

Radical Love and Radical Forgiveness

A Sermon

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Central Nassau

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Interfaith Invocation

The Tao of Heaven is eternal, and the earth is long enduring. Why are they long enduring? They do not live for themselves; thus they are present for all beings. (Tao te Ching)

Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it. (Mark Twain)

Love thy neighbor as thyself: Do not to others what thou would not wish be done to thyself: Forgive injuries. Forgive thy enemy, be reconciled to him, give him assistance, invoke God in his behalf. (Confucius)

What lies beyond us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. (Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Our musical interlude today, and what will be our closing hymn, is a song welded in our memories to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, *We Shall Overcome*. And yet we have not overcome, have we? We have gained some important ground, but overcome we have not. I want to suggest that the reason why we have not overcome is that we have been too focused on what is *out there*, and not focused enough on what is *in here*, in the human heart, the place where real world transformation must take place.

There is no dispute but that we have been able to turn our instrumental reason toward the creation of ever sophisticated technologies that glow in our living rooms and studies, or glisten on the skylines and horizons of our cities or in space itself. But we have not been able to keep braced-open the door to that *inner* glow, that divine spark in each of us. We have mapped the human genome, and we will one day soon know how to stop the onset of disease by rearranging nucleotide sequences, and select the color of our children's eyes, or change the color of our own. We will be able to, one day, make the heart of flesh that beats in our chest beat for decades more than our four score years, but there is no talk about *that other heart* that beats along side it – the heart that is not made of flesh.

Where is the gene for love in the genetic map, and would we really care to find it? If we find it would we opt to enhance its power and its hold on us, or would we opt to instead weaken it so as to hush the voices of guilt that intrude upon our enjoyment of our own, personal worlds, as we look on at the wretched of the earth?

We have not overcome war and crime and poverty and ethnocentrism and color consciousness and greed. We move in timid steps rather than leaps, and we think the civil rights movement is a historical moment rather than a river that never ceases its flow. Too often we choose to camp along the *shores* of righteousness rather than launch our vessels and catch its currents that lead where we are to go as people of

faith. So we have slumbered and have become content with half measures, and we look to dead heroes rather than believing that it is our task in life to take their place once their bodies hit the ground.

How many candle light vigils have we had since the words of that hopeful song was sung? How many petitions have we signed? How many care packages have we sent to the disenfranchised? How many checks have we written on behalf of the poor? We have spent a lot of time doing all of these things, and yet the gap between the rich and the poor in our country has steadily widened over the past decade; and we have seen African war lords multiply, and Latin American kingpins prosper, and ossified Asian leaders take their countries and their peoples to ruin, and we have seen the great power of America used to commit atrocities in our name, so that we might continue to live in comfort, in our American paradise.

We have to ask ourselves whether our methods are adequate to the challenge, or whether they are designed primarily to make us feel good, like we have done and are doing something about the conditions we claim to hate. Perhaps we have been spending too much time at candlelight vigils and not enough time in what our Muslim brothers and sisters call *Jihad* – not enough time in the effort to let what our Jewish brothers and sisters call the *Shikinah* shine into us. Perhaps the road to overcoming, to the Beloved Community that Josiah Royce and Martin King envisioned, is not merely the road of protest politics and demonstrations of indignation before dinner, but must be, at least in part, the road into our own shadow selves where we harbor our wounds and resentments and personal hatreds and fears that, ultimately, make us like those we call *Oppressor*.

We have not overcome because we have come to think overcoming will come about by passing new legislation, and redistricting, and other methods of coercion – that is, by forcing the hand of external power to move, slightly, this way or that, while the foot and trunk and leg and head of power remain unmoved from their selfish path. Perhaps we have not overcome because we have convinced ourselves that we are good and decent people, or good enough anyway, as evidenced in our petitions and candles.

There is certainly nothing wrong with our vigils and our petitions and our candles. But there is something fundamental that we may have missed in our efforts to affect power and the prevalent discourse of our culture about what is right and what is wrong.

Frederick Douglass told us that “power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will.” But perhaps Douglass’s understanding of power was only half complete. Perhaps the true goal is not to wrest justice from power, but to persuade power that the sole reason for its existence *is* justice. We have perhaps forgotten that part of the equation. It is the part of the equation that was taught to us by the old spiritual masters and prophets, whose grasp of human psychology and whose vision of possible futures in which people would live to benefit their fellows inspired hope that our species is not in fact destined to live lives of butchery and fear, forever. Their attempts to open our eyes to that possibility did not always bode well for them. But though they had fallen at times, either in natural death surrounded by devotees or as proselytizing martyrs, their visions have survived and their grand explosions of love and spirit have left the earth, careened into the heavens, cooled returned in the forms of the great spiritual traditions that we have today, of which our own Unitarian Universalism is but one species.

