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Acts of engaging "the other" take our breath away.

READINGS

Reading #1: "Two Ways" by Warren Lindsey

In 1944, a Colonel in the Wehrmacht, Claus von Stauffenberg, decided with others that something had to be done about Hitler. They developed a plan to assassinate him.

On the staff of the German High Command, Von Stauffenberg was the one chosen to carry a bag containing a bomb into a meeting with Hitler and his generals. He would then be called out of the room for a telephone call.

All went as planned but when the bomb exploded, Hitler had changed his position in the room and was only wounded. Von Stauffenberg was executed along with others.

Around the same time in a small town in southern France, Huguenot Pastor Andre Trocme, his wife Magda and his congregation had hidden over 4,000 Jews from the Nazis. The authorities became suspicious. Asked to give up hidden Jews, the pastor told them, "We know no Jews...only men." He always insisted that the Nazis be resisted with non-violence and love...that helping the Jews was more important than killing Nazis.

When the police came to arrest him, Trocme and his wife invited them in for dinner. The policemen were embarrassed but came into the house and had a meal with them. As they then took Pastor Trocme away, the congregation, who had gathered around the house when they heard what was happening, showered the car with gifts of food.

Trocme survived and died in 1971. He and Magda were honored by Israel as *Righteous Among Nations*.

These are two very different ways to resist and oppose evil in the world. Which one we choose depends upon our commitment to the Unitarian Universalist teaching of the First Principle. We all agree that killing is wrong, and yet we are sympathetic with von Stauffenberg's approach because, after all, it was Hitler he was trying to kill.

The way that Andre and Magda Trocme chose is difficult to understand and more difficult yet to do. The First Principle requires us to treat all with "*the inherent worth and dignity of every person*," and that must logically include even such a man as Adolph Hitler. If we mean what we say, then even a Hitler has inherent worth.

The path chosen by the Trocmes and their congregation is much harder. Like von Stauffenberg's act, it requires great courage and determination, but it does not surrender to violence. Even Vichy policemen have inherent dignity. Good and evil are not to simply be placed on the scales of cost versus benefit. The way of good, of loving our enemies as ourselves, even if it seems counter intuitive, must be the right way.

Reading #2: Facebook post by Rachel Banderob, September 2017

Tonight I got the closest I have ever been to a "bar fight." Their hatred and disgust at the NFL players who #takeaknee was way beyond my tolerance level. I had absolutely no idea what to expect when I approached them - 2 white men spouting off and 1 woman (dating or married to one of them) speaking up in opposition. But I knew what to expect if I DIDN'T speak up, so with slightly shaky knees but a solid voice I got up from the table with my sister and walked over to the bar.

I don't remember much of what I said or they said, it's all a swirly blur, but whenever I asked one of the men whether he had read...the details into every Black and Brown person shot by police (no they were not all criminals!); [whether he had read] that Kaepernick was recently awarded MVP by the NFL community association; [or if he'd read] articles written by veterans who support #takeaknee and don't appreciate their service being used as a means of oppressing/silencing Black people....there was an interesting honesty - not angry or defensive or dismissive - in their 'no.' They also went from 'all Black people shot by police are criminals' to admitting there were a few incidents that involved disgusting behavior by police officers.

The roots of the racism were deep - 'they don't belong here' (and much worse, which I will not repeat) which is nothing new in this country, but [this] was the first time I had heard it said in real life.

They clearly had strong military ties, and I did learn something new: their PASSION for the flag, its SACREDness, their DEVOTION to it... that level was new to me. It helped me understand their thinking.

I stood my ground until the 2 men left to smoke their cigarettes outside; then I talked to the woman. She was "with" one of the men, she said he was a wonderful person and a fabulous father, but they have this argument almost every day. I think we each appreciated the other's support and agreement - I know I did! I truly wish her the best, whatever course that takes.

I'm still a little shaken, trying to process it all, but one thing I know for certain is that I am glad I got up off my seat and walked over to that bar and challenged them. They can't say that [stuff] that loudly in public and not get challenged - not when I'm within earshot, anyway!!

Walking Our Talk

We can hardly believe these stories of the pastor of yesterday and the young woman of today choosing to truly engage with “the other.” Could we ever be so brave? So open? So empowered to close the distance between us and a person across a great divide? Stories like these stay with us – we can’t shake them, especially the part where the protagonist’s generosity of spirit changes everything, us included.

We know enough about those terrible times in Europe to picture, in the story Warren wrote, the sickening moment when the pastor and his wife heard the knock on the door and knew it was all over. Empathizing, we feel sick too, imagining the dismay, the cold fear, the helplessness they must have felt.

But who among us can imagine mustering what it took to do what this couple did next? Can we see ourselves having the poise, the self-control, the courage, the *faith* to invite into our home officers who’ve come to send us to a death camp, people whose beliefs and actions we’ve devoted our life to for years? While we can almost hear the clink of glasses at the dinner table, it’s hard to put ourselves in their shoes that night, almost inconceivable to imagine the surreal experience of holding the door open for these men and hosting them: seating them around the table, serving them food we’ve made, pouring their coffee, perhaps making quiet conversation with them.

In this true story that took place in the worst of times, rather than give way to their fear or anger or opinion, the pastor and his wife chose instead to look for a bit of humanity in those officers...and to offer a bit of humanity to them. That act takes our breath away.

