

From Hate to Love
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
May 13, 2018

Reading

from the Metta Sutta (Buddhist)

Let us cultivate boundless goodwill. Let none deceive another, or despise any being in any situation. Let none in anger or ill-will wish another harm. Even as a mother watches over her child, so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings. Radiating friendliness over the whole world, above, below, and all around, without limit. Love unrestrained, without hate or enmity.

Sermon

In a Buddhist journal recently was an piece that gave me today's sermon title. The article is "From Hate to Love: An ex-neo-Nazi's journey to Buddhism."

How would you not want to know that story?

So here it is, the short version (gleaned from this article by Lindsay Kyte in the May issues of "Lion's Roar"):

Arno Michaelis grew up in the 1970s in what looked on the outside to be an idyllic setting – but inside his house was an alcoholic father and a mother made miserable by the father's drinking.

All this led young Arno on a path of addiction – first to the adrenaline rush that came from bullying and hurting others, which in turn led him to be consumed by interest in the white supremacy movement. "He fancied himself someone who was saving the white race from oppression." As he himself put it more recently, "It was about fighting for your people and National Socialism. Anybody who didn't like it was an enemy. It was all very romantic and it really repulsed civil society, which also gave me a kick."

Then, after a number of years in the movement, Michaelis founded his own branch of "the largest racist skinhead organization in the world, Hammerskin Nation," often using music as a vehicle, through a white power band he headed.

And as Michaelis also said recently, "As we radiated hate and violence into the world, the world handed it back to us."

He and others in the movement got into gang fights, particularly in his home city of Milwaukee, already, like too many of our cities, racially divided. "I practiced violence until it was natural, and the violence became who I was."

He was hooked on the adrenaline rush of it all.

As time went on though, in the words of this article, "...amid the chaos and bloodshed, something within Michaelis was glimpsing something that didn't fit his violent narrative – the kindness and compassion of people he considered enemies."

Apparently there were many such examples. Here's one, having to do with an elderly black cashier at a McDonald's. "Spotting the swastika tattoo on Michaelis' middle finger, she looked at him and said, 'I know you're a better person than that. That's not who you are.'"

Other instances had to do with his being treated with kindness from his "Jewish boss, lesbian supervisor, or Black and Latino coworkers."

Significantly, even his parents the article reports, themselves living a difficult journey, never gave up on him.

And then Michaelis had a child, itself transformative; then, seeing his daughter playing with children of other races at daycare, as he now puts, "It struck me that they were all children – not Black children or white children, but the sons and daughter of mothers and fathers."

So, finally, Michaelis could no longer bear the thought of all the hurt he had caused others, and could not bear the thought of his own daughter being exposed to the sort of violence he had inflicted on others.

Later on, "when his daughter turned ten, she started reading books about the Dalai Lama and seeking solace in Buddhism."

So – and this was now years after he had left the hate groups – Michaelis himself began to explore Buddhism, becoming gradually deeply committed to regular Buddhist practice.

"Arno Michaelis says he now defines hate as 'the willful denial of compassion.'"

Notice that language.

Implicit in this affirmation is that compassion is natural, and that it is the denial of compassion that is unnatural, even inhuman. This means that whether through Buddhist meditation or Christian prayer or simply a humanist commitment, compassion and love don't need to be learned. Rather, the task is to unlearn the cultural or personal conditioning of hate and separation, thereby revealing natural compassion, natural love, the experience of interconnection of all beings that *is* who we are, not who we have to learn to be.

How do we unlearn hate? Here's one way:

In the life of Arno Michaelis, the beginning of his unlearning hate hinged on others treating him with compassion, kindness, and love.

Which we can do for others, even when it sometimes takes courage to do so.

Since I read this article about Arno Michaelis, the image that has most insistently stayed with me is an image of courage, the courage of that McDonald's cashier.

Picture the scene. This tough young white guy, not just with tattoos, nothing wrong with that, but with hateful tattoos, including this apparently quite visible swastika on his middle finger. Then picture the cashier described as an elderly black woman – a woman who because of the color of her skin would have been one of Michaelis' natural targets.

So I find myself in awe of the way in which in just a moment, her obviously beautiful heart and clear mind led her to see the tattoo and at the same time really see

Michaelis... and be able to say, “I know you’re a better person than that. That’s not who you are.”

How could she know that? Maybe she saw something in his eyes that he could not see. Or maybe because she knows that every human being, at heart, is a better person than that tattoo.

The article doesn’t say much about Michaelis’s parents – only noting at the outset their own troubled lives, and then later affirming that they never gave up on him. It seems that they, too, knew or certainly hoped as sometimes only a parent can hope, that their son was “a better person” than those tattoos and his behavior seemed to proclaim.

They never gave up.

That’s the story, too, of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke, isn’t it. The father in that story had every reason to believe that his son who had run away, squandered his legacy in high living, was unredeemable. But without a question, without even hearing his son’s story, the father welcomed him home with a celebration. He, too, knew that his son was better than his behavior would indicate.

Traditional interpretations of the parable affirm that the father is a stand-in, so to speak, for God. In other words we are meant to understand that God will never give up on us, that God the Father/Mother knows we are better than whatever behavior or appearance might suggest.

What might that mean if your language is not God language? Simply that inherent worth or goodness, predilection for kindness, compassion, and love, is baked into our DNA – however much our upbringing or culture or whatever might try to teach us hate and separation.

As the Franciscan brother, Richard Rohr put it in a recent meditation on the importance of community for early Christians and for all Christians and for all humans today:

We are made for each other. As a species we have always known we could not survive, could not flourish, without each other. Whatever is to prosper, grow, or multiply will only happen with the nourishment of people who are *for each other* in a significant way.

For each other as Michaelis’ father and mother, as well as that McDonald’s cashier – herself perhaps also a mother – were for Arno. For each other as the father was for his prodigal son. For each other in the spirit of a mother for her child in the ancient Buddhist text.

For each other as we are meant to be, born to be, naturally compassionate, naturally kind because we are kin, naturally loving.

And in the words of Carolena Wood, printed at the top of your order of worship this morning, “No love is ever wasted.”

So it is – so may it ever be.