

LOVE CAN BUILD A BRIDGE

Our Unitarian Universalist religion may start in the head, but it must flow through the heart, and ultimately be translated through our hands. As our order of service cover suggests: this is a crucial time for all San Dieguitan hands to be on deck, ready to fully serve...to praise, to massage, to wring, to resist, and to reconcile.

I want to focus upon the last two motions today: resistance and reconciliation, both in the name of love, for, as country-western-singer Ashley Judd puts it: “love can build a bridge...between your heart and mine; love can build a bridge, don’t you think it’s time, don’t you think it’s time.”

We can start building that bridge by resisting the demonization of otherness.

Sadly, there exist those in our land, indeed throughout our own San Diego county, who would demonize their opponents—and when opponents are designated demons, then shooting people working in abortion clinics and murdering gays and lesbians is not a matter of killing people but simply ridding the world of evil.

During the Vietnam War, our GI’s called the Vietcong “gooks”; in Iraq, our soldiers call the insurgents “rats” and their trails “ratlines”. Psychologically, humans can kill rats much more easily than we can kill hungry, tired, frightened young women and men more like ourselves than not. For once we produce a label that doesn’t fit us, we can ignore the humanity of the labeled. Labels make it acceptable to erase “peasants”, “insurgents”, “enemy combatants”, even “protestors.”

The truth is that no human being is illegal and no person is an alien. Progressives, as well as conservatives, have our own way of demonizing. We hurl stones whenever we

use terms such as “fundamentalist” or “rednecks” in derisive ways that allow no room for nuances, individual differences, or empathy with our adversaries’ points of view.

Negative labeling can only lead to exclusion, often destruction.

As ardent supporters of religious liberty and compassion, we must consistently aspire to resemble our open-minded convictions. We must also reclaim American history, register and mobilize voters as 2008 arrives, encouraging one and all to be principled rather than ideological, clear but also civil, engaged without being used.

Our liberal and liberating religion charges us to create an inclusive, fair-minded, and nonviolent community where we live, work, and worship. In short, we must resist demonizing, resist hate-crimes, resist dogmatism and resist intolerance, wherever they rear their ugly heads. As Coretta Scott King says, “It’s vitally important that we endorse zero tolerance for bigotry!”

And while being full-bore resisters as Unitarian Universalists, we must be devoted reconcilers as well—and, yes, occasionally with the very same individuals or groups. Our way of religion summons us to be spiritually ambidextrous, to confront and conciliate, to crash barriers and build bridges. But to complicate matters, some of us who resist are, in fact, temperamentally combative and some of us who reconcile, are unduly compliant. So, we need reconcilers who have spine and resisters with suppleness.

I know my own Achilles heel: being naturally accommodating, I have to be vigilant that my attempts at peacemaking aren’t disguised faintheartedness. In any case, genuine bridge-building is never to be confused with passivity or acquiescence, for, as King, Gandhi and all bona fide activists have taught: reconciliation is an act requiring enormous nonviolent strength and prodigious moral force.

I belong to a small, local band of peace-makers called the Fellowship of Reconciliation—an international, interfaith organization founded in 1914. I assume it wasn't christened the Fellowship of Peace, Justice or Mercy because the founders wanted to challenge us, and they did; for reconciliation is perhaps the most difficult of life's encounters, since it entails the coming together with some measure of harmony among individuals who've been sundered. There's no tougher religious art or skill than finding common ground and making healthy compromises—be it between partners, work associations, congregants, nations, races or faiths.

To illustrate my point, I've never forgotten a disturbing phrase tucked away in the familiar, comforting 23rd Psalm in the Hebrew scriptures that reminds us of the ever-present call to be reconcilers and reconciled: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” Now, setting a table before family or friends usually poses no special challenge, unless, of course, you're at odds with your own kin, or have to go silent when talking about religion or politics. But being called by God to be companions with our foes, literally, to break bread with our enemies—well, that may just constitute the ultimate spiritual test.

But what does it really take to diminish hostility...internally, interpersonally and internationally? What will it take to find, then cultivate, common ground with our opponents—some of whom, some of the time, may even lie under the same roof with us or be one of our relatives or friends? Or surely live in the same neighborhood in which San Dieguito is set. How will you, alongside your new minister, actively join and form coalitions of creative compassion here in North County?

