

Cost of Iraq (UUSC Justice Sunday)

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 30 March 2008
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OPENING WORDS

Life makes distinctions. Single-celled organisms seek certain substances and avoid others; geese and eagles select one mate and eschew others; humans classify each other with hundreds of categories and criteria. Some of these differentiations are important, and some end up working against us. For the next sixty minutes, and for the rest of our lives, may we strengthen our life-affirming distinctions, and may we loosen and expand our other definitions, to widen and deepen our circles of inclusivity.

FIRST READING

Rolf Jacobsen was born in Norway, in 1907. Although he wrote editorials supporting the German occupation in World War II, his later poetry wrestled with compassion for his fellow beings, and found joy in the “little things” in life. This is slightly adapted from his poem, “—When They Sleep”

*All people are children when they sleep.
There's no war in them then.
They open their hands and breathe
in that quiet rhythm heaven has given them.*

*They pucker their lips like small children
and open their hands halfway,
soldiers and statesmen, servants and masters.
The stars stand guard
and a haze veils the sky,
a few hours when no one will do anybody harm.*

*If only we could speak to one another then
when our hearts are half-open flowers.
Words like golden bees
would drift in.
—[Mercy], teach me the language of sleep.*

SECOND READING

Alice Walker was born in 1944, in a small town in Georgia. She and Mel Leventhal became the first legally-married interracial couple in Mississippi, when they married in 1965. She was named “Humanist of the Year” in 1997. This is adapted from a speech she gave to the Midwives Alliance of North America, eleven days after the World Trade Center towers were felled.

“There is not a midwife in this room who would bomb a baby or a child or a pregnant woman. Perhaps in this particular room there is not one person who would do so. And yet, that is the position we find ourselves in. The war against Iraq continues. In the ten years since [the first Iraq war began], millions more have died, the majority of them small children. Unlike most North Americans I did not watch the initial bombing on television; I did see later, however, footage showing the bombing of a long line of what looked like old men trying to flee. They were running this way and that, their eyes filled with terror. I recognized more than I ever had that it is the very soul of the people of North America that is being lost, and that if this happens, for the rest of our time on the planet we are doomed to run with the dogs of war. This is the vision that I have of this period. Ravenous, rapacious dogs, mad with greed and lust, red tongues out and salivating, running loose across the planet. They are the dogs that show up in some of the art of our time...It is an ancient image, however, and what astonishes me is how accurately and irresistibly it has arisen in the psyche. And the psyche recognizes this image, not because it is only external. But because some part of

it is internal as well. Which means we must all look inside and get to know our own dogs of war. Some of our war dogs, we have to own, are paying taxes that will be used to destroy people almost identical to us. Many of our war dogs are connected to heating our homes and driving cars.”

THIRD READING

Jean Shinoda Bolen is an Asian-American psychiatrist and author. She graduated from medical school in 1962, and won the “Pioneers in Art, Science, and the Soul of Healing Award” in 2002. This was also written in response to the September 11th attacks.

*At this time of mourning
May we be connected to each other,
May we know the range and depth of feelings
in ourselves and in each other.
For there is vulnerability, fear, love, rage, hatred,
compassion, courage, despair, and hope
In ourselves, each other, and the world.
May we know our most authentic feelings
And voice them when we speak.
May we tap into soul and spirit
When we are silent together.
May healing begin in us.
May we form and become a circle.*

*Begin by holding hands in a circle
(even two people can be one),
Be silent and feel the clasp and connection
Of hands and heart.
Then each in turn
Speak for yourself
And listen to each other.
Put judgment aside
Remember that anything voiced
That you may want to silence
May be a silenced part of yourself.
Sing what spontaneously wants to be sung
and end each circle as it was begun.
Hold hands once again,
hold silence (for meditation, contemplation, prayer),
Invite blessings.
Until we meet again.*

SERMON

How many of you, if you were given \$10,000, with the stipulation that you could not use it to pay bills, would prefer to spend it on one fairly large item, rather than making many smaller purchases? How many would prefer to make many smaller purchases? If you had to donate it, how many would give it to a hospital over a school? How many, to the school instead of the hospital? How many of you would prefer to spend money rebuilding our national infrastructure, especially in the hurricane-stricken Gulf Coast, rather than using it to fund the war effort in Iraq?

