

Sermon Every Last Soul

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There are times when I find it hard to live this faith of ours – particularly the Universalist part. It requires of me a capacity for compassion and understanding that all too often elude me. Forgive me, I'm about to unburden myself to you and only hope that some of you have felt the same way and that together we can become stronger in the broken places.

This past week I was mailing a letter at the post office and had to walk past two young men and their hateful curbside display. Since we're being televised and I don't want their message to see the light of day on my account, I won't tell you what it said. One young man beamed at me as I walked past to reach the mailbox and asked "would you like to join us today?" I answered that I found them despicable and would not join them today or ever. No, I felt nothing for the absurdity of their youth, only anger.

For a while, I fumed about these stupid ignorant children. These young men were acting out the evil online drivel we see every day. Then I started fuming about the hateful crackpots that seem to infiltrate every aspect of the world wide web to spread their lies. Then I started fuming about the terrorists who use the internet to spew their venom into our lives.

Why do I leave myself open to this? Why do I not do more to protect myself from heartache and rage? But I kept fuming: my mind went to a dear colleague whose daughter's high school buddy – a bright, adventurous boy – was Steven Sotloff, the second American to be beheaded by stupid, evil children half a world away. It has left my friend in a despair that at times seems insurmountable. She is not alone. I have these low moments when the news and events of our days get me so far down that my calling grows faint. I realize that venom has the capacity to hurt me, to hurt all of us, even at a distance. And as the daughter of a victim of violence, I know how it reaches across time and generations to snatch away joy with its ugliness. I've spent my life building confidence and positivity to repel these inroads on my spirit. But sometimes it is harder to hang on to what I've worked so hard to create. Painful places indeed become powerful and empty places full.

What can we do when we are in that broken place? What sharing, what comfort can I offer my friend? Experts on resiliency in the face of suffering tell us to ground ourselves in what cannot be changed. To not give in to despair. To accept within ourselves what we cannot do, and realize what we can do. To go out and do what we can and believe it is important. And to rely on the strong support of others.

("Supersurvivors: The Surprising Link between Suffering and Success"
by David B. Feldman and Lee Daniel Kravetz).

As of now, I have not been able to reach out to my friend. I am not in despair. I am angry. When I imagine Steven's executioners, I don't imagine doing unto them what they have done unto others. I want more than that. I want them to disappear from sight. I want to stop their eyes, stop their mouths, stop their ears, bind their arms and legs so that they can only feel and have to depend upon enemies for their survival. In other words, I have ended up like all the stupid, cruel, ignorant and helpless children all over the world. By their cruelty, I have become someone I don't want to be.

I am not who I want to be when I am this angry, or when I am impatient or fearful. It makes me question whether I can minister to my friend. It makes me question whether I can minister to you with genuine honesty if I am not who I want to be all the time. I'm telling you this in part because you have to realize that I understand you when you are angry or impatient or fearful because I have been there myself. And eventually I realize that maybe we are in the perfect place and time to help one another. This is, after all, a faith for those who are not perfect.

One of the consequences of Universalism is that we rejected aspiring to be saints. It was no longer imperative that we become destined for sainthood or be able to identify the saints among us. We rejected sainthood when we accepted Universalism. Because we believed God had the capacity to forgive all who sought forgiveness, we became the

extremists whose views could lead the righteous to damnation. God was and is benevolent, with an infinite capacity for mercy, we said. We live as if God, or whatever we ally ourselves with as our foundation and hope, does not rely on our professions of belief, but on our efforts to be and do good. Our connection to the divine is not forged of what we believe about God or Jesus or the Ultimate, but of how we live our lives in relationship to all creation.

In his wonderful sermon “Why You Should Not Be a Unitarian Universalist,” Rev. Dr. Tony Larson explains it this way: “You are free to believe whatever you want here - but only as long as it helps you live a caring and humane life - or at least doesn't prevent you from living a caring life... [As for creeds], we don't care much one way or the other which of them you believe - as long as whatever you believe helps you live a humane life.” So there you have it; we affirm our humanity and our failures and our commitment to be and to do good, but there are limits. There are things we do not welcome and cannot affirm. There is no room here for perfection, for self-righteousness, for absolute certainty, for inhumanity in the name of idealism.

So it is with relief that I find myself in a place that will accept my brokenness. This is a faith for those who know they have a capacity for mistakes and selfishness and dishonesty. This is a faith where we admit we can act out of anger and need and ignorance. We admit our faults and take on the responsibility to balance the scales. There is no room here for perfection, for self-righteousness, for absolute certainty, for inhumanity in the name of idealism. If I want to belong here, I have to do something about my faults and those in particular. We admit our faults and thereby find compassion for others. We admit our faults and covenant with one another to do better.

This is what I have to accept and cannot change – that I do not have an answer to, much less a right to inhumanity. But to emerge somehow from our despair and rage and heal our brokenness, we all need to figure out what it is that we can do, and then believe it is worth the effort, more than that – that it is imperative that we do it. The great Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale once said, “I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything; but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

Universalism tells me that every last one of us has the capacity for goodness. Reality tells me that some will never look for it, never find it. There are some who believe that they need to be inhumane in order to make the world over in their own eyes and to make sense of it. I cannot, will not, go there.

What is it that I can do to mitigate the effect of inhumanity on me? “You must do the thing you think you cannot do,” said Eleanor Roosevelt. What is the one thing I must do, that I think I cannot do? Well, the reality I must accept is that I cannot reach the terrorists and anarchists and stop them. What is it that I might be able to do but think I cannot? I might be able to use my voice, to speak my truth, but am afraid it is a waste of time. I may need your help to figure out what I can do. Perhaps all I can do is to say to the venomous youth I encounter: I understand your desire to express your rage that the world is not the way it should be. I can understand the yearning for the simplest answers, and the wanton impulse that feeds them. Perhaps I can say I understand your pain, but I will not accept your actions in my presence, under my roof, in my sight. What else can we do to mend our broken places?