

Punching Nazis

A sermon by William McEvoy

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On Inauguration Day 2017, Alt-right, white nationalist leader Richard Spencer was doing an interview on the street in Washington DC with an Australian TV news show. A masked man ran up to him and punched him in the face. Because of the fortunate timing of this attack, the footage from the punch quickly became a viral video on the internet.

Much fun was had with this video – it ended up on hundreds of memes, social media users set the video to music including Bruce Springsteen’s Born in the USA and the soundtrack to Hamilton. In many ways, it was a fantasy come true, watching a white nationalist, someone who has spewed racist, hateful words at Alt-Right rallies around the country, get his comeuppance in the form of a right hook to the chin. And on video no less.

I get it. I understand the satisfaction one might initially feel at this display. It feels like justice is being done. It feels like this man got what he had coming to him. It feels right.

Now as the discussion of this continued among my friends both in person and on the internet, the question arose – is it okay to punch a Nazi? Is it okay to counter hateful speech with physical violence? And as the days went by, I saw some of my friends, my progressive, Unitarian Universalist, and even my seminarian colleagues show differing degrees of support for the idea of punching Nazis.

And that puzzled me a bit. Because these were people that I knew were otherwise against violence. They supported Black Lives Matter. They tended to be anti-war. They would speak about using non-violent communication. But here they were on Facebook, Twitter and in personal conversations, saying sometimes, it was okay to punch someone, that some words went beyond the pale and could only be answered by violence.

I have a guiding principle that I use to initially measure most situations. It’s called the Non-Aggression Principle, and it simply states “The initiation of force to achieve one’s ends is immoral.” Let me say that again, the initiation of force to achieve one’s ends is immoral.

So it’s not a totally non-violent principle, it doesn’t in any way keep someone from defending oneself, what it essentially does is say the same thing our parents taught us when we were young, what we teach our own children. You don’t hit, you don’t push, you don’t grab, you don’t use force to get your way. You ask. You talk. Maybe you argue, maybe you cry and stamp your feet. We teach two wrongs don’t make a right.

And if someone says something bad or hurtful, you don’t hit that person. It’s what I was taught, and I’ll bet you were taught it too. The saying goes, “sticks and stones will break your bones but

names can never hurt you” and while the second part of that saying isn’t accurate, names can hurt you, they can wound you deeply. But I haven’t heard anyone amend the statement to “names can hurt you so go punch the guy in the face.” We wouldn’t say that. We wouldn’t teach our kids that. We don’t teach our kids that.

Sometimes, people will make the argument that somehow the rules change when we become adults, that there are situations that transcend the morality of the schoolyard, that allow us to do these things we tell our kids they can’t. This seems to be what the people advocating punching Nazis are doing.

I don’t see it. If it’s important enough to teach our children, it’s important enough to strive for as adults.

I don’t find much support for this initiation of force in our Unitarian Universalist principles either. Our first principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. There’s little in the way of equivocation there. If you’re a person, your worth and dignity are inherent – it can’t be denied, it can’t be taken away.

Now I want to note here though that we affirm the worth of a person, we do not extend those values to ideas. Not every idea has inherent worth. Not every idea deserves equal consideration. Some ideas, like those of racist white supremacists like Richard Spencer, deserve derision, deserve ridicule, deserve condemnation. Their ideas deserve banishment to the trash heap of history.

But the person? No. We don’t put people in the trash heap. We don’t throw people away. As Unitarian Universalists, we don’t deride the poor, we don’t ridicule those suffering from addiction nor do we condemn those with mental illness. We regularly advocate that our society not throw away people who have committed crimes. And we are right to do this. These people have inherent worth and dignity and these are noble stances we take, and which we often back with actions.

I would argue though, that these are the easy moral choices. It is not that big a stretch to uphold the worth and dignity of these people, who are often in their situation through little fault of their own. No, the challenge comes when we’re called to affirm the worth and dignity of those who seem to actively make a choice to separate themselves, who advocate for ugly ideas. We look at them and say “They chose to be hateful! Give them what they ask for!!! Hate them!

No.

No, no, no, a thousand times no. Though you’ve broken your vows a thousand times, come, come whoever you are. This is our Universalist heritage speaking. A heritage that said that everyone will get into heaven, that even the worst of us, our Richard Spencers, our Josef Stalins and our Adolf Hitlers, will eventually get into heaven, kicking and screaming maybe, but they’ll get in.

Now many of us don't hold our Universalist predecessors belief in a heavenly afterlife, but that doesn't let us drop the idea of universal salvation, that everyone is worthy of heaven, worthy of dignity. Even Richard Spencer.

No, punching our enemies, forcing them to be silent, hating them, those are the easy choices. And for a time it feels like justice is being done. It feels like they got what was coming to him. It feels right. But when we do these things we become our enemy. When good people take on the tactics of evil, take on the actions of evil, no matter how good their intentions, they are doing evil.

