

Values in the Tragic Gap

April 2, 2017

A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine

By the Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia

I love this place. I love this congregation. And I love this faith.

But it is a faith of human beings and human beings are complicated. It's been a rocky week in the world of Unitarian Universalism. I don't want to shy away from talking about it – not if I want to live with myself in any sort of harmony as a minister or as a person – the only way to go is forward. And, I guess, on a Sunday when I was planning to talk about values, it's as good a time as any. And particularly with our theme for the month being Transformation – this is timely – because it critical that whenever we seek to transform we are in touch with our deepest values and highest principles because – they will guide our choices for good or ill and awareness is all that makes the difference.

Earlier in the week, a UU community minister in Tulsa was arrested for child pornography (since there are children in the house I will call it bad – the worst – reading material). A non-stop activist for the poor and marginalized, this was a man whose public persona spoke of his commitment to social justice, whose kindness was widely experienced, and whose behavior appeared above reproach. But his private self was broken in a way that has, absolutely rightly, cost him his job, his standing and fellowship as a UU minister, and his freedom. At the same time, while his colleagues, all of us, are wrestling with the news, heartbroken at how the news may affect all our people, throughout our congregations, while eloquent public statements came out from the UU Society for Community Ministry, the UU Minister's Association and one colleague after another weighed in on our facebook page, while all of us wondered what we would say on Sunday morning, I have been moved by the conscience, compassion, intelligence, and Unitarian Universalism demonstrated over and again.

The UU Christian Fellowship – our national organization for those who identify as Christian as well as UU – of whom the minister was an active member and leader, published a moving statement which read in part: "We are Unitarian Universalist Christians. We believe in universal salvation, but we do not believe in cheap grace. There is much work to do in healing the world. When one of our own has broken the sacred trust of ministry, we must speak out, even as we hold out hope of eventual reconciliation with God."

In part, the letter from the Board of the UU Society for Community Ministry (UUSCM) said,

We are horrified by the actions of our fellow UU community minister. Those of us working in community ministry routinely confront the depth of brokenness in our world, the great suffering of humanity, and the ills all too prevalent in our society. We will not turn away from this tragic reality. Instead, we in UUSCM will face it together and challenge its extensive and undeniable violence and oppression, just as we have been called to do throughout the history of UU community ministries. All of us involved in UUSCM leadership are grateful for the principles of our faith, reminding us of the "inherent worth and dignity" even of those whose humanity we are sometimes sorely tempted to deny. Because we are people of a covenantal

faith, we are concerned that no one feel alone with whatever... they are experiencing around these recent events.

They go on to offer resources. In this congregation, the staff consulted and we also offer pastoral support as well as a reminder that we have in place a safe congregation policy that is comprehensive for our children and young people. I plan to return to this a little later.

And, you may have heard that the President of the UUA resigned this week. I have to do a little background here. A hiring process in one of our regions resulted in an explosion of emails and other lamentable forms of communication. Now, hiring processes are confidential, so we may never know all the factors that went into the decision. And the UUA has, steadily over the last 8 years, done significant work in improving hiring practices throughout the UUA so that more women and people of color work throughout our national association. But people of color are still noticeably missing from our key regional leadership, although our last two presidents have been men of color, and in an association that is led by clergy at least 50% of whom are female, no woman has yet served as President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. I think that our intentions are good. And yet, we work within the confines of a faith community that has been predominantly white for some time – just like much of the American religious landscape. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said that 11 am on Sunday morning was the most segregated hour of the week. And, while things still change at a snail's pace, the Unitarian Universalist Association and our congregations have made a dedicated effort – particularly in the last 20 years, to address the underlying issues that keep Sunday morning so divided by race. I have watched this work and admired the love that is at its root.

So, here's a little context. There was a search for a director for the Southeast Region. Emails were leaked that revealed that the Region had chosen to hire a white, male minister, from the Southwest, who is going to commute by skype and airplane, over a qualified woman of color, ready to move to the Southeast. As word got out and things were made public – as hiring choices should seldom be, all and sundry rushed to comment in a virtual firestorm of emails. The response from the office of Peter Morales was unfortunate, to say the least. As concerns were raised, Rev. Morales began to respond with a calm and reasonable demeanor. But in the course of a very long email, sadly, he began to wear down. I think that it's largely summed up on the UUA website.

