



**Sermon**

In the last couple of weeks, I have simply stopped watching the news because the actions of those opposing health care reform have so disturbed me. The lies and misinformation, the bullying, the slurs and slogans, are so hateful and deliberately manipulative I can barely stand it. And because this issue is so huge right now, as it should be, you can't get away from it. So, I made the decision that I would find other ways to inform myself of what was going on, ways that did not assault my space, my mind, my heart, or my intelligence. I'm trying to be kind to myself, so that I can use my energy in creative and constructive ways, rather than being overcome by anger and bitterness, which is exactly where I was heading. In times of change, when there is the potential for new life, there is also fear, which means that the threat of violence, whether emotional or spiritual, is always present. That is what's happening right now. We have the possibility of change and new life for millions of people, and that change is so frightening that emotional and spiritual violence is erupting throughout our society. I don't want to be a part of that violence.

In Iraq, everyone expected that once American troops pulled out, the violence would increase. And that has come to pass. Sunni extremists have taken advantage of the temporary vacuum of power and there has been a string of bombings. Their goal is to provoke the majority Shiites into retaliation. This is what happened two years ago, and the escalating violence led to the American troop surge. But since then, things have changed. There is a growing desire from moderate Shiites not to be pulled back into sectarian violence. The potential loss is so huge. So, when a Shiite mosque was bombed by Sunni extremists, rather than calling for revenge, its imam, Sheik Khudair al-Allawi, encouraged patience, and the will to wait it out. Across the board Shiite leaders are calling on their people to respond to the violence with non-retaliation. Even Shiite extremists have pulled back, on the hope that peace increases their potential of having real political power.

Unfortunately, Sunni extremists have responded to the non-retaliation by stepping it up. They have bombed refugee camps, school buses, religious pilgrimages, weddings, marketplaces, hospitals, and even the funerals of their victims from the day before. The more the Shiites refuse to respond, the harder they push. And so far, the Shiites are holding on, telling each other that they win by not responding with violence, that they are taking the long view.



Who are the Shiites being kind to? Themselves? The Sunnis? It appears that the rationale for their non-violence at this time is based on their own interests. It's too hard to have any goodwill for the Sunni extremists. So, many Shiites are framing it in terms of being kind to themselves. That they will get the peace they want in the long run by enduring violence in the short run. That's the only way they can hold on to the faith that someday stability will return to Iraq and that there will be a future for themselves and their children.

Today we're talking about loving kindness as an act of faith. Last week we spoke about faith not as a set of beliefs but about living out the values we hold dear. Far too often faith is turned into this restrictive box that contains beliefs we have to profess loyalty in, beliefs that we can't honestly say we hold to be true, and our faithfulness is measured by how well we do at this mind-numbing practice. But this is a false way, actually a very destructive way, of looking at faith, one that continues to break human spirits all around us. Perhaps it broke yours at one time. Many people come to Unitarian Universalism because they can't accept this kind of faith.

Faith is much more than simple belief. It's not a set of things you have to subscribe to. Faith is what you actually trust in, what holds solid for you in the dark times of your life. Faithfulness is living through your trust so you have the strength to manifest the values you hold dear, thus transforming yourself, your community, your world.

As Unitarian Universalists we look at life in a very holistic way. We seek a seamlessness between what we live and what we believe, what you hold true in your heart, and to what you devote your life to. We profess freedom in the spirit of compassion and responsibility. That's what we are about. No pretenses. No guilt. No pressure to conform. This is a religion where things should come together, not tear apart. Many of us have healed a lot of wounds and found a great deal of comfort through the grace of our free religious faith.

But, one of the things I also said last week is that discomfort isn't always a bad thing when you're trying to live your faith. The truth of the matter is that in our often imperfect world so much stands



between our values and being able to live them. The timeless plight of the human condition is that we will always experience a gap between who we are and who we want to be; how things are and how things should be. Faithfulness is about trusting that even in all this imperfection and suffering, beauty can happen, things can change for the better, what is broken can be made whole. For all the disconnects, harmony can happen.

