

Chalice Lighting

We have not come here to take prisoners,
 But to surrender ever more deeply
 To freedom and joy.
 We have not come into this exquisite world
 To hold ourselves hostage from love.
 Run my dear,
 From anything
 That may not strengthen
 Your precious budding wings.

SERMON- Answering the Call of Love

We are singing “Standing on the side of love” – but not all of us can!
 We are singing Rise up, rise up! - And not all of us can . . .
 We all have an awareness of different abilities, different limits, different gifts, different challenges; different dreams for a new world, here, right here among us.
 And we listen when anyone of us explains their experiences of the world.
 At General Assembly, during discussions about accessibility, the wording of our hymn “Standing on the side of Love” was brought up. And the author, the Rev. Jason Shelton, went deeply into reflection and meditation. And he changed the words to his hymn. And now we sing “We are answering the call of love.”
 Our Universalist forebears told us that the Divine love was all-embracing. And now, from our paradigm, from our place in history, we are answering the call of love.
 During the discussion at GA, and in most UU congregations afterwards, some people said, “well, people who can’t stand or get up - it’s such a small group! Do we really need to consider the needs of every minority?”
 Well, this is like saying, will take care of the hungry, but if the hungry are diabetics, or vegetarian - naw, that’s such a small group. We can’t be bothered. Let them starve ...
 If the people of the First Nation in Alaska, along with many Native American, are deeply offended by the white arrogance in hymns like “We build a land...” – can we just ignore it?
 I myself had a hard time understanding why it was hurtful for folks who are second or third generation Americans, but who don’t look Caucasian, and are asked again and again, “Where are you from?” The question often persistently repeated... Then I got it – when I realized that my daughters were clearly identifying as Americans, a few years ago ...
 But you know, what’s really important here is not the words, but the message of Unitarian Universalism ...to take sides and to speak up!
 It could happen anytime, any place – it could be on a playground, when you observe a bully picking on a new kid. It could be in the cafeteria at work, where your co-workers enjoy a joke that’s filled with racial slurs. Or at a supermarket check-out line, when a young mother struggles with her toddler - and people in line behind her become impatient and nasty. It could also be on Capitol Hill in Washington, where you gather

proudly with other UU's, lobbying for the rights of immigrants, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender folks, or other minorities.

We all know such moments, don't we? They are moments when we realize that we can make a difference by speaking up, by speaking up out of the deep love we have for humanity.

Too often we make a choice between the relative comfort of being on the sidelines and watching, and actively intervening; trying to make our world just a little bit more friendly, more compassionate – by answering the call of love.

The medieval German scholar and mystic Thomas a Kempis encourages us to choose love, because *"its mighty power surges upward and surmounts every obstacle."*

Whenever we do that, we defend, support, and advocate for each other. We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Are you skeptical? Maybe you think I'm too idealistic?

After all, we fallible humans are not all that powerful! If *answering the call of love* is so significant, then why isn't the world a better place already? After all, most people we know are on the side of love. Or at least as much love as they can manage, given that most of us cannot live as saints? In a way this is a spiritual paradox. Because we live in a world which knows the evils of greed and violence and of human indifference we understand on an emotional level just how sacred it is when our acts of love and compassion actually triumph. And because we live in a world which knows such triumphs we will not give up hope on our imperfect humanity completely!

When the Unitarian Universalist Association started the campaign originally named *Standing on the side of love*, we were invited to see love as an active force in our lives. Often we think of love as *passive* --- and our language reflects that. For example, we are "falling" in love; we are "helplessly" in love. We also often assume – and take for granted - that love is automatically present in our families, in our communities; and we are shocked when we find out otherwise. Ah well... But, love is more than just a power that claims us. It is also a power that we claim by choosing our response to the realities of our world.

Let me tell you about an old friend: the Pastor Dennis Washington of the United Methodist Church of *Huntington Station* on Long Island: Their church was getting too small, and a move was the only sensible solution. They had an option to move to an upscale neighborhood with an almost new building, or to move downtown Huntington Station, to a closed down strip mall; in a poor urban neighborhood near the area's soup kitchen.