Did you ever start out a letter or even a conversation with your thoughts neatly organized and then ended up blurting out something unfortunate – or thoughtless? Well, maybe you haven't, but I have.

Then, Rev. Morales stumbled in his communications. He began by complaining that the constant, ongoing controversy about race and hiring was draining.

As a minister, I can tell you that when you begin by announcing that you are already drained by a situation, at least two things are going to happen: one is that you're not going to bring your best self to it – and that's bad; the other is that you've already hurt the people you need to talk with by letting them know that the concern that they are bringing isn't worth your time. Sometimes, there is something frivolous that comes up again and again, but probably not when issues of race, class, gender, employment, health, faith, age, life, and death are involved. At this point, my heart went out to both Rev. Morales, clearly headed for a world of trouble with that line, and to the people raising the issue of UUA hiring practices. This is a heart and soul issue. So, as he responded to the challenges that were made about the fact that none of the five

regional heads are people of color, he said it was too bad there weren't more qualified applicants of color in the pipeline. A truly unfortunate choice of words since in the world of racial bias in hiring, that's the classic phrase used most often to dismiss charges of bias. That alone was bound to rub many people, white and of color, the wrong way. And, without going any further into "he said / they said" – it's clear that Rev. Morales responded with a raft of stock phrases and attitudes that alienated people of color, women, and religious educators.

In a political climate where many of us are anxious that racist attitudes are finding new and greater license, there is a tremendous desire in diverse faith communities that we will resist that vigorously and work even harder to live out the best of our faiths together. It's why we have the National UUA Statement of Conscience that the Board and I and many in this congregation have signed, which expresses our commitment to live and fulfill our principles. So it's no wonder that those who leaked and responded to this issue were highly sensitized – looking carefully and mindfully to communication – to talk and even more the capacity to walk your talk. A member of our congregational community here suggested that it was, perhaps, a matter of over-sensitivity on one side and insensitivity on the other. While that's a bit of overstatement, it does capture something of the perfect storm that shook the halls of the UUA. It was a matter of hyperawareness on one side and failure to stay "woke" at a critical time.

Rev. Morales's resignation was his choice as a response to a sad situation. He only had three more months in office and that wouldn't be enough time for effective healing, likely, but it also means that he is absent from the conversation – a conversation that must continue.

I've certainly had my own moments when the words of my mouth fell below the standards of my heart. I've shared with you embarrassing examples from my own life – from childhood forward – times when despite my aspirations, efforts, and intentions to live beyond the racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and xenophobia of our times, my language made it clear that I had a way to go myself.

I know that people belly-ache about having to be "politically correct," but this isn't that. Our language actually speaks for us – both for our cherished values and our not so neatly hidden core values. Language has power.

Just last week, someone was talking with me about a doctor. When I responded, I used the pronoun he. My conversation partner gently said, "the doctor is a woman." And there it was – my own internalized sexism. I'm a feminist! I trust doctors of any gender. But somewhere, nesting in the subterranean recesses of my being are the residues from growing up in a patriarchal culture. I admit I was embarrassed. But I also know that liberating the mind – liberating ourselves – takes a lifetime of intention and attention.

This doesn't call for shame. It's the human condition to live in what the Quaker teacher Parker Palmer calls "the Tragic Gap,"

The tragic gap, Palmer says, is the distance between what is and what should be. These gaps take place in our society and in ourselves. I keep watching these little videos on YouTube that give you brief tours of tiny houses. I really want to be someone who could live in a tiny house. Now I tell myself that I couldn't do it because I have so many books they wouldn't fit in a tiny house. But that's not true – they'd fit – just nothing else would. But, actually, it's not true because I am just still too attached to things. I tell myself I value a simple lifestyle. And I do – but I also value things of beauty and lots of books. The two values duke it out on a regular basis.

We do have values that are sometimes competing. The aspiration to walk more lightly on the earth by living simply is a worthy value. The aspiration to live in and create a world in which there is an abundance of beauty, which delights the eye and nourishes the spirit, is also a worthy value.

