

Rev. Linda Simmons
May 8, 2016
Mothers, Courage, Standing Together

Mother's Day became a modern American celebration through the efforts of Anna Jarvis in the early 20th century. Her mother, Ann Marie Reeves Jarvis, gave birth to 12 children, but lost eight before they turned seven. Her response to such grave loss was to combat the poor health and sanitation conditions that contributed to the high mortality rate of children in West Virginia. In the 1850s, she founded Mothers' Day Work Clubs to provide medicine for the poor, nursing care for the sick. During the Civil War, these social action brigades fed, clothed, and treated the wounds of both Union and Confederate soldiers with neutrality.

On May 12, 1907, Anna organized a memorial to her mother and embarked upon a campaign to make "Mother's Day" a recognized holiday.

Several years before Anna Jarvis commenced her campaign for Mother's Day, Unitarian Julia Ward Howe wrote a preliminary charter for women to unite as an international congress for world peace. Howe had already earned some degree of fame for her popular lyrics to "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." But weary of the carnage of wars, this feminist-pacifist drafted an "Appeal to womanhood throughout the world" in 1870. It would later be known as the "Mother's Day Proclamation" and appears still in our hymnal, urging people to lay down their arms, to chose peace.

In 1872 Howe asked for the celebration of a "Mother's Day for Peace" to be held on June 2nd of every year, but she was unsuccessful.

Interestingly, it took Anna Jarvis 7 years of harassing presidents until Woodrow Wilson finally declared the first national Mother's Day in 1914. It was designated as a day for American citizens to fly the flag in honor of those mothers whose sons had died in war.

And today is Mother's Day once more. And though we fly no flags for our children lost to war, we do raise a glass to our mothers, make them breakfast, send them cards, give them flowers. We remember them, that they birthed us and that they loved us too.

As I reflect on what makes a mother, with all of the difference mothers represent, what I come to is this: Mother's reproduce the world. They make life from their bodies, from the fabric of their beings. No matter how they stand in this world or where they stand, They say, yes, yes, I believe enough in this world, in this community, in this possibility of goodness to create more life.

In this way, I think so many of us are mothers, no matter our gender or if we have progeny, particularly as Unitarian Universalists. We have stood in so many storms throughout history and we have stood in many of them weary and we have said, I will stand here because I believe that standing here matters, even if it is where the darkness grows deepest, and I will risk something standing here because I believe that the imprint of my life makes a difference, that it creates room for other life to follow.

Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists have left imprints to guide us as we chart our course.

Unitarian Francis David in the 1500s in Transylvania argued for an Edit of Toleration so that no one could be harmed for practicing his or her religion, and he won the day at a time when people were burned at the stake for their beliefs. He later died in prison for his beliefs.

Unitarian Rev. Theodore Parker preached with a loaded gun in his pulpit in case anyone came looking for the runaway slaves he had helped on the Underground Railway.

Unitarian Dorethea Dix, mental health and prison reformer who would travel to prisons and mental health hospitals demanding to see those chained to walls and living in their own excrement at a time when women did not travel alone. She went to the state house to advocate for change with little regard for herself, her reputation, her needs.

James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister, became nationally known as a martyr to the civil rights cause when he was murdered on 11 March 1965, in Selma, Alabama, after being attacked by a group of white supremacists. Reeb had traveled to Selma to answer Martin Luther King's call for clergy to support the nonviolent protest movement for voting rights there. Delivering Reeb's eulogy, King called him "a shining example of manhood at its best" (King, 15 March 1965).

There are hundreds of thousands more examples of those imprisoned fighting for gay rights, immigrant rights, climate justice, and more recently in the DC protest for clean elections.

We as Unitarian Universalists know what it means to stand in the face of injustice. The last of these examples I will use is of our own Rev. Ted Anderson when he started the Aids Network on Island in the 1980s. He was driving in the car one evening to the south shore to put ashes out to sea with parents who knew so little of their son's life. He knew then that he had to make a difference in beginning this conversation. There were anti-gay sentiments and many untruths to surmount about the disease of AIDS but these were overcome with time and effort and advocacy and education. People came to understand that it was only through acting together that lives could be saved.

And so that brings us to today, to our work to make the world a better place and to save our own lives in doing so. Last week, I told you that we are renting the Meeting House once a week during the summer for 13 weeks to a small group of Muslims for one hour for their prayer service. If you were not part of that service, I will briefly recap by telling you that during our World Religion Class when we were discussing Islam, two folks came to class who we later learned were Muslim that helped us with our understanding of Islam greatly.

