

A Ministry of Mediation

23rd Annual John Murray Distinguished Lecture

*¹Reverend Nathan C. Walker, Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia
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My heart goes out to my colleague Rev. Gail Geisenhainer and her partner Celeste, who could not be here today because Celeste is recovering from two surgeries to her brain. May they both know they are on in our hearts and on our minds.

Filling-in for Gail is a tall order. She's a life force. Thankfully my friend gave me this special bracelet which reads WWGD – what would Gail do? Well, those of us who know Gail, the charge is clear. She would get us all moving about and all fired up. So what better way to start this ever so distinguished lecture with play!

Play

In that spirit, let us begin to snap, snap, snap, snap. I'm going to invite you to imagine yourself building a home, a beautiful home. Snap, snap, snap. The home is warm and safe and healing. A baby is in the home. Snap, snap, snap. Just then, a fire erupts. The home is on fire. Do you save the baby? Snap, snap, snap, snap. Another person is in the house. It's a man. His name is Adolf Hitler. Do you save Hitler? Snap, snap, snap. Another baby is inside. The baby's name is Adolf Hitler. Snap, snap, snap. Do you save baby Hitler? Snap, snap, snap. (Silence.)

A house is on fire. A baby is inside. Do you save the baby? A house is on fire. Adolf Hitler is inside. Do you save Hitler? A house is on fire. A baby named Adolf Hitler is inside. Do you save baby Hitler?²

Principle

These questions are designed to get at the heart of two significant parts of our religious heritage: Universalism and our first principle. Universalists believe God is too good to damn; Universalists believe not in original sin but in universal salvation, where all will be reconciled by the love from which we are all born. We seek to emulate this universal love by affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person, every being. Therefore no matter who may be trapped in the burning building, Universalists teach us that everyone is worthy of being saved. But saved from what?

John Murray calls us to give them not hell but hope and courage. Aware that hell is not a place but a state of being; aware that hell is what we make for one another here and now; we must have the courage to save ourselves from the hell that we create, especially when we are responsible for fueling the fire of fear and judgment. Fear and judgment are the elements that form the *discriminatory mind*, the subject of this

¹ Reverend Nate Walker is a substitute speaker for Reverend Gail R. Geisenhainer, Senior Minister with the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor, Michigan, who was unable to attend.

² Reverend Nate first used these questions when serving as an Interim Director of Religious Education at the Fourth Universalist Society of the City of New York. He doesn't remember if he came up with these questions or if it derived from a particular curriculum.

morning's address – it's a way of thinking based on a quick-to-condemn mentality rooted in a primal desire to defend by any means necessary. All forms of invidious discrimination are rooted in this way of behaving, which can result in *otherizing*.

Robert Schreiter¹ says we can (1) *demonize* the other, treating the other as someone to be feared and eliminated if possible; we can (2) *generalize* the other, treating the other as a non-individual; we can (3) *vaporize* the other by refusing to acknowledge the presence of the other at all. Otherizing is made possible when a mind that is quick to judge meets a heart that is fraught with fear.

Problem

Today we will explore the problem of the *discriminatory mind* through a story rife with fear and judgment. It is the true story of the living hell that we endured four weeks ago, we your sister congregation, First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia established by Joseph Priestley in 1796. The story begins with the following viral email. I offer it to ask simply, what would you think and feel if you received the following press release from a group called Anti-Racist Action:

The First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia hosts racist, homophobic, [anti-immigrant] hardcore band... There is no doubt that the Keystone State Skinheads (KSS)...will be attending the show in force... Reverend Nate Walker...is fully aware of this show but stated that the church would not " censor its tenants."

The email went on to ask the reader to call my cell phone and to email the nine congregational leaders, whose contact information is also listed, and to persuade them to "shut down the show." What would be your initial impulse if you received this notice?

This email was sent to hundreds of ministers and social justice leaders in countless congregations through the country; it was sent to the Board of Trustees of the Joseph Priestley District and the Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association; the executive committee of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, as well as to countless staff and anti-oppression leaders throughout our denomination.

