

Rev. Linda Simmons
Labor of Love
September 4, 2016

There's an old joke, "How many Unitarians does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Well, first: what's your definition of lightbulb?" We love our words don't we! That is the rap on us all. The other popular joke is this one: "A Unitarian dies and is walking down a path and comes to a crossroads marked: Heaven and Discussion about Heaven and she chooses Discussion about heaven."

For all of this making fun, our faith is built on so much more than discussion. We are those hewn in the fires of resistance and speaking truth to power. We are those who refused to believe what was told us because others told us it was true.

Yes, we like our words and discussions, but we have always been a people that test them in the world, who put them on in our lives, and who watch the effect of systems of thought on those whose lives are more vulnerable than our own. When we are at our best, we work to unravel what is known, including what we hold dear, and put it back together again.

We are a people who are willing to risk our identity for relationships that offer new understandings. And when we are no longer this, we depend on each other to be called back home to it again.

Dan McKanan, Unitarian Universalist and Professor at Harvard Divinity School who came to speak to us here a few years ago and was one of my favorite professors, wrote a book called, Prophetic Encounters in 2011. In it, he tells us that when people see parts of the world as unjust and this seeing cannot be unseen, and this seeing forces them to action through which they meet those whose lives are different from their own, these encounters break through us and make us more human, more whole, more capable.

I would say, that these meetings between ourselves and others whom we have not known and whose worlds we cannot define are the context of salvation.

Dan McKanan argues that these encounters which connect those in the caldrons of social justice seeking also connect one to the ultimate or God. For me, these two are the same. When there is a profound connection with others, when our own stories are able to expand to the place when they become part of the human story and can find the human story written all around them, then we are in the place of the sacred I believe, and we can experience ourselves and others in this place as utterly human and utterly divine.

McKanan begins his book with the story of famous African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass coming to Nantucket on August 11, 1841, when he made his first

public speech at a convention here. “The prospect of addressing white people, Douglass would later recall, was “a severe cross” because he still “felt myself a slave.” Yet the act of speaking proved to be liberating for Douglass and revelatory for his audience. “I spoke but a few moments,” Douglass wrote in his autobiography, “when I felt a degree of freedom.”¹

The antislavery editor William Lloyd Garrison, for his part, reported that “I think I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment. Certainly, my perception of the enormous outrage which is inflicted by it, on the godlike nature of its victims, was rendered far more clear than ever.” For both men, their meeting was an encounter with the divine, and they retained a sense of its religious power long after their personal paths diverged. Thirty years later, Douglass mused that it was only through his encounters with other radicals that he could “get any glimpses of God anywhere.”²

McKanan’s book goes on to look at Dorothy Day, who came a century after Douglass met Garrison. “She was a radical journalist...(who) found herself longing to encounter the “poor and oppressed” immigrants, whom she regarded as “collectively the new Messiah.” Noticing that most immigrants were Roman Catholics, she joined the church. Day launched a national network of farms and households where pious Catholics, committed radicals, and the desperately poor encountered one another.³

When people meet on the field of justice, joined together to create in the name of peace and equality, something greater than self lifts each of us into a place in which we become more than we were, more than we could have been without each other, more than we could be before we touched each other’s sorrow and aching and fear and were washed in the courage born of those encounters to step into a vision that allows us to know that there can be and must be equality for all people.

The commitment to social justice is inextricably tied to commitments to deepening one’s capacity for understanding and humanity, and ultimately in the knowledge that our salvation is tied up with each other’s.

When we act from these understandings, we heal the separation within us that keeps us isolated from ourselves and others, that keeps us from what the famous theologian Paul Tillich calls “the ground of being,” what I think of as the source of our humanity, our common soul.

My own story about this is one that involves all of you. When we came around to renting to Dr. Qureshi and his family for Muslim prayer and Lucretia, our office manager and event coordinator drew up that contract, I thought my role would be

¹ Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters*, (Boston, Beacon Press, Kindle Edition: 2011), 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 2.

to help us all welcome the other as the Muslim by strengthening an understanding of how this was about living into our principles, and learning more about Islam together.

And because of who you all are and your ability to come to me and speak to me with integrity and clarity and because you allowed me to speak to you from my own integrity and clarity, I had a revelation. My soul met yours, my way of seeing touched yours, my way of defining the world opened itself to yours and I could see with eyes I could not see with before.

I had some sleepless nights inside of all of this and on one of those nights, I woke up at 2 in the morning or so and realized that my role as a minister was not only to welcome the Muslim here but also to protect the space in which those among us who had concerns could speak and be heard. I had to welcome the other, those with concerns that our liberal mindedness could not easily predict, among us. That was my first job as your minister.

