

Standing on the Side of Love

delivered March 3, 2013 at the
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

The words and music of the composer, Henry Purcell, may seem quaint by today's standards. After all, the electric guitar hadn't even been invented yet. But his music still has the power to speak to us. As we follow its melodies and harmonies, progressions and resolutions, we are lifted up into a world of beauty and hope. His seventeenth century perspective may seem distant from ours, but when I think of what he meant by the words, "O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is gracious, and his mercy endureth forever," one thing in particular stands out for me. His meaning, as well as his music, is unrelentingly positive.

Purcell expresses, in his time, what the Unitarian minister, Carl Scovill, expressed in ours: the audacious claim that life is good. In his 1994 Berry Street Essay, Scovill said, "The Great Surmise is simply this: At the heart of all creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, and to which we shall at last return. . . . Our work on earth is to explore, enjoy, and share this goodness. Neither duty nor suffering nor progress nor conflict – not even survival – is the aim of life, but joy. Deep, abiding, uncompromised joy."

This is a surmise because it cannot be proven. The Great Surmise represents the fundamental act of faith. We can express this in a multitude of ways. For some the word, "God," suffices. Emerson found this limiting and so spoke of the oversoul as the ultimate source of joy, love and goodness of which we are a part. Albert Einstein said that, "A human being is a part of a whole, called by us *universe*, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest . . . a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

For all his modernity, Einstein is really echoing the ancient Hindus who asked, "Do you sense the vast creative power of the universe? The power that

creates all things, sustains all things, and claims them all in the end? Well, you don't have to bow down or feel insignificant, because you are part of that power. You are part of the infinite and the eternal, just as you are."

And if we take our place within the power and goodness of the universe, it leads us to serve. As Albert Schweitzer said, "The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found a way to serve."

So what is it that keeps us trapped in our private worlds, what Einstein called the "optical delusion of our consciousness," our belief that we are separate from each other?

Sometimes I like to say that there are two kinds of people: the kind who think there are two kinds of people and those who don't.

But I'd like to suggest two basic ways of framing our experience. One is through identifying with the Great Surmise, the Oversoul, focusing on our goodness and connection with one another. This is the work of religion, of faith, of the heart. The other, into which people all too often descend, is through the negative, defining others as not-self.

This negative path of identity often manifests as the shadow side of human community, in what we call "in-group" and "out-group" dynamics. People and groups can fall into the habit of defining themselves in terms of who they are not, rather than who they are.

This has been the shadow side of American history since its colonial beginnings. Who are the Americans? They are not the blacks; they are not Indians; they are not foreigners, they are not lesbians or gays. When our nation descended into Civil War, the South was not the North and the North was not the South. What all these negative categories have in common is that they all characterize others as less than self, worthy of being opposed, oppressed, humiliated, beaten or murdered without regret. This is a tragically sad way to create identity, and it dominates our national character to this very day, for negative identity finds its expression in righteous anger, and there is little in our national discourse these days that is free of righteous anger.

We live in a society that endorses anger, hatred, and even murder as fundamental to its identity.

Even Unitarian Universalists often fall into this fundamental error by defining ourselves by what we are not, rather than what we are, reinforcing our separateness from others rather than seeking understanding and common ground.

This tendency finds its most tragic expression in ideologically motivated murder, a theme in the news that has become all too familiar. No matter the reason, these killings all have in common that they are based on the conviction that ideas or attitudes are more important than human lives.

Nearly five years ago, in July of 2008, the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville experienced this firsthand when Jim David Adkisson, angry with liberal policies being enacted at the federal level, decided that killing liberals was the answer. The Knoxville congregation had long been known as a leader for various progressive causes, from integration to marriage equality and had a sign in its yard that said, “Gays welcome.”

Adkisson entered the church when about 200 people were watching about 25 children perform a show based on the musical, “Annie.” He opened a guitar case, removed a shotgun and began shooting. Long-time member Greg McKendry, serving as an usher that morning, stepped in front of him to block the blast and was the first to be killed. Adkisson continued shooting, killing another woman and injuring six others before being tackled and disarmed.