We have not overcome. We can no longer settle for a morsel of justice here, a crumb there, which is what we get from coercion. Coercion does not often enough affect the heart. The time for coercion alone is past. To it we must add a vigorous program of *conversion*. Coercion and conversion. Coercion to stop the present injustice; conversion to redirect the body of power toward future justice created and preserved of its

own volition. Just as faith without works was said to be dead in the writings of the early Christians, so let it be said today that *coercion without conversion is no more than the temporary adjournment of the conference of evil*. Whatever is gained by it will remain at risk for as long as the hearts of those who hold the power to affect the fates of the people are in line with a law that is not the result of any legislative act, but with what Theodore Parker and Martin King called, poetically, the arc of the moral universe. It is not the *hand* of power alone that we need to affect, but the *hearts* of the powerful.

But what of our own hearts? We will never affect the misdirected power structures of our time if we continue to resemble them in our daily lives, and I do not mean merely in the outward and obvious ways. We may be deluding ourselves into believing that we are really after the social changes we claim to be after, especially when our lives are indistinguishable from those we have called *The Oppressor*. If we look at our lives and nothing distinguishes us from the average workaday American whose concern is limited to what is his or hers, then our protests must remain tepid, our churches and temples and synagogues places to pay mere lip service to high ideals.

The institutions that were crystalized after the blinding heat created by the work of their founders must reclaim some of their fire and vision.

We are part of a religious community, and we are so by choice. So what is the point of such a community? As people of “religion” (and I mean “religion” in the thick sense of a life of spirit and love and Transcendence in community) we should be engaged in a daily process of inner transformation and personal transcendence so that we may always have that inner fire to speak truth to power and not waiver. That is what makes the religious community different from all other types of association, and why it must remain different. Our aim should be personal holiness, and that does not mean some kind of backwards purity. Regardless of the tradition, this is nearly always the professed goals of the adherents of a faith. The mythopoeic texts that so many in our culture and even in our movement perilously reject are full of the rich wisdom that can provide the guides to holiness that we need in our modern, overly rationalistic world, by providing us the *imagery* and *language* with which to pursue it.

Joseph Campbell, the great historian of religion, tells us of a hero with a thousand faces, that all the great stories of the world’s religions come down to one story - ours. In psychological and spiritual terms, the hero that is in each of us is called out of its slumber by reading the heroic acts of love and compassion and forgiveness that are contained in the great mythopoeic literatures of the world, and that are the soil out of which Unitarian Universalism grows. The demons that the prophets of old set out to defeat are really none other than our own demons, the demons that stand between us and holiness – a holiness that is a depthless well of love and forgiveness that stands before all war and terror and greed and hatred and embraces the enemy and calls him or her brother or sister, and forgives, not for the hero’s sake, but for the sake of that enemy, violator, oppressor, abuser, racist, profiteer. *The religious community is the training ground of love and transcendence*. It reminds us that though we are made of flesh and blood, we are far more than that, and capable of far more than we think. We have an awesome power that the rest of nature does not – we have the power to make events as though they did not happen. That is the power of forgiveness.

In the Buddhist tradition, we are told that the deceiver, Mara, a figure similar to the Satan of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, tried to dissuade the Buddha from the path to final enlightenment. We needn’t and do not take such stories literally, of course. But they reveal something very real, nonetheless. They reveal a truth about the human heart better than could be revealed by any treatise on psychology. There is a Mara and a Satan in each of our breasts, no less than in the breasts of those who hold the reigns of political and

economic power. As we move toward holiness they emerge. The deceptions of which Mara and Satan are capable are ingenious. And indeed, we shall not overcome until we understand this fact.

The world thinks talk of radical love and forgiveness is mad. It says that such selflessness is beyond the pale of human capability save for in intimate relations. The world tells us it is not natural to expect the kind of self-sacrifice called for by so many religious traditions. And in saying so, it tells us precisely what Mara's deception is. Listen closely. *The deception entails convincing us that our natures are fully understood once our love of pleasure, our greed, our lust for power are understood.* That is how we are kept in check, in our torpor. That is how we accept meliorism and timid steps when moral revolution is what is needed, how we accept baby steps when powerful manly and womanly strides are called for. The root of the deception is this limited notion of our natures, to which we have bought in. It is our so-called nature that is appealed to when we extend ourselves to help others, and Mara says to us "Now, be kind to yourself, go only so far in your charity; you don't want to give in to excess." But the great religious teaching tell us of a higher nature, a nature that can overcome the first. It is the nature of the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, of Jesus on the Cross, of Al-Hallaj dismembered, even of Thoreau at Walden. Each of the prophets of the many traditions, the hero that has set out to follow the call of self-discovery and self-knowledge and holiness, had his or her own dragons of nature to slay. Mara tempted the Buddha with sex and power and privilege and a life of selfish bliss. The same with the Jesus of the Gospels. Both tempters were the same. They appealed to the everyday nature that we display with the regularity of clockwork, and in the same recognizable patterns from generation to generation.