These times challenge us too. They test us. What we hear on the news and right here where we live tests our commitment to our beliefs and principles, challenges our willingness to see dignity in each other, to look for worth, to lead with love, to walk our talk. These days, the person we perceive as “the other” – the one with whom we fundamentally disagree, the group whose values are abhorrent to us – the “other” is our neighbor, it’s the guy spouting off at the next table, maybe it’s our sibling or our parent.

Rachel’s story tells of confronting “the other” just a few weeks ago. It’s not so beyond our experience that we can’t imagine ourselves in her shoes, sitting at the table where she and her sister sat, listening, shell-shocked, at what the guys at the bar were saying. But it’s another thing to imagine ourselves having the wherewithal she had to get up and approach them. She knew she had to do something.

Once upon a time, walking ahead of me up a small incline, my mother-in-law called back to me, “Betsy,” she said, “would you please put your finger in the small of my back and help me get up this hill?” When have you felt that little finger in the small of your back: “Come on,” it says, “you can do it!”

A few years ago in Providence, Sister Simone Campbell gave the keynote address at General Assembly. (That’s the annual June gathering of Unitarian Universalists – we come from all over

the world, everyone's invited.) A renowned human rights activist, founder of the advocacy group Nuns on the Bus, and a terrific speaker, Sister Simone is a Roman Catholic nun. In her speech, she shared stories of families separated at the Mexico border, men and women crowded into dark, damp prison cells beneath the streets of Iraq, one shocking event after another. She calls what she does, witnessing human atrocities all over the world, "walking toward trouble."

Walking toward trouble challenges us to our core. When faced with situations or conversations that unnerve us, many of us hesitate. We doubt. "Can I do that?" we wonder. Sister Simone counsels us, "We must reverence our doubt. To question, to risk, to be uncertain [she says] is living our faith. When [I] walk toward [trouble], I open myself to questions, to uncertainty, to risk..."¹

Twentieth century theologian Henry Nelson Wieman believed that conversations are what move humanity forward, that every interaction changes us and changes the world. When we share pleasantries, information, opinions or feelings, we go out into the world carrying that interaction with us. As we meet others, we share pieces of it. New elements become part of each new conversation, and so it goes and grows. Wieman called this phenomenon "the creative event."²

In both of the stories we heard today, something like a calling – a finger in the small of the back – moves people to cross the distance to "the other" into the unknown.

Let's look at those moments. The handing a plate of food to the arresting officer, looking into his eyes, perhaps not uttering a word. Neither person knows what that moment will bring. They're in uncharted territory, a place of mystery.

Same with the moment when it's clear that Rachel hasn't gotten up to walk past those men on her way somewhere else. No, she's approaching them. Here too, propelled by something she doesn't name but says "yes" to, all she knows is that she's going over there into the unknown, open to whatever happens. "I had absolutely no idea what to expect when I approached them," she wrote. Thinking back, even the conversation feels mysterious: "I don't remember much of what I said or they said, it's all a swirly blur."

In any conversation, we are walking into the unknown. When we approach our child, a friend, a partner, a colleague, a stranger, we don't know what will happen, what is in their head or heart at the moment. We don't know where we will go together or what will find voice next. A longtime minister once suggested that this moment of not knowing is the mystery that some people call God – a curious concept, lifting up and revering that the moment between the words we say to each other. A moment of openness, waiting...possibility.

Of course, we often think we do know how a conversation will go. Maybe we have an agenda to accomplish. Or we think we already know what the other person has to say. But Sister Simone

¹ Sister Simone Campbell, Unitarian Universalist Ware Lecture, Providence, RI 2014 at <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/campbell-walk-towards-trouble>

² Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Source of Human Good*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1946.

warns us about being too sure: “If the only thing we have is certitude,” she says, “that leaves us in a very righteous position....The challenge,” she goes on, “is to be open.”³

What happened at dinner that night in the south of France? If the story has persisted some seventy years, chances are that it changed people. You can imagine that officers around that table remembered and talked about it for a long time. How could anyone forget such moments of intense intimate contact in a time of such horror? We who listen and who repeat this tale are also changed by it.

What happened at the bar in Boston? A young woman could not but move herself toward trouble. “I had...no idea what to expect,” she said, “but I knew what to expect if I DIDN’T speak up.” We only know her side of the interaction, but surely Henry Nelson Wieman would have called it a creative event – she came away changed: “I did learn something new,” she said. “...It helped me understand their thinking.”

What happened affected Rachel so much so that she wrote it down. “Would she be willing to share this post?” I asked her mother, for her words had already changed me, opened my understandings, inched me forward – another creative event. You see, in the writing, Rachel had capitalized three words: PASSION, SACREDNESS and DEVOTION. Recalling *those words* – passion, sacredness and devotion – alongside the men with their harsh words brought me closer to them, closer to their dignity and worth.

Thank goodness for each others’ stories. They fuel us, says Sister Simone. They land deep. Get us thinking. Inspire us. Think of famous stories that live in our minds – Jesus of Nazareth upending the tables in the temple, victims of crimes responding with love and forgiveness. Think of wordless story just a few years ago in Baton Rouge, when a young African American woman, peaceful and mild, stood tall, within arm’s reach of policemen in riot gear, her arms bare, her dress gently swirling in the breeze.

Thank goodness for these well-known stories, and thank goodness for *each others’* stories, too – a young woman many of us have met walking toward trouble and coming away changed, learning something new.

Let us tell these stories and tell them again. May they inspire us and help us live into affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Stories about answering the call to cross a distance, to come face to face, to connect. Stories that take our breath away.

So may it be.

³ Campbell, *ibid.*