Pastor Dennis managed in many sessions and discussion groups, to persuade his flock to move downtown, to be with the people they were trying to reach out to. He was aware that he would lose some members of his congregation (he actually lost about 25%), but he and the congregation took the risk, knowing that the presence of his church in that part of town could potentially make a big difference. Yet, it turned out to be a very good decision. The congregation was now able to provide services such as after school tutoring; counseling for drug and alcohol abuse, and a job club, right where they were needed. Membership in the church increased dramatically, and today the congregation is vibrant with a passion for social justice work.

This church took the risk to *answer the call of love* despite the potential for violence and vandalism that was very real in their new neighborhood.

Love is a choice, and love calls us to act. Whether we are demonstrating in support of a minority ...or sitting outside a shopping center or a sport stadium collecting signatures for a petition. Whether we are side by side during a vigil to help end discrimination, or arguing with the Board of Education for the sake of our children. The love that inspires the courage and commitment of such choices is not a sweet or sentimental kind of love. Rather it is an active love which recognizes the greater good and the bonds of kinship of which we are a part.

As the American mystic Thomas Merton said, *“The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another.”*

Once we accept love as a choice, we must also come to terms with where that choice leads us. This was the profound and radical insight of our Universalist forbears – that if love comes from God, then there can be no exceptions. Consequently, they believed that there was universal salvation for all human beings. Love cannot be just for one, or some of us. If it is for any of us, it must be for all. Love can not be just for those with loud voices, but also for the voiceless. Love cannot be just for those with power, but also for those who are marginalized. Love cannot be just for those who still have hope, but also for those who despair that help and hope will ever come.

By the way, the *“Standing on the Side of Love”* campaign was born out of the tragic shootings in our sister congregation, the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church (TVUUC) in Knoxville, TN, on July 27, 2008.

Jim David Adkisson walked into the church’s sanctuary during the performance of a children’s musical and began firing a shotgun, killing two and injuring six. Among the fatalities were members of TVUUC and of the Westside Unitarian Universalist Church, also in Knoxville.

In a letter that was later found by the police, Adkisson said that he targeted the church because of its liberal values—including its openness to gays and lesbians. He wrote of his beliefs that *“The UU church is the Fountainhead, the veritable wellspring of anti-American organizations like Moveon.org, Code Pink, and other un-American groups.”* However, after the shooting, both Knoxville congregations pledged to remain open and welcoming, and in fact chose to embrace their inclusive and loving spirit even more boldly in the days that followed. They were supported by their wider community and many religious neighbors. The two congregations drew on their Unitarian Universalist principles which consistently urge us to choose love over hate and fear.

We here at the UU Congregation of York often stand on the side of love. We get actively involved in immigration issues, we host PFLAG meetings, We educate the community through our green sanctuary activities, and we sign petitions.

We had – and still have - many programs and efforts to people who need our help, who need us to *answer the call of love*: to fight against white supremacy and against racism; to make food to feed the hungry; to help city folks grow vegetables in the family plots; English as a second language; Habitat for Humanity. UUCY helped found the York Interfaith alliance in 1999 along with temple Beth Israel, Ohev Shalom Congregation, York County Council of Churches, the Islamic Society of York and the Noor Mosque, and had a Partnership with the Crispus Attucks Center. UUCY hosted the Interfaith Dialogue Symposium for many years.

[The Noor Mosque is now part of the Hadee Mosque in Harrisburg which donated the use of its building for our Central PA UU Celebration Sunday in 2014. This is a precious historic relationship I grieve UUCY has lost.]

And there is probably more that you all could lift up as examples. (Sophia spoke about Share the Plate)

But we really don't need this list to be "intent on vanities" in the words of Thomas a Kempis, or to pat ourselves on the back. That isn't why we choose to *answer the call of love*.

However, I want to lift up those few examples to point out that the love we choose is always contextual. We choose how to *act on the side of love* in our own lives and in our own community ... the choices made by our neighbors a few towns over, or our fellow religionists several states to the south may very well be different.

