

REDUCING VIOLENCE, STANDING UP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE!

There are many forms of violence perpetrated within and between human communities, families, areas, and nations. Wars and other forms of state-sanctioned violence set the tone and often are related to more limited forms of violence but are largely beyond the scope of this particular sermon. That does not mean that I accept or condone such violence, just that it has been and will be the topic of other sermons. Today I want you to think with me about more personal levels of violence, the kinds that occur within homes and families, civic organizations and businesses, schools at all levels, and on the streets of our cities, especially here in Stockton.

I intend to shine a light on some of the forms of violence which are rampant in our society and ask your help in discovering ways that we might work together to reduce such violence. Our UU Principles call us to respect the worth and dignity of every person, to work for justice and equity with compassion, to practice democracy, and to seek to build a better world. The Unitarian Universalist Association has been for several years particularly emphasizing efforts to be anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multi-cultural while increasing awareness of white privilege. I would say that those efforts appear to me to have had a mixed effect, at best, no matter how well-intended. Historically, UUs have probably had more impact and greater effectiveness when they are looking outward to address the many problems and challenges within society, rather than looking inward to focus on our own shadow side!

Violence is not a new topic of concern in society. Archeology has documented the effects of personal violence in various places long before the Biblical report was written of Cain killing Able. Whether anger and violence or love better describe patterns of human interaction have long been matters of dispute. That violence has been frequent among humans is impossible to refute. Murder, rape, sexual and physical assault, theft, and fraud are among the most significant forms of violence frequently documented, but there is also violence in our words and thoughts as well as our actions. Too often there is violence of which we are not even aware.

Modern society allows many forms of violence, both personal and categorical. Violence toward women, LGBTQ persons, and persons of color are some of the most frequent and most virulent forms of violence, but isn't it violence too to pay persons less than a living wage while blaming them for living in poverty? Isn't it violence to persons and families to exclude them from adequate health care? Isn't it violence to keep people from getting a decent education or charging them so much that they will spend decades paying for it?

The inequality in our most prosperous democratically capitalistic nation is really beyond belief. Nowhere else in the world are there such great disparities of wealth between rich and poor. No other civilized nation protects the profit margin of insurance companies while excluding millions from coverage and attempting to dismantle the gains in coverage under the Affordable Care Act. Nowhere else in the world is such inhuman treatment of persons considered normal while the nation is called a Christian nation. Nowhere else in the world is such a huge military-industrial complex supported while the needs of ordinary people are ignored. And nowhere else is so much corporate welfare so freely handed out while social services and supports are cut to provide tax-relief to the wealthy.

It is amazing to me that a candidate from one party is highlighting all these societal problems, while the leading candidate from the other party gets more attention for his hair and his rude behavior. Isn't it violence to a free nation to have most of the media under corporate control? Isn't it violence to democracy to have quibbling and name-calling and insults dominate the political discussion rather than matters of substance? We live in a very strange world indeed, and too many of us have become apathetically immune to its insanity!

And through it all, even our language is violent, with ongoing battles and perpetual efforts to target audience desires. Some candidates are categorized as weak, described as acting like little girls while the one leading candidate preaches against foreigners and Muslims and energizes white males against women and persons of color. More racism and classism has already been stirred up in this election than at any time since the societal turmoil of the 1960s. This is bringing out violence between people and groups in many ways also not often seen since the 1960s. Beneath this violence, the first thing to fall has been any semblance of truth, for lies on top of lies have been told again & again.

It has been a troubling statistic for years that the good old USA is the murder capital of the world. We have more gun violence here than anywhere, all under the supposed protection of the 2nd Amendment, which was written in the days of Muskets. With the years I lived in Montana, Colorado, and Wyoming, I could see reasons for some guns, but not for assault weapons or automatic weapons with more than a dozen rounds in the clips. But even if some guns are always allowed, they are often more dangerous to the owners when intruders or attackers come than it would be to be unarmed.