Within a 48-hour period, the following organizations called me personally: the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania State Commission on Human Relations, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and two detectives from homeland security.

Meanwhile, countless UUs and ministers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Montana, California, Texas, Oregon and Michigan, to name a few, emailed and called to say that the "image of the entire denomination is at stake," that members who are Jewish and gay and people of color and Latina/Latino people feel that if we host this concert we rob them of the promise of creating a safe and welcoming place. One local colleague wrote, "*Censorship is a weak defense if you're making money off what amounts to legal hate-speech. It's like putting lipstick on a pig.*" All of these emails took place the date we testified in City Hall about the proposed plans for a developer to build a high-rise

that would eclipse our Center City church. In that context, one colleague wrote, “*You can’t really protest losing sunlight on your building if you’ve moved into your own shadow.*”

Practice

These are but a few examples of how within two days our church caught on fire. I’ll spend the rest of the address explaining how three spiritual practices, rooted in Universalism, were used to define my understanding of a Ministry of Mediation. This ministerial style was made possible by first, integrating the healing power of direct communication; second, engaging the healing power of study; and finally, using the healing power of the imagination as a spiritual discipline.

Direct Communication

Several months before the firestorm, the church staff and board were contacted by members of Anti-Racist Action and One People’s Project, two groups that monitor the behavior of neo-Nazis through a “decentralized network of militant anti-fascists and anti-racists.” We had deep sympathy for their mission but concerns about the means by which they were achieved. Over the months we confirmed that the concert was not scheduled at the church; that the company that leases our building, R5 Productions – the only company that has a legal contract with the church – had not scheduled the band, One Life Crew. A few days before the drama escalated, we confirmed that a third-party had booked the One Life Crew and was advertising it playing at our church. We practiced direct communication by asking the promoter about the band, their lyrics and the history of the controversy. Meanwhile, we engaged in multiple pastoral conversations with members of Anti Racist Action and One People’s Project, who clearly had a long and violent history with the band and with those whom they thought would be attending the concert. I learned that over 12 years ago fights had broken out and since then various events led people from both sides to be arrested. The feud had only gotten worse over the years. The church therefore had become the locus of the anticipated showdown.

I explained to Anti Racist Action that we needed time to consult with our tenant, to speak with the band, and to discuss whether or not we had the legal authority to censor the activities of our tenants. I made the rhetorical statement, “can we tell the daycare centers that rent from our church what they can teach or what guest preachers can preach or what lyrics guest musicians can sing?” These, of course, became the fateful words that were used to make it look as if the church was “determined to host” a hate group, which the minister “refused to censor.”

I continued to practice direct communication by responding with a public pastoral letter, which it can be argued added more fuel to the fire. It began by educating the public about the 10-year relationship with our tenant, R5 Productions, its drug- and alcohol-free mission, its excellent security and history of hiring off-duty police. I made clear that if skinheads were to attend and cause violence they would be dealt with immediately, which is true of anyone who becomes a threat on church property.

I proceeded to publicly invite Anti-Racist Action to work with the church to create a public process to help the community talk about racism and homophobia. Why? I

believe with all my heart that conflict is an opportunity for deeper intimacy. Intimacy is necessary to build trusting, authentic relationships. I made clear that through a Ministry of Mediation we could invite the band to meet with me and a camera crew to talk about the differences between free-speech and hate-speech. The ministerial philosophy was made simple: being in relationship heals racism and homophobia; refusing to be in relationship perpetuates fear and judgment. Said another way, by quickly demonizing people we have never met, or know very little about we use our fear to justify their elimination; by treating them as non-individuals we generalize them and justify not acknowledging their presence at all. But through relationships we have the power to heal with love. How is this made possible? When love, put into action, brings together a punk band and skinheads and radical activists to meet face to face with little ole me, an openly gay minister who for the last three years has been in an interracial relationship with an immigrant.

