

The Balance of Terror
Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister
UU Church of Minnetonka
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First Reading

Charge to the Graduates

Meadville/Lombard Theological School Graduation 2005

The Rev. David E. Bumbaugh
Professor of Ministry

*The world we knew is passing; all things grow strange;
all but the stout heart's courage;
all but the undiminished lustre of an ancient dream--
which we shall dream again as others have dreamed before us,
pilgrims forever of a world forever new.*

*And what we loved and lost
we lose to find how great a thing is loving and
the power of it to make a dream come true.*

*For us there is no haven of refuge;
for us there is the wilderness, wild and trackless,
where we shall build a road and sing a song.*

*But after us there is the Promised Land,
strong from our sorrows and shining from our joys,
our gift to those who follow us along the road we build singing our song.*

These words by A. Powell Davies have echoed down the corridors of my mind for nearly half a century. I confess to you that they seem more appropriate and more compelling with every passing day. I commend them to you today because, my colleagues and friends, you go out from this place to begin ministries in a world grown strange, a world where all that once seemed so permanent, so reliable, is now passing away.

You take up your ministries in a nation which has committed its vast resources to a war on a noun, a war on terrorism--a concept so vaguely defined that it is a war no one can win or even envision ending--an endless struggle with a shapeless, faceless, formless fear. You take up your ministries in a society that has decided that in pursuing that war, it can only protect freedom by destroying it...

...You take up your ministries in a time when the church is sorely tempted to forsake its ancient obligation to the larger world, to the despised, to the excluded, to the marginalized; at a time when the church seeks to ensure its own survival by devoting itself assiduously to scratching the itches of its members.

In such a time, I charge you to tend to your own integrity. In such a time, there is no other standard by which to judge between options or to make the hard choices life will demand you make.

As you go out from this place, I charge you to build a road in the wilderness of this time, even when the ultimate destination of that road is not clear. I charge you to heap stones into cairnes and to establish mile markers that others who travel the path may know you have been here, may discern whence you have come and whither you are tending.

As you go out from this place, I charge you to keep ever in mind those who will come after you along the road you build, singing your song. In the end it is they to whom you are responsible, yeah even unto the seventh generation.

I charge you to remember the dream that lured you into ministry; to trust that dream no matter what befalls. For somewhere along that road, somewhere in the singing of that song, somewhere in the dreaming of that dream, lies the key to the promised land.

Second Reading

From *Antidotes for Fear*

A 1963 sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr.

The advent of the atomic age, which should have ushered in an era of plenty and of prosperity, has lifted the fear of death to morbid proportions...our fanatical quest to maintain “a balance of terror” only increases our fear and leaves nations on tiptoes lest some diplomatic *faux pas* ignite a frightful holocaust...

[Martin Luther King, Jr., offers four antidotes for fear, the third one of which is *love*. Of the third antidote, Martin Luther King, Jr., has this to say:]

...Hate is rooted in fear, and the only cure for fear-hate is love. Our deteriorating international situation is shot through with the lethal darts of fear. Russia fears America, and America fears Russia. Likewise China and India, and the Israelis and Arabs. These fears include another nation’s aggression, scientific and technological supremacy, and economic power, and our own loss of status and power...We say that war is a consequence of hate, but close scrutiny reveals the sequence: first fear, then hate, then war, and finally deeper hatred. Were a nightmarish nuclear war to engulf our world, the cause would be not so much that one nation hated another, but that both nations feared each other.

What method has the sophisticated ingenuity of modern man employed to deal with the fear of war? We have armed ourselves to the nth degree. The West and the East have engaged in a fever-pitched arms race. Expenditures for defense have risen to mountainous proportions, and weapons of destruction have been assigned priority over all other human endeavors. The nations have believed that greater armaments will cast out fear. But alas! they have produced greater fear. In these turbulent, panic-stricken days we are once more reminded of the judicious words of old, “Perfect love casteth out fear.” Not arms, but love, understanding, and organized goodwill can cast out fear...

...Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.

The Balance of Terror
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**Balance: (1) a state of equilibrium; (2) remainder: something left
 after the other parts have been taken away.**

It is with a sense of awe and reverence that I stand before you today, on this long weekend honoring the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. Today, even as we move down the tangled and overgrown paths of our own life journeys, we also walk in the footsteps and ride on the shoulders of giants.

I was born in 1966, two years before the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Though I was never old enough to be aware who he was while he lived, I have always felt a deep spiritual honor that my life overlapped his by two years. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, my parents were both deeply involved in the civil rights movement in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and I felt his influence on our family. My mother was the administrator of a nearby inner city HeadStart program, and for many years, between settled ministries, my father worked as the program director for a large housing project and several social service agencies.

