

Can Love Trump Hate?

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This election year has seriously challenged this Unitarian's efforts to live out our first principle: "To affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Even during the primaries when I was feeling the Bern, I managed to view Hillary with respect even though I agreed more fully with my candidate's positions on the issues and trusted him to follow through. I managed to do this even when some Hillary supporters, who are my friends, disparaged him and me for daring not to support her pre-ordained right to be president. I managed this even when it was confirmed that the game was rigged just as Bernie's supporters had long believed. Of course it was. Those in power have never given it up easily.

But now we are in Act Two of the election. It is an act like I have never seen before. I have never been presented with a candidate for president that I truly despise and that is saying something. I was hardly a fan of Nixon, Reagan, Bush I, or W. I disagreed fiercely with their policies and practices, but I can't say I ever despised them, just what they did to my country. But I do despise Donald Trump. I'm not bragging. It's just true.

All the world's religions agree as to what it means to be a good person. It means having integrity, to be honest, and above all to be compassionate towards other people. None of us are always good at all three all of the time and politicians are no different, but Donald Trump isn't good at any of them, apparently ever.

Before going further I want to apologise for letting Trump pollute this sacred space again. If you are like me, you are grateful to the Rio Olympics for breaking up the constant stories about Trump's latest outrageous statement on your Facebook newsfeed. I can't wait for this election to be over. I have no illusions that it will end hearing about or from him, but I do hope the world can return to having a life again. Cute videos of kittens will be a welcome relief. But I do have concerns about what kind of life it will be.

I equate this election with 9/11. The world did not react well to those planes flying into the World Trade Center. From Osama Bin Laden's sick perspective it was a complete success, not because of the horror of that day, but because of our reaction to it. Bush's choice to respond by declaring a War on Terror instead of treating the act as the crime against humanity it was has led to two never-ending wars, more terrorism, ISIS, the death of countless innocents, a refugee crisis in Europe, a world willing to give up freedom for a false sense of security, distrust between ethnic groups, hatred of those who don't worship the same as we do, and the rise of Donald Trump and the politics of hate.

Philosophers talk about a "moral atmosphere." It is like the air we breathe, only it is the values and attitudes we breathe in that shape our behaviours and relationships. It is no less important to life than oxygen. It is strongly shaped by those we accept as leaders. A recent high profile example is the ousting of Roger Ailes at Fox News for sexual harassment. Apparently he was not only guilty of personal sexual misconduct, he created an atmosphere that made that behaviour acceptable and prevalent for over twenty years within the organisation. It works in a positive way as well. When the

leader demonstrates integrity, honesty and compassion, the behaviours of those in the organisation begin to reflect those values. We are seeing some of that happening within and beyond the Catholic Church since Francis became Pope.

Donald Trump is polluting the moral atmosphere, not just in the US. It is a global climate change. I've had three conversations with Kiwis who were white males between 35 and 50 who, learning I was an American, were eager to express their support and admiration for Trump. The Guardian pointed out this week that there is a hardening of attitudes in New Zealand as reflected in our normalising child poverty. Is this any different than Trump normalising all Mexicans as criminals and rapists or all Muslims as terrorists? There was a time in our history when we would have been universally outraged that one third of our children live in poverty. In fact, in the moral atmosphere created by former leaders, it never happened. Donald Trump's hateful, bullying, name-calling, violent rhetoric is not unique to him, but he has taken it to new levels to leverage our worst prejudices, fears and hatreds for political gain. It is language that shreds, not tears, the social fabric. A tear can be mended, shredding can't be. The damage he is doing will not be undone by his much hoped for defeat.

I grew up in a moral atmosphere that warned me to be careful of my speech: Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary? Would you like it said of you? I had not yet studied world religions so I didn't know that my parents were paraphrasing people like the Hindu saint Sai Baba, who taught that we should ask ourselves four things before we speak: "Is it kind? Is it necessary? Is it true? Does it improve upon the silence? If the Donald remained silent for the rest of the campaign, his poll numbers would probably improve, but it is not going to happen as long as he has a Twitter account. So he is 0 for 4.

Meanness has become pervasive in our western culture. Being mean has become a form of entertainment to be laughed at. You only have to read the comments section on the Internet following a story or opinion piece. I rarely do anymore. It brings back painful memories of the hundreds of nasty comments I used to get after I would put up a new billboard while at St Matthew-in-the-City. Donald Trump is making that meanness legitimate. One teacher recently said, "We've seen Donald Trump act like a 12-year old and now 12-year olds are acting like Donald Trump telling their Muslim and Hispanic classmates that Trump will deport them.

But the most disturbing thing about Donald Trump is that he has become my spiritual guru. He is forcing me to examine my own values. Do I really believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person? Do I permit myself to footnote the exceptions?

John Donne is known best for being the renaissance poet who warned, "do not ask for whom the bell tolls," but his day job was being a preacher. He once explained, "I preach to myself and allow others to listen." I have often told people that of course I don't practise what I preach, that's why I'm preaching it. It is my way of holding myself to the standards and values I say I believe in. So today's sermon is in that mode, and I invite you to listen to my confession if it seems relevant to you.

Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus, once said, "When no one is acting like a human being, you must act like a human being." In the increasingly polluted moral

atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being, I feel less and less sure about how to do that. Donald Trump as my spiritual teacher pushes all my buttons to figure out how to act as Hillel demands. I may have no control over what Donald Trump does and says—I'm not sure even he does—but I can control what I do. Doing so cannot be put off. It is about our survival, no less so than is global climate change.

A couple of sessions ago in our Adult Religious Education class on *Saving Jesus from Christianity* we heard a story about Mullah Nasrudin, a 13th century Sufi philosopher, trickster and wise man. He was often challenged to debates about his ideas. On one occasion a philosopher who opposed his ideas made an appointment to dispute with Nasrudin. He arrived at the appointed hour and found Nasrudin away from home. Nasrudin had completely forgotten their plan and was in a teahouse playing table games and telling stories with his friends. After waiting for quite awhile, the philosopher grew angry. Picking up a piece of chalk, he scrawled 'Stupid Oaf' on Nasrudin's door, and left in a huff. As soon as Nasrudin got home and saw this, he rushed to the philosopher's house. "I'm so sorry for not having been home! I completely forgot our appointment," he said. "Of course, I remembered the appointment as soon as I saw that you'd left your name on my door."

This story that gently chides the unkindness and judgment of his colleague by refusing to take offence, was an introduction to Jesus ministry of compassion. Jesus wasn't interested in teaching correct belief or a moral code. He was a proponent of authentic human relationships. For the Hebrews, compassion was the secret name for God. So, for them, to be compassionate was an expression of our divinity. In Latin, compassion means, "to suffer with," but the Hebrew and Aramaic words, translated as compassion in the Latin Bible, mean to be womb-like. Jesus was calling us to be compassionate like God is compassionate. He meant for us to be as nourishing, life giving; sustaining, as is the womb.

He didn't say we were to be this way just for the people we like. Not just for the people who agree with our beliefs and values. He said we were to be like this for everyone, and especially for people on the margins of society; for people who hate us; and yes, even for people we despise. He was calling us to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Compassion is how we do it.

Compassion can be easy when it is with someone with whom we can identify. It is not so easy with the stranger or someone who repels us. It is not something that we naturally feel universally. Being compassionate is something we choose to be. To some degree it is learned behaviour. Jesus mission was one that reminded us that when we call others a stupid oaf, we lose a portion of our humanity. To the degree we hate or despise another we degrade our humanity. When we choose not to give in to those impulses we create a crack in the wall between those whose inherent worth is not obvious and ourselves.

The crack in the wall is the place where people absolutely refuse to see each other as evil. To step into this place where we choose to see the other as good is essential to changing this division. To step into that crack is where we need and must choose to live, if we are to make any changes. For that crack is holy space.

To find that crack, that opening where we can see each other fully, we need to ask one simple question of the other and that is this....“what hurts?” In asking, we are no longer required to be right or wrong. It doesn't require us to agree. Asking “what hurts” of each other reveals what is at stake. It helps us to understand our beliefs and feelings in human terms

If we are to heal the moral atmosphere, we must create safe space so we can speak together honestly and relate to each other with dignity. Asking, “what hurts,” allows us to see what is causing our family members or co-workers to side with things that don't make sense to us. It opens us up to seeing their vulnerability and fears in a much more human way.

Educator and author Parker Palmer calls us to cultivate an understanding of the value of otherness. We grow the most in our lives, not by preaching to the choir but stepping outside of our tribes and realising that “us and them” does not mean “us versus them.” Palmer says that this requires us to cultivate a supple heart. A supple heart is one that can bend, receive and give without brittleness. When we refuse to listen, when we demand that others change their way of thinking to our own, then that is a brittle heart.

By asking “what hurts?” we allow the other to show us their pain, to show us why they hold to beliefs that are so different than ours. It is the one thing that allows us to find truth as best we can. If we only listen to OUR hurts we can never truly know the other.

Our efforts individually to be compassionate matter, but that compassion can only truly change the atmosphere when we act in community. It was not Jesus' compassionate acts and words that made him a threat to political authorities. It was the compassionate community he inspired. It was a community that poured out love to others giving life, nourishing life; sustaining life. It was a fearless community that trumped hate with love. They refused to let fear divide them. They learned that compassion had power. It had the power to transform and heal. It is the kind of community we seek to be.

On Thursday, September 1 at 6:00 pm at St Matthew-in-the-City we can practise that kind of compassion. There will be a People's Assembly where candidates for mayor and Auckland Council will be asked their views on housing, transport and the Living Wage. Its success in convincing our future leaders to show compassion to the working poor will be largely dependent on whether or not enough people come to show them that Aotearoa New Zealand has a supple heart. Compassion requires everyone to have at least a Living Wage. Let us act like human beings and create a life-giving atmosphere. We will all breathe easier.

So be it.