I invited the community to join in this process – to witness against hate speech and to work with other neighbors and area congregations to stand against oppression. I made clear that we would do everything in our power to create a secure, safe and healthy setting in order to publicly engage in some of the most morally challenging issues of our time. I invited everyone to call my cell phone, to engage me in the process and to speak with me directly if they had advice, questions or concerns.

Internally, some leaders rightfully questioned whether a minister, who is also the Executive Director of the organization, can make a public pastoral statement or whether it should have been vetted by leaders if not fully approved by the Board. These are all healthy and important questions about process and decision making and the timely matter of prophetic outreach. Externally, most appreciated my willingness to engage in this urban ministry; others were outraged by my choice not to use my power to immediately shut down the show. This leads me to explain why it was so critical for us to immediately engage in the healing spiritual practice of study.

Study

Together, staff from the UUA and District, my colleagues and leaders within the church as well as our church staff continued to study the situation, the history and the context. During this time we held a dozen national conference calls where we examined the lyrics of the band and spoke with local, state and federal officials, which led us to have an incredible amount of data about every single individual related to this conflict.

This gave me the necessary information to speak directly with the band and to welcome into my office one of the leaders of Keystone State Skinheads, who started the meeting by asking, “Reverend Nate, were you afraid to meet with me?” I said, “No, were you afraid to meet with me?” We laughed at the situation and clarified that he in fact had been part of a skinhead group but has since left it and moved from “white power” which can be quite violent to “white pride” which still has nationalist views, is explicitly non-violent as an organization, even though there was evidence to the contrary.

We spoke of his police record, his history of coming to concerts at the church for the last decade, his deep concerns about multiculturalism and illegal immigration. We even had

a respectful discussion of the complexity of homosexuality. It was clear that we had different views on these topics but that did not keep us from upholding one another's dignity. Before shaking my hand and hugging me, he expressed his respect for the church and said "thank you for not making me out to be a monster." In that moment, we were both saved from the fires of judgment and fear.

I spoke with the band the following morning and asked about their racist lyrics. They began to laugh. I asked, "What's so funny?" and they replied, "We have a Turkish singer, a Russian and an Arab guitarist and our drummer is Jewish." They explained the irony of how they have been made out to be this hate group when the reality is that they are all in their late-forties, with kids and full time jobs who put out an album 12 years earlier with lyrics that do not reflect their current beliefs. I specifically asked them about the lyrics of one song that started by screaming the word "Fag" followed by the sound of a machine gun. I asked them if they were referring to me personally. They backtracked and apologized and told me they said those things to get a reaction from those "liberal fascists." We had a long talk about how liberal fundamentalism is born when we who take pride in becoming open minded close our minds – when we become what we set out against.

I explained that their lyrics, the sounds of their machine guns, did not shock me. I then read to them a passage in the Christian New Testament that says homosexuals deserve death (Romans 1:26-32). I explained that whether such a message is in scripture or in Punk lyrics, it is my responsibility to study the words and to understand their context, to not fall victim to a fearful heart and a judgmental mind. I explained that my commitment to observe without reacting motivated me to learn about the context in which they wrote those lyrics.

I asked if they understood the consequences of hate speech, which could be seen as inviting others to behave violently. I told them about Jim David Adkisson who opened fire on one of our sister congregations in Knoxville, Tennessee, because of his hatred for liberals and for a church that welcomes gays. I asked them if they intended to use such words to provoke others to do the same. We proceeded with a healthy discussion about the differences between free and hate speech.

I asked them why they wanted to come to the church. "Because Rolling Stones says your church is one of the top punk venues in the country." I then took the advice my UUA colleague, Keith Kron, and asked if they would be willing to donate the proceeds of the concert to the Human Rights Campaign and the Freedom to Marry fund. I invited them to participate in a public forum with me and to explain how their beliefs evolved over the years. The band replied, "Man, we'd do anything for you Reverend Nate, anything, but the thing is if we clear our name then people won't think we're crazy." I said, "That's the point." They explained that the more and more fear that people had about the band the more popular they became. The power of fear at work can be dissolved by the willingness to listen with a heart rooted in Universal love. I then asked, well then why in the pursuit of fame would you want to defame the church – the organization that would be viewed as giving a bullhorn to a racist and homophobic band. They said, "That's why we need to cancel the show. We'll cancel it," they said, " You have shown us respect so we'll respect the church."