I met someone recently who shared part of their story with me – for the sake of confidentiality, I'll call him Jake. He said, "At the age of eleven I spent many afternoons at the neighbors' when school was out. My mother worked outside the home and the neighbors' home included a stay-at-home mom, a dad who traveled a lot for work, and two daughters, Mary - 9 and Carla - 7. It was just after the new school year began when Lisa was diagnosed with Leukemia. Because we attended the same school, I saw how her disease affected those around her. As she grew sicker and weaker, kids made fun of her appearance or avoided her as if she were contagious. I have never been of the size or stature to think starting fights was a good idea, but I could not take seeing Lisa's being further victimized by ignorant students and teachers who knew too little how to educate students on such matters. I watched her decline until her death in May. She was 8, I was 12." When I asked Jake, who is today a minister, if I could share this story, I said that it was a perfect example of someone for whom compassion was a core value – though as an adult, I think that he would be able to extend compassion and protection for the little girl and even some intelligent understanding for the bullies. Our values can strengthen and mature over time, but a core value that is there from the beginning is strong indeed.

I've been thinking a lot about values lately – about how we hold them, how we know them, and how we live into them. There are teeming teams of people who talk about our values and suggest different ways to label them.

I would say that we have somewhat different sets of values – one that is core – those are our Core values. We can learn them early in life or later, but they help us to know right from wrong, help us to make choices in all kinds of situations, and they show up in our actions. Some of those values are beautiful and noble. Some are a little or a lot dicier.

We also have what I am calling Key Values – the ones that we may aspire to and espouse – that make the world better, that bring us lasting happiness and a sense of wholeness. For Jake, his Value of compassion was both Core, beginning so early and organically in childhood, and Key, a value to which Jake aspired and toward which he would dedicate his life.

So we have core values and key values, and sometimes they are at odds. We have a lifetime of experience and history that shapes us and shapes our core values. My core value of beauty was, in part, formed early with a parent who was an artist and an activist. And I remember as a very little girl imagining that I would have enough money one day to go block by block through the poorest neighborhoods in the city with tools and paint and fix up people's houses until whole blocks were made beautiful again. It was a childish dream on one hand, but on the other, Millard and Linda Fuller did create Habitat for Humanity. What stopped me? Or what pushed them to change the lives of, so far, more than 6.8 million people around the world?

The sad dust-up at the UUA this week made us look into the tragic gap – into a space that we want to bridge, we work to bridge, and we are bridging.

The tragic news that emerged about the minister in Tulsa is also a gap we look into with grief, anger, bewilderment, prayer, and a wish that he could have bridged it.

But we all live over that tragic gap between what is in us and what should be. The purpose of houses of worship is not to arrange perfect people in tidy rows or even to serve

perfect people a cup of coffee. It is to shape a community in which all of us, imperfect people, can lean together and wrestle with our imperfect selves and live into our values.

As you came in today, you received a values inventory – one created by Herb Stevenson. I ask you to take it home, think about how much you value each value, how much of yourself you invest in each value.

When we do not live into our key values or our core values are in contrast with what our best selves yearn for, we are not whole, not at peace. To bridge that gap, to live our key values – the ones that unlock our souls – is to become whole.

To bridge that gap is to be able to make choices from the cohering center of our meaning. Annie Dillard wrote, “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days. It is a scaffolding on which a worker can stand and labor with both hands at sections of time.”

It is something that we can do each in our own lives and together as a faith community.

I was heartened by the response of the UU community to both of these significant events that rocked our hearts and halls. Not only because it spoke clearly of each person’s inner guidance – core values and strong UU principles – but because it spoke of our own growth and evolution and transformation as a faith community and our core values that are leading us in paths of greater wholeness, health, justice, peace, and compassion.

Margaret Wheatley wrote, “I do believe that what’s possible is we make a commitment to practice the values that we cherish, the practices that we know support other people’s creativity and commitment, and that we be ... a counter force, a counter revolution... it does give us a kind of nobility of purpose that I think ... people are craving at this time... we can create, what right now I’m calling ‘islands of sanity’ in the midst of this very crazed, lunatic, charged sea.”

One of the key purposes of such a faith as our own – a faith grounded in a passionate commitment to love, to truth, and to authenticity; in justice; and in openness – is to help us bridge that gap in ourselves. It’s how we find peace and purpose. To become at one with ourselves, to be transformed into our truest selves.