


September Theme:
UNITY
The Mystery of Unity
Sunday, September 18, 2011

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How do we decide where to put our time and attention? What brings us together, in the midst of all the competing demands for our energy and care? And what blocks us from caring?

That Good Samaritan story can help us—it may overwhelm us at first, but hang in there with me, and let’s see what answers we can find. First, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. tells us what we need to be the Good Samaritan¹: (1) a “*universal altruism*,” in the sense of our Univeralism—the ability to see that we’re all beloved, to see beyond differences in religion, race, class, ethnicity, to what makes us all brothers and sisters; (2) a “*dangerous altruism*”—a willingness to put our life or livelihood in danger in order to save a brother or sister. The Samaritan could have been mugged herself for stopping to help the injured man. Right now, there are 20 states, including Alabama and Arizona, that have laws in process or in place that would make it a crime to help others—taking them to the hospital, taking children to daycare centers while their parents work—a crime to do these things if those others don’t have the proper documentation. In Alabama, clergy across denominations are saying, Our faith calls us to offer hospitality to the stranger. We’re going to have to break this law. A *dangerous* altruism. And (3) an “*excessive altruism*.” In the original story, the Samaritan binds up the injured man herself, getting his blood all over herself; she puts the injured man on her own donkey and takes him to an inn where he can be cared for, and *then* leaves money for the innkeeper to purchase anything that might be needed, and *then* says she’ll come back to check on the man and to pay the innkeeper anything he might have had to spend out of his own pocket. King says, she gives her *soul* to this stranger’s well-being—her newfound brother—because she’s got a “commitment to an inner law, written on [her] heart.” An inner law, written on her heart. Ah. And how do we listen to that inner law?

A universal altruism, a dangerous altruism, an excessive altruism.

Overwhelming? Maybe the other characters in the story can help us even more. Because, in stories from the Bible, just like in our dreams, *every* character could be us.

Martin Luther King says, Look, maybe the people who pass by are prejudiced—maybe the injured man looks too different or disgusting for them to mess with. *Or* maybe they just feel constrained not to touch this guy

¹ This exegesis of the Good Samaritan story borrows heavily from Martin Luther King Jr., “On being a good neighbor,” in *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963).

when they are on their way to church to perform a sacred ritual; they won't be able to do their jobs if they do, and they've got a higher calling. *Or* maybe they're afraid of getting hurt, too. How can we know whether we'll be a hero under fire, like Dakota Meyer who just got the Medal of Honor this week for rushing *toward* the wounded in the midst of battle? *Or maybe*—and I love how King puts it—maybe they are “on their way to an organizational meeting of a Jericho Road Improvement Association.” The infamously dangerous Jericho Road is where the original parable takes place. Maybe they're focused on trying to fix the root causes of “economic injustice” and they don't want to get “bogged down with a single individual.”

We do need to work on the systemic level to get at the root causes of oppression of all kinds. We've got to pass laws and write letters when we can—I've heard that every letter received by our elected officials counts for 1,000 people. We have the power to represent some 200,000 voices! Even if we only write one letter a semester—it counts.

But what matters most is our work on the heart level—the level where we connect with our brother or sister who is suffering, where we are motivated by love, by a powerful sense of kinship. By the certainty that love is our most powerful tool for transformation.

So if we as individuals, or as a community, or as a nation, are feeling overwhelmed by all the calls on our heart, as well as on our time and energy, we need to ask, What's blocking the Love? And where is Love calling me right now?

See, for us, the “Unity” in “Unitarian” is not about what we believe—that runs a wide and glorious gamut. It's not about all the different causes that are dearest to our individual hearts and minds. It's about moving into our lives, into this world, with Love etched on our hearts. It's about our power to teach and to share this love. Our Unity lies in Love.

There's a fabulous video on YouTube from the Unitarian Universalist church in Rochester, called “Coming Home.” They say, “What unites us is desire to listen, open our hearts in every situation, serve the world with all the gifts we're given, so if you're in it put your hands high, so let's begin it, put your hands high!”

When we feel overwhelmed by the amount of information, the sheer volume of need; when we feel disconnected or impatient or judgmental about our fellow humans, we need to ask, What's blocking the love? Where is Love calling me?