I grew up committed to the ideals of peace, justice and love. So when I turned 18 in 1984, during the presidency of Ronald Reagan, I felt compelled to register for the draft under protest. Congress had recently passed a law that required young men to register if they wanted Federal Financial Aid for college. Among other issues, I saw the law as a form of blackmail against poor people (that is, those who were the children of rich families could afford to have a conscience by not registering and still paying for college, while the children of poor families could not). Our family did not have much money. And since it was not, and still is not, possible to register as a Conscientious Objector (the only two choices are to register or not to register), I completed my registration form and then I wrote in bold capital letters the words “Conscientious Objector” across the entire form and photocopied it before handing it over to the postmaster at my local post office.

It seems as though not much changes in this country from war to war. In 2002 our United States government – both Republicans and Democrats – declared a war on terror. I recall a newspaper essay from that time by Wendell Barry in which he refers to the National Security Strategy that defines terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents.” In response, Barry writes, “This is truly a distinct kind of violence, but to imply by the word ‘terrorism’ that this sort of terror is the work exclusively of ‘terrorists’ is misleading. The ‘legitimate’ warfare of technologically advanced nations likewise is premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents. The distinction between the intention to perpetrate violence against innocents, as in ‘terrorism,’ and the willingness to do so, as in ‘war,’ is not a source of comfort.”

For all its violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, and for all its absurdity and imperialistic aims, our United States war on terror has not much affected the normal lives of the majority white middle and upper class American citizens, including the majority of Unitarian Universalists. Apart from showing our driver’s license at the airport and going through long security lines, we UUs generally live our daily lives without being impacted by the war on terror. Until now.

This summer at General Assembly we face a troubling moral dilemma. For those who are not familiar with it, General Assembly is the annual business meeting of the Unitarian

Universalist Association, and is held in a different city each year. Each congregation sends delegates in accordance to its size. In addition to the plenary sessions, many programs and workshops are also scheduled.

This year, General Assembly will be held at the convention center in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The problem is that the convention center is adjacent to the Port of Fort Lauderdale. Because of heightened security after 9/11, shipping ports around the United States are now fenced off with controlled access points. This means that anyone eighteen years of age or older entering those “secure” areas must show government issued identification – for most of us, that means showing our driver’s license.

Back in 2004, when the UUA entered into negotiations and signed contracts for this General Assembly, officials at the convention center indicated their belief that by 2008 the security perimeter would be relocated so that the convention center would not lie within it. This has not happened, nor will it, prior to this Assembly. This leaves us with a multitude of intertwined ethical, moral, and theological issues to consider. In addition, the financial repercussions for backing out of our contracts now would include a loss of at least \$800,000 to the Unitarian Universalist Association.

As you might imagine, this issue has inspired passionate debate among Unitarian Universalists across the country. I know that congregations are becoming more informed about this, and for the past two months the minister’s email chat list regularly sizzles with differing perspectives on this issue.

Some people, both ministers and lay members, see this issue at General Assembly 2008 as a non-issue. As I understand it, that perspective says we signed the contracts three years ago, that any verbal statements about the removal of the security zone were non-binding and we should have known it, and the financial loss would be too great. In effect, we made our bed and now we need to lie in it. In addition, some people don’t mind showing their ID at the entrance to the convention center because they see this as just part of the new world order. To be safe, the belief is that we just have to sacrifice some of our personal liberties.

I do not come from that perspective. I have not yet quite sorted out the extent of my position, but I do feel this is an extremely important issue that we must examine, as individuals and as a congregation.

In his charge to us seminary graduates in 2005, David Bumbaugh told us that, “a war on terrorism – a concept so vaguely defined that it is a war no one can win or even envision ending – [is] an endless struggle with a shapeless, faceless, formless fear.” He observed that we “take up [our] ministries in a society that has decided that in pursuing that war, it can only protect freedom by destroying it.”

Furthermore, David also charged us to tend to our own integrity, “to remember the dream that lured [us] into ministry; to trust that dream no matter what befalls. For somewhere along that road, somewhere in the singing of that song, somewhere in the dreaming of that dream, lies the key to the promised land.”

So in this moment, as I recall the charge I received upon leaving seminary, and as I recall the words and the actions of Martin Luther King, Jr., as he countered the stone fortress of fear and hatred with the solvent of love and compassion, I cannot help but trust the dream that lured me into ministry. Part of my dream included the desire to be present when people feel broken, to nurture relationships, to hold each of us and our organizations to our own highest ideals, and to respond to fear, anger and hate with creativity, humility, compassion, and love.

So even though I do not stand before you today with a plan of action, I trust my feelings of deep discomfort and sadness as we head towards General Assembly 2008. I feel a bit as though we've been backed into a corner, and I feel as though my trust in General Assembly organizers has been betrayed. I cannot help but feel a deep disappointment with my Unitarian Universalist Association who will go along with the voices of fear.

A primary issues for me revolves around the fact that the nomadic General Assembly is the locus of our organizational business and worship life. This summer at GA, in order for any person to conduct the business of our religion, or to attend the worship services of our faith, we must first show our government issued ID to an officer of the Broward County sheriff's department. Imagine for a moment being required to show your driver's license to a Hennepin County Sheriff at the door to this church every time you attended a Board meeting, every time you attended a Wednesday night soup supper or choir or religious education, and every time you attended Sunday morning worship. This is what the United States government requires of us if and when we attend General Assembly this summer.

