

# Disarming Ourselves

Rev. Peggy Clarke

On August 9<sup>th</sup>, 18 year old Michael Brown and his friend Dorian Johnson were walking down the middle of the street in their hometown of Ferguson, Missouri when police officer Darren Wilson drove up and ordered them to move to the sidewalk. There was an argument. Michael Brown and Darren Wilson struggled through the window. Wilson's gun was fired. No one was hit. The sound of the gunshot ended the scuffle and Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson ran from the car in different directions. Darren Wilson chased Michael Brown. Officer Wilson shot Michael Brown six times. It is unclear if the teen had his hands up when he was shot or if he was moving toward or away from the officer before being killed.

The response to yet another black male teen being shot and killed by a white police officer was public protest on the streets of Ferguson. The initial protests, and most of the subsequent protests, were non-violent in action, although they were clearly fueled by anger- an anger that has been seething in this country for centuries and that has found a voice periodically throughout our history. And while the police, being accused of serious over-reaction to Michael Brown, responded to the protestors, they did nothing to dissuade the public from that impression. The response to the protestors was excessive. Police used tear gas and threw flash grenades into groups of non-violent protestors. Within the first three days, they drove a military-style armored vehicle topped with a manned rifle attached to a tripod down the suburban streets. On the fourth day, trying to capture the story, two journalists were arrested, one from the Washington Post and another from the Huffington Post. Over the next three weeks, eleven journalists were arrested and others were threatened with arrest if they didn't leave the area. Some reported being targeted for tear gas. I didn't read any reporters in the first few weeks who weren't discouraged in some way from doing their jobs.

Violence begets violence. It didn't take long for the non-violent protestors to set fires and vandalize some private and public property, albeit in comparatively small numbers. Two months later and the protests are largely over, although there are still small groups outside the police department waiting for the findings of the grand jury, currently in session.

A few days after Michael Brown was shot, Antonio Smith, a 9 year old was killed by a random bullet while playing in his backyard. You probably didn't hear about him because little Antonio was only one of more than 300 people who were shot and killed accidentally that week. About a thousand people were shot in an assault but not killed, 350 people killed themselves using a gun and about 225 people were murdered by gunshot that week. How do I know? That's about the average for every week in this country. That means that in the coming week, close to two thousand people will be shot or killed by a gun.

In response, this congregation approved the text for a letter calling on our government officials to institute greater gun safety. The letter reads:

We, the members of the First Unitarian Society of Westchester, are saddened, frightened and angered by the level of gun violence in our nation's streets, public places, houses of worship and schools. Of late, even small children have become targets of deeply troubled individuals with easy access to weapons capable of mass killings.

This is unacceptable... It must stop. Now. For the safety of our children, our friends, our neighbors and our communities, this congregation requests immediate action from our elected officials. This action may include, but should not be limited to, the following:

- All firearms should be registered with appropriate federal agencies;
- The sale of assault rifles should be banned;
- The sale of high-capacity magazines should be outlawed;
- It should be required that all guns be safely stored under lock and key such that they cannot be accessed by children or anyone other than the registered owner; and
- It should be required that all guns be equipped with trigger locks.

We call upon our elected officials to give protection from gun violence urgent priority until our children and our communities are safe.

It's a good letter and a necessary start to protecting our community. We need to get this letter out, so next week everyone in our directory will get a copy on First Unitarian letterhead; we are asking you all to email it to your representatives. It would also be good to email it to your local newspapers. I'll be sending it to the district and to other UU hubs.

The letter is good and necessary. But the letter doesn't address our culture of violence. It doesn't point to the causes, the reason we need letters like this. Within our nation, the death tolls are astounding. Domestic violence, gang violence, ecological violence, racial violence- we have grown accustomed to the many ways we live with death and suffering. But it's not just within our borders. As a nation, we provide three quarters of the planet's weapons. We have a Democratic President, a President we might think would reduce arms sales, but in fact they've increased exponentially. In 2010 sales tripled. We have an international policy of targeted assassinations. And now we've started a campaign targeting yet another group, ISIS. We go to war as a matter of course. Why can't we end terrorism with war? Because war is terrorism. We're in a cycle of violence we have never even considered stopping. Violence is how we solve problems. We do it on the international stage. We do it on the national stage when we arm our police force. We do it on the local stage when we arm our citizens.

Flash grenades and tear gas and tanks were part of the police response in Ferguson, and we were surprised. But, those same tools are our response on city streets in Iraq and on streets all over the world for the last hundred years.

If we're really honest with ourselves, we know this nation was born in blood. This weekend is Columbus Day. The Unitarian Universalist Association has decided not to celebrate Columbus Day any more but to celebrate Indigenous People's Day. Columbus didn't discover America, even if that's what my son's teacher told him. Columbus invaded what is now the Americas. And there were many to come after him in waves with swords and guns taking what they wanted and laying waste to the rest.

Letters like the one we are sending out are good, but I'm hoping for a world in which they are no longer necessary. We need to change the culture, alter the paradigm of violence in which we live, the paradigm that is so familiar to us, we can barely see it any more.

This sermon was inspired by our need to talk about guns in our current climate of violence and in light of the letter we voted to approve last spring and it was inspired by the International Day of Nonviolence celebrated a few days ago by the United Nations. This day was established in memory of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi did what no one would ever have dreamed possible. And Gandhi's work influenced Martin Luther King and, just to close the circle a bit, Gandhi was influenced by Henry David Thoreau, a 19<sup>th</sup> century American Unitarian.

