

Who We Are Not

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 21 October 2007
Chip Roush

FIRST READING Jaye A. La Vallee was born in 1952, in Winnipeg Manitoba. He is also known as *Akicita Wakan Mani*, which means “warrior of spirit who walks and talks to others.” He has a black belt; is a kickboxer and a professional bodyguard, and he is a holistic healer.

This is adapted from his entry in a book that came out in 1999, called *Prayers for a Thousand Years: Blessings and Expressions of Hope for the New Millennium*.

“Wakan Tanka, Great Mystery, I, Akicita Wakan Mani...ask you to please hear me, for I seek your gifts so that I may know the gifts in others.

I struggle on my journey, Wakan Tanka, my journey is a spiritual war. It takes place inside me as I seek to bring in unison my heart and mind...

Wakan Tanka, please grant me the indomitable spirit to continue to clear my mind of my judgments and my grievances of others who are different from me. It is what I carry of my early years that taints my vision today. I am motivated by fear and I ask for strength to talk honestly and compassionately to all my fellow human beings. Without these two virtues, cruelty can arise.

O Wakan Tanka, help me be ready for this new millennium by letting me continue to clear my own heart and mind and let me walk this road of life in the good way, and to walk the talk of you. I pray for the inner peace of humankind and for mother earth to be honored with harmonious life upon hear. Hear my prayer, Wakan Tanka.

Mitakuye Oyasin We are all related.”

SECOND READING Naomi Shihab Nye was born in 1952, in St. Louis, to a Palestinian father and a mother from the United States. She has won a number of prizes for her poetry, and currently calls San Antonio home. This is her poem, “Messenger”

Someone has been painting NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE across the backs of bus benches, blotting out the advertisement beneath with green so the strong silver letters appear clearly at corners, in front of taco stands and hardware stores.

Whoever did this must have done it in the dark, clanging paint cans block to block or a couple of sprays – they must have really wanted to do it. Among the many distasteful graffiti on earth this line seems somehow honorable. It wants to help us. It could belong to anyone, Latinas, Arabs, Jews, priests, glue-sniffers. Mostly I wonder about what happened or didn't happen in the painter's life to give her this line. I don't wonder about the person who painted HIV under the STOPs on the stop signs in the same way.

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

Did some miracle startle the painter into action or is she waiting and hoping?

Does she ride the bus with her face pressed to the window looking for her own message?

Daily the long wind brushes YES Through the trees.

SERMON How many of you have attended at least one reunion with your high school class? How many attended a reunion at least 25 years after your graduation? How many of you enjoyed talking with someone at a reunion, with whom you rarely or never spoke, when you were still in high school?

I attended the 25th reunion of the 1982 graduating class of River Valley High School, in Marion county, Ohio, last August. Although I was a bit nervous about going, it turned out that I had a really good time.

I had also attended my 10- and 15-year reunions, but those were much less enjoyable. Ten years was simply not long enough; we stuck pretty much with the groups and the cliques with which we had associated in high school. At the fifteen year, things might have been different for some, but I wasn't really comfortable with who I was, yet, so I wasn't able to appreciate reconnecting with my classmates.

Now it's ten years even beyond that time, and I've discovered my vocation, and taken a job serving a really great congregation, and I've met and married Becky. I went to seminary, where I was forced—I mean, encouraged—to face every difficult experience in my life, every sorrow, every transgression, and make meaning out of those experiences.

So, two months ago, on my way to the 25th reunion, I knew I shared some gray hair, and some weight gain, and 43 years of human life: struggles and disappointments, family crises and health issues, and joys and successes, with my fellow graduates. It no longer mattered whether we were “jocks” in high school, or “brains” or “misfits” or whether we went on to college or learned a trade. Because we had a deeper appreciation of our own life experiences, we were able to find compassion for the life circumstances of others, and we were able to talk and reminisce and sympathize and celebrate our life journeys so far.

So now, I'm really looking forward to our 30th reunion, in the summer of 2012.

You know, some Baptists believe that drinking alcohol is a sin. It therefore tickles me when my teetotaling inlaws explain that Protestants do not recognize the authority of the Pope, and Jews do not recognize the divinity of Jesus, and Baptists do not recognize each other in the liquor store.