As I was thinking about the issues around violence, I remembered a collection of philosophical essays that one of my more memorable professors at Northern Illinois University, Sherman Stanage, had edited back in '74. I think I took 3 classes from him, including an upper level seminar on some aspect of Philosophy. Anyway, I found my copy of Reason and Violence and looked back through some of the essays. More than 4 decades later, a few of the particulars might have changed, but the philosophical issues around the justification for violence and the problems caused by violence are not significantly different. Religious and political violence then and now undergird many of the problematic aspects of society. When will we ever learn?

The question for today is not just to quantify the various kinds of violence in society, but to explore ways we might reduce the violence and increase social justice. I don't know of any easy answers, but I do believe that we need to be aware of the broad picture. Adding more police in one area or city may help to move some kinds of violence to another area or another city, but without addressing the reasons the violence is ongoing will not really bring much progress. Addressing a few of the symptoms may help for a while, but the longer lasting solution must look at all the factors that allow such violence.

Fear and desperation are often at the root of violence. Why? Because fear drives all kinds of behaviors and desperate people do desperate things. Mental illness is also often a significant factor, especially for psychopaths and sociopaths. Addiction to alcohol and drugs is another important factor for much of the crime, especially burglary and theft. Where treatment programs for mental illness and addiction are less available, certain kinds of crimes tend to increase.

In impoverished areas of cities, if there are no afterschool and summer programs, more youth and teens tend to get into trouble. The more involved parents are in the lives of their children, the less problems they tend to have, except in the case of helicopter parents! Even in the case of single parent homes, if there are other stable adults interested in the lives of children and youth, they tend to do pretty well. Unsupervised children and youth too often become victims and then perpetrators of various kinds of violence toward others.

Supporting and helping with afterschool programs, tutoring programs, summer programs and treatment programs can be very effective ways to make a difference, at least for the children and youth involved.

Advocacy addressing poverty, racism, sexism, and the great wealth disparity in our country may be longer term ways to make a real change in society. Taxing corporations and wealthy individuals at higher rates may make more money available for all kinds of social safety net and health programs. Advocacy for paying workers a living wage may help to move the working poor out of abject poverty and provide hope for a better life. A living wage will also help to address the fear of losing housing or transportation or going hungry. Advocacy for free or inexpensive higher education opportunities may also give hope for a better life for families, at least for the next generation. Creating a larger skilled workforce could change the shape of society.

It seems to me that the first thing we need to do is stop listening to the lies that are perpetuated by politicians who tell us there is never enough or that trickle down policies will work. Putting more money in the hands of the wealthy has never really made society better, even if some institutions were founded or supported by the wealthy. Putting more money in the hands of families has allowed them to save and to spend more, putting more people to work. Making more health insurance available has kept more doctors and clinics busy, has taken pressure off emergency centers, and generally helped the population to be healthier. I wonder what would happen if we joined the rest of the civilized world with health care for all?

Environmental concerns also have to be considered, for the violence done to earth by three centuries of human over-consumption and unabated population growth

have also had an impact that must be addressed. Human populations are at risk in low-lying areas around the globe as polar icepacks melt. Asthma and pollution related diseases continue to increase. Clean water sources and delivery systems must be carefully managed to prevent crises like the one in Flint, Michigan. Poor and minority areas must be protected from the prejudices of the dominant groups.

Among other things, we need a new paradigm of responsibility in which all persons are made aware of our shared responsibility and our likely shared plight and held accountable for our actions. Wealthy individuals, politicians, and corporations cannot be allowed to bury the best science and the widest scientific consensus by throwing their money into studies and programs intended to spread lies and deny the facts about climate change. Ultimately this will hurt everyone, for even the rich still haven't created an off-planet haven for when the environmental crisis fully breaks.

Perhaps we need a new bill of rights for those things that even the founders took for granted under life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We need to guarantee adequate shelter, edible food, pure water, breathable air, along with access to education, work, healthcare and the freedom to meet and associate with other persons for both religious reasons and leisure. And of course, these needs must be addressed both within our country and around the world.

I would argue that we must address issues such as homelessness, poverty, food insecurity, healthcare, and the lack of opportunities for work at a living wage and affordable education to really impact violence, but what are your ideas? Where do you see us called to respond as Unitarian Universalists?

Thank you for sharing your ideas and responses! May our quest for justice lead us to works of compassion with a sustaining commitment, and may the result be a better world for all!

So may it be! Amen!