Well, the first building block to becoming a reconciling presence is a willingness to give up our sense of rightness. And you have to start at home and work.

Unquestionably, one of my toughest life-challenges is to relinquish my sense of being in control, being correct, being rated the “good guy” in fair or foul weather. I have to regularly remind myself that the purpose of my holy union with Carolyn is mutual growth *not* individual triumph, shared satisfaction never personal virtuousness. Being right is the booby prize; staying healthfully together—ah, that’s the goal. And after 34 years, I can only say that I’m making progress in this regard.

And on the global level, a perfect example is Jerusalem. Recently more than 100 U.S. rabbis claimed that there’s no theological rationale for Jewish control of the disputed Temple Mount in Jerusalem and that both Jews and Moslems should *share* control of this holy site. As they put it:

The temple Mount, which contains the ruins of the ancient Hebrew temple, as well as two major Islamic shrines, should be a “house of prayer” for all peoples.

The first step, then, in finding common ground is simply giving up our own rigid sense of rightness.

A second, related reminder, is negotiating compromises on a regular basis. Too many people see compromise as a sign of weakness rather than strength.

Backbone and tenacity are certainly virtues, but they wreak havoc whenever arrogance and inflexibility creep in. “Right relationship” banks upon individuals willing to resolve conflicts through compromise, not through trying to bully or lure others to the “superiority” of our position.

Now creative compromises don't always mean giving in to the other side, but they do mean giving up being right all the time. Three cheers for compromise. It's a healthy process, a mature endeavor. Every relationship requires yielding and shifting, time and time again. Giving up something so that the welfare of the overall union, institution, or coalition might be served. Compromise means each person *promises* to contribute something *for* the benefit of the larger relationship, the greater good, instead of abetting our separate egos.

Compromise is the trademark of the human species and a source of adaptability in our evolution. Only 15% of our brain is grown before birth, and 85% is developed afterwards; so we're far more adaptable than imagined. As one analyst noted about the grand achievements of Eleanor Roosevelt: "She mastered the art of compromising *up!*" Personal and communal life, my friends, are essentially about compromising *up*.

Blessedly, there are mediation workers, nowadays, who are trained to serve those of us who honestly struggle to build bonds across seemingly unbridgeable gulfs. Did you know that dialogue between pro-choice and pro-life supporters has been growing from the grassroots? There exists the *Common Ground Network for Life and Choice* in Washington D.C. that offers linkage and recourse to people engaged on local reconciliation efforts. We're badly in need of such organizations in our world today.

Common ground is an approach to dialogue in conflict situations that emphasizes areas of agreement while respecting profound differences. Think of the relevance of this commitment to common ground, as San Dieguito forges its outreach mission in North County.

Common Ground isn't some mushy, middle ground, but an attitude that offers opponents a space in which "to sit down together, to hear each others stories and to re-humanize people on the other side of any given chasm." The aim isn't to agree but to understand—without sacrificing ones prophetic morality to do so.

In small groups, participants are invited in Common Ground to share the story of how they came to call themselves pro-choice or pro-life. You see, no one can argue with a person's experience. Feelings are facts. And it's amazing how often the common denominator is a painful experience; that's usually why there's so much passion on this particular issue.

Other Common Ground topics might include: "Have you been stereotyped by the other side and how has that affected you?" "Which parts of the stereotype fit you and which don't?" "What's your current, set view of the other side?" "What question did you always want to ask but were afraid to ask someone on the other side?" "What main thing do you want the other side to know about you personally?" Finally, "I wish this group could work together to do Project X because of reason Y."

Common Ground works for people who don't have to keep on creating an enemy in order to do our moral work. Participants realize we may meet the same people next week at a clinic on opposite sides of the sidewalk. But many say, "When I go there now, I'm looking at people differently, because I've re-humanized them in another safe and trustworthy space."

So, if there's one word in the vocabulary of Americans that needs rehabilitating, it's the word compromise, "the process whereby each party to a conflict gives up

something dear, in order to get something that is truly invaluable...it's the uncompromisable which compromise exists to protect."

