## "WHEN WE NO LONGER CAN COMPROMISE"

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Reading Responsive Reading #584—"A Network of Mutuality" by Martin Luther King, Jr.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

There are some things in our social system to which we ought to be maladjusted.

Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.

We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation.

The foundation of such a method is love.

Before it is too late, me must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war.

One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal.

We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means.

We shall hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.<sup>1</sup>

## Sermon

I have often said that the first and the seventh of our Unitarian Universalist principles are by far the most significant. Affirming the dignity and worth of all people and understanding we are part of the interdependent web of all existence: these two principles provide an excellent framework for how to live an ethical life. When I face confounding personal or societal issues, I turn to these two principles for guidance and wisdom.

These principles remind me that I matter and other people matter. We all matter because every human being inherently matters, and we matter to each other because we all live in relationship with each other. A wealthy person living in a suburb of Milwaukee and a person with struggling to make ends meet in Kimberly and a dairy farmer trying to keep the operation running in rural Winnebago County—they all matter to me because they inherently matter, and because my life is inescapably tied to theirs. We are tied in a single garment of destiny, as Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote. Dr. King was not a Unitarian Universalist, but this belief is profoundly in synch with these two UU principles.

I am reminded of this single garment of destiny when I watch a dystopian movie. This is why I find such movies incredibly disturbing: they depict how things might turn out if we massively ignore the reality of every human's inherent worth and our inter-relatedness. Take, for example, the 2006 movie *Children of Men*. The movie is set in London in 2027. African and

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Reading #584 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon 1993).

Eastern European societies have collapsed. Survivors from these areas have fled to wealthy nations like England. Warring nationalistic sects, violent criminals, totalitarian government, rapidly rising poverty and desperation, social breakdown: all of these inevitably come to London. No one can escape them. We are all in this together, for better or, as *Children of Men* memorably depicts, for worse. If we think that hiding behind figurative and literal walls and gates and armed guards somehow protects us from the fate of others, we are dead wrong.

I have been thinking about all of this in recent weeks as our state has struggled with a host of confounding problems. I am no expert about our current political situation. I am struggling to make sense of all that is unfolding. Thinking about addressing this with you, I am aware that there is a diversity of opinions in the Fellowship—yes, there really is! Please do not assume we all think alike! I am aware that the decisions being made in Madison impact some of us much more immediately and directly than others. For some, this feels very personal. I am aware that exploring this conundrum with you gets me into murky waters in church/state separation: Where's the divide between appropriate comments from a spiritual perspective on government policies and inappropriate partisanship? In addition, I am aware that my beliefs do not have to be your beliefs. All of this has made me reluctant to take on these issues. But then I remembered that part of my job is to share my confusions with you—especially when there is a high likelihood many of you are struggling through the same bewildering maze. And so I need to wade into these murky waters with you.

So how do I think about these current events in Wisconsin? Mindfulness of the two cornerstone UU principles is the place I start. When I am mindful of these principles, a couple things jump out at me as particularly distressing.

The first is the lack of desire to find common ground. The two UU principles I talked about a minute ago tell me that common ground is important. Now there are rare times when searching for common ground should not be a priority—for example, in the face of a horrific and categorical evil like slavery. But by and large, searching for common ground has served our state and our nation well. Our nation's founders set up a system of government designed to encourage us to find common ground.

If I had to put the fiscal problem confronting government at all levels today in one sentence, here is how I'd put it: We expect government to do more than we are willing to fund. We expect government to do more than we are willing to fund. This is the problem. It is a difficult problem. Its difficulty cries out for us to work together. It calls for us to find common ground. I have no doubt that we need to make some significant cuts in government spending. Entitlements need to be reformed, probably dramatically. And there needs to be more revenue from fair taxation, too. We simply cannot go on forever financing our government with borrowed money from others. But to solve this problem, we desperately need to work together. We need to bring our best minds and hearts to this discussion so that we might make the best decisions we possibly can. We need everybody at the table. Nothing less than the common good is at stake.

This is why I find the Governor's approach so distressing. Let me be clear: I am not talking here about the merit of his proposals. I'm talking about his approach. In my view he has been willing to sacrifice the kind of hard, long, grown up conversation we need in order to get his way as quickly and as completely as possible. His attitude has felt like "I know what needs to be done. I have the votes. So like it or not, it's going to happen." This attitude has not encouraged the kind of dialogue we need. It has left little room for the life-blood of democracy: discussion, debate, compromise. It has led to rushed and chaotic votes in the Legislature. It has

led to short-circuiting public scrutiny and understanding. This kind of approach is not likely to resolve our state's financial problems in a lasting way. The politics of polarization are not helpful. When there is no room for compromise, we are on the wrong road.

I'm not pre-disposed to favor the idea of fleeing the state to stall legislation, but I think the fourteen Democratic senators understandably concluded that this was the only way to slow things down. This slowing down was important even if in the end the proposal they opposed was adopted. It allowed, for example, officials at Valley Transit to understand the acute threat posed by the proposed ban on most collective bargaining for state and local government workers. There was time for city officials and the transit workers' union to sit down and work out an agreement that will remove this particular deadly threat to our transit system, at least for the short-term. This only happened because the fleeing senators slowed down the process.