Our denomination has discerned that Love calls us as a faith into a few specific areas of pressing concern. I want to lift up one of them today, because we have a real chance to do something. And when the path is clear about what to do, that can help diminish the overwhelm. This issue is the struggle for *human* rights for undocumented immigrants—an end to outright abuse. Love calls us to learn, to hear the stories, to see our kinship. Think back to the Good Samaritan story, as you listen:

A young girl threads her way over the stony path, ducking under the scratchy mesquites.² She wears everything she has—two jackets, one lined in pink; jeans and, over them, sweatpants with “Hollywood” across the rear; and bright green sneakers. Josseline Hernández, fourteen, walking with her ten-year-old brother, on their way to southern California to join their mother, whom they haven’t seen in years. Weeks on the road, from home in El Salvador through Guatemala, Mexico, and into the Sonoran Desert in Arizona. Now Josseline is sick—from bad water or too little water, from exposure or exhaustion. The *coyote* leading the group makes a quick decision; the group will go on without her. Don’t worry, he says; *la migra*, the Border Patrol, they come here all the time—they’ll find you. Josseline sends her crying little brother off with the group, saying, “You’ve got to get to Mom.” Then she’s left in the desert alone.

Three weeks later, a volunteer from No Mas Muertes, No More Deaths, finds her body, stretched out on a rock under a bush.

Josseline’s is one of over 2,000 bodies found in the southern Arizona desert since tallies began in earnest in 2001. And those are just the bodies that have been *found*. Margaret Regan, author of *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands*, calls the region a “killing field.”

Some folks wonder why people take such risks. One artist asks in response, “How far would you walk to feed your children?”

In detention centers, immigrants are sometimes beaten; sometimes fed little more than crackers and water. In cities and towns, fathers, mothers, children are picked up for lack of papers—even when they have been productive workers and students in this society for years. They are dropped across the border like something discarded.

What’s happening in this country that we would treat human beings this way? What blocks that deeper law that sees us all as brothers and sisters? What blocks the love?

Scapegoating, of course. In times of economic hardship, There’s almost always a scapegoat, a group of people pictured as “evil”; the rhetoric spouted about undocumented immigrants by vigilantes and even some lawmakers is incendiary and dehumanizing.

But many people feel ambivalent about this issue. Most of us like order and legality, so the fact that migrants have broken a law to cross the border is troublesome. And our country is changing really quickly, and change is hard. What is it that blocks our capacity to see each other as one family?

Maybe the most loving thing we can do right now—loving for ourselves and for our brothers and sisters, is to come to this topic with an intent to learn. Here are some Learning Opportunities this year—each of us

² Margaret Regan, *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona Borderlands* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

gets to choose among them, because they're all good, but let me lay them out like a feast before you:

1. We can come next week to hear UUA President Rev. Peter Morales talk about "crossing borders." He's not actually talking about immigration—he's talking about how we can access that fundamental power of love in ourselves. We'll also hear from a DREAM Act student, and we'll have a chance to let Gov. Jerry Brown know that we want the DREAM Act passed in California. Stay for the potluck lunch and build the strength of our love just by being together. That's all next Sunday, September 25.
2. Sign up for the one-day conference for UUs on Saturday, October 29, in Walnut Creek, called "Immigration Reform: A Moral Imperative." It's listed on the Announcements page.
3. Take part in the School for Compassion—classes that Rev. Geoff and I are leading, starting in November, to build our capacity for self-love, love for others, and love for the world.
4. Learn a little Spanish. Ervin Barrios stands ready to offer affordable group lessons—he's a fantastic teacher, I can testify!
5. Come with us to Justice General Assembly in Phoenix in June 2012, where we will be witnessing for the rights of our brother and sister human beings.

"Nancy, that list is too long! We're overwhelmed again." Yes. Of course. Deep breaths. We have to choose, and each of us will discern which single or several opportunities calls to us. What are we capable of, and where does Love call us? Let us be united not necessarily in the individual choices, but in our motivation to love. Like Rumi's, this is no caravan of despair, this is the caravan of love.

In that same desert where Josseline died, volunteers for No More Deaths leave water, food, and blankets to help save lives. As they walk, they cry out in Spanish, "We're friends. We're from the church. We have water and food for you!" Over and over. One group came upon some migrants, who fled when they saw the volunteers coming, thinking they were *la migra*. The volunteers, in their hurry, called after them simply, "Agua! Comida! Water, food!" Suddenly the immigrants stopped, turned around, and came running back. "Here," they said. "We don't have much, but we will share with you what we have."

Samaritans, acting from the power of love.