And yet, of course, as Alice Walker rather pointedly reminds us, that is exactly what we are doing. Our United States government has spent over half a trillion dollars of our tax money to prosecute the war in Iraq. Now, it sounds like Ms. Walker might be recommending that we become tax protesters, and refuse to pay taxes as long as the revenues go to the war. I do not know if I can follow her all that way, but I do respect her reminder that we are responsible for our world.

Our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, hereinafter referred to as "UUSC," thus saving a full eleven syllables each time I say it, has provided the order of service covers, and the inserts, and they have some flyers you may take home, with even more information *and* some concrete steps we can take, to work toward justice in our world.

The flyers, which are on the credenza, between the sanctuary door and the office, say things like,

"More than two years ago, the terrible power of nature, combined with a failure of government, brought about a massive humanitarian crisis. The recovery process remains horribly inadequate and severely skewed along lines of race and class. Affordable housing is nonexistent with rents up as much as 200 percent and thousands of habitable public housing units remaining closed or slated for destruction. Health care continues to be sorely lacking with only one of seven general hospitals in New Orleans operating at pre-storm levels, according to a detailed analysis by the Institute for Southern Studies. Immediately following Katrina, New Orleans public schools fired 4,000 experienced teachers. In January, 2007, 300 students were placed on waiting lists because schools simply had no room for them. While severe mental health issues are on the rise and post-traumatic stress disorders continue to worsen, funding for mental health services has been cut.

All this is happening in the wealthiest nation in the world. Meanwhile our tax dollars have been diverted to pay for a misguided war rather than to fund programs of social uplift. We must change this course."

Let the congregation say, "amen!"

None of these statistics include 4,000 dead U.S. soldiers, nor the 100,000 dead Iraqis nor the millions displaced from their homes. It does not include once-integrated neighborhoods now walled off along sectarian divisions, and the fear and hatred that replaced a once-relatively-peaceful, relatively-secular society. It does not include the precious antiquities, from a cradle of civilization, literally the original garden of Eden, lost or destroyed in the fighting. It does not include the loss of moral capital that our nation can no longer spend to influence other countries to uphold human rights.

It does not include the toll taken on our young women and men, killed or living radically different lives now, damaged physically or mentally or both, families torn apart and/or dragged into poverty...The cost of Iraq is the social fabric of two nations callously sliced to ribbons by our at-best-misguided leaders.

Saddam Hussein did, by all accounts, do some horrible things. It could be argued that the nations of the world have an obligation to remove such tyrants from power. But if we were willing to commit 500 billion dollars and thousands of human lives, might there not have been some better, more effective alternatives? Maybe we could have spent half of that, and still had enough money to provide health care for every child in the United States.

Taxpayers in Louisiana will pay 1.2 billion dollars for proposed Iraq spending in fiscal year 2008. According to the National Priorities Project, they could have built 14,220 affordable housing units, or trained 24,974 elementary school teachers, or hired 36,443 public safety officers.

Just here in Traverse City, we have already spent 17 million dollars of our taxes on Iraq. That money could have provided health care for 6379 people, or 1745 university scholarships or built 137 affordable housing units, or built—or in our case, kept open—two elementary schools. 2.7 million dollars of Traverse City money has already been requested, for fiscal year 2008, and a projected expenditure of another four and a half million dollars of our money in fiscal year 2009. Just the 2.7 million dollars this year could build 3823 homes with renewable electricity.

What can we do to help?

We can *actually* support our troops by demanding adequate health care for returning vets, especially those with post-traumatic stress disorder.

We can ask, and keep asking, all through the election process, about a realistic exit strategy from Iraq, and about the proper ratio of our tax dollars spent for war and our tax dollars spent for rebuilding our own nation. We can ask how the candidates will handle the remaining issues in our Gulf Coast. However much the mainstream media may dodge the issues, we can work to keep them in the public awareness.

We can join the UUSC, and help fund their work. We can send groups to help reconstruct the Gulf Coast communities affected by hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

And, at least as importantly, we can work to understand and diminish our own human impulse to define other persons as “different”...“dangerous”...“less than”...or “evil.”