And different times and moments in history, we are called to join our brothers and sisters in the world on different issues and for different needs. I invite you to take a moment to remember and reflect on a particular time in your own life, in the lives of your family and friends, and in the state of our community and our world. And then look at the present, the here and now: Are there individuals or groups of people who need us to stand with them on the side of love? Are there moral issues which we really should address?

We don't have to be alone in this fight. We can hook up with liberal folks from other denominations. Now, more than ever before, do we have to intentional about Interfaith Work to strengthen our own voice; to create a voice that can speak with a shared passion to the moral issues of our times, whether health care or immigration reform, hunger or homelessness? *Answering the call of Love* is a nationwide interfaith public advocacy campaign, sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association and open to all. It seeks to harness love's power to stop oppression.

I don't have all the answers, nor are the choices only mine to make. But I lift up these questions to spark a conversation – among us as individual people who care about this world, and as a community of faith. The President of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), the Rev. Peter Morales, expresses it with these words: "There's no difference between spiritual values and social action," he observes. "They're two sides of the same coin. When we experience our connection with that which transcends us, and with other people, we become compassionate. We suffer with, not separated from the other. That's a deeply spiritual experience... Answering the Call of Love... is simply a way in which we can act upon our deepest religious passions." Love is a choice. It is a deep life-changing passion, not just for our hearts, but also for our souls.

In her *map of the country*, the poet Adrienne Rich ponders whether or not she has described a map or a mural. Her description of our troubled and difficult world reminded me of the maps of olden times, where there would be occasional warnings of danger marked with the words "here there be dragons." I always wondered why the map makers never quite seemed to create a similar tip for places of help and safety?

Where were the places that could be marked, "here there is love?"

As I reflect on the relatives, friends and the experiences that have shaped my own faith journey, I know that I have found the love that has helped me in making those important choices in all the UU-congregations that I have been in, ... as a member or a minister.

It is you who always remind me of the importance of love, you who remind me of why we are called to find love, and choose it, and act it out in the world, over and over again. I am glad to serve this Congregation. Glad to be in this house of the spirit, in this caring community, and to present this service to you.

It is good to be here, with you, on the side of love—the only place I would ever choose to be. Will you join me?

Closing Words

We don't accomplish anything in this world alone ... and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something.

- *Sandra Day O'Connor*

Standing on the Side of Love: A Story for All Ages

I want to tell you a story about being new—and how sometimes it's fun and sometimes it isn't.

Once there was a second grader named Paul. In September, he moved to a new town, had a new teacher and a new class and a brand-new desk. There was a boy sitting

across from him with bright red hair, and his name was Ryan. He told Paul a knock-knock joke, and he was really funny—so that first day was a good day.

The second day, three other boys came up to Ryan and he thought, “Oh, great. They want to make friends with me too!” But that wasn’t what happened. They came up and started poking Paul, and even calling him names.

He looked at his friend Ryan. Ryan really didn’t want to hear what was going on, so what do you think he did? What would you do if you didn’t want to hear something that was going on?

Wait for kids to answer.

Well, what he did was this. *Stick your fingers in your ears.*

That second day wasn’t such a good day. But the next day was even worse, because the three boys came up to Paul at lunchtime, and they stole his lunch. He didn’t have anything to eat!

The next day, Paul didn’t come to school at all. The three boys were cheering that day because Paul wasn’t there. Then, even though he didn’t want to, Ryan heard them planning mean things they were going to do when Paul came back to school. But this time he didn’t stick his fingers in his ears. What do you think he did?

Wait for answers again.

That’s right, he told the teacher. And when Paul came back to school and there was recess, the three boys came around. But then, the teacher came around too.

And Ryan said, “C’mon, come play with me!” And that day was the best day of all, because that day, Paul and Ryan became best friends.

And so my hope for all of you is that, when you hear something you’d rather not hear, that you don’t stick your fingers in your ears. I hope that when you see or hear someone that needs your help, that this year, you find a way to stand up for someone who needs you.