This blew me away. It was a prophetic experience for me in that it revealed to me something I did not know how to protect before and that I did not know needed my protection. But this experience did more than this for me.

As some of you know, I have been in preliminary fellowship for 3 years. I just finished the last of those 3 years and should be receiving final fellowship next month. At the end of these past three years, I had to write an evaluation of my ministry, as did the board and the committee on ministry.

In my self evaluation, I was writing about all that I learned from the Muslim prayer rental, and I found myself saying at the end, "I came into my ministry in those weeks and learned so much about how to care for my people." I stopped after writing that, my heart in my throat. I had never called you my people before. You became my people in those weeks. You may not know this, but now you are my people!

This is how the work of social justice changes us. It gives us a chance to practice and be changed by courage.

Courage comes from the Latin *cor* which means heart. The poet David Whyte says courage does not mean showing up in battle ready to fight, but is rather the "measure of your heartfelt presence."⁴ It gives us the chance to show up in heartfelt presence and risk a measure of salvation when salvation is an opening of ourselves to each other in ways we could not define before we got there, and could not see before we reached the possibility. When salvation is a meeting within our humanity in which there is room for all of humanity and we know each other as holy.

⁴ David Whyte on Conversational Leadership, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQNIJzyEhE8>

And so my friends, there is another opportunity now to be courageous together, to change who we are and who we can be and in so doing, offer our goodness to the world.

Do you remember when we collected things for Syrian refugees and filled Paul Stewart's van with household goods for their new homes in Worcester? We did this in liaison with Ascentria. Ascentria's mission is: *To break the cycle of poverty, and build thriving communities where everyone has the chance to achieve their full potential, regardless of background or disadvantage.* They not only help refugee families resettle through their New Americans' Program, they also have an Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program (URM).

Ascentria helps refugee, asylee and trafficked young people under the age of 18 who are in the U.S. with no parent or guardian. They have placed more than 400 unaccompanied minors with foster families in Massachusetts.

This year the Worcester Ascentria program has a total of 68 high school students, 64 returning and 4 entering from junior high. These youth receive not only foster care placement, but educational support, MA Health, a quarterly clothing stipend, holiday and birthday stipends, case management which includes legal and mental health services, and much else that they need to thrive, perhaps most importantly compassion.

The young people in this program have come to the United States unaccompanied by any adult or guardian, arriving primarily from refugee camps in Asia and Africa and/or the city streets of Central America and Mexico. They have experienced interruptions in their education as a result of displacement caused by war, persecution, famine, poverty, civil strife, abandonment or neglect. Some had never attended school prior to their arrival to the United States. Despite this, more than 81% of the more than 600 minors who have been in the program have earned their high school diploma or GED. This is above the national average. The majority of these young people go on to study at community colleges or universities.

In Massachusetts alone, there were 30 high school graduates and 28 went to a community college or university.

We at The UU Meeting House on Nantucket will be helping these youth in their return and continuation in high school by donating some items they needed when returning to school: Backpacks or book bags, pens/pencils/erasers, notebooks, binders/ loose leaf notebook paper, pencil cases, rulers, calculators, pocket dictionaries, pocket folders.

Three of the youth specifically that Ascentria asked we offer our support and prayers to are: Juan from Honduras, Kuya from Eritrea and Vishnu from Nepal.

On October 12th, we will bring what we collect to Ascentria in Worcester and meet with our partners there, leaving on the 7:45 Hyline Ferry and returning on the 5pm Steamship fast ferry.

Please join us in this 7th Principle Project Action as we continue our work to make a difference in our own lives and the lives of others.

Dan McKanan in his book, Prophetic Encounters writes, “[F]or most radicals, activism is itself a source of revelation. And one cannot see the face of God, or the shape of ultimate reality, without having one’s...identity transformed.”⁵

And here’s the thing, as we go, we’ll share our stories, we’ll hear others, we’ll open our lives in new ways on the boat to deliver these back packs and notebooks and as Dan McKanan writes, “By telling our stories and sharing our lives, we can glimpse the face of the divine and change the world.”⁶

The face of the divine lives right here in your face and in your face and in yours and we can only know its contours when we tie our lives to the lives of those whose faces we do not know, whose lives we cannot perceive, whose ways of being we have not understood, whose definitions we have not yet learned to speak.

May the courage of walking with each other toward what yet needs to be known so that we might all be saved through the grace of each other’s love, be ours today, here and now.

Amen

⁵ Ibid, 10.

⁶ Ibid, 16.