Yes, there are people who are genuinely dangerous, and there are people for whom the only adequate description may be “evil,” but there are many, many fewer such people than certain news programs and radio hosts and election-seeking politicians often claim.

To address the root causes of war and racism and classism and all the rest of the ways that we turn living beings into mere “Others,” we have to confront our own dogs of war: fear, and sorrow, and anger; hunger, and lust and loneliness. These live in us and bark in us, they sometimes snarl, and sometimes whine and whimper in us. Our dogs of war snap at us, and they snap at others and we all get hurt.

Most of us do not want to hurt people, or ourselves. We want to speak and act as if our hearts were half-open flowers. Alas, the only time that we are able to do that, according to the poet, is when we are asleep. And frankly, I’m not even sure *that* is the case. It is at least possible that we make the same distinctions and judgments when we dream as when we are awake. It is a necessary process to live. I learned the difference between me and the rest of the world as an infant. I learned the difference between me and my family; and then the difference between my family—the people who look like me—and people who do not look like me.

We learn to differentiate between lots of different people, and most of us learn to fear at least some of those differences.

Just in this election, we are shown Barack Obama in Muslim garb and sent emails that assert his radical Muslim beliefs; and we are reminded that black men got to vote in our country fifty years before any women got to vote. And we may watch history repeat itself, as a black man is voted in before a woman.

A dear friend of mine is a minister in another state. When she sought feedback from her congregation, she received a great deal of positive feedback (because she is a marvelous minister) and several notes that said, “I won’t be satisfied until I never have to hear a woman preach again.” In the 21st century, that was written. Clearly, this is more about the person writing, than the person preaching, but it is a sobering reminder.

Also in the 21st century, a young lesbian woman was tied to a tree in Oklahoma and had an ugly word gouged into her chest with a ballpoint pen.

When I was still in Chicago, the Unitarian Church of Evanston actually convened a support group for the wealthiest members of its congregation, who felt judged and marginalized by the whispers and the jokes during coffee hours, because of their wealth.

In two other congregations I’ve been part of, I saw a family enter a Sunday service with at least one person wearing overalls. Despite my efforts to reach out to them, both times, the family came twice and never returned because of the cold shoulder they received from the congregation.

My wife, Becky, comes home at least once a month, lamenting that she's heard yet another health-care professional dismiss older patients because "they're just old." Usually, Becky is able to help that "irretrievably old" person to function without pain and with greater mobility for years later. Even professionals who should know better are ageists.

At the other end of the spectrum, when we walk through the mall, what flits through our minds as we note all the black-clad teenagers? Is there compassion for their difficult journey through adolescence? Is there amusement at the coping strategies of their generation? Is there a bit of fear, or annoyance, and a desire for them to be elsewhere?

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Virginia landowners deliberately set about dividing their black slaves from their poor white indentured servants. The landowners feared that the two groups would recognize their shared interests, and rise up together. So they created legal distinctions between the two, such niceties as blacks being whipped naked, while whites were allowed to be clothed when they were whipped. It worked. The two groups were effectively separated, and the legal system in our United States continues to perpetuate racism.

After hurricane Katrina, there were many pictures of people struggling through waist-high water, trying to survive the catastrophe. In one set of twelve photographs, posted on the internet by news services, over a few hours' time, 11 of the twelve photos contain black people, who are identified in the captions as "looters." The sole picture of white people is labeled "survivors seeking food." They were all carrying the same stuff; mind you.

Racism permeates our culture, as it does virtually every human society. In our United States, black people are often stereotyped and prejudged, as are Hispanics, and Latinos and Latinas, Native American people, Asian American people, Irish people, people of Middle Eastern descent, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, old people, young people, people who are too heavy or too thin, disabled people, rich people and poor people, liberals and conservatives, bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people, women and yes, straight white men are sometimes stereotyped and judged, too. Have I named every person in the room, yet?

Our internal dogs of war bark about all of these differences. It is hard work, but we can quiet these dogs. We can learn to speak as if our hearts are half-open flowers, and, once in a while, fully-opened flowers. Most of the time, we are part dog and part flower. But so is everybody else, part dog and part flower. Together, we can create a large, loud kennel, or fracture into rival packs, or we can co-create an exquisite garden.

