

Can't We All Get Along?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading The Golden Rule across the World's Religions

Bahá'í Faith (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings)

Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.

Buddhism (Udana-Varga 5.18)

Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.

Christianity (Matthew 7:12)

In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

Confucianism (Analects 15.23)

One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct....loving-kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.

Hinduism (Mahabharata 5:1517)

This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.

Islam (The Prophet Muhammad, Hadith)

Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.

Jainism (Mahavira, Sutrakritanga 1.11.33)

One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated.

Judaism (Hillel, Talmud, Shabbath 31a)

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.

Sikhism (Guru Granth Sahib, p.1299)

I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me.
Indeed, I am a friend to all.

Taoism (Lao Tzu, T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien, 213-218)

Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss as your own loss.

Zoroastrianism (Shayast-na-Shayast 13.29)

Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself.

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Reading

“Consensus Decision-Making,” from the Haverford College website

“Consensus” is a voteless decision-making process that emphasizes inclusiveness, openness to new insights, and broad ownership in decisions. “Consensus” implies that people are carefully listened to, since each person is necessary and responsible for the growth and learning of all. That requires everybody to be open to the possibility of modifying his or her position. There is an active effort to incorporate minority views into the final decision. For consensus to work, people need to give up the tendency to form factions or seek “influence.” Instead, the community needs to be willing to struggle together for creative agreement.

Sermon

Perhaps you, like me, have found yourself often sad these days, a sort of underlying feeling tone no matter what else is going on in your life for good or ill.

The sentence from the writing of the 20th century psychologist Erich Fromm that we’ve placed at the top of today’s order of worship names, it seems to me, at least one reason for this sadness:

One cannot be deeply responsive to the world
without being saddened very often.

How, after all, can we not be sad as we see the scenes of destruction and human suffering in Ukraine? The only way not to be sad – and maybe angry too, maybe lots of other emotions – is to ignore and deny, to shut ourselves off from anything beyond our immediate purview. In other words, to *not* be “deeply responsive” – to use another word, to not be deeply sympathetic.

And as I say those words (“responsive” – “sympathetic”) they sound inadequate, pale, even hollow in the face of the cruelty and suffering we are witnessing every day.

Of course we send as much as we can, if we can (even though it never feels like enough) to support humanitarian relief efforts. We pray, if prayer is part our spiritual life. But neither a check or a prayer means that we can now go on with our safe and privileged lives as if we’ve dealt with the situation and can now avoid sadness.

Further, I’m also aware, as you are, that the suffering in Ukraine is far from the only suffering on the planet in the midst of other wars: Yemen, Ethiopia, post-war Afghanistan... not to mention suffering in the midst of various oppressions... and not to mention just the “ordinary” suffering that comes from being a human being.

Plenty of reasons to be “saddened very often” as Erich Fromm put it.

Why is it that we respond, viscerally respond, to suffering half a planet away? Maybe it has to do with the truth that four hundred years ago poet John Donne expressed in these lines:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself.
Each is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thine own
Or of thine friend's were.
Each man's death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.

Simple really.

Contrary to the base extreme individualism of our culture, contrary to the reductionist idea that we humans are at root selfish, that even the good we do has a selfish motivation, if only to make ourselves feel better... yet contrary to all such ideas, we in fact are, each of us, "...a piece of the continent / A part of the main."

This is more than an abstraction, not just a pleasant idea that might be a salve for existential loneliness. It is a truth, it is *the* truth of who we are as human beings. I preach this all the time, as you know – just last week I preached it. As you know and as you've heard me say on innumerable Sundays, it is a truth variously expressed in the spiritual traditions of humanity: Paul asserting that we are each part of one "body of Christ"; Buddhists giving us the metaphor of the "Jewel Net of Indra," each jewel a node of one beautifully interconnected reality; indigenous traditions of our own land naming humans as siblings not only of one another but of every creature... and so on.

The various iterations of the Golden Rule that we heard earlier? All are grounded in the same reality of how we are inextricably related to one another, one intimate interwoven fabric of life.

Further, now it turns out that these metaphors and assertions are increasingly being born out by contemporary science.

So... all this said: Of *course* we feel sadness in response to suffering anywhere, to the suffering of any person, indeed any creature.

Yet... importantly... it is also true that because of our deep interconnectedness with one another, we just as naturally feel upwelling joy in response to the joy of others... response to, for example, the smile of a child, any child anywhere: a neighbor here... or a neighbor in Ukraine... or Poland... or Russia.

With all this in mind, then, I'm reminded of another poem, this by the Irish poet Michael Coady:

Though there are torturers in the world
There are also musicians.
Though, at this moment,
Men are screaming in prisons,
There are jazzmen raising storms
Of sensuous celebration,
And orchestras releasing
Glories of the Spirit.