I like that joke because it skewers our human capacity for hypocrisy, for holding others to a higher standard than we do, ourselves, and because it demonstrates another human truth: we excel at drawing distinctions and dividing one group of us from another.

I do not believe that this is always a bad thing. Sometimes, it is appropriate, even necessary, to notice our differences and dissimilarities. It is embarrassing to walk into the wrong bathroom, for example. But sometimes, we get sloppy with these distinctions, and we spend more time focused on who we are not, than on who we are.

There is a long historical precedence for this, in our liberal religious tradition. Well before the word “Unitarian” became common, our spiritual ancestors were called “Anti-Trinitarians” And our Universalist forebears were sometimes called “No-Hellites.”

Even today, it is often the case that we define ourselves by what we are not. How many of you, when asked what Unitarian Universalists believe, have ever started with “we don't believe in...”?

Reverend Kevin will be teaching an adult religious education class, next spring, that will help us answer questions about what we believe, and what our fellow UUs believe. In the meantime, we can notice that we have abandoned the older, negative terms, for words that emphasize our positive message. “Unitarian” is not just a response to the Christian trinity, it can mean that “god is one”—that all the metaphorical names we use to refer to that from which we come, and to which we return, and which changes us in ways we cannot change ourselves, all those names refer to the same human experience. And Universalism isn't only about the lack of a Hell, it affirms that all people, of any, every or no faith tradition, have inherent worth and dignity.

And that is where it gets difficult. Because we humans have thousands of ways of dividing ourselves, and declaring one group better than another group. By affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people we are called to question those divisions and comparisons. We are called to challenge any economic, philosophical, political or so-called “religious” system that privileges one group at the expense of another.

Nor can we take the easy way out, and say, “we're all equal; we all have more in common than we have differences, so we'll just treat everybody equally.” Our differences are real; overlooking them, or acting as if they were insignificant is disrespectful. If we all have worth and dignity then our differences must be acknowledged and respected.

Every human being is oppressed somehow; we are all kept from achieving our full potential. And every human being is an oppressor. We have all treated other people unfairly. All of us.

Some humans are more oppressor than oppressed. Many more people are more oppressed than oppressor. Yet we are all both. We all suffer, and we all cause suffering.

Our task is twofold: seek healing for ourselves and those we love, and minimize the harm we inflict on others. In the best-case scenario, as we learn to acknowledge our own pains and sorrows, we become more aware of the suffering of others; and as we find healing, we learn to extend it to others.

Ann Richards made this quotation famous, but I believe it was first said by Coach Barry Switzer: “Some people were born on third base, and go through life thinking they hit a triple.” All of us in this room have struggled—and a huge number of people have had a more difficult struggle. This DOES NOT mean that our sorrows are devalued by comparison; it does mean that as we heal, there are many more who need our help.

You may have heard the phrase, “white privilege.” It refers to the fact that, in this culture, most white people have an easier time getting through life than most non-white people do. Some people claim that the proper response to the existence of privilege is to relinquish it. I do not think that those with privilege, of any kind, should give it up. Nor should we feel guilty or ashamed about any privilege we possess, as long as we use it to help those with fewer or no privileges. We *should* acknowledge, and learn to use, our advantages, and then ask others how best to help them. Whether we were born on third base, or second or first, or even in the batter’s box, there are many people waiting to come to bat, or are still outside the stadium. It is our religious imperative to use all the skills we possess to help our fellow human beings achieve their potential.

We are all oppressors, and we are all oppressed; we cannot really tell by looking at someone to what extent they oppress others, nor how they are oppressed. The only way to tell is to get to know that person. Talk with her, learn his story. Share your own. I think it was Glenn Hilke who said, “the most radical thing you can do is to introduce people to each other.”

To help demonstrate that point, we will now hear the story of Sam Slaven, adapted from Lisa Pollak’s version, which appeared on the public radio program, *This American Life*, on September 7th, 2007.

LISA: Sam is from Indiana. After high school, he enrolled in Purdue. But college wasn’t for him back then, so he dropped out, and joined the army. When he was sent to Baghdad, in 2003, at the start of the war, he was Sergeant Sam Slaven, of the 2nd Armored Cavalry. He didn’t know much about the people of Iraq, or their religion, but he knew he wanted to help them. At first, it seemed like they wanted that, too.

