

Tilting at Windmills 5/15/11 service at UUCR

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. *Charter for Compassion*¹

Reading

The reading this morning comes from the lead into an article entitled “Against Innocence” written by the Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt. It was published in UU World in 2003.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. observed that “one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites—so that love is identified as a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love.”

It isn't hard to notice that power without love surrounds us in this country today. But think too of the extent to which we live our lives amid expressions of love without political power.

Think of the countless acts of mercy with which each of us may have aligned ourselves: We work with Habitat for Humanity, we volunteer at shelters and mentor children, we testify before hostile legislators unwilling to extend human rights to the whole human family; we lobby for an end to punitive drug laws that target people of color; we do a thousand things in an effort to make our love visible.

And yet, if we had power, real political power, would not the hungry already be fed, those children already joyful? Would not Habitat be out of business and our legislators obsessed with supporting human dignity rather than denying it? Would not captives of every variety already be freed? If we had real power, is it not possible that our work would already be done?

King continues to challenge us: “What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

Sermon

I volunteered to do this service and had to submit a title and description for the newsletter 2 days later. The title “tilting at windmills” popped into my mind. I later thought “Oh, no! This implies I'm crazy and fighting against imaginary foes.” But I'm NOT crazy and I'm focused on real problems. The fit for the title, though, comes with the idealism – to dream the impossible dream... and to engage your heart and conscience in doing something because it could make a difference.

My talk this morning consists of 4 strands: a bit of my personal journey, some fantasy, a brief description of Golden Rule Now, and my request for your help.

My Journey

I daresay I'm not alone when I describe that I've been almost overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness in regard to politics. Virtually everything I hold dear is under assault. Issue after issue, the irrationality, the callousness, and the disdain for empirical evidence boggles me.

In recent years, I found myself fighting depression in regard to what was happening in the world. I tried cutting myself off from news and that helped. I'm privileged enough that if I were so constituted, I could have just spent my days painting, hiking, reading, listening to music, and gardening. After all, I'm retired, and our culture is constantly telling me that I've earned my leisure time, so I should just relax and have fun.

But I'm NOT constituted that way. I'm connected to the larger world, and issues of justice trouble my soul. A sense of responsibility feels hardwired in me.

If it's not hardwired, it was instilled early.

I grew up in the Unitarian Church of Arlington, VA. Our church was committed to racial integration and sponsored summer workshops for children – open to *all* children. The local northern VA newspaper ran a photo on its front page which I can see clearly in my mind today of 3 children sitting side by side at a table sculpting heads for the puppets they were making. The photo was important *to me* because one of the children was my little brother and another one was my friend, Vicki. The photo was important *for the paper* because of the little girl sitting between them, who was African-American.

Not too long after that, we had a bomb scare at church. The upset and fear of the adults was palpable as we cleared out of the building. Children were united with their parents, and then, later, we walked home. The next Sunday, my Sunday school teacher explained that there are times when you must take a stand because it's the right thing to do, even if it might place you in danger. That made a strong impression on me as a child, and I think of this as the moment I became an activist for justice.

I have been an engaged citizen for my whole aware life. I went canvassing for the first time with my mother when I was six years old. I have kept informed. I have worked on campaigns and at the Democratic National Committee. I've been an active part of many movements. I've been harassed by police in VA while doing voter registration back in the early 60s and arrested for trespassing at the Nevada Test Site with other Unitarian Universalists back in the 1980s.

Like many of us, I always had energy, commitment, was well-informed and articulate, and I was hopeful. I believed that education and reason would move the world in the direction of justice. But those beliefs have been eroded by the changes in the political and economic system over the last several decades.

What had worked in the past seems merely symbolic or cathartic today. Protests from the left are systematically downplayed, those from the Tea Party emphasized. Research and efforts at educating the public seems to make little difference politically. The media tries to keep it simple with two polarized, irreconcilable positions each with a set of talking points. One side wins, the other loses. Today, it's hard, as a rational person, to find a fit.

To politicians and tacticians just plain constituents aren't of that much concern because they can be manipulated by the media or driven to apathy. A large majority of people is willfully ignored, as politicians, regardless of party, appear to base their decisions more on the need to *woo* those who can fund their elections and to *avoid* being targets of attack ads. And so it has become common practice to shift wealth from the poor to the wealthy, to ignore suffering, to trash our environment, to risk destroying our very life-support system in pursuit of greater short-term profit for the already wealthy. I've been so depressed.

