

## Why Should We Care...?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
Sunday, April 25, 2021

*“We made you peoples and tribes  
that you may come to know one another.”  
--Quran 49:13*

### Readings

“Interracial” by the Black American poet Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880-1967):

Let's build bridges here and there  
Or sometimes, just a spiral stair  
That we may come somewhat abreast  
And sense what cannot be expressed,  
And by these measures can be found  
A meeting place—a common ground  
Nearer the reaches of the heart  
Where truth revealed, stands clear, apart;  
With understanding come to know  
What laughing lips will never show:  
How tears and torturing distress  
May masquerade as happiness:  
Then you will know when my heart's aching  
And I when yours is slowly breaking.  
Commune—The altars will reveal . . .  
We then shall be impelled to kneel  
And send a prayer upon its way  
For those who wear the thorns today.

Oh, let's build bridges everywhere  
And span the gulf of challenge there.

Three brief passages translated by Coleman Barks from the Sufi poet Rumi  
born in what is now Afghanistan in 1207:

*Lo, I am with you always* means when you look for God,  
God is in the look of your eyes,  
in the thought of looking, nearer to you than your self,  
or things that have happened to you  
There's no need to go outside.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.

The rule that covers everything is:  
*How you are with others, expect that back.*

## Sermon

I spent most of January 1971 in Kabul, Afghanistan. I was there with my father, a surgeon, who was volunteering there through CARE/Medico to help train surgical residents. CARE/Medico (since dissolved) at the time had programs in a variety of countries around the world; and Dad had in earlier years spent a month in Algeria and a month on two separate occasions in Honduras with each of my brothers, Bob and Jim.

January in Kabul. A cold time of year. But starkly beautiful. The Kabul River winding its way through the hills of the city, and to the north the white snow-covered wall of the Hindu Kush mountain range. The sky a bright blue during the day, and dark black sprinkled with stars at night.

Well... when you've been to a place, whether a hundred miles away or halfway around the world, the news of that place ever after takes on more intimate meaning.

In 1971 the government of Afghanistan seemed fairly stable, and the country was, at least for the middle and upper classes, modernizing. And it felt quite safe for this 19-year-old American college student to wander the streets and markets of this ancient crossroads of Central Asia.

Needless to say, so much has changed. The decades since a coup in 1973 have been decades of unrest, civil war, foreign interventions, hundreds of thousands of lives lost, millions displaced internally or as refugees to other countries.

I have followed it all closely, often with distress, sometimes with guarded hope – and always with particular personal memories never far from mind and heart:

The man at the fruit stand around the corner from the AID staff house where we were staying who shouted a smiling “hello” each time I passed on a morning run and shouted back my own greeting. (Wondering what must he be thinking of this strange westerner running by in grey sweat pants and a hooded sweatshirt against the cold?)

The deaf old man who fired the noon gun (a little canon actually) at the top of a nearby hill each day. I went up the hill one day to watch (and hear) the ritual up close. No question why he was deaf. (Or maybe it was because he was deaf that he was given this assignment.)

The boy by the noon gun that same day to whom I gave my gloves and who then led me down the hill by another winding route to and through his neighborhood; I've always regretted refusing his invitation to chai, tea.

Another boy expertly flying a kite, giving me a chance at it until I almost crashed it. But smiles as he wisely and quickly resumed control.

The crowded markets. The bargaining.

The persecuted Hazaras, the men often pulling heavily laden carts as if they were pack animals – or carrying loads on their back as tall as they.

The rifle toting, bearded men in the villages, grim-faced, or so it seemed to me, as we drove past on one of our excursions outside the city.

The women doing their shopping in the markets, hidden in plain sight behind full chador; the contrast with the stylish middle-class women working in the hospital.

The patients Dad cared for, operated on at Avicenna Hospital – hernia, gall bladder, cancer... women, men, children. The patients lined up in the courtyard of the hospital, often carrying their own x-rays to their appointments.

The young surgical and medical residents, so intent on learning their trade: Dr. Abedi, Dr. Shah Wali, Dr. Yousufi, Dr. Mahmood, and many others.