SAM: They were happy to see us. You know, they’d bring tea out for us, and sit and socialize. We even had one family bake us a cake.

LISA: After a few months of that treatment, it’s no wonder that when Sam came under fire for the first time, outside a power station he was guarding, he was truly surprised.

SAM: It just didn’t make sense...I was thinking, “what are you doing? ‘Cause, you know, I’m going to have to shoot back.” And we did.

LISA: Sam’s unit was stationed in Sadr City, where the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr was building a militia. Translators told the soldiers that Iraqis were being told to “kill the infidels.” ... On October 9th, 2003, his platoon was out on patrol; on a nearby street, another platoon drove into an ambush. They were lured in by a woman, and child, pretending they needed help.

SAM: Everything let loose. IEDs, RPGs, rifles, machine guns...so many guns... it was literally a wall of red, moving left to right, and right to left...We weren’t armored; we didn’t even have doors on our vehicles...It was terrifying. We weren’t in the worst part of the thing, but it was still the scariest thing I’d ever seen, or probably ever will see.

LISA: The ambush was so big, the locals must have known. But none of them warned the soldiers who had been trying to help them. After that, Sam says, he could never really look at Iraqis the same way.

SAM: From that point, it was like, “kill all these people.” You know, just to be safe...It was a two-way street, they hated us more, and we hated them more.

LISA: Sam was eventually moved back to the states, as an army recruiter in Florida. That might sound like a good job, but Miami was too much like Baghdad: the temperature, the canals, the palm trees.

SAM: Between my apartment and the recruiting station, there was a mosque. I’d see that, and I’d physically feel myself tense up. My heart would start pounding; it just made me angry. I expected people to come running out with guns, to shoot me up.

LISA: Sam began to have nightmares, and trouble sleeping, and other symptoms of PTSD—post-traumatic stress disorder... I asked Sam if he ever hit bottom.

SAM: I was sitting in the recruiting office, at the far back. A new recruiter was up front, practicing his little speeches...including how “not-bad” Iraq was...I thought, I just can’t take this, knowing that we’re lying to these kids. We’re *training* people to lie to kids. I went to the small storage area, and sat down and just...broke down. I was crying, I couldn’t take it. I had to go home, and I just quit.

LISA: After that day, Sam got help. He started treatment for PTSD, retired from the army, and moved to Champaign, Illinois, where he had family. In May, 2006, at age 28, he started classes at Parkland Community College. The campus wasn’t exactly a hotbed for Arab and Muslim culture, but for Sam, it didn’t take much.

SAM: I was like, there’s Muslims everywhere...If I saw one of them, I’d walk the other way. I just wasn’t sure, if I got too close to the guy, what would happen.

LISA: One day, he did almost get too close. In the hallway of a building, he spotted this guy, Middle Eastern-looking, with a long beard.

SAM: An instantaneous rush of anxiety—I was like, what do I do? ‘Course, the option of—of “ridding” him from the situation was an option. I thought of choking him out, taking him in for questioning.

Then I thought, “what am I doing? This isn’t a war zone! Stop, and stand here a minute and think about it.” I want to say, I felt good that nothing happened, but at the same time, what have I become? What can I do to get back to the way I was...a better person. I sat and thought, and I looked up...and I saw a little poster on the bulletin board, that said “Learn about Islam! Join the Muslim Student Association.” I thought, you know what? Maybe that would be good for me.

LISA: Now, the founder and president of the Muslim Student Association was Yusef Radeef (?), who happened to be that man with the beard that Sam almost “choked out” in the hallway. He is an Iraqi, although his family moved out of Iraq when he was 10, to Jordan, and then to the United Arab Emirates, before coming to Illinois three years ago.

Yusef was 17 when he arrived, and it was very hard, at first. His fellow Arabs warned him to lay low. But he didn’t want to hide who he was, so he joined lots of groups at Parkland, and he wasn’t afraid to say he opposed the Iraq War. And he started an official chapter of the Muslim Student Association. He wanted this particular chapter to be different from other Muslim groups he’d heard about—one of his main goals was to reach out to students who weren’t Muslim, especially the ones who had a bad impression of his faith. For Yusef, having a guy like Sam, somebody filled with negative emotions about Islam, just walk into an MSA meeting, was actually kind of a dream scenario.