Though the image of God
Is everywhere defiled,
A man in West Clare
Is playing the concertina,
The Sistine Choir is levitating
Under the dome of St. Peter's,
And a drunk man on the road
Is singing, for no reason.

Just the other day, Ukrainian cellist Denys Karachevtsev played, so beautifully, Bach's Cello Suite No. 5, amidst the ruins of Kharkiv, his home-town.

How can one not feel sad *and* joyful at the same time as we listen to him play in front of bombed out apartment buildings?

Do we not need to amend Erich Fromm's statement?

One cannot be deeply responsive to the world
without being saddened very often...
or without often feeling joy.

Well... all this is a long introduction to my stated topic: "Can't we all get along?"

More than an introduction actually. I would affirm that everything I've said thus far reminding us of the underlying reality of who we are (utterly interrelated, connected, part of the unfolding evolution of the universe, as I put it last week)... is what makes getting along even feasible to begin with!

There are, quite needless to say, countervailing forces at work. So – the reality of who we are is simple in one way of looking at things: we are indeed part and parcel of one fabric of life. But it is a complex fabric. And when it comes to humans, though we are often kind and generous to one another (getting along) – more often than not I would affirm – another part of who we are is indeed also prone to the illusion of separateness which too often leads to delusions of greed, selfishness, cruelty.

I don't claim to know why this is to. But it is.

Which is why "getting along" doesn't always just happen, isn't always easy, and sometimes, as now in Europe or in Congress, seeming to be close to impossible.

Now: As you may have read in the newsletter, today's topic evolved from my conversations with Old Ship member Michael Jordan, who happens also to be a fellow Haverford College graduate some years after my commencement forty-nine years ago. But though we were at Haverford at very different times, one common thread was Haverford's commitment, as a Quaker-founded college, to the Quaker process of consensus when it comes to decision-making – getting along in the midst of decision-making.

In the second reading we heard a description from the Haverford College website of the consensus process: “a voteless decision-making process that emphasizes inclusiveness, openness to new insights, and broad ownership in decisions.” It is, this statement went on to affirm, a process that requires all voices to be listened to with care and that requires each person to be willing to change. As the statement concluded, “the community needs to be willing to struggle together for creative agreement.”

Which in fact the Haverford student body does every year to ratify once again the student Honor Code, sometimes with lively even contentious plenary meetings, as I recall, as I expect Michael recalls, and as our daughter Sandra (also a Haverford grad) also recalls: These big conversations about something that matters a great deal – namely, how to be with one another in respectful community (getting along with one another) which is what the Honor Code is all about. Hence... big and sometimes long conversations over the course of more than one plenary meeting, yet always conversation with the shared intention to come to consensus agreement.

Keeping in mind all along the way that consensus is based on the idea that in conversation “creative agreement” can be discovered, agreement that often might transcend whatever initial positions there might have been on whatever issues are being discussed.

It is what we do here at Old Ship in some measure, even though we don't name it consensus decision-making. For yes, we do eventually vote on one matter or another, whether on our Board of Trustees or at meetings of the congregation. But we try to be in conversation long enough to make room for a variety of views that just might lead to something at least closer to consensus that would have been the case if we moved too quickly to a vote.

Well, all this about the possibility of reaching consensus on whatever it might be is I believe indeed rooted in the assumption I lifted up to begin with this morning, that we are indeed part of one fabric of life – so that if we talk long enough with good enough will on all sides, we will slowly come in synch with one another... and get along.

I know: In light of everything from the war in Ukraine to the contentious hearings of the Senate Judiciary Committee to consider the eminently qualified Ketanji Brown Jackson's nomination to the Supreme Court... in light of these realities and much else, this all might sound naïve, even foolish.

But here's something I think is worth noticing. I would understand if you might disagree on this point, but I do believe that in spite of the loud and visible divisions in our society these days, mostly, if only behind the scenes, we human beings do get along. Think of everything that gets done just in the course of daily living, and mostly without much serious contention. Much of it through consensus, even when that word isn't used... in our households, workplaces, daily casual and often helpful interactions.

In any case, though consensus is not always reachable, it is certainly always worth seeking and perhaps more often possible than it might look at first sight given *who we truly are*.

In her book *The Art of Gathering*, Priya Parker wrote that she begins any gathering inviting everyone to imagine that when they enter in conversation they are creating a spider web together, connecting each to all.

Well, I'd begin just a little differently, by reminding a group – you for example – that you/we are already part of a web. And that now we just have to make it stronger by listening, by speaking with care, and by sticking with the conversation and with each other.

If more of us on this planet were to remember that we are already a web, leading more of us to speak and listen accordingly in the midst of our lives of joy and sorrow woven fine, a world filled with both suffering and joy, we just might get along a little bit better.

Maybe we could find something approaching consensus about something other than a war against a common enemy – maybe *for* the flourishing of all life on our sacred Earth home...

Wouldn't that be good!

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.