We learned that this couple was Dr. Quereshi and his wife Laura, who gave me permission today to use their names and to tell you they look forward to becoming part of the interfaith community. A few days later, the Quereshi's called again and asked if they could rent the AR for Muslim prayer once a week and as Lucretia, our Office Manager, and I have been charged by the board to approve and draw up the contracts for renters and because it was a simple rental that did not involve food or drink and was not more than 10 people with a limit of 20 and was for so few hours each week, it was an easy contract to put together.

I should have understood that some of us might have worries or concerns and understanding this, I should have spoken to the board so they could have been prepared to support you. I erred and ask your pardon. I was out of sync with some of you.

I have been studying Islam for 7 years now. It was my second religion at Harvard Divinity School. I have sat with Muslim scholars from all over the world. I have studied with one of the foremost Muslim feminist scholars in the world, Leila Ahmed. I have studied beside other Muslim students. I have read large portions of the Qur'an. I have visited many mosques. I have lived with Muslims all over the world and shared meals with them.

So when I met Dr. Qureshi and his wife during class and listened to Dr. Qureshi explain his understanding of Islam, I knew it be very liberal version of Islam. When I met with his wife Laura to discuss the contract and asked if men and women pray together and she said yes, I knew it to be an even more liberal form of Islam than I had considered. When I asked if we would be welcome and she again said yes, I knew that the form of Islam we were inviting into our Meeting House was one of peace, acceptance and good works.

The board and I met this week. The board agreed that our principles and sources and our history require of us to be a place that rents to people based not on color, creed, ability, race and religion but based upon mutually shared understandings of respect, peace, and good works.

Our first principle is The Inherent Worth and Dignity of All People. Our 3rd is Acceptance of One another and encouragement to spiritual growth our 6th is the Goal of World Community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

None of this means anything goes. None of this means that a violent, hate speaking Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, or Hindu group would be allowed to rent our building.

The Muslims we are renting the AR to this summer are Muslims who interpret the Qur'an, which is neither a book of peace or violence, as a book of peace.

I spoke to Rabbi Bretton Granatoor, the Rabbi of Shirat Ha'Yam yesterday about renting to Muslim's for prayer and he was very pleased that we are doing this. He mentioned that he wrote a book called Shalom/Salaam: A Resource for Jewish-Muslim Dialogue. I ordered it on Amazon!

Gary said he expected his congregation to also be welcoming, which their president echoed this when I spoke to him. When I asked Gary if he would like to share the pulpit with Dr. Qureshi and I, he said he'd be delighted.

Speaking to another in their leadership who is another islander, he said that he has wanted to have a Shirat Ha'Yam group to study the Qur'an for sometime now and that maybe Dr. Qureshi could help with that.

I want you to know that this rental to a small Muslim group does not mean that I and the board are asking that we hang a banner outside the Meeting House that says, "We support our Muslim brothers and sisters." Maybe that will come another time but that would require a congregational vote. This is not that. Right now, this is about a rental and it is about all the dialogue that this rental is allowing us right here and now.

I also want you to know that what matters most to me, what matters most to us I believe, is not that we all agree about Islam, but that we agree to stay in the room together, covenanted as Unitarian Universalists to keep listening, to keep seeking understanding, to keep asking questions of each other until we hear each other's minds and hearts. That is the work of our promise to each other and all that we have is this promise my friends. No hell, no heaven, no god to keep us here. Only a promise to stay in this room and keep listening until we can hear each other.

How do we accept each other as we discuss this issue. Do we have the courage to support each other in our difference? Can we listen beyond ourselves and hear another who is not us?

The great work here is not what we already do but what we have not yet done. Let's not form groups determined by where we fall on this issue. Let's rather ask each other how we feel, risk feeling the gray parts, the unknown parts, the in between bits. Risk listening even when what is being spoken it is not what we personally hold to be true. Risk compassion when it is not our political position being reflection. Risk empathy. Let's let the basis of our promise to each other- to listen to one another so well that we can hear the voice of love rise above us- guide us.

I want you to know that no matter where you stand on this, I love you. I am willing to hear you. I know that we all come to our stands honestly. What matters most to me is that we can model right here and now what it means to be Unitarian Universalist in the best sense of those words.

By the way, I asked Ted what he thought about all of this and he said, UUs should be out in front of this, not standing on the sidelines with their hands in their pockets. And the community should know, if you spit at a Muslim, you spit at a UU too.