Consider what the philosopher and historian James Carse says about evil. He says "Evil is never intended as evil. Indeed, the contradiction inherent in all evil is that it originates in the desire to eliminate evil."¹ Now if you think about the evil done in this world, it's almost always done in the name of good. We may not agree with their sense of good, but they're convinced of it. No one is the villain of their own story, many people see themselves as the hero.

There's almost always a utopian vision at the end of evil ideas. The impetus of evil can often be broken down to "If people would just stop being different from me, the world would be perfect." It's this idea, which the best of us have had at our worst times, that propels evil in this world.

But it's an idea, and ideas don't get defeated by punches, they get defeated by better ideas. And the way we convey ideas is by talking. And not by talking to each other, to people who agree with us, in our echo chamber. By going out and talking to the people who hate. To the people who have these awful ideas.

Daryl Davis is an African American 58-year old blues musician with an interesting hobby. He talks to members of the Ku Klux Klan, eventually convincing many of them to leave that organization. Here's the story of his first encounter.²

"I just happened to be, in 1983, the only black guy in this country band and consequently the only black guy in many of the places where we played," Davis said.

One place was the Silver Dollar Lounge in Frederick, Maryland. After a performance there a white man stopped me as he walked off the stage.

"And he says, 'You know I really like your all's music.' I said, 'Thank you,' I shook his hand...I don't drink but I went back to his table and I had a cranberry juice with him," he recalled.

"Then he makes the remark when the waitress brings my cranberry juice, he clinks the glass and cheers me and says, 'You know this is the first time I ever sat down and had a drink with a black man,'" he continued. "Now I'm thinking, 'Wow what's going on here? This guys really having a night of firsts.' And I said, 'Why?' Again I was naïve and I wasn't trying to be facetious."

"He stared down at the table top and didn't answer me and he had a friend with him and he goes, 'Tell him, tell him, tell him,'" he continued. "I said, 'Tell me,' and finally he says, 'I'm a member of the Ku Klux Klan.'"

This encounter set Mr. Davis on a mission, one that he's pursued for over 30 years. He finds and talks to members of the Klan. That's all he does. He goes to where they are, even to Klan rallies and gatherings, and starts conversations. He talks to them. Gets to know them, and more importantly, let's them get to know him. And in the course of those conversations, he asks why they hate him. And more often than not, by the time he asks that question, they don't hate him.

Over the years many of them, 40 – 50, have renounced their memberships in the Klan, including Scott Shepard, a former grand dragon, or chapter leader. Many of these "reformed racists" give Mr. Davis their Klan robes, which he keeps as a "trophy" of his win.

Now this, to me, is the way to go. But I want to hold up something Mr. Davis does that is key to his success in this mission of his – he goes to them. He deliberately takes the first step, he puts himself in uncomfortable and even dangerous situations just to talk. I think that that's a lot braver than running up to someone and punching them in the face. I think it's a lot more effective too.

It certainly isn't the only answer to hate – it would be a very slow process were we to depend on that alone. But most of the methods that are going to be successful are based on this idea – to engage the people who have these hateful ideas and to counter them with better ideas.

This is why gay marriage swept over the nation in a short two years, because the idea that marriage was only between a man and a woman was challenged openly, was questioned, was countered, and when people holding that position were confronted with people they knew, their opposition was dropped.

The answer to hateful words is more words, it's better words, it's louder words. The best way to fight hate is with love.

In Romans 12:20 Paul says "'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.'" This is the verse I alluded to in the story earlier. In the next verse he implores us to overcome evil with good. These enemies are hungry, they're starving for good ideas. Give them some jelly beans.

But also, go to where they are and talk to them. Now I'm not saying we should descend on KKK rallies and meetings of the alt-right, although I love the image of a sea of UU tie-dye surging over starched white Klan robes. But I know that in the course and aftermath of the 2016 elections, many connections between long time friends were severed. No longer invited to dinner, or unfriended on Facebook. We can reconnect to these people, we can reach out, we can talk to them and ask why. Ask why with an open, loving heart, and not an angry, closed fist. This is, I think, the UU way. This is, I think the best way.

I'd like to close with a quote from the Reverend Doctor Mark Morrison Reed, "The great insight of Universalism is that you cannot coerce people into loving one another. No one has ever or will ever draw true love out of another with punishment...Behind this is a simple truth: in being loved we learn to love. Those who are loved will in turn love others."

¹ Finite and Infinite Games, James P. Carse, Free Press, 2013

² "How One Black Blues Musician Convinced Dozens of KKK Members to Quit" by Caitlin Burke, CBN News, January 15, 2018; accessed February 16, 2018; <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2016/july/how-one-black-blues-musician-changed-25-members-of-the-kkk>



William McEvoy, 2018

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