

Defying Hatred  
by Rev. Diane Dowgiert, September 25, 2016

The call comes. You are being invited to take part in the first intervention against evil to be undertaken by the denomination to be started immediately overseas. How do you respond? What do you say?

If you are Waitstill and Martha Sharp, you say yes. You leave your Unitarian church in Wellesley, Massachusetts where Waitstill is the minister. You leave your children in the care of others. You travel to Czechoslovakia where the winds of a world war are brewing. You help people who are being targeted by the Nazis to escape. You get them the necessary documents, even false documents. You are followed by the Gestapo. You are confronted by the Gestapo. You avoid being arrested and imprisoned by narrow chance or blind luck. You trade foreign currency for American dollars so that the refugees who manage to escape will have money with which to start a new life in a new country. You take children from their weeping mothers arms, mothers who give them over to you so that you may get them to safety and the hope of a good life someplace else. You are separated from each other for weeks and sometimes months at a time. You fear for your own life and the life of your beloved.

You finally return home, torn and frayed. You drift apart from each other. You divorce. Each of you remarries and picks up the threads of your life as best you can, changed forever by the experience. Years later, you are named as Righteous Among the Nations, an honor bestowed on those who aided the Jews during the Holocaust, two among the five Americans to be honored this way. After your death, the full story of what you did and the lives you saved begins to emerge. Finally, your story is documented by your grandson, Artemis Joukowski and the documentary filmmaker, Ken Burns. Millions of people around the world are touched and inspired by your story. All because you answered the call. And you answered, "Yes." At least if you are Martha and Waitstill Sharp.

A. Powell Davies, who served as minister of the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC during the post World War II years, asked in a sermon, "Is this your religion?" He went on to describe a religion that stands for freedom while standing against fearful cruelties, ugly hatreds, and bitter prejudices, and then asked, "Is this your religion?" then "What are you doing with it?"

The Sharps answered that question by forsaking all they knew, sacrificing their comfort and their safety in order to defy the Nazis, and thus, defy hatred. The

story of their physical and moral courage is inspiring. We identify with them as one of our own which helps to define our character as a people. There comes a time when each of us must answer the question for our self. If this is your religion then what are you doing with it?

Before the Sharps said yes to the invitation to take part in the first intervention of evil undertaken by the denomination and going overseas, seventeen other people had said no. They thought a war was definitely coming. They had families and they didn't want to put themselves in danger.

For the denominational leaders at the American Unitarian Association who were seeking someone to send to Europe, to intervene in the evil that was unfolding there, they had to go through seventeen no's to finally get a yes.

I find some reassurance in this fact. When I try to put myself in the shoes of the Sharps, imagining how I would have responded to the call they got, I most likely would have been among those who said no. Each of us will answer that question of "if this is your religion then what are you doing with it" differently.

If you are Robin Tanner and Jay Leach, two of our Unitarian Universalist clergy in Charlotte, you answer by helping to organize and then showing up for what was to be a peaceful protest following the police killing of Keith Lamont Scott on Tuesday, September 20. You join a multi-faith group of clergy who intentionally position themselves between the police and the protestors, seeking to be a protective barrier between them, providing protection for both the protestors and the police. You stand face to face with police in riot gear. You are tear-gassed. You are in the crowd when civilian gunfire takes down a protestor who later dies.

You speak eloquently to local and national news media talking about your experience, in Robin Tanners words, of "bearing witness to the righteous rage, to the lament, to the pain that was a pulse throughout our community." If you are Robin Tanner and Jay Leach or one of the other fifty clergy who were at that protest, you put your body on the line for peace and for justice, standing for freedom and against cruelty, hatred, and prejudice. (By the way, I'm aware that many of you know Robin Tanner, as she is the wife of your former minister, Anne Marie Alderman. I'm also aware that UU clergy in Tulsa responded to the police killing of Terence Crutcher that same day.)

Not all of us are called to put our bodies on the line. Not all of us are called to put our faith into action in that way. We can, however learn from the example of

those who do, whether it be the stories from our own tradition, stories of people like Martha and Waitstill Sharp or Robin Tanner and Jay Leach or the story of the young Ruby Bridges who courageously faced down hatred everyday as adults shouted insults and even spit at her as she walked into her classroom, the first black child to desegregate an all-white school – the story we told our children this morning.

No matter how any of us chooses to answer the call that rings through our religion, there are lessons to be learned from these exemplars, lessons of physical and moral courage. I lift up three of these lessons for you today.