SAM: I tell you what, that first meeting, I was sweating, trembling, and like “my god! what am I doing?!” ... I walked in the door, and I saw that same bearded guy. Wow. I saw a lot of females on one side of the room, and a lot of males, on the other. I thought, “I know I’m not supposed to sit by the women—that’s what they told us in Iraq—but that’s where the door is, and I need to be near that door.”

I sat there...I know my fists were clenched on the desk. I was trembling, and sweating, and I felt like I was about to have a major anxiety attack. It was the first time I’d been outnumbered by Arabs and Muslims since I’d been in Iraq. I had to keep telling myself, I’m not back in Iraq, I’m here, at the college, and I’m here voluntarily.

LISA: At first, the other MSA students were uncomfortable, too. They thought Sam was a spy.

SAM: Somebody asked me, why are you here? And I said, “I’m doing this for therapy” and they all looked at me like I was crazy. I told them “I was in the war, and I want to change how I feel about your religion.”

LISA: Later, Sam and Yusef met each other on campus, and they did pretty well. They shook hands, and began to talk.

SAM: I know I went home, and I told my therapist, “I sat down with a bunch of Muslims this week,” and he was like, “Oh, no! what happened?”

LISA: Psychologists have a term for this kind of approach—“exposure therapy,” where you try to re-experience the things that traumatize you, make them so they’re no longer horrific, merely bad. Sam’s therapist would *not* have suggested such a radical version of exposure therapy, but he felt Sam could handle it, so he encouraged him.

SAM: Probably by the 5th or 6th week, I moved away from the seat by the door. I started talking, and asking questions...

LISA: As the school year went on, Sam became one of the most active members of the Muslim Student Association. He was usually the first person at a meeting, and he almost always volunteered to sit at the MSA table in the student center, to do outreach to other students. His dedication eventually won over the other MSA members.

Even better, Sam and Yusef were becoming actual friends. They went places and hung out together. Sam began to teach Yusef magic tricks.

SAM: We took a ride in a car together—and I think I even said it out loud, I said, “I can’t believe I’m sitting in here without a gun.” ‘Cause every time I’d been in a vehicle with an Iraqi, I was armed.

LISA: Yusef helped Sam repair his roof, and Sam gave Yusef advice on raising money—he said not to use the whole name, Muslim Student Association, just say ‘MSA.’

Then, last April, came Sam and Yusef’s biggest collaboration...the Parkland MSA held a 5K run to combat the negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims. Runners from all over the country competed for the \$1,000 top prize. The race would not have happened without Sam—he volunteered to organize it, and spent months planning and publicizing it. In the end, it was a positive event for the whole community, that just happened to be sponsored by Muslims. To top it off, after the race, Yusef invited Sam to play in a soccer game, with a group of Muslim students from the state university. A year earlier, just the idea of being on a playing field, surrounded by Muslim men he didn’t know, would have made Sam anxious.

SAM: I considered that day as a big milestone, in overcoming PTSD...

LISA: It was only through the sheer force of will that Sam attended the Muslim Student Association in the first place. To do it, he had to overlook every instinct he had, to run the other way. And then he had to meet someone like Yusef, who welcomed him, ignoring anything Sam might have done in the past. When you consider what it took for Sam to overcome his hatred, it’s no wonder it happens so rarely.

Perhaps it is not as rare as the radio reporter thinks. I submit that people *are* learning to work across these barriers of race, or class, or sexuality or religious tradition, all the time. It may not be as dramatic a story as Sam’s, but I see it happening all over.

I think that is partially why the people who make such distinctions are making them more loudly and more vigorously—because they see the “danger” in their barriers eroding.

Which is not to say it isn’t hard. It is difficult; it’s some of the hardest work we can do. And, we are called to do it, as a religious/spiritual imperative. We must do it, to find wholeness for ourselves, as well as wholeness for our world. Sam Slaven did it; we can do it, especially if we challenge and support and help each other in our struggles.

As Naomi Shihab Nye reminded us: NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE.

So may we be.