

KIDS, GUNS, AMERICA AND NON-VIOLENCE

A Sermon for Martin Luther King Sunday

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

I shared this true story seven years ago. I share it again this Martin Luther King Sunday, because it feels appropriate, relevant, and real for this Martin Luther King Sunday of 2013.

I am standing on the steps of a church, not unlike the one in which I grew up. “They are coming,” someone shouts. “O my God,” whispers the woman next to me. “I can’t believe they are actually here, on our street!” Hisses and boos begin.

And there they are, rounding the corner: thirty-five women and men. They are surrounded by police cars and police motorcycles. Sirens scream. Troopers on foot push back the crowd. Someone spits. A rotten cabbage flies down from a roof. A beer bottle smashes in the street. It is 1992. This is the first time a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender group has marched in Boston’s St. Patrick’s Day Parade. Next to me, on the steps of the church, a priest yells, “Shame, shame, shame!” and turns his back. Others follow the example.

Moved by all I cannot change, I look away. And then I see them, near the doors of the church: a young mother and her child. She bends down to pick up a rock. She puts it into the hand of her five-year-old son. In a loud voice she says: “Throw it, throw it hard! Kill the fags!”

I often think of that mother. I wonder what would have happened that day if she had put a gun in his hand instead of a rock? I often think of that little boy, who is probably twenty-six years old this spring. I wonder if anyone ever took the time to tell him about the worth and dignity of all human life? I wonder if he grew up filled with hate, or if someone taught him to stand on the side of love? I wonder if he played with guns while he was growing up? I wonder if he honed his marksmanship with video games? I wonder if he watched his father head off to hunt on weekends? I wonder if there is a gun in his house? I wonder if someday he will kill me because I am a fag.

The Rev. Dana McLean Greeley, a Unitarian Universalist minister, once wrote: “We need faith in people, in their dignity and their potential and their good intentions . . . faith such as will bring out the best in them and the best in us also.”

Can we have faith in people when, in their hands, they hold guns? Can we have faith in our children when, in their hands, we place guns, and teach them how to hate?

It is estimated that eight children and teens are killed in America every day by firearms. It is estimated that seventy-two adults die in America every day by gun violence. That is

29,000 sisters and brothers, daughters and sons, mothers and fathers, wives, husbands, lovers, and partners. 29,000 lives ended every year by a gun in a hand. (Note: This number includes homicide, suicide, accidental death, and justified homicide.)

And still, *still*, our Unitarian Universalist faith teaches the inherent worth and dignity of all people. While many religions believe that humanity is inherently evil and stained by sin, our proud and ancient faith proclaims that each person contains the spark of divinity within them. While many faiths teach original sin, we look for original blessing. We teach that no one needs to be saved from on high. We believe that the innate goodness of each person's soul can be cultivated and nurtured here on earth.

Is this radical belief in humanity a great spiritual insight? Or, is our Unitarian Universalist faith hopelessly naïve? In affirming the inherent dignity and worth of people, the inherent goodness of people, are we ignoring a history of human butchery: two world wars: the genocide of millions in Armenia, Europe, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, the Sudan? Are we turning a blind eye to today's bloodshed in Syria? Are we ignoring centuries of colonialism and imperialism? Are we ignoring so many hands holding so many guns?

Geoffrey Canada, a celebrated author and expert in youth violence, grew up in the harsh realities of the Bronx. Yet, he writes: "As an adult I have heard many times the debate about whether violence is part of the human makeup or a learned behavior. There is no way that I can buy the theory that humans have some genetic predisposition to violence. I know better. I remember clearly the time in my life that I knew nothing of violence and how hard I worked later to learn to become capable of it." (*Fist, Stick, Knife Gun*, p. 21)

Geoffrey Canada, and so many behavioral scientists, believe that we teach our children how to be violent, that we actually destroy their natural goodness through acculturation. We teach them by rationalizing certain behaviors. We teach them through their play, through their entertainment, through what is permitted in the home and the school, and through the intrinsic values they see acted out around them.