The first lesson is about overcoming fear. We can never be rid of our fear. It is hard-wired into us. It can be useful in protecting us from danger. Fear can also keep us from acting or it can make us run away or it can make us fight. Fear can help us to rationalize our behavior. How many times have we heard fear cited as justification for police shootings of innocent, unarmed people? Xenophobia, the fear of outsiders, fuels anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments. Politicians and advertisers prey on our fears to manipulate us in order to gain votes and profits.

We would be wise to heed the words of the mystic Sufi poet Rumi who said “don’t move the way fear makes you move.” There are those that say the Bible’s number one statement is “don’t be afraid.” There are at least 365 places where the Bible instructs us to “fear not,” which is easier said than done. I believe this instruction to overcome fear is lifted up as a spiritual value because it is a necessary lesson if we are to do what is needed to make justice in our world.

In my own life, I find the greatest antidotes to fear are relationship and community. When I have to face something that scares me, having a friend by my side and knowing my family and my community have my back makes it easier. It’s as the words of the old spiritual say, “We’ll walk hand in hand and we shall overcome someday.” The first lesson is about overcoming fear.

The second lesson is about activating moral imagination. Sara Bloomfield, who is director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum says that the Sharps had moral imagination. She says “they could imagine the human capacity for evil and they could imagine the possibilities for action.”

Moral imagination begins with being able to imagine the human capacity for evil. Unitarian Universalists don’t use the word evil much. Maybe it’s because so many of our members came here fleeing religions that taught total human

depravity, hell-fire and damnation, and associated evil with Satan, the devil, and hell. For Unitarian Universalists who are skeptical and disbelieving about the existence of an otherworldly hell where those who perpetuate evil are banished for eternity, it can be easy to dismiss the reality of evil.

I'm reminded of a story told by the daughter of Sophia Lyon Fahs, the groundbreaking liberal religious educator of the mid-twentieth century. The daughter said that her religious upbringing left her totally unprepared for the cruelty and hatred she would face outside of her liberal religious cocoon.

Moral imagination begins with being able to imagine the human capacity for evil. In order to see evil, we must first be able to imagine that it exists. The Sharps had to be willing to believe that people could actually commit the atrocities that occurred under the Nazi regime. Today, for us, in order to see racism, we first have to imagine that it could exist: same with sexism, or heterosexism, or ableism, or classism, or any of the isms that keep us divided and fearful of each other. If we can't imagine their existence, we will never see them. Until we see them we won't be motivated to imagine possibilities for action. The second lesson is about activating moral imagination.

The third lesson is about what our friends in the Black Lives Matter movement call "staying woke." We need to stay awake. At the core of religious teachings throughout the world and throughout the ages is the idea of awakening. Here in the United States we are being shaken awake by the relentless images of black men being shot and killed by police. We're being awakened to the reality that proportionally, people of color stand a much higher chance of being killed by police than people who are white, and proportionally, people of color populate our prisons in higher numbers as compared to people who are white.

Here in the United States and around the world, we are being shaken awake by images of Syrian refugees fleeing the devastation of war and terror in their homeland, the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Speaking of World War II, it took an attack on Pearl Harbor to shake Americans awake to the realities of harsh cruelties being perpetrated by totalitarian regimes, and the need to act, Americans whose goals at that time were to keep America out of the war and immigrants out of America.

When The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the General Assembly of Unitarian Universalists in 1966, delivering the prestigious Ware Lecture, he

admonished our association of congregations to not sleep through the revolution, or in today's language, to stay woke. Which is no easy thing to do.

I have to admit that when I heard the news of last week's police shootings in Tulsa and closer to home in Charlotte, I felt myself shutting down. I felt myself going emotionally numb, the spiritual equivalent of falling asleep. Then I saw Robin Tanner on the news, answering the call to stand for freedom and to defy hatred. I was inspired to do the one thing I could do in that moment, which was to stay woke.

Ken Burns quotes Mark Twain to illustrate the importance of knowing our history. "History doesn't repeat itself, it rhymes." Burns says that it is less about repetition than it is about patterns and themes. Staying woke is about listening for the poetry of history, hearing its patterns and the way it rhymes with our current time.

The poetry of history is reminding us that freedom is not won once and for all. It must be struggled for in each new generation. Tyranny is not vanquished once and forever. It rises again with new forms and new faces in each generation. It must be faced and dismantled each time it rears its ugly head.

When the call comes to defy hatred and to face evil in whatever form it takes, I have no doubt you will fill the shoes of those who walked the path of justice before. They taught us well about overcoming fear, activating moral imagination, and staying woke. When the call comes, it is more a question of how you will fill those shoes and how you will answer the question, if this is your religion then what are you doing with it?