

## Living Our First Principle in Today's Turbulent World

January 24, 2016

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Worship Committee

### Chalice Lighting and Responsive Reading

by Rick Kimball

In this time of dark division and despair,

*we join as one to kindle hope.*

In these days of angry violence,

*we join to offer not creed but comfort and care.*

On this planet torn and threatened,

*we join to help and to heal.*

In this world of frightened, fleeing refugees,

*we join to reach out with welcoming hand.*

In the midst of people lost,

*we join to seek and find ourselves in each other,*

*and each other in ourselves.*

**All:** So do we covenant and so must we do.

### My Struggle

by Michael Crosby

*France Gripped By Fear After Paris Terror Attacks: 130 dead, many wounded*

How can I continue to be a UU?

*December 3<sup>rd</sup>: Fourteen dead in San Bernadino terrorist attack*

Ever since the ISIS attacks in Paris and San Bernadino I have struggled with being a UU. I have thought "how can I subscribe to a philosophy who's first principle is 'the inherent worth and dignity of every person' when there are people in the world who are obviously devoid of worth and dignity, who only know hatred, who breed hatred, who seem to be in love with hatred?"

As they sow, even shall they reap. ISIS has earned the hatred of the world. I hate them. It feels right to hate them. It feels good to hate them.

Feels good to hate? What was wrong with me? I went to Reverend Myke looking for a magic answer for this most un-UU feeling. No magic answer. She did, however, help me to see that my righteous hatred had blinded me to the quiet fact that thinking this way made me no better than the people of ISIS and that I had climbed into the same boat with them. They had won. The ease with which I had hated had become dis-ease. I found some inspiration that helped

me towards overcoming these feelings in [a reading about love overcoming hate].  
(text omitted due to copyright protections)

How can people descend to such depths? No one is born evil. People may be driven despair and to evil by hunger, war, oppression. Perhaps we share some of the responsibility for their despair. By supporting some of their oppressors who strip them of their dignity and feeling of worth, we may have helped push them towards a vengeful creed and dogma, but the people of ISIS are not evil although their deeds are. They are trying to reclaim the worth and dignity which was stolen from them. I do not condone their methods but now I have come to sympathize with them as suffering human beings.

I came to Unitarian Universalism fleeing from creed and dogma. UU seems easy; think what you want, no belief requirements, one god at most, just a set of seven easy principles. Only they are not easy, if you really try to live the principles, not just giving them lip service. True commitment to the UU principles is hard, damned hard.... But it's worth the effort.

### **Prayer for Joys and Concerns**

The Peace of Wild Things  
BY WENDELL BERRY

This can be read online at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171140>

### **Secret History**

Molly Brewer

Two weeks ago, at a service here at A2U2, our minister was leading a Lesson for All Ages. While giving examples of some of the contents of the Bible, she held up a big round placard, about the size of a serving platter, with the words "Love Your Neighbor" written in sparkle paint. One child raised his hand and asked, "But what if your neighbor is mean?"

What a great question.

At the time, I was in the midst of putting this piece of writing together, looking for a place to begin. There it was, out of the blue: my research question! A little more simplified than the adult version that has to take into account things, such as hate crimes and terrorism, that go far beyond mere meanness. But still, it sums the idea up quite well.

How do you love your neighbor, if your neighbor is mean?

On its surface, it seems easy. Of course other people matter to us; of course we want to love them, to affirm their worth. But to practice it isn't so simple. Others

can disappoint us, betray our trust, or damage us physically and emotionally. If we're committed to loving all of our neighbors-- even the bullies, even the demagogues, even the murderers-- even those who have personally caused us harm-- we open ourselves wide to hurt. The safe choice in response is to disengage with others. To shut ourselves both down and up. But still the angels of our better nature ask us to love again, to trust again... and especially, to forgive.

Now, that's a hard prospect.

Forgiveness can feel to us like something we're morally impelled to do. "To err is human; to forgive, divine," or so the saying goes. But if someone wrongs us, we're the ones who have to live with the hurt of what they did. The other person may feel no regret nor remorse, or even worse, as if their actions were justified. They may never be held accountable for the pain they caused us, and continue to cause us. How can it then be our imperative, our responsibility, to give them our forgiveness and understanding? It feels unfair, like we're being asked to martyr ourselves when we just aren't ready to give that absolution. Not only must we shoulder the burden of the pain they've caused, but we're constantly reminded that to be the "bigger person", we need to let it go and forgive them? Where's the justice in that?

