

Birmingham Lecture

Deepening Our Call

Madly, Truly, Deeply: Loving the Work

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Birmingham, Alabama

March 7, 2002

To love the work madly is to love it with passion borne from an ecstatic encounter with life's beauty. You minister because you have fallen in love with life with irrational fervor. You've seen the moon rise over the night ocean. You've watched an old man's face soften into a radiant smile that holds worlds of memory and awareness. You've felt how this existence we are inexplicably given is shot through with glamour -- with the glimmer of an incandescent presence. From the uncurling of the fern frond, with its spine like a seahorse, like a human fetus, like the arc of a galaxy's spiraling throw of fire, this earth, this universe, this multiverse has captured your heart and you answer with devotion. You will do anything so madly do you love it. No ritual of thanks, no life of committed service will ever fully satisfy your desire to make your whole life an act of praise.

To love the work truly is to love it stone cold sober, on the dullest day, when no mysterious fire burns at the core of things, but there is only this task, and the next one, and the people are petty, and the copy machine has broken down, and you wonder, "Is it really my job to keep everyone happy?" To love the work truly is to know that it matters, even when it doesn't feel like it matters, even when you can't see that it matters, and you worry that you are involved in a different kind of madness. Not the ecstatic kind of madness, but the static kind that keeps on keeping on, nevertheless, even with no observable results. You do this because at some moment you did see clearly and said yes. In full possession of your reason, you pledged yourself, to the work of ministry. And there was joy in that decision. Now, with fidelity to your own hour of high resolve, you labor to serve a religious community that is devoted to compassion and justice, even when it behaves badly, and forgets its own purpose, and is preoccupied with unimportant things. Your touchstone is true love that doesn't waver in the dull heat of noon because it remembers the nights of ecstatic fire.

To love the work deeply is to love it knowing you are not alone. You minister in the company of the saints. In your work, your preaching, your teaching, your advocacy for justice, your watch at the bedside, your witness in the struggle, your prayer -- in every act of ministry -- you join hands with those who have gone before, who did the same things, for the sake of life, for the sake of compassion, for the sake of justice. Their work was not completed in their lifetime. Yours won't be either. None of us saves the world alone. Only by joining our lives to the legacy of goodness, the generations of kindness and the heritage of courage, can our small gestures become part of the communion that everlastingly savors and saves life. The stupidity that squanders life for unimportant gains, that sacrifices it for unworthy causes, that ignores it in anesthetized bitterness always threatens to prevail. Yet always, there is the communion of saints that pushes against the tide, insists that life be revered, and labors that it might be so. Always. O Lord, let us be in *that* number when the saints go marching in.

Ecstasy, fidelity, communion --- these forms of love undergird the call to ministry, though even these words do not name all that moves any one of us into this life. It is a life that some of us sometimes wish we had never chosen, or wish had never chosen us. And on other days, it is a life that we feel lucky to

have. We know we are blessed beyond measure. On his deathbed, Josiah Bartlett wrote, "Ministry is the best seat in the theater of life." He gave thanks that he had been so fortunate as to have spent his life as a Unitarian Universalist minister. A few years back, Ray Manker gave the fifty-year address during Ministry Days. With sly delight, he organized the address by reviewing his FBI file, courtesy of the Freedom of Information Act. Ray, I'm sure I haven't got the details exactly right, so forgive me, but this is how I remember the record of your ministry, as documented by the FBI: 1940's conscientious objection to war; 1950's resistance to McCarthyism; 1960's civil rights, opposition to the war in Vietnam; 1970's abortion rights, gay rights, farm workers rights; 1980's nuclear freeze movement, the sanctuary movement; 1990's environmental justice, anti-death penalty activism, and on and on. I must admit I'd never thought of J. Edgar Hoover as one of St. Peter's underlings, dutifully recording faithful deeds in the book of life. But the Lord moves in mysterious ways her wonders to perform.

Listening to you, Ray, I wondered if my life record would be as faithfully courageous, committed, clear sighted and persistent as yours. Would I, like you, do this work madly, truly, and deeply? Would we together, in the fellowship of Unitarian Universalist ministry, do this work as madly, truly, and deeply?

Which brings us to here and now, to this moment of our gathering and this time in history. If we love madly, truly and deeply what is asked of us now? Will we rise to the calling? Go deeper in the work? Persist? What will hold us steady and inspire us to act boldly when we might otherwise dither, falter, avoid, miss the cues, resign ourselves?

The most immediate challenge is clear. We are living in the aftermath of a terrorist attack on the United States and the advent of war. Images of ashes linger for many of us, even when our eyes are closed. After September 11 the smoke rose for weeks from the smoldering heap of collapsed concrete and steel at ground zero, where nearly three thousand human lives were turned to ashes in one horrible hour.

Since then, similar images of rubble, dust, and smoke have greeted us in photographs from Afghan cities and towns, bombed in retaliation. The anguished faces of refugees in this country so weary of war, huddled in tattered tents against the winter cold jostle in our mind's eye alongside the faces of jubilant Afghans rejoicing at the defeat of the repressive and cruel Taliban. Our own anguish intermixed with their suffering and hope is almost more than the heart can hold.