Re-reading my journal from those weeks fifty years ago brings faces and places back into focus, and I wonder what has become after all these years of those I met or just passed on the street:

Those earnest young doctors – did they manage to have careers serving their people... did some of them fight in the wars... did some of them flee the country?

The boys I encountered... are they still alive, did they fight in the wars, are they fighting still, did they survive the terror, did they become Taliban... or are they living simple family lives as best they can, perhaps parents and grandparents by now?

The women I never really could see through their veils and head to toe coverings – what have their lives been?

All this is by way of saying that though I say the words affirmed in all the religions having to do with caring for all people, for all beings, like most of us my heart is specially drawn to those I know or have known or have some personal connection to... like the people of Afghanistan.

So, as you often hear me say, each of us can only do what we can do – we can't heal all wounds or bring justice to all people. What then? We can move in the particular directions our heart leads to do what we can do. One of the places my heart leads is to the people of Afghanistan.

All this said, we don't have to have or have had personal experience with the suffering of a fellow human being in order to be moved to help and heal. For one of the beautiful things about being a human being is the power of imagination we each have... So, for example, you don't need to have ever been to Afghanistan in order to care, for example, about the education of the girls of Afghanistan.

So... we were *all*, most of us having never been to Afghanistan, moved by the presentation a few weeks ago by Shabana, the founder and director of SOLA, the School of Leadership of Afghanistan in Kabul; all moved by her stories of girls seeking to be the first in their families to have a high school or college education, all moved by the story of the father who travelled a great distance to the school to plead for his daughter to be accepted to SOLA so that she could return to the village and teach others.

Yes, I felt particularly moved since it is so easy for me to imagine the streets of Kabul and the villages of the countryside, the sights, the sounds, the smells. But with the gift of imagination leading to empathy leading to giving... we all can be moved.

In a similar spirit, this week I've also been moved, as I expect you all have, to reflect yet more deeply on the experience of Black Americans. And I sure hope that we don't need to have black skin in order to care about justice for our Black sisters and brothers.

As a white man living with the privilege that comes of being white in our country, I should never pretend I can know what it is like to be a Black person who trembles with fear when pulled over by the police. But I ought to be able to at least imagine myself partway into that reality, enough into that reality to be moved to speak up and speak out and to be among those seeking real transformation in policing, in health care, in housing, in so much more, to be among those (in the words of the Black American poet Georgia Douglas Johnson, from whom we heard earlier) sending...

...a prayer upon its way  
For those who wear the thorns today.

And to be among those who strive to...

... build bridges everywhere  
And span the gulf of challenge there.

Now, I had originally titled this sermon “Why Should We Care About Afghanistan?” – inspired by Shabana’s presentation, amplified by worries about the effects of the planned withdrawal of American troops.

But this week I changed the title to, simply, “Why Should We care?”

Why should we Americans care about Afghans... or, for that matter, about those who live in Myanmar or Palestine or Russia or China. Why should we, if we are white Americans, care about Black Americans, Latinx Americans, Asian Americans? Why should we, if we are cisgender, care about those who are transgender? Why should we, if we are neurotypical, care about those who are neurodiverse?

And so on. You get my drift.

Well, when I looked up the word “care” it turns out that the root etymology has primarily to do with feeling... and *then* it is about action that might spring from feeling. For in Old English and Germanic the root meanings of “care” have to do with griefs, sorrows, laments, suffering.

All that said, my shorthand is that we care because it is profoundly human to care, which means to feel our own feelings *and* to have empathy for the feelings of others – and conversely it is inhuman not to care, not to feel others’ griefs, sorrows, laments, suffering almost as our own.

And when we allow our natural caring for someone we love or for someone we don’t even know... we have met the so-called other in Rumi’s field beyond wrongdoing and rightdoing, that place where we see the God in each other’s eyes.

So we do – or say or give – what we can, where we are, with what we have and who we are. This is all we can do. And it is everything. It is love.

How else would we care to live?

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.