The most astounding example of non-violence our planet has known was the Indian campaign to be free from English rule. India was being occupied. There was talk of war, but Gandhi was able to lead the nation to freedom by other means. It wasn't that he didn't think India could win an uprising; after all America did with far fewer resources. It was that he did not believe in founding a nation blood. He was adamant that when England left India, it would be because they have seen the truth and know that it is right for them to leave. He said often, when they leave, it will be as friends. As a Hindu, Gandhi believed in Ahimsa, the concept of non-violence that comes from understanding the truth of our interconnectedness. Gandhi believed that English rule was wrong and but that the English were fully human and would ultimately recognize the error of their occupation. He believed it to be his job and the job of every Indian to know the Other, the English to be part of a single reality and to use the great force of love to show them the truth of their mistakes.

You might remember the sermon I preached last year on Hinduism. Essentially, Hindus believe that each individual soul, each Atman, comes from our common source, Brahman. We live thinking we are separate, when we are, in fact, deeply, profoundly connected. You might remember me saying at the core of Hinduism, Atman is Brahman. We are all God. We are all the One God. Many faces, many ways of being, All One. Our separateness is an illusion.

Ahimsa is the recognition that all life is connected, all life is sacred. It's a practice of non-violence, non-killing. Gandhi went further in creating the term *satyagraha* which means Soul-Force or Truth-Force or Love-Force. It speaks to the recognition of our unity and the necessity for non-violence as an active embodiment of Truth. It is powerful. It is Power Itself. It's a knowing that violence is a sign of brokenness and non-violent resistance is an insistence on Truth, an insistence on the power of the Truth of our Oneness.

In speaking of Gandhi, the 20<sup>th</sup> century American contemplative Thomas Merton wrote, "Gandhi's nonviolence was not simply a political tactic which was supremely useful and efficacious in liberating his people.

On the contrary, the spirit of nonviolence sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself. The whole Gandhian concept of nonviolent action and *satyagraha* is incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved." <sup>i</sup>

Non-violence is the consequence of inner unity. Violence is the consequence of inner brokenness. *Satyagraha* doesn't allow for enemies, but for love to take over, to be patient with falsity, to create a mirror for wrong to recognize itself and reconcile with right.

Traditional Unitarianism taught that God is One. Unitarians introduced the radical notion that life is not divided, that we are wildly, radically interconnected. They understood the source of our existence to be singular. Unitarian – one god – not Trinitarian – three gods – and they extended that concept to include all of life. We've codified it in our 7<sup>th</sup> Principle. And the Universalists believed that, aside from being unified, we are blessed, we are saved. Every single one of us. Every person on the planet, enemies included. Regardless of how wrong or violent, everyone is saved.

There are ways in which this theology seems obvious or irrelevant (who talks about salvation anymore?) but there are ways in which it is still radical. Everyone is saved. Everyone is loved. Everyone is good. The husband who beats his wife, the police officer who shoots an unarmed teen, the government official who drops bombs on civilians on foreign soil- they are all saved. They are all from the same Source. We are all connected. We are all saved.

We live in this world of violence, a world not connected to Truth. We live without a sense of our deep connections or that love is a more powerful force than hate.

Love, practiced, cannot be overcome. But practicing love is a difficult task. If I love my adversary, it is evidenced by my willingness to be taught by them. It's evidence by my acceptance in their full humanity, rather than my reduction of them to cruelty or incompetence or narcissism or greed or just plain stupidity. If I love them, I am not seeking to outwit or out-do them in some way, but to enter sincere dialogue. The power of love is that it witnesses to truth, not self-righteousness.

If a principle of nonviolence rather than a culture of violence was the American way, I believe Michael Brown would be alive today.

I have police officers in my family. I know that they are trained to assume everyone is a danger, that the way they stay alive is to take charge and stay suspicious. One of the results of that training is the creation of a clearly delineated in-group. There has to be someone you trust, so other officers and their families become the tribe and everyone else is potentially dangerous. I read clearly what my cousin was writing about Michael Brown on Facebook. He wasn't part of the tribe. Officer Darren Wilson was. When Darren Wilson saw Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson walking down the middle of the street, he recognized them as being a danger, the kind of danger he was armed and trained to handle. He ordered them out of his way. He fought with them when they didn't comply. He chased them when they ran and he shot Michael Brown six times because that's what he's trained to do.

Police officers and any citizen who desires can have a gun for protection. The US has the highest guns per capita than any country on the planet. For every 100 people, there are 90 legal guns. Number two is Serbia with 58 for every 100 people. Anyone in this country who thinks they are unsafe, can purchase a firearm.

There's an issue of racism going on with the Michael Brown case and with many shooting deaths. White people in power killing black people not in power, often teenagers. Racism and militarism and violence in our streets and violence we bring to other streets- these things are all connected. We are afraid. We use violence when we are afraid.

The practice of nonviolence challenges us not to be afraid. It offers us the radical and wonderful idea that we are one people from one Source. It calls us to love our enemy, our adversary. When they are walking in the middle of the street or engaging behavior we find offensive or unjust or even when they attack us. It calls us to Truth.

In the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, "Sooner or later all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace... If this is to be achieved, man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love."<sup>ii</sup>

May we all find the Truth of our profound connectedness; May we all find the Truth of the power of Love.

---

<sup>i</sup> Gandhi on Nonviolence, New Directions, New York, 1964.

<sup>ii</sup> Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, Glasgow, 1964