus. Love, by its very nature, reaches out beyond ourselves. The more we keep that mission and vision front and center in our collective life, then the greater unity we will experience, and the more effective we will be as a church. May

this year be the year where we reaffirm our mission to transform the world while loving each other as well. And may we be blessed in the work of love. Amen Blessed Be.