There is a higher nature in each of us. It is a super nature, no different than those dead and buried prophets who came before us. The super-natural does exist, but it is not to be thought of as the etherial realm of which we have no experience. We have plenty experience of the super-natural. The super-natural is a word explained by its own construction once you step to the side and take a different view of it. It is none other than the overcoming of a false view of our *natural* capacities – our capacities to love and forgive and transcend our selfish cravings. Religion is associated with the super-natural for a reason, but we must actively *translate* the term away from superstition and fable, and look at its deep psychological and spiritual dimensions. Here are some examples of super-nature in action:

- * We see it in a young student in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square, refusing to let it pass no matter how it tried to maneuver around him, face to turret, foot to lethal tread;
- * We see it in Anne Sullivan and in Helen Keller's overcoming the hopelessness of sensory deprivation through Herculean devotion;
- * We see it in a bus full of freedom riders facing injury and death as they pass over the Mason-Dixon line, seeking love and justice for people they would never even meet;
- * We see it in a nun in the middle of India with no radio or television, tending to an orphanage of children who do not know enough to be unhappy.

That *other* super-natural, that ethereal *Something*, what some call God, and others the Tao and yet others the Great Spirit or Logos, is what *I* believe is tapped into for the strength and love and forgiveness needed to perform these more human super-natural feats. But you don't need to believe in the former to believe in the latter. We are still who we are in any case.

We should not dissuade radicalness in religion. Our religion must not fetishize moderation and reasonableness in the face of human cruelty and suffering. True religion *is* radical. It goes to the root, to the core and very foundations of our psychology, our souls. It is no mere ethics. The best of religion demonstrates, through reports and stories in its wisdom literatures, *the power of the impossible possibility of love*. A religious community that is not radical is but a gathering place for sublime and pretty talk, which means it is on its way to death as a religious community. We humans are in a radical predicament and our religion must speak to it. And by radical, I mean “to the root,” the etymology of the word. To the root, we are beings standing between birth and death searching for reasons day after day to put our feet on the ground and press on. We could give it up, turn to a life of pleasure and comfort, but the truth of our predicament will find us, like rain finds its way into every crack on every street.

As religious people, we must be obsessed with confronting the pervasive evil of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery in our world. Slogans like “right relations” and “radical hospitality” mean nothing unless they mean that.

Buildings like this one must be training grounds for those who enter through their doors, a place to go and perfect our capacity to love and to forgive. It is a training ground for us to *slough off an old nature* and *assume a higher one*; one that is waiting inside each of us to be born or to be perfected.

Love [agape] and forgiveness are not feelings. Love and forgiveness, like faith itself, are decisions. To love and to forgive rightly requires a near complete transformation of our minds, and that is why the tropes of “conversion” and “rebirth” are used from the Greek religion through the Judeo-Christian ones. And if not rebirth, then what in Hebrew is called *Tikkun*, restoration and repair of our right relation with our higher nature and with the source of life itself.

This is no easy work. It is, at times, *excruciatingly difficult work*, and that is why a community is required to help us achieve our success. We are here to sharpen one another’s capacity to engage in supernatural acts of radical forgiveness, radical love. We are here to help each other to absorb without offense the slights and the insults and the verbal blows of others, even each other, and to hold no one in our debt for such offenses. We are not here to do the opposite of that. It is in loving and in forgiveness that we show ourselves to be far more than the dust of which our bodies are made. In love we sacrifice our own interests for those of others. We begin by learning how to do that with our closest friends and family. But in religion, we are asked to train to extend that love to the stranger who lives a world away. In forgiveness, we are asked to release our fellows from their debts to us, to await no apology, no explanation before we grant it – remembering that to forgive and to love are not mere feelings; they are decisions to engage our fellows in a certain way, and to place their interests, as often as possible, ahead of our own. Because we have a counter-community, our religious community, we have something from which to draw our resolve and power to go out into the world and to practice what so many others will tell us is *unnatural*.