The second aspect of the crisis in our state that distresses me does involve policy. It has to do with whom we ask to sacrifice so that the state's budget might be balanced. My concern is that the Governor's budget proposal places the burden not only on public sector employees, but also on the most vulnerable among us. I may be wrong, but I do not find coupling a tax cut for businesses with drastic cuts in school lunches for low income children to be consistent with the ethical principles of Unitarian Universalism. UU-ism, like most world religions, calls us to be particularly aware of those who are vulnerable: the poor, the sick, children, elders, those with disabilities, the oppressed for example. How the most vulnerable are treated says a lot about the state of the common good: when they are not cared about, the health of the whole community is not good. An ever-widening income gap and a decimated safety net: this is also the wrong road to be on. I fear it is a road that ultimately leads to the kind of dystopia portrayed in *Children of Men*.

Let me interject a word here about collective bargaining. Unitarian Universalism has historically opposed restrictions on the ability of workers to organize and bargain collectively. We have, in the words of a Wisconsin UU clergy statement Dottie and I signed onto, upheld "the right of workers everywhere to secure for themselves a dignified livelihood, a living wage and a secure economic future for their families." In the past, anti-union legislation has enabled exploitation of workers. When this happens, workers become part of the vulnerable in our society. Getting them a place at the table to collectively bargain was an incredibly important tool in changing this. This is why I favor collective bargaining rights, including for public sector workers. There is no doubt in my mind that there will be less money overall for these workers; I think they and all of us will be better served by having them work at the same table with local officials to figure out how to parcel out the smaller pot of money.

I want to share some of the feelings I've cycled through in recent weeks. I suspect some of these may be familiar to you, regardless of where you stand on these issues. I have felt angry. I have felt despair. I have felt resignation. I have searched for distractions to take my mind off what is going on. Underlying it all, I have felt anxiety. I have felt anxious about the most vulnerable among us; anxious about the public sector employees who will take a huge financial hit; anxious about smaller but still important aspects of the proposals that impact things I care about—things like recycling, family planning services, mandatory sentencing. I have felt anxious about our fractured state's psyche; anxious about how this could fragment us here in this diverse congregation; anxious about the impact this could have on the Fellowship's budget and ability to fulfill our mission; and, I'll be honest, anxious about the potential impact on my own

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> http://www.wichurches.org/sitecontent/pdf\_files/programs/Unitarian\_Universalist\_Statement.pdf.

income. I've felt anxious about what I should do in the face of all this—as a citizen, as one of your ministers.

So what can we do in the face of this crisis and the overwhelming anxiety and other emotions it has created? I have come up with seven things that I can—and must—do. I'll share my list in the hopes it's helpful for you.

First, I need to stay spiritually centered and grounded. For me this is absolutely essential to living my life, especially when I'm struggling with feelings like anxiety and anger. Staying spiritually centered helps me stay balanced—and balance is extraordinarily important in times when external events feel so out of balance. I stay spiritually centered by tending to my daily spiritual practice and by staying fully engaged with my spiritual community—namely, this Fellowship. This is not a time for disconnecting from my spiritual practice or my spiritual community.

Second, I need to take time to contemplate what's going on. For me contemplation is not just about my mind—it also involves my feelings. I need to try to understand what is going on, and figure out with as much clarity as possible my own thoughts and feelings about it.

Third, I need to act. There are some things we should be maladjusted to, as Dr. King wrote. These things cry out for thoughtful action. For me, action includes voting, working for candidates who I think will promote the kind of Wisconsin I would like to see, and speaking out. So, in recent weeks, I've written letters to my elected representatives. I've signed onto statements such as one written by my colleague at First Unitarian Society in Madison, the Rev. Michael Schuler. (This statement is posted on the website of the Wisconsin Council of Churches.) I am engaging in some of the multiple responses of ESTHER, our local interfaith community-organizing group. I haven't yet participated in a march, but I probably will. (I would be at the rally this weekend, but as you have no doubt observed, I have to work!) I've reached out to support and encourage people working for resolution—people like the director of Valley Transit. Action matters. Letting anxiety push me into passivity is the worst thing I can do.

Fourth, I need to be humble. My actions are not going solve this problem on their own. This doesn't all ride on me. Humility reminds me that the best thing I can do is find other folks to work with—such as ESTHER, such as my UU colleagues. Humility reminds me that my contemplation may lead me to wrong conclusions and wrong actions. Humility reminds me that this is not a time for self-righteousness. And humility reminds me that the timeframe of history is long—far longer than I can see from here or that I will experience. This will not get fixed overnight.

Fifth, I need to stay true to non-violent principles. If I give into demonizing those with whom I disagree; if I give into violence in my heart or in my actions, then I have lost my bearings. "Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal," as Dr. King said. Love is a related means. The answer is not name-calling or breaking windows or making death threats or blowing up buildings.

Sixth, I need to keep hope alive in my heart. This is a hard time, but giving into hopelessness and despair will accomplish nothing. And in fact, I am truly hopeful. Maybe more than anything else, I believe many people on all sides have learned or re-learned that elections and civil engagement matter. This learning may have an extraordinarily positive impact on our government in the years ahead.

And, finally, I need to remember that we are all in this together: business owners, the homeless, teachers, police officers, the undocumented, dairy farmers, Republicans, Democrats,

Independents, union members, the wealthy, the unemployed. This is relentlessly true, whether we recognize it or pretend otherwise. We are all in this together. I must keep on speaking and acting on this truth.

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