Despite the chaos, blood and injury, one member observed that, “For the situation, everyone responded phenomenally. June and Kevin Spooner mobilized and got the kids out the back. Vicki Masters, the director of the play the children had been rehearsing for all summer, yelled for people to get out of the building. Another woman ushered children to the Presbyterian church next door after the gunman was subdued. Everybody did exactly what they needed to do. . . It’s a remarkable congregation of people. I’ve never seen such a loving response to such an overwhelming tragedy.”

But the response didn’t end there. After the shooting, instead of retreating, both Knoxville congregations pledged to remain open and welcoming — and many other religious communities from across the theological and political spectrum rushed to provide food, comfort, and assistance. And on the national level, the Unitarian Universalist Association took a full-page ad in the New York

Times announcing that “Our hearts and our doors will remain open,” closing with, “Unitarian Universalists are standing on the side of love. We invite you to stand with us.”

It’s an elegant answer that can cut through the contentious rhetoric of our divisive society. Where do you stand on the issue? We are standing on the side of love. We stand on the side of the Great Surmise, of the best of all religious traditions that affirm the goodness and interdependence of life.

Although we’ve long been at the forefront of advocating for the rights of all people, this campaign has taken on its own life and given our movement a new, positive focus. Standing on the side of love was the theme of our justice General Assembly last year in Phoenix as thousands of us, including me, demonstrated in favor of equitable and humane treatment of immigrants. Bill Sinkford, the UUA president at the time, said, “Every day people are targeted because of identities which are somehow deemed ‘okay to hate.’ We are called to use our public presence to more actively stand up with and for those who are targets for violence, exclusion, or oppression because of who they are.”

Standing on the Side of Love has become our signature campaign for advocating for human rights in a compassionate culture. It begins with our first principle, the belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, that everyone deserves respect and love for who they are. It points out that, although both love and fear are rising up in our nation, we stand on the side of love. We are called to harness love’s power to stop oppression, exclusion, and violence against people who are targeted because of their identity. We are working to build a society where the color of our skin, the conditions of our birth, who we love, how we worship, and how we express our gender do not determine our worth, rights, and opportunities.

When we stand on the side of love, we commit to recognizing the common threads in the justice struggles of marginalized communities. Through our commitment to justice, we live out our faith in a better world, and we do so with patience, with hope, and with the conviction that our collective love is far more powerful than fear – indeed, more powerful than anything else in the world.

What is more truly religious than this outrageous claim to be standing on the side of love? Ever since Jesus, we’ve known that God is Love, so we don’t need

to worry about anything in that department. Fear, judgment, punishment, retribution, fiery furnace, all miss this essential point that was so clear to our Universalist ancestors. God is Love! Get it? Love is the substance and motive force of the cosmos in which we live and move and have our being. Both Carl Scovill and Friedrich Schiller would agree: we were made for joy.

And joy finds its expression in community through service. When we bring love and joy to our value of compassion, we truly delight in understanding and appreciating the inner lives of others. When we bring love and joy to our value of nurturing growth, we truly delight in encouraging and supporting the unrealized potential within each person. And when we bring love and joy to our value of justice, we are being true to our selves by being true to others, for justice is truly love in action.

This congregation is standing on the brink of our annual Stewardship Campaign as well as an ambitious but feasible Capital Campaign to support our beloved community and renew our facilities. There will be a lot of talk about money and needs and budgets and target goals and why your contributions are needed. But I encourage you to frame this differently.

Generosity can be a spiritual practice that deepens our connections with each other and our community. I often say that the offering is a sacrament of the Free Church which is supported by the voluntary generosity of its members and friends. It can truly be a sacred act that binds us to fulfilling our ideals, hopes and wishes for a better world.

As Scovill Said, “At the heart of all creation lies a good intent, a purposeful goodness, from which we come, by which we live our fullest, and to which we shall at last return. . . . Our work on earth is to explore, enjoy, and share this goodness. Neither duty nor suffering nor progress nor conflict – not even survival – is the aim of life, but joy. Deep, abiding, uncompromised joy.” Could there be a better form of generosity than this? May we share the fruits of our labor with goodness, gladness, gratitude, and deep, abiding, uncompromising joy as we boldly take our stand on the side of love.

May it be so.