But this year has brought a significant set of changes for me. First was Rev. Kathy's challenge to us to develop or deepen a daily spiritual practice. I took this to heart and found that the contemplative and affirming space I created in my life led to greater peacefulness, deep gratitude, and an invigorated sense of wonder.

Within that space was also the pain I feel about our world and the personal need to do something.

Another thing happening was that I signed up for the Building Your Own Theology class. There we were each examining our own past spiritual journey and I suddenly recognized that my moral and ethical self was not being reflected in any political party right now. AND that that moral and ethical self – that I could trace back throughout my life – I had to be true to.

Within that understanding – that I could and must act from the core of who I am – arose what I have come to call Golden Rule Now.

Why, the Golden Rule?

When I taught elementary school, each year my students (with my help) would come to recognize that all the rules we might think we need were merely examples of the Golden Rule. And once they had come to that recognition, I would share a poster similar to this one that conveys the Golden Rule as articulated by different religions and cultures.²

I had been deeply touched by the universality of this principle of compassion. But I had never taken it beyond the personal realm to ask, why shouldn't the people we elect govern by this, too? I guess I had assumed it. But it could not be assumed.

So, for us, what if, instead of accepting the ways politicians and the media frame the issues, we just kept coming back to basics. If you were to treat others as you would wish to be treated, what would you do?

So I imagined (here's the tilting at windmills!) a movement of people who regularly reminded their elected representatives that they needed to govern with compassion and with an eye to the common good. I imagined constituents challenging their reps with questions about what position they would take on an issue if they wanted to justify their actions in relation to the Golden Rule.

What is the compassionate thing to do? If this issue were affecting you, what do you wish would happen? Then how could that become possible for everyone? What are the obstacles? How can they be overcome?

What if representatives' offices got calls continually from constituents identifying themselves as members of GoldenRuleNow? They'd begin to pay attention. And the core truth of the Golden Rule resonates for most people. It seemed so easy and something that all of us who are heartsick or disgusted with what's happening politically could do, too.

I imagined members of UUCR involved in Circles of Citizens and drawing friends and neighbors into this action. I imagined UU congregations throughout the country embracing GoldenRuleNow as part of their justice work. And I imagined it spreading to other faiths through NIM. Wow! We could go viral and change the country almost overnight!

This playful exuberance brought me out of despair and into a new frame with lots of energy.

Jim Wallis of Sojourners in his book *God's Politics, Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, describes what he says to groups who have come to Washington to lobby. He tells them that they'll be able to identify the people they want to talk to because,

“They're the ones ... who walk around town with their fingers held high in the air, having just licked them and put them up to see which way the wind is blowing. ... The political leaders are really very good at figuring out the direction of the wind, and are quite used to quickly moving in that direction.”

He goes on “It's not a matter of malice for most of them. I've met quite a few politicians, and in fact many came to Washington because they truly wanted to do the right thing. But after a while, they get entrenched in Washington's ways, and change seems ever more distant. Power and wealth are the real governors here, and people adjust to those realities. Even the ones who still really want to make a difference will tell you they can't without public backing, and they don't often find it.

“Many of us believe that by replacing one wet-fingered politician with another, we can change our society. But it never really works, and when it doesn't we get disillusioned. We then get tempted to just grumble, withdraw, or give up altogether on ever changing anything. But that's where we make our mistake. ... you don't change a society by merely replacing one wet-fingered politician with another. You change a society by *changing the wind*.

“Change the wind, transform the debate, recast the discussion, alter the context in which political decisions are being made, and you will change the outcomes. Move the conversation around a crucial issue to a whole new place, and you will open up possibilities for change never dreamed of before. And you will be surprised at how fast the politicians adjust to the change in the wind.”³

With GoldenRuleNow we would change the wind so our reps would know that we're watching and we expect compassion and attention to the common good to be clearly part of how they make their decisions and act.

