

## *Defying Hate*

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Did any of you get to watch the Ken Burns film “Defying Nazis” on PBS this week? For those who didn’t, it’s a film about a Unitarian minister and his wife who were asked by the denominational president, Frederick May Eliot, to go to Europe in 1939 to help Jews escape the Nazis. Rev. Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha spent the next few years first getting people from Germany and Czechoslovakia into France and then, when the Nazi’s moved into France, out again and to the US as refugees. Together they rescued thousands of people, many, many of whom were children.

The service today is part of a national preach-in, an effort to tell their story but more importantly, to carry the message of hope and of the power and necessity of direct action in the face of state sponsored hate. The painful reality is that there are similarities between what happened in Germany in the 1930s and 40s and what’s happening right here right now and clergy across the nation are being called on to speak truth from our pulpits this morning, to call us all to attention.

In 1933 the Nazis took power peacefully. Hitler had been *elected* and a good number of Jews had voted for him. Germany had been polarized with people at both extremes of the political right and left. Many who voted for Hitler did so in spite of his anti-Semitism, not because of it. That kind of rhetoric wasn’t completely uncommon and very few people thought he’d actually follow through on the more extreme things he said. They voted for him because he had a plan to heal a beaten nation. The economy was in crisis as was national self-esteem after the massive loss of WWI and people were feeling angry and were desperate to feel powerful and proud again.

Any student of history can tell you that declaring a common enemy – especially one to whom you have easy access and over whom you can exercise power – is a smart political move. Aside from Hitler’s personal goals regarding Jewish people, an anti-Semitic ideology moved him and his party in their intended direction of national unity. It established a common ideology which created an illusion of consensus. It isolated an opponent and created a winnable situation, simultaneously diverting people from the difficulties in their own lives and creating potential success. It also helped terrorize a population, which serves people in power well. And, by targeting a group as the enemy, the Party – not the state – becomes the source of salvation. Jews belong in the nation. They are German. The enemy is within our own walls. Past governments have let them in and those governmental systems have not been able to protect us. We need the Party, not the government, the Party is willing to speak the truth about our predicament, to protect us. Loyalty quickly shifted from the state to the Nazi Party and the party was then free to supersede law to protect people from their declared enemy.

There’s a meme going around that says something like “Those who don’t study history are doomed to repeat it. Those who do study history are doomed to watching everyone else repeat it.” I used to teach about the Holocaust in every course I gave when I taught undergraduate theology. I thought that if we educate enough people about the Nazis that we, as a nation, wouldn’t go down that road ourselves. But, when I see what’s happening, when I watch the wave of hate coming up around us, I know some of my students are likely part of it. This has been vexing for me. Knowing history isn’t good enough.

Hate gives us power. Powerlessness is a common experience, so common we’ve come to accept it. A medical test you need is rejected by the insurance company. You get a speeding ticket because speed limits on that road are artificially low so as to increase revenue through ticketing. You are charged an extra fee on your cable bill but can’t get anyone on the phone to talk with about it. A high pressure pipeline is running through your town despite the many dangers they pose. These situations aren’t usual and there’s nothing we can do about them. There are corporations and governmental agencies and medical systems and our little voices aren’t heard under the noise of these giants.

And there are other frustrations. Political correctness. You can’t say what you want to say. You hurt people with language you’ve been using your whole life. You don’t mean to be obnoxious but you can’t keep track of all the potential micro-aggressions. Every time you turn around there’s something else you can’t say. Or eat! You can’t just give your kid and her friend a peanut butter and jelly sandwich after school. What about nut allergies and gluten? You can’t take them out for a burger because meat is bad for cow and climate or give them a lollipop

at the bank with all that corn syrup. This feeling isn't just for conservatives. Plenty of good liberals are feeling the pressure.

When you're angry, it's good to have someone to hate. And it's even better when everyone around you hates them too. It's cathartic to organize and lash out. Hate groups increased by 14% in 2015, and most of those groups are inspired by white supremacy. They are anti-black, anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant.