It's tempting, really. The idea that we shouldn't be compelled to forgive, that we shouldn't have to go that extra emotional mile. Holding onto the anger can feel righteous and validating, and in some ways, better than forcing ourselves to feel compassion and forgiveness before we're ready to. Maybe you're like me, and you have to try hard to even feel forgiving toward a driver who cuts you off on the freeway.

But maybe, like me, you're a little more willing to feel compassion toward that other driver if you catch a glimpse of them behind the wheel, and happen to recognize a friend.

Longfellow wrote, "if we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each person's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility." Every person who hurts us, who hurts others, is still a person every bit as complex as we are. That doesn't make their actions right; it doesn't erase the pain they've caused. And even our forgiveness can't do that.

So what can it do?

What it can do is diminish that person's power to continue to hurt us, long after the injury has been caused. It can help to relieve the burden of carrying our pain. And it's okay if time has passed and we're still not ready to let go of that burden. We do, after all, have sorrow and suffering in our own secret history. But our forgiveness is itself a tool of justice. With it, we can build a bridge between our

own secret history and our neighbor's. Sometimes it can give us the freedom to once again love that neighbor.

Even when they're mean.

## **Breaking Down Darkness**

by Keith Prairie

When I hear of the terrible things happening in the world, it is hard to remember the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

The psyche of modern culture is such that when our culture or community or home is attacked or challenged, we tend to create an enemy.

[Sam Keen wrote about this] in "Faces of the Enemy"... *(text omitted due to copyright protections)*

Keen pens a dark statement for sure but it holds true across most times and cultures.

With this mentality we build walls to keep ourselves safe but those walls create division, classism, racism, sexism and all the other isms.

I have difficulty with the idea of welcoming into my city, community, church or home, those individuals who have inflicted terrorist acts on others. But how does one know? If we look at these images of the enemy, who are we seeing? In these times how do we know who the enemy is? But take it further and look into the mirror to see how we are painted. Our country has pushed our values and ideas onto 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries, we use our politics and power and our veiled propaganda to push our position, to manipulate markets and media for our purposes. Are we terrorists too?

How do we step back from fear and enmity, and not react in ways that create more derision?

Here is where the 1<sup>st</sup> principal comes in and even though it is not easy to bring into everyday life we must if we are to erase the sinister shadows from our so called enemy and thus ourselves when we see ourselves in our enemies mirror.

I am reminded of Nelson Mandela, and his ability to engage his jailers. In jail, he learned the Afrikaans language and would not hesitate to greet people and converse in it to the amazement of his fellow prisoners. He worked to get to know those who kept him confined and by humanizing them, he built bridges, alliances and friendships. By sharing interests and asking about their families, he became endeared to them and eventually to much of South Africa.

Here is a man who did something incredible, not by instilling fear and hatred and living with revenge on his tongue, but by reaching out to counter the fear and hatred with respect and caring and love. Mandela was in prison for 27 years. I'm sure it was not easy. I like to think each day he was imprisoned he took a little step and pushed himself, even though it was not easy.

That's all we can ask of ourselves. Even though it isn't easy, each day to honor and respect *The inherent worth and dignity of every person*; each day push yourself to expand your own circle and honor and respect *The inherent worth and dignity of every person*; each day push yourself to recognize your fears and hatred, lay them aside and honor and respect *The inherent worth and dignity of every person*.

Blessed be

### **The Cult of Death and the Love Response**

by John Howard

Whenever I examine the seven UU principles in an attempt to find a clear answer to some of life's biggest mysteries, I find that the answers aren't there. Today we are asking if the inherent worth and dignity of a person is ever forfeit. We are asking how to love our enemies. We may be asking if love really is stronger than hate. It's interesting to see that Love is not given as an ultimate solution in our principles, though we've worked it rather nicely into our own mission statement. It is rather one of three qualities named in human relations – justice, equity and compassion. And the important fourth principle which affirms a free and responsible search for truth and meaning precludes my telling you that you must subscribe to my particular answer to those tough life mysteries.

It is uncomfortable, even intolerable to not have an answer to the big questions. Perhaps this is why religions have so often become corrupted, even to the extent of becoming instruments of fear and death. I have heard that the Mayan religion was rather blood-thirsty, though I don't claim to be an expert. The Christian church went wholesale into Empire building and land grabbing around the time of the Crusades, which is when the message seems to have shifted from finding paradise in this world through loving our neighbor to meekly accepting a life of self-denial in hopes of a glorious afterlife. According to Brock and Parker, the authors of Saving Paradise, this paradigm shift was essentially a way to consolidate power in the hands of a few by instilling fear into the many and thereby gaining control. Today we see this same strategy in full force in religious fundamentalists of both Christian and Muslim faiths.