Last week I spoke about the important role disillusionment plays in a person's commitment to a community, and how our response to disillusionment is an indicator of our commitment. So this week I also cannot help but feel compelled to call on people of faith, the people of *my* Unitarian Universalist faith, to return to the values and ideals that our faith tradition seeks to serve and embody.

It is one thing to be required to show ID to board an airplane. It is quite another thing to allow our government to dictate who may enter our business meetings and our houses of worship. So over the past several weeks and months I have heard many thoughtful and creative ideas in response to the situation in Fort Lauderdale. Some people want to boycott GA this year. Some people want to engage in nonviolent resistance or street theater. Some suggested attending GA but boycotting all the local restaurants. I am happy to report that just this week I received notice from the Unitarian Universalist Minister's Association – which always meets at the General Assembly site for three days prior to the opening of GA – that they successfully negotiated a change in our meeting location so that we will now meet at a different place in Fort Lauderdale outside the "secure zone."

Because this congregation sends delegates each year to General Assembly, we need to wrestle with our own response. When we send delegates to GA we need to send them with some form of intention. It may be that this congregation decides to boycott GA. It may be that we tell our delegates to attend GA and vote or take action according to their own conscience. It may be that we decide upon a congregational course of action, and then charge any delegate who attends GA with carrying out that action – whether it is playful street theater or nonviolent protest with the intention of getting arrested. Whatever we do, my main concern is that it be done with forethought and intentionality.

To become more informed, I invite each one of you pick up and read copies of letters by the door. On one side of the door is a memo from the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, stating the UUA position and response. On the other side are letters from two Unitarian Universalist ministers who ask that we not compromise our faith and integrity by allowing the government to mandate who may participate in religious practices.

As we become more informed on this topic, and as we consider our response, we also need to consider toward whom we direct our actions. It would be entirely appropriate to communicate our feeling and position to the UUA. But the UUA did not create the situation, they are merely going along with it, not changing their course of action.

Some people want to stage a form of protest at each entrance to the convention center. This may be an effective means to address the situation. Depending on what it is, I may even support that action. But again, neither the convention center, the chamber of commerce, or even the Broward County Sheriff's department were entities that created this situation.

If we develop a response, I believe the primary direction needs to be toward those who created or heightened current state of fear: the President of the United States, his aides, the congress of our senators and representatives – republican *and* democrat – who agreed and voted that a so-called “war on terror” was necessary. Yet, at the same time we, the people of the United States, have been complacent on the whole, and so have collaborated with the forces that continually erode our civil liberties. One of the most frustrating tasks about forming a response is finding an entity that is appropriately accountable.

In his original sermon called “Antidotes to Fear,” Martin Luther King spoke about the “balance of terror” between the United States and the Soviet Union. Kin wrote, “our fanatical quest to maintain ‘a balance of terror’ only increases our fear and leaves nations on tiptoes lest some diplomatic *faux pas* ignite a frightful holocaust.”

With the perspective of our current age, as we commit the vast resources of this nation to war on a noun, when our huge, powerful nation wages war on small bands of isolated, swiftly moving, and mortally committed bands of terrorist cells, I see a nuance in Dr. King's words. The “balance of terror” has a second meaning. The word “balance” also means “remainder.” It is what we have left after something else is taken away.

It seems to me that the terrorists – both the small bands of Muslim extremists as well as the small bands of government officials in control of the “legitimate” terror of our state-sponsored warfare – are already obtaining their objective. The balance of terror is not speaking out if we are not directly affected. The balance of terror is a collective shrugging of shoulders when constitutional democracy and personal liberties are taken away. The balance of terror is agreeing to show government issued identification to a police officer in order to attend worship or conduct the business of our association. The balance of terror is fear.

Part of my vision for ministry includes countering fear with creativity. Just as small independent groups of Islamic extremists or barricaded elected officials can force change, I believe it is also true that small groups of religious liberals, acting in organized goodwill, can effect change. I don't know by myself what all the answers are. I do know that violence begets violence, that fear often causes apathy, and that apathy often raises feelings of isolation. So it seems to me that a good place to begin is to get together. When we join together we are no longer alone. When we work together we tend to get creative. When we get creative we become empowered.

In 1963, Dr. King wrote that, “Our deteriorating international situation is shot through with the lethal darts of fear...In these turbulent, panic-stricken days we are once more reminded of the judicious words of old, “Perfect love casteth out fear.” Not arms, but love, understanding, and organized goodwill can cast out fear...” I firmly believe in the power of love. I believe, as did Dr. King, that “hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear; only love can do that. Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.”

[As an ending, I sang the last lines of the U2 song, *M.L.K.*, which had previously been sung by the choir before the sermon. The last line is:] “Sleep. Sleep tonight, and may your dreams be realized. If the thundercloud passes rain, oh let it rain, let it rain...rain on me.”