The thing about Hitler is that he didn't act alone. If he had been one man, he wouldn't have been successful. But he had a whole nation behind him. Or, most of a nation. Enough of one. Plenty of people thought what he said about Jews was absurd, but they didn't know any Jewish people and didn't care a whole lot one way or another. They weren't going to join the Nazi party, but they weren't going to join the Underground either. They suspected it was an exaggeration, that Jews weren't in fact enemies of the State, but they weren't moved to get involved. They had plenty of things in their own lives that required their attention; they didn't have the time to worry about people they didn't know.

I imagine a lot of us fall into this category. We wish hate crimes weren't on the rise but we have to make sure homework is done and dinner is on the table and we have to get to work in the morning. We won't vote for the party promoting hate, but there's not much more we can do.

*If history has something to say to us, it's that the silence of the many makes room for the voices of a few.*

The rise in hate isn't about one person with a microphone. It's about a culture in which hateful rhetoric, finds support. It doesn't matter who wins the election; the damage is done either way. Hate has found a voice. Hate is embodied, this time in the American public.

What's our counter-strategy? We could scream back at rallies, hit back during riots and shoot back every time a person in a marginalized population is targeted.

But that's not what our faith teaches us. Rather than hate, rather than screaming, rather than meeting anger head on, the message of our covenantal faith is one of honest, committed relationship, one of forgiveness, of acceptance and of love. Unitarian minister Rev. Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha knew that. They were very ordinary people of faith who were willing to both see what was happening and to respond, demonstrating terrific love for strangers in need.

Living a life of empathy, the Sharps saved thousands of people. Waitstill Sharp told a harrowing story of saving a group on a high priority list the Nazi's had of intellectuals who spoke out against the Party. During their escape, they were nearly caught several times until they eventually climbed and bribed their way out of the country. Had they been discovered, they'd all have been killed, Waitstill included. When one of them later asked why the minister did it, assuming he was getting paid by some do-gooder agency, Waitstill assured him there was no financial benefit. He followed up quickly, though, with the clarification that he's not a saint. He said, "I'm just as capable of the many sins of human nature as anyone else. But I believe that the will of God is to be interpreted by the liberty of the human spirit." The man asked if that was enough for him and he replied, "Yes, it is. All of our lives are in the hands of someone else..."

Just as an aside, those two lines are a perfect summation of Unitarian theology. He's clergy, but no closer to God or perfection than anyone else; everyone is of equal worth and dignity. He believes the will of God is interpreted through personal freedom. And he recognizes our radical interdependence, that all our lives are in the hands of someone else.

Martha and Waitstill were risking their lives for the sake of love and for the sake of what's right. They left the safety of their home, left their young children behind because they were driven by their own ethical standards. Inconspicuously, they moved in and out of Nazi occupied territories, rescuing Jewish refugees. Rev. Sharp wrote, "I knew it was illegal, but I did it because I had no choice. I was beyond the pale of civilization. I owed no ethics to anybody. I owed no honesty to anybody either, if I could save imperiled human lives."

In 2016, the targeted groups include Muslims, with no distinction for whether or not they are American. Like the German Jews, simply being Muslim marks someone as an outsider. We're also targeting Central and South American immigrants with plans to build big walls to keep people out and to round people up and send them away, both reminiscent of solutions to the Jewish problem of 1930s Germany. But Muslims and Latino immigrants aren't the only ones losing protection from our government. So far this year, almost 200 black men and women have been killed by police under what can, at best, be called suspicious circumstances.

If we pay careful attention, we can also see that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are in high risk groups. Indigenous people's very few rights are being whittled away to nothing. And, if we are willing to

hear what's being said into microphones, in newspapers and on social media all over the nation, women are also being marginalized.

Detailing all the ways this is true seems tedious and unnecessary. As I listen to the casual conversations you have with each other, I know this isn't news to you.

Last week I talked about our responsibility to our congregation. I said that we are in a covenantal faith, that we are committed to and for each other. I reminded us of our theological history that grounds our faith in our common search for truth in partnership and our commitment to being in accountable relationship with each other. Now I'm going to tell you why that matters.