Geoffrey Canada writes: "America has long had a love affair with violence and guns. It's our history, we teach it to all of our young. The [American] Revolution, the "taming of the West," the Civil War, the World Wars, and on and on. Justice, righteousness, freedom, liberty—all tied to violence. Even when we try to teach about non-violence, we have to use the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., killed by the violent. I'm sorry, America, but once you get past the rhetoric what we really learn is that might does make right." (Ibid.)

This American ideal of justice by violence and retribution is, in part, a religiously created ideal. (Now, let me be clear. My following statements are not Anti-Christian, but rather an observation about the undergirding religious foundations of this country.) This country was founded, in part, on conservative Christian values. Those values are the same values perpetuated in conservative Christian, Jewish and Islamic images of a wrathful

God. What happens in a culture that worships a God who demands bloody punishment for wrongs? What happens in a culture that bows before a God of Divine retribution?

These are words from the Bible: “Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.” “He smote all. . . with the edge of the sword.” “If you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is a servant of God, an avenger who carried out God’s wrath on the wrong doer.” If religion teaches that we should model our behavior on God, then is it any wonder violence is commonplace?

Spurred on by this core religious value, justice by violence has infused the popular culture we devour daily. Noted film critic A.O. Scott comments: “Revenge has been a staple of American films for most of their history, but lately it has begun to seem like the only thing our movies (or perhaps our movie audiences) can understand . . . [it] occupies a special, even a central place in the mythology of the United States. [It is] what literary critic Richard Slotkin calls the American tradition of regeneration through violence.” (*New York Times*, May 2, 2004, AR 24)

Just five days ago, on January 15th, the conservative leaning Culture and Media Institute analyzed the top 5 grossing movies from last weekend (including Oscar nominees “Django Unchained” and “Zero Dark Thirty”) and found that “185 people were killed, shot, stabbed, beaten, burned alive, and blown up in 65 scenes depicting violence.” (<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/study-185-victims-violence-weekends-412686>)

If these moving graphic images are our society’s scripture, is it any wonder so many of our children play with violence? They are, after all, practicing the religion of the righteous.

But there is a great price for placing guns, even toy guns, in our children’s hands.

One classic study shows that college age students who were simply exposed to the *sight* of a gun acted more aggressively towards peers than those who were not shown a gun (Berkowitz, L. & LePage, A. (1967). Weapons as aggression-eliciting stimuli. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 7, 202-207). In another classic study, called the “Bo-Bo Experiment,” a researcher watched children who played in a room filled with many toys, including Bo-Bo, one of those blow-up “sock-it” clowns that bounce back when you punch them in the nose. Researchers found that if an adult hit Bo-Bo, the kids would follow suit. If the adult didn’t hit Bo-Bo, then the kids were less likely to hit (*Transmission of Aggression Through Imitation of Aggressive Models*, Albert Bandura, Dorothea Ross, and Sheila A. Ross [2] (1961), First published in *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 63, 575-582).

Harvard researcher and professor Deborah Prothrow-Stith writes: “It matters what we say to our children. It matters how we are entertained. It matters when we watch superheroes solving problems violently.” (“Dueling and Youth Violence,” April 30, 2007)

According to the American Psychiatric Association: "The debate is over . . . the one overriding finding in research . . . is that exposure to . . . portrayals of violence increases aggressive behavior in children." (Web site for American Psychiatric Association, Psychiatric Effects of Media Violence)

This violence is amplified when we allow our children and grandchildren to play violent video games. Violent video games literally train our children out of their humanity. And this is how. I've shared before in sermons that "at the end of World War II, US army researchers discovered that our boys overseas had a terrible 'kill rate.' Army research showed that in World War II, seventy-five to eighty percent of the American soldiers in combat did not fire at another human being. "That means that for every 100 soldiers who got a clear shot at the enemy, only 15 [to 20] actually fired." The US military "concluded they had to find some way to overcome this human impulse against killing. They turned to something called 'operant conditioning,' a process that, over hundreds of repetitions, conditions a person to do just as the trainer wants - without thinking, simply as a reflex." "In the US military, the operant conditioning took the form of ever-more sophisticated target practice," taking the thought out of killing. Round targets were replaced by "human silhouettes, then pop-up human forms." What was the result of this conditioning? "It helped raise U.S. military kill rates to 55 percent by the Korean War, and 90 percent by the war in Vietnam." (Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*)