Surely, at the heart of relinquishing our claim to rightness and practicing the art of creative compromise lies the honest desire to listen deeply. The Chinese verb "to listen" is composed of five characters: "ears, you, eyes, focused attention, and heart." When we listen with our whole selves, we're validating others with all our attentive equipment. Listening always brings us closer; for differences don't build walls, judgments do.

When we listen deeply, we're open to compromising *up*. We're saying: "I respect your views, your feelings, and your thoughts. You have a right to them and a right to express them, and I welcome them in order to build our relationship, on the road to creating a more beautiful and loving world!"

After all, alone I don't stand on holy ground nor do you: ground becomes holy only when we move beyond our previous biases into realms we haven't yet ventured, trusting that sacred possibilities lie before us. Ground becomes holy when we migrate to a higher plateau that includes each of our visions but transcends us both.

Finding common ground means embracing the bedrock humanity we all share, and the profoundest dimension of our common humanity is the fact that we've all mourned. At one time or another, every sister and every brother among us will grieve the loss of a dream, a job, a relationship, a loved one to death. There's nothing that binds us more closely together across races, genders, countries, classes, and orientations than acknowledging our share in life's unyielding anguish.

In short, we'll make no progress in reconciliation with the fiercest of our foes, until we've empathized with their soul-deep aches and torment.

There isn't a more dramatic story of this bridging than that which happened here in our hometown of San Diego. It's familiar to most of you, I'm sure, but worth retelling. It's the story of the Tariq Khamisa Foundation, committed to breaking the escalating cycle of youth violence and planting seeds of hope for our children's future.

While delivering pizza on a cool San Diego night in January of 1995, a shot rang out and young Tariq Khamisa fell mortally wounded. At the other end of the gun was a 14-year-old gang member.

From the beginning, Azim Khamisa, the dead boy's father, saw "victims at both ends of the gun." And so he reached out to the shooter's family. Azim embraced the boy's grandfather, Ples Felix, and asked him to join forces against youth violence. Out of that remarkable union was both the Tariq Khamisa Foundation whose sole purpose is to stop children from killing children, to break the escalating cycle of youth violence and plant seeds of hope for our children's future.

TFK brings its message of peace and nonviolent choices to school children through the innovative Violence Impact Forum program, a lively, multimedia presentation. It has been presented to over 10,000 children, by now, in the fourth through ninth grades, with the resultant reduction in attitudes that lead to gangs, revenge, and violence.

Remarkably, the senseless shooting of Tariq Khamisa has sparked the creation of a powerful violence prevention program that works. As Azim puts it: "I will mourn Tariq's death for the rest of my life. Now, however, grief has been transformed into a powerful commitment to change. Change is urgently needed in a society where children kill children."

Now, that's a mighty dramatic illustration, unlike most we may ever encounter firsthand in our own journeys, but you and I can *feel* into it at some poignant, visceral level. Why? Because there's been or will come a time in our lives when we too must be united with our opposition, and the unifying cement requires our respect, our compromise, our listening, and our shared inconsolable pain. Perhaps it's a divorce that ripples on, or a seemingly irretrievable break with a child or a sibling, or a devastating loss at work—where both sides, everyone involved, leaps not in triumph but slumps in inexpressible anguish.

So during our lifetimes, we humans experience in common the reality of massive sorrow and inexplicable joy, and more than that, we also share the gift of earth and the challenge of dying. And those experiences alone should make us committed to doing our damndest to stop the cycle of human violence.

The Hindu salutation, “namaste”, says it all: “I honor that which is divine in you, or that place where you and I are one!” suggesting that we love each human being we encounter as if they were God, Allah, the Eternal Spirit or whatever we may deem of ultimate value. So I ask: what would it take for us to see the Divine in every person we meet? Try it for a day, then a week. Try it at home looking in the mirror or gazing at your family. Try it at work, here in this Fellowship, and in our larger, daily world.

Yes, “love can build a bridge, between your heart and mine, love can build a bridge, don't you think it's time, don't you think it's time?”

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