



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Tearing down, building up: two sides of one door

Clay Nelson © 30 August 2020

We all have buttons that can be pushed. When my mother's Alzheimer's had reached the stage where she no longer knew who I was, I teased her, "Why haven't you forgotten how to push my buttons?" I'm not sure what happened but she had a moment when all her synapses were functioning normally. She smiled as she explained, "Because I installed them."

Other than the ones Mum installed, there are a few others that when pushed can make me livid or leave me in despair or both. One is vandalism and the other is callous disregard for others or ourselves. They are of course related. They both tear down. One destroys or disfigures the context in which we live, be it our neighbourhood or the planet. The other crushes or scars our spirit of life. I know when both buttons were installed. Or perhaps, I know when I was first aware of their existence is more exact.

In a previous, pre-ministerial life, I acquired a tertiary degree devoted to understanding and promoting healthy human and community development. This resulted in my being recruited to run a university residence hall complex, housing 1000 students. It was an experiment by the university to see if residence life could be integrated into the educational mission of the university. To test the idea thoroughly they gave me the four worst dorms on campus. The technical term to describe them was a "zoo". They had a history of racial unrest, rampant drug and alcohol abuse, and property destruction. The campus police were there so often they should have moved in. Clearly it was not a place that promoted learning or community.

I had just turned 24 and was blissfully ignorant. Clueless about how hard it was going to be, I set to the task of building an educational community out of chaos. When I left four years later: mission accomplished. But during that time, it felt like I was constantly trying to sweep the waves breaking on the beach back into the sea before they could wash away our sand castle still under construction. There are always a few who would rather tear down than build up.

I do understand the appeal of tearing down. From the time we could first build a tower out of blocks, just so we could laugh while knocking it down, we have been fascinated by tearing down. I'm still amazed to watch a large building being imploded to make way for new construction. I know the satisfaction of taking a sledge hammer to a wall to renovate the space. What I don't find appealing is tagging a newly painted wall or an

election hoarding or public art. It has no purpose other than destruction and degradation and it pisses me off. I do understand that the attraction is that there is no delayed gratification. Leaving a nasty comment on Twitter or Facebook only takes a moment, but it is out there immediately, undermining any possible civil discourse. With little effort it adds to the pool of meanness in the world that seems to be growing ever bigger and deeper.

You might wonder what has taken my musings down this dark path? Well, it has been a rough week. Several events have weighed on me. Listening to the victim impact statements of the survivors of the massacre in the mosque a year ago last March, opened the door. It only took one hate-filled person to kill 51 people and injure 40 others, tearing asunder their families, a city and a country.

It was not helped by following the travesty called the Republican National Convention. I can only read about it. I can't bring myself to watch. Stephen Colbert couldn't either, justified not doing so by saying, "Why should we watch their reality show if it doesn't reflect our reality?" This is the first one I haven't watched since 1956 when Eisenhower was nominated for a second term. I wonder what he would think of his grand old party now? No elephants to be seen, only sycophants. Or is that "psychophants"? I knew Trump was a vandal, but I thought the checks and balances provided in the US Constitution would mitigate the worst of his actions. I did not foresee that he was willing to tear it up to preserve power. Nor did I anticipate that his base and all but one of the Republican senators would cheer as he did so. The failure of five of the nine Supreme Court justices to hold him accountable feels like the nail in American democracy's coffin. It took 240 years to build a more democratic union, albeit still imperfect, and only four years to topple it like a toddler's tower of blocks.

These two alone were enough to push my buttons big time, then I watched a video of a policeman, a Trump supporter, paralyse Jacob Blake, an unarmed black man, by shooting him seven times in the back while he was looking after the welfare of his three children in the back of his vehicle. His crime? Being black. Never mind feeling pushed, I felt crushed by those buttons.

Such events compressed into a week make me more glad than usual that I have made New Zealand my home, but those damn buttons are here too. May I never have to endure another election during a pandemic. After surviving the first wave and enjoying some sense of normalcy for 102 days because of an extraordinary level of unity devoted to eliminating it, we can see cracks in the consensus as we deal with a second wave. Because power is at stake, blaming and dividing is deemed justifiable. Comments by a few opinion makers, some members of Parliament and many on social media grow increasingly nasty. These are Trump-like tactics and it should give us all pause. They are intended to tear down not

build up, moving me to tears at the idea of enduring 48 more days until the election.

It is the task of every preacher to offer at least a smidgen of good news when our spirit is being sucked into a black hole. My word of comfort is that tearing down is necessary to new life. A compost heap is an example. Before being used to nourish next year's garden, organic matter needs to be broken down first. Like a swinging door, tearing down is one side and building up is the other. It is only when the tearing down side of the door can be pushed is there a problem. The door needs to swing both ways as the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us: "There is time for every purpose... A time to build up, a time to break down".

If we want to build up racial harmony, we have to tear down structural and institutional racism. If we want to build up a clean, green planet we need to tear down dependence on fossil fuels. If we want to build a world without poverty we need to tear down globalisation and neoliberal policies that depend on cheap labour. You get my point.

It can be done, but not quickly. It can easily take generations. Patience, perseverance and passion are required. It can be wearing, but we are here together to encourage and support and strengthen our resolve to embody our seven principles necessary for building up. Kia kaha.