Now, in today's high tech world, our soldiers train with realistic video simulations of combat. These are the exact same first person shooter video games our kids play at home and on line. What these violent video games do is reduce reaction time, reduce thinking time, so that when you perceive a threat, you act without thinking. Our children are being taught to react without taking time to think about what they are doing. That is how you get a high score: shoot instantly, react instantly. That is how you kill a young person's ability to reason and discern. That is how you kill a young person's access to their inherent goodness. That is how some young people will kill someone else.

Geoffrey Canada says this lack of reaction time, mixed with an increasingly easy access to guns, is complicating the violence of our times. In the past, young people would get in fights, using their fists. It is harder for a person to disassociate from the violence they are committing when they are feeling every impact their fists are making. Violence by fists takes time, it gives time for thinking, getting yourself back under control, and stopping before real damage is done. Fistfights give time for peer groups to stop it if it gets out of control. But now, easy access to guns means that fists are no longer the weapons of choice. Now, the act of violence can happen in an instant, it can happen from a distance, it can happen with no physical contact to awaken a human response.

So, the question for us as liberal religious people seems clear. What is it that we will choose to place into the hands, into the hearts, into the consciousness of our children?

In the weeks since the massacre in Newtown, as our nation began a long-needed discussion on gun control, access to munitions, and questions about mental health care for our young, many parents have approached me to ask questions about whether they should let their kids play with guns, play war, play Cowboys and Indians, and, most importantly, play violent video games. One frustrated parent (who gave me permission to quote them) exploded: “How can I stop my son from playing the video games he wants to play? All the kids do it. All his friends do it. It is what boys do. He’ll hate me if I say ‘no!’”

I’m not a parent, so perhaps it is easy for me to stand up here and pontificate. But I offer the response I offered a friend of mine several years ago when he wrestled with whether to let his kid play first person shooter video games. (I acknowledge it is a rather crude, gross and un-pastoral response.) But I say: “If your child wanted to go outside and play with piles of dog droppings—if your child, if your grandchild, wanted to play with piles of dog excrement—would you let him? Would you let her? Would you say: “That’s what kids do, I can’t stop them.” ***No you would not!*** Why are we so different when it comes to playing with guns and video games? Why are we so different when it comes to movies of destruction? Why are we so different when it comes to violent music lyrics? Why are we so different when it comes to access to firearms? Why are we so casual about what can kill the spirit and the goodness and the body?

Martin Luther King, Jr. devoted his life to a path of nonviolence that he believed would allow future generations—us—to choose life so that we and our children would live. In a May 4, 1966 speech entitled “Nonviolence: The Only Road To Freedom,” Martin Luther King, Jr., said: “This is no time for romantic illusions about freedom and empty philosophical debate. What is needed is a strategy for change. Violence creates more problems than it solves. Only a refusal to hate or kill can put an end to the chain of violence in the world and lead us toward a community where we can live together without fear. Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.”

In the Jewish scriptures, the 30th Chapter of Deuteronomy says: “See, I place before you Life and Death, Blessing and Curse. Choose life so that you and your children will live.”

I believe—our Unitarian Universalist faith believes—that sometimes, in order to say “Yes!” to life we must be willing to say “No!” to something else. Sometimes “No” is the greatest gift we can give our children. Sometimes “No” is the greatest gift we can give our world. Our Unitarian Universalist faith must have the courage to say “No!” “No, this is not acceptable.” “No, this is dangerous.” “No, we will not let our children be exposed to this.” “No, we will not endorse or support or participate in or vote for this.”

We must say to our children: “No, you belong to a different kind of religion, one that cares deeply about you and *everyone* who is alive. You are part of a wonderful web of life. And to harm any part of it, even in make believe—even in play—is to do something hurtful, something dangerous, something *wrong*.”

Placing this “No!” in a child’s outstretched hand is far better than placing there a rock, placing there a gun, placing there a violent video game, placing there the permission to play with death.

Blessed Be. Amen.

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