There are various reasons why a person might be attracted to a cult of death, most notably the lack of opportunity and hope in their present circumstances. But fundamental to this embrace of violence and religious zeal is the profound and terrifying awareness of our own mortality and the inescapable knowledge

that we each contain both good and evil. We search the world's religions in vain for a way out of this dilemma. There is no way out. We are all of us going to die, and we all must daily and moment to moment discern good from evil, sometimes choosing good when it is clearly the hardest path to take. Many it seems can't face this, finding scapegoats to blame or material pleasures to distract.

Our principles don't give easy answers to the big questions. They affirm our values but don't tell us exactly where to find the courage and strength to put them into action, to do the work to make this a better world. This is why we also have the sources, some of which are the direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, the words and deeds of prophetic women and men, and, yes, the wisdom from the world's religions, if carefully discerned and interpreted.

Lately I find myself turning again to Christianity, though it's been a while since I practiced it, because I like the notion of loving my neighbor. It seems a good place to start. I can't help but be impressed by lives turned to service under His influence. As my notion of neighbor expands, perhaps I will find a way to love even those who hate me.

And I have also been inspired by books I discovered here, such as [Saving Paradise](#) and [A House for Hope](#). These have shown me that when the hard-earned wisdom of experience is collectively valued, cultivated and carried forward, then Love is indeed stronger than Hate.

### **The Voice**

by Rick Kimball

Two weeks before Christmas our TV reception fluttered to a quiet death. I called Time Warner. After four failed suggestions and three phone disconnections, a woman who sounded competent introduced herself with a name I immediately forgot. She instructed me to click some buttons on my equipment and wait a few minutes. I clicked the buttons. The phone line was so quiet that I feared another disconnect. "Where are you?" I asked.

"The Phillipines," she replied.

Oh-oh. I had read that ISIS was recruiting in the Phillipines. Had they gotten to her? Was she a jihadist? Did she wish to kill me?

"How's the weather?" I asked.

"We're in between typhoons," she told me. "Now I'm going to put you on hold, and when I come back I'll send a signal to your modem."

I gulped. Did she know of some secret explosive in my little black modem box? Was she going to blow my whole neighborhood sky high? Would CNN show the flattened remains that night?

During the silence I reflected about the people who are eager or at least willing to harm me. They are not all in ISIS. Some are the people who make and try to sell me cigarettes. Others are climate change skeptics who will deny the water when it rises to my ankles and knees. There are industrialists who fake auto emissions tests so they can keep polluting. And there are more - the list is long.

Still on hold, I imagined myself running to the closet where Tirrell and I keep our family civil war sword. I became Rick Quixote, rushing about, stabbing and jabbing here and there, destroying enemies left and right, enemies always hateful and always wrong, enemies soon to be pierced and dead.

But speaking of wrong, that vision was wrong. I cannot save the world by adding to its violence and inviting bloody retribution. I must act not with sword in hand, but as so many in this church already do, with outstretched hand, helping those in need, seeking to reach and understand the stranger, maybe even bothering to remember the stranger's name, striving to acknowledge the inherent worth and dignity of every person, even those who may cause misguided but intentional harm.

"I'm back," said the voice.

"I hope the typhoons won't be bad," I answered.

"We'll survive. We usually do. I'm going to send that signal now." I tensed and waited. Two lights blinked. Nothing exploded. The TV stayed dark. "Did that help?" the woman asked.

"No," I reported.

"Good," she said.

"Good?"

"Good," she repeated. "Now I know what is wrong. You need a new modem. You can pick it up on Johnson Road in Portland. That's near the airport. Is there anything else I can do for you, Mr. Kimball?"

"No, thanks."

"Then I want to wish you a very merry Christmas in advance."

"The same to you, and if you don't mind, could you tell me your name again?"

But she was gone.

Later, driving to Johnson Road, I felt a song rising up from my childhood, striving to be heard. "Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war." Horrified by the content of my own memory, I swatted it down, and encouraged another musical thought to rise. "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

"Better," I thought. "Even if it's trite. And it's got the God word in it." But the song became a hum, and I sensed the truths that even cliché can reveal. We cannot hope for understanding unless we can honor god-concepts unlike our own. And we cannot achieve world peace without finding peace in ourselves.

I have sometimes condemned myself for being angry and suspicious to the point of hurting others. Let me move toward peace by forgiving myself and forgiving others the way Christians in Charleston forgave the man who came among them and killed. Let me find peace by feeling the acceptance, the laughter, and the love that let me see clearly. Let me make peace by adhering to my own and my UU principles.

Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with us.

### **Closing Words – hopeful gardeners**

by May Sarton

Text can be read here: <http://coachmediateconsult.com/hopeful-gardeners-of-the-spirit/>