What resonates with me about the Iraqi Shiites is that they're living kindness even if they don't feel kindness. There is a dissonance between where they are and where they want to be. And that has got to be uncomfortable. They're having faith that their non-retaliation, their "kindness," is going to make a difference, even if right now they haven't yet seen that difference. The bombings continue. The deaths mount, and yet they're still refusing to retaliate. I find myself thinking about a slogan you hear in many 12 step programs - fake it till you make it. Act the way you think you should act even if it feels uncomfortable and unnatural, because you are moving yourself into a healthier way of being and some day it will feel comfortable and natural and you will have transformed in some way.

That's what I'm seeing here. Many Shiites may not be feeling a lot of kindness. These hatreds are so old, after all. The same imam who counseled patience and forbearance, for instance, also condemned the Sunni extremists to hell. Clearly this path of kindness is a hard one to walk. But, he wasn't calling for an uprising. He was staying the course, following the fragile path of faithfulness, trusting in the process.

That, I think, is what faith is about. Whether that be faith in the potential of humanity, faith in a group of people, faith in the power of love, faith in a process, faith in God, faith in kindness, when we have faith that something will endure, even as this imperfect world changes around us, it frees us from focusing on resentment and loss and failure, and allows us to see the blessings of the present and the possibilities of the future.

So I've been looking at my own resentment and bitterness toward all those people who are fighting health care reform and wondering what we have to learn from the Shiite example. Because you know, I am so angry, I would say I almost feel revulsion at the sight of people filled with so much hatred



and bigotry. I would love to stand at a town hall meeting and yell back at those protesters, rubbing their noses in their ignorance and hatred. I just want to flatten them.

But what would that accomplish? Taking their own behavior and throwing it back at them is going to escalate the situation and lead to no good. But it's more than that. I actually have great difficulty having faith that people who are so strident can back away from their stridency. I doubt that kindness would make any difference.

So how does one find kindness in oneself towards people that you don't trust or like? How does one practice kindness when you doubt in it?

It depends on who the kindness is for.

I'm not sure that the Shiite non-retaliation is really about changing the extremists so much as weakening their ability to destabilize the country. They're trying to take away the power of the extremists by getting moderates, Sunni and Shiite, on side, hoping to change a groundswell of public opinion. Give the Sunni extremists no reason to attack, and the Sunni moderates have no reason to support them. And when the Sunni's attacks become more vicious, they lose support, branded by their own hatred. That's the same way we're going to achieve health care reform. It's not the extremists that we're going to influence. It's those who stay at home, who look at their insurance rates going up, who want change, but at the same time fear something they don't know and have never experienced. That's who we need to reach out to, in kindness, in understanding, speaking the truth in love. And I have no doubt that our opponents will respond with an escalation of violence, just like the Sunni extremists. So you minimize their power by actually not focusing on them at all, and focusing instead on those who are open to listen. That is kindness.

But really, the thing about kindness is that it's not really about changing other people. That can't really be why we do it. Kindness expressed for the purpose of changing others isn't kindness, it's control.



Kindness changes us, how we see and experience ourselves, how we feel ourselves to be fully alive. We become different people. When we act with incredible regard for the well being of all living things, and that's what kindness is, acting with incredible regard for the well being of all living things, we are changed. We become new people and become part of the bridge between what is and what could be.

And ironically, when we allow ourselves to change, the people around us often do change because they're in a relationship with a different person. The possibilities for their lives expand because of who they can become in relationship with us. And sometimes, we actually end up getting what we need from them.

The Iraqi Shiites are stretching in kindness towards what could be. Those in this country working for health care reform are stretching in kindness towards what could be. And we will be changed for the stretching.

I wish I could say that non-retaliation will result in the peace Iraq wants, or that speaking the truth in love will make health care reform happen this time around. I wish I could promise you that being kind would always take you where you want to go. But of course I can't, because getting where we want to go isn't always where we need to do. But I can guarantee that you will go where you need to go when you practice kindness as an act of faith. Your faithfulness will bring you new life and offer new life to all who love you should they choose to walk into the possibility. That is how change happens. That is how healing happens. That is how we bridge the gap between what is and what could be.

May it be so.