I then spoke to the third-party promoter, who had been an excellent communicator through the entire process. He too agreed to cancel the concert. This leads us to reflect upon the final Universalist spiritual practice that forms a Ministry of Mediation: the imagination.

Imagination

We use our imaginations to picture ourselves in another person's shoes. We observe how misperceptions are born and how fear is fueled. We imagine the pain that has built up over time with those who have been in conflict for over a decade. We imagine what it must be like to be raised in an environment where one is groomed to be a skinhead. We imagine what it must be like to be so fiercely committed to an anti-racist agenda that even the police and the government and churches become one's enemy – because there are often the institutions perpetuate systems of oppression. Imagine but a simple truth: "hurt people hurt people."

To imagine is to empathize, to sympathize and to understand. And while understanding need not imply agreement, understanding *is* necessary in order to heal the poison found in a heart bound by fear and to heal the poison found in a mind bound by judgments. The discriminatory mind is healed when we imagine ourselves as the other, which leads me to close by reflecting upon the nature of pride and to pose a final question.

Pride

The day after the concert was canceled we met with the leaders of the Philadelphia Anti Racist Action and the One People's Project. They verbally apologized for not giving us the time to process the information and for being so quick to condemn the church whose strategy differed from their own. They began to use their imagination and to empathize with a church whose values are similar to their own. Later the Anti Racist Action put out a headline that read, "VICTORY: One Life Crew will not play in Philadelphia!" They felt proud that dozens and dozens of people mounted a campaign against our church.

The band and the promoter later told me they felt proud because they took the "highroad." They respected the church and chose to cancel the concert. And then there's me, who in a prideful tone explains in this address the significance of a Ministry of Mediation. I suppose we could call this a win-win-win situation.

One thing we can all be proud about is the fact that countless ministers and denominational leaders immediately and thoughtfully dropped everything and were poised to help and support our urban ministry. I received some of the most lovely phone messages, the most encouraging emails and the most strategically-aligned advice that truly made this Ministry of Mediation possible. I had never before felt such a deep connection to an intricate sisterhood of congregation, a movement that is so intricately tied to a social justice movement. Numerous community officials and national leaders were committed to taking a N.A.P., an acronym for being a non-anxious presence. Countless people, who were elected to serve our Association, to serve our Districts, to

serve the historic Philadelphia congregation, treated me personally with the utmost respect and diligently worked together, and for that we can all be proud.

I'll close with a final question.

Conclusion

A church is on fire. A minister, a Punk band, skinheads and anti-racist activists are all inside.

Who do you save from the fire? Everyone. Why?

Because we are all worthy of being saved from the fires, even the ones that we helped to create. How are we saved?

Through a Ministry of Mediation rooted in Universal Love: by using direct communication, study and imagination as spiritual disciplines we can save one another from the judgmental mind and the fearful heart.

You see, we are all merely babies, growing and learning; we are all worthy of being saved from the fires of the discriminatory mind. In doing so we truly live with hope and courage the saving message of Unitarian Universalism by preserving everyone's inherent worth and dignity.

May it be so.

¹ Robert J. Schreier, *The Ministry of Reconciliation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 63-64, 11-16. "We can *demonize* the other, treating the other as someone to be feared and eliminated if possible; we can, on the other hand, *romanticize* the other, treating the other as far superior to ourselves; we can *colonize* the other, treating the other as inferior; we can *generalize* the other, treating the other as a non-individual; we can *trivialize* the other by ignoring what makes the other disturbingly different; we can *homogenize* the other by claiming that there is no difference; we can *vaporize* the other by refusing to acknowledge the presence of the other at all."