But then came the question, how would we hold our reps accountable? After all, we know they can say anything and that there's often a huge disconnect between words and actions. Again, in that deeply contemplative place that I've made home with Rev. Kathy's encouragement, it came to me that our representatives would have to show us how they were working to reform the system *so that they, and all other elected officials could be free to be the best they could be, working for the common good*. They needed to show us such things as what they were doing to strengthen ethics rules, what they were doing to reduce the influence of huge amounts of money on election results, what they were doing to get a constitutional amendment to define a person as a human being and NOT a corporation!

And in return, we, their constituents, would become well informed, connected face-to-face in our neighborhoods, committed to covering their backs against attack ads, and voting in reliable large numbers.

Now, the idea of focusing on system reform doesn't grab people. It seems somehow less important than the flashpoint issues of our days. But I really believe it's key.

Sandra Steingraber shares this story at the beginning of her book, *Living Downstream*:

“There was once a village along a river. The people who lived there were very kind. These residents, according to the parable, began noticing increasing numbers of drowning people caught in the river's swift current. And so they went to work devising ever more elaborate technologies to resuscitate them. So preoccupied were these heroic villagers with rescue and treatment that they never thought to look upstream to see who was pushing the victims in.”⁴

We work so hard on all the issues confronting us -- and we can't stop that because the need is so acute. BUT, we really need also to explore upstream and change the conditions that allow those who have “power without love” to keep pushing victims into the water.

There's so much I could describe. Living with the idea of a movement called Golden Rule Now has recharged me. I've talked with people who resonate with the ideas. I've discovered others working on complementary projects. I've learned so much about potential reforms to the political system. I've begun to build a website from which the ideas could be shared as GoldenRuleNow develops. I'm even developing compassion toward politicians and corporate CEOs whom I see as trapped by corrupting systems. And I now actually relish conversations with politicians.

As the extreme right wing continues to push their agenda into territory that's waking up more and more people, I really believe we can use this opportunity not “to replace one wet-fingered politician with another” but to change the wind and to change the conditions upstream that are causing the great damage.

How to help

I hope you will help this dream move forward. Like Rosemary Bray McNatt, I believe that we need to develop our capacity to exercise “power with love” through face-to-face communities if we hope to make a real difference in the world.

For me, a powerful model for face-to-face community has been our covenant groups – a small group of people who meet, maybe once a month, to deepen their connections by sharing thoughts on a short reading presented by the group’s facilitator who then monitors the discussion to assure all have a chance to be heard. Then there is time to focus on a project or action. This is one model, but there could be many others.

For Golden Rule Now⁵, I’ve called these face-to-face community groups Circles of Citizens. Circles are local, placing their attention only on their own representatives. The next step for developing Golden Rule Now is a pilot of the Circles, so we need real people (meaning you all!) to get in, try it out, and add your ideas so the Circle becomes something you look forward to because it’s so meaningful in your life!

For the pilot, we’ll meet once in June, once in July, and once in August – and if you have to miss a Circle because you’re on vacation, that’s okay. There’s a sign up sheet downstairs in Fellowship Hall.

We have one year until the 2012 primaries. Let’s see if we can start to make a difference right here. What we develop from the pilots will create the model that can be used by our congregation in the fall and shared with congregations elsewhere.

GoldenRuleNow was formed here at UUCR as a result of Rev. Kathy’s encouragement to develop a daily spiritual practice and then emerged from the focus on my own spiritual journey that was part of the Building Your Own Theology class. I hope it can now be nurtured and become part of the beacon of justice work shining forth from our congregation.

Thank you. May it be.

¹. “The Charter For Compassion” was “crafted by people all over the world and drafted by a multi-faith, multi-national council of thinkers and leaders” brought together by theologian, Karen Armstrong. It “seeks to change the conversation so that compassion becomes a key word in public and private discourse...” See <http://charterforcompassion.org/site/>

². This poster, designed by Paul McKenna, can be seen at http://www.interfaithmarketplace.com/home/ifm/page_130_24/golden_rule_poster.html

³. Wallis, Jim; *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It*; ©2005; pp. 20-21.

⁴. Steingraber, Sandra; *Living Downstream: An Ecologist’s Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*; ©1997, 2010; pre-forward.

⁵. For more information on Golden Rule Now, see <http://goldenrulenow.wordpress.com>