Okay, so let's take a minute now and take a brief look at Islam.

Islam has always been part of America. Starting in colonial times, many of the slaves brought here from Africa were Muslim. Muslims were often called Mahometans then. And Thomas Jefferson explained that the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom he wrote was designed to protect all faiths as he wrote "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan."¹

Jefferson and John Adams had their own copies of the Qur'an. Benjamin Franklin wrote that "even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach to us, he would find a pulpit at his service."²

Generations of Muslim Americans helped to build our nation. They were part of the flow of immigrants who became farmers and merchants.³

So let's put some well research data about Islam on the table as we begin our conversation together:

Same-sex relationships are legal in 20 Muslim-majority countries. In Albania, Lebanon, and Turkey, there have been discussions about legalizing same-sex marriage.⁴

Sharia law is overwhelmingly concerned with personal religious observance such as prayer and fasting. Currently, 35 countries incorporate Sharia into their civil, common or customary law. The diverse manner in which these countries apply Sharia to daily life highlights how Sharia is neither static nor rigid but instead a reflection on how different communities interpret it.⁵

Muslims adhering to Sharia do not universally engage in stoning and amputations. These penalties are not allowed in 52 countries that make up the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation, encompassing most countries with a Muslim-

¹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/03/remarks-president-islamic-society-baltimore>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_in_Islam

⁵ <http://www.tolerance.org/publication/sharia>

identified government. Indonesia, the most populous Muslim majority country, along with Egypt, Turkey, and Morocco all use Sharia as a primary source of law and none allow these punishments.⁶

American Muslims overwhelmingly support the U.S. Constitution and do not seek to replace it with Sharia or Islamic law. The vast majority of American Muslims understand Sharia as a personal, religious obligation governing the practice of their faith, not as something American governments should enforce.⁷

Concerning women and Islam, Muhammad, the founder of Islam and its prophet, encouraged women to play active roles in political community and that the Qur'an gave women rights of inheritance and divorce in the 7th century. Western women had nothing comparable until the eighteenth century.

The predominately Muslim countries of Turkey, Bangladesh and Indonesia women have rights equal to men and are represented in government and in Turkey, are heads of state.

I recently read the article, "What ISIS really Wants" in The Atlantic that argued that ISIS is taking the justification for their violence from the Qur'an and Hadith, which is the sayings of Muhammad, directly. I have not read all of the Qur'an or all of the Hadiths, but even I had read enough to know that the texts quoted in this article have been taken out of context, grabbed from a middle of a complex paragraph and made to fit an agenda that is horribly violent.

ISIS is not the first to have done this of course. The Christian Inquisition is most famous for its distortion of another sacred text or in more recent times, the Christian declared KKK is another example of a violent organization that uses the bible to support its agenda. Those who distort sacred texts for their own means have done so and will do so again. It is wrong to associate them with an entire religion.

According to the Pew Research Center, the majority of Muslims say that suicide bombings and other forms of violence against civilians in the name of Islam are rarely or never justified. Including an overwhelming majority in our own country.⁸

There is much more to learn about Islam. These are just some few highlights. There are many Muslims, many Christians, many Buddhists, and many UUs for that matter so many in fact that to say anything at all about any of them one must speak about a specific place, time, and culture to say anything well.

⁶ <http://www.tolerance.org/publication/sharia>

⁷ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/07/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>

⁸ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/12/07/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>

I would like to engage in a dialogue together about our concerns and hopes not only for having the Qureshi's lead Muslim prayer here at the Meeting House but about this dialogue between us and what it might bring up.

So during the offering, please take the card out of your order of service. One side says concerns; the other says hopes. Please write your concerns and hopes of not only having Muslim prayer here but also of opening up this dialogue among us. If you are a visitor who does not live on island and will not be returning for further dialogue, please put a V on the card so we know. If you are listening online, please send your concerns and hopes to me at revlindasimmons@gmail.com.

And then on Friday May 20th, we'll have a potluck at in the AR and I'll have all of these fears and hopes printed out for you with no names attached to read and we'll eat together and spend some time talking about these.

Thank you for being willing to walk together my friends. Thank you for trusting each other, for allowing me to be your minister, for this honor of walking with you. I have never walked a walk more worthy of walking in all of my life.

Happy Mother's Day, to those creators in all of us, the lion-hearted. May it be a year of peace we are willing to make.

Amen.