Fancy metaphors aside, our internal work to be less prejudiced and less closed-off is *difficult*. There will always be people who challenge us.

And, with a lot of practice, and a little luck, we can become more authentically open to more individual human beings; and we can become more likely to treat more persons as individuals instead of mere examples of whatever group we classify them into.

I will close with a true story—well, two stories. Well, maybe one, universal, story:

At the 2005 General Assembly, in Fort Worth, Texas, there were a number of racially-based incidents. Some were perpetrated by local law enforcement, harassing our teens, especially teens of color, as they moved from hotel to hotel through the city streets. Some were by older, white UUs who asked the teens to carry their luggage for them. The whole tragic tale culminated in the cancellation of the final dance, which was to have been sponsored by the youth, most of whom were boycotting until their grievances were addressed.

After the events, our UUA board created a Special Review Commission to investigate and make recommendations. This tale is part of the Commission's report:

“Upon reviewing over 80 accounts of the events that took place in Fort Worth, the members of the commission came to a common understanding: that into every situation each of us brings a personal body of experience that affects the nature of our interactions. This is exemplified by what we refer to as ‘the elevator story.’

In this true occurrence, a woman of African descent recalls riding in a crowded elevator with several emotionally exhausted youth and young adults of color on the final night of General Assembly. Two of the youth present had just been involved in a near-altercation with a white female minister outside of the closing ceremony. The elevator stops and as the doors open, she hears a white woman yelling at the youth of color in the elevator, ‘If you people really want to be antiracist, you will get off the elevator now and allow this poor man to get on.’ The woman of African descent peers outside the doors and observes that the poor man in question is an older, black hotel employee with a food cart. When she looks at him, she reads shame and embarrassment on his face. Meanwhile, the white woman has boarded the elevator. The woman of African descent remembers a flood of emotion. ‘In his eyes,’ she said, ‘I saw me.’ And she wondered, ‘What was I doing with rude, insensitive white people so far removed from his world, my roots?’ This episode reminded her of many of the negative, race-based encounters she’d experienced within the UU community over the past 15 years. She questioned why she was a part of this faith community, but ‘I stayed on that elevator. I stood my ground . . . I belonged on that elevator, too.’ Soon after she learned that the white woman was a UU minister, which increased her discomfort.

The white UU minister recounts the same event. She had heard only that the dance had been canceled due to incidents of racism and the youth community feeling ‘broken.’ Leaving the ballroom, she came upon an older, black hotel employee waiting at the elevator doors with a food service cart. An elevator arrived, and a dozen YRUU [Young Religious Unitarian Universalist] youth hurried past him to fill it. This happened twice as she watched. The man told her that he’d been waiting for some time as this scenario repeated itself. The third time the elevator arrived, and youth rushed to enter, she interrupted to ask if they would step out and let the man in. She recalls that the youth ‘were screaming at me that their world was broken.’ She told them that if they were concerned about racism, they would care about this man. She reminded them that everyone at General Assembly was privileged, and urged them to look after the hotel staff. After boarding the elevator, she and the youth continued to dialogue until an adult woman of color said to her, ‘You need to stop now and go with your white community and talk about this.’ This incident left her shaken. She was accustomed to speaking out for the underdog, she said. Although she too had attended the closing ceremony, ‘I had no clue what had happened with the youth or what I had gotten into.’ She described this incident as ‘one of the more unpleasant experiences in my entire life.’

The story of the elevator demonstrates the vastly different lenses through which two women viewed the same event. While race played a factor, so had encounters immediately preceding this one, and all the experiences associated with being an adult, a parent, a woman, a person of color, a white person, a person of authority, and so on. The commission views the elevator story as a metaphor for many of the stories we were privy to during this investigation.

It is our conclusion that a vital part of the effort to become a more whole and loving community involves listening to and sharing our honest perspectives--not to determine who is ‘right’ and who is ‘wrong,’ but to identify where it is that we have attempted to communicate with one another and simply failed. The good news is that we are reaching out and striving to connect. Let us be kind to each other, and try again--and again, and again.”
So may we be.

BENEDICTION

The silenced parts of ourselves encourage us to silence others. May we keep talking; and may we keep listening to each other; and may we keep trying. So may we be.