In this very complicated moment of history, as we see the rise of hate groups, the institutionalization of racism and xenophobia, we need communities of love. We need beacons of hope, centers of respite, of justice and safety. We need to do the work of building our capacity for love. The work, the challenge of Unitarian Universalism is stretching our arms wide and wider still, stretching so wide we can reach people on the farthest edges of the margins, grab them with the tips of our fingers and pull them in to the center.

Here's where the work begins for us. Pulling people into the center means making room for them. Making room for the Other. People who look and sound and smell differently. It might mean feeling displaced.

This is also the American promise. But what we're seeing is that all those people in the center are angry about their displacement. A black president. A woman poised to be next. People of color in every profession, in every school and neighborhood. Humans don't let go of dominance easily.

And that's true for us too. If we are going to counter hate with love, we'll have to change the narrative for ourselves as well. Luckily, we have practice. And we have a long history of standing on the side of love. And we have our shared faith that grounds us as a people of both mind and heart.

To move forward, there are a few things we will need to do. We have to commit ourselves to living a life of love, of countering hate in any way we can. I preached on a similar topic last spring and a member here asked me after the service what one thing he can do. He, like all of us, lives a busy life. He wants to do the right thing, but has lots of right things to do. I was stumped. Because I couldn't let the question go, I asked many colleagues and they were stumped too. It's been six months and I have the answer now. There isn't one thing to do. There is no magic bullet, nothing to put on a to-do list. If we, as a nation, are going to survive the waves of hate, we're going to have to show up again and again and again. We're going to have to learn to live out of love in ways we haven't before.

I think we're ready and I don't think this is as difficult as it sounds. There are three parts to this life of love.

First, I ask that we each add to our spiritual practice, the practice of love. Throughout your day, ask yourself what would be the most loving response. How can I alter this situation, this relationship, this feeling through love. Let's make acting in love our shared spiritual practice.

Second, I ask that we commit ourselves to each other. Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith, but this congregation doesn't have a covenant. There's a group headed by Charlie Wiecha that wants us to write a covenant together. It will be a relational covenant that declares our intention to do the best we can to learn and live in the ways of love. After worship next Sunday we'll have a congregational conversation about our covenantal faith. Please plan to stay as we find the ways of love together.

After the individual spiritual practice of love and the commitment to a shared faith, the third thing I'm asking us all to do is to show up where justice invites us. Emily, Sue McAnanama and I met with the Martin Luther King Center for Non-violence last week and will be meeting with the leaders of the local NAACP and the Center for Police Reform. There are coalitions being built in this county. I sit at some of these tables, but not all of them. I can't be everywhere, so I'm asking you for help. Instead of just sending the minister, why not join her. Why not go in her place. Instead of just supporting my justice ministries, why don't we all have justice ministries. Let's join our neighbors calling for police accountability, asking our leaders to recognize that budgets are moral documents and standing in solidarity with those who have suffered at the hands of racial injustice.

I'll put dates up on our Facebook page, in the Scoop and on our web site. But, let me tell you now that there's a vigil on November 19<sup>th</sup> marking the 5 year anniversary of Kenneth Chamberlain Sr.'s death at the hands of the White Plains police in his own home. I'd love for all of us to bring our embodied love to those still suffering and those asking for justice. Try to get it on your calendars. As Rev. Sharp said, "All our lives are in the hands of someone else."

Waitstill and Martha Sharp were able to do what they did because they had the support of their church and our denomination. We have that too. We are in a critical moment in history. This is our chance to take our faith out for a spin to see what it can do. Preachers all over America are calling their congregations this morning to Defy Hate. With them, I am asking you, in defiance of popular culture, in defiance of the anger rising up from the bowels of human nature, to counter waves of hate with love. I'm asking you to practice love, to commit this congregation to love and to bring our love into the streets. Martha Sharp said, "One can only manage a miracle every so often but a series of miracles *can happen* when *many* people become concerned and are willing to act at the right time." This is the right time and we are the right people. Join me in turning the tide of history. Join me in finding and living the Ways of Love.