Our ministries, in recent days, have taken shape in response to the tragedy of September 11. In the immediate aftermath our churches provided a space for people to come together to grieve and to talk. We have spoken from our pulpits to proclaim that terrorist crimes against humanity call out for justice-making. Some of us have asked our nation to see its own complicity in the rise of terrorism around the globe. We have raised money for relief efforts in Afghanistan. We have recognized the call upon us to foster greater respect and mutual understanding among non-Muslims and Muslims.

Our ministries have been thoughtful and bold, but our work is only beginning. We are facing a rising tide of war, an unfettered enthusiasm for vengeance, and tightened controls on dissent. What are we called to in this time? To approach this question, we need a wiser understanding of religiously sanctioned violence, a deeper awareness of how trauma affects human life, and a clearer grasp of what offers saving hope in the presence of violence.

Mark Juergensmeyer in his book, Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Terrorism, studies religious terrorists whom he finds represented in every major religious tradition on the planet. What religious terrorists all have in common is a view of the world as a site of cosmic struggle in which the forces of evil are threatening the forces of good. Their theology evolves in a context of injury or threat. Holy Warriors experience themselves as victims of an enemy's unjustified aggression and violence. Having been humiliated, they are fighting back, in order to restore honor for their people and pay back injustices. They believe their own death will bring glory to their family, will be honored among their

people, and will be pleasing to God. Acts of religious terrorism may not defeat the enemy – may not even have a military or political objective. Their meaning is religious: an act of faithful defiance of evil to declare one's devotion to God.

The religious terrorists who flew the planes into the world trade center operated with this kind of theology. The United States has been traumatized and families around the world are grieving because of people who believed that God desires the humiliation and destruction of enemies. We have been directly hit by the theology that says God saves through violence.

Such theology is not the purview of religious extremists alone. The idea that God saves through violence has been a core doctrine of Western Christianity for the past 1000 years. At the end of the 11th century Anselm of Canterbury formulated the theological idea that Jesus died on the cross to pay back God for the injury to God's honor caused by human sin. His theology, written to defend Christianity from Muslims and Jews, provided explicit justification for Christian Holy War. The first crusade, called in 1095 by Pope Urban the II, urged holy warriors to sacrifice their life just as Jesus gave his on the cross. The Pope promised that their noble deaths would merit the forgiveness of debts, and garner rewards to the slain soldiers' families. Inspired by a theology of sacrificial violence that justified the destruction of God's enemies as a holy act, Christian knights began murdering Jews in the Rhineland and Muslims in the East. From 1095 forward, Anthony Bartlett writes, "the holocaust became a possibility on European soil."

Renaissance humanism, the enlightenment, and liberal theology attempted to dethrone the bloodthirsty Christian God in the West, and replace him with the primacy of Reason. But too little seems to have changed. Now that Reason is our God we justify destruction of our enemies as reasonable.

Juergensmeyer explains that religious terrorists operate with a sense that they are

constantly at war, and that war has an appeal that we must face: "To live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated, and at what expense they have persevered. The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and eschatology and offers the reins of political control. Perhaps most important, it holds out the hope of victory and the means to achieve it. In the images of cosmic war this victorious triumph is a grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations. One does not easily abandon such expectations. To be without such images of war is almost to be without hope itself." (Juergensmeyer, 155)

Juergensmeyer was describing religious terrorists, but he might just as well have been describing the popular theology of our day. If public opinion polls are any measure, the God in whom the majority of U.S. citizens trust is the God who is on our side, who sanctions the destruction of our enemies, and executes justice through retaliation. In its December 24th issue, Time magazine's lead story celebrated how close the U.S. was to destroying Bin Laden. **PAYBACK TIME** the headline crowed in bold red letters. Meanwhile, at church, we lit candles and sang, "Silent Night."

Harvard laws professor Martha Minow counsels us not to be too quick to recoil from the passion for vengeance. She says, "Through vengeance, we express our basic self-respect. Vengeance is also the wellspring of a notion of equivalence that animates justice." (Minow, 10)

But vengeance has grave dangers and holds out false hopes of closure for those aggrieved by violence and injustice. Psychologist Judith Hermann reports, "people who actually commit acts of revenge, such as combat veterans who commit atrocities, do not succeed in getting rid of their post-traumatic symptoms; rather, they seem to suffer the most severe and intractable disturbances." (Quoted by Minow, 13) Martha Minow adds, "The core motive may be admirable but it carries with it potential insatiability. Vengeance ... can set in motion a downward spiral of violence."

We see such a spiral happening in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This week the New York Times reported : "Ariel Sharon, Israel's prime minister, has enunciated a stark vision for achieving peace. 'The aim is to increase the number of losses on the other side,' he said Monday. 'Only after they've been battered will we be able to conduct talks.' This strategy of peace through pain is the same one adopted by the Bush administration ... The strategy so far has brought only more pain." (James Bennet, "A Test of Wills: Deep Divide With Both Sides Seeming Only to Dig In," The New York Times, Wednesday, March 6, 2002).

Alfred North Whitehead observed that there are times when violence is a last resort in personal or national defense. But the most violence can do is stop something. It can stop a violent aggressor. But violence can never create. It can never console. It can never bring peace into being. It can never repair what has been lost.

It is important for us as Unitarian Universalists to remember that our religious heritage has consistently protested the image of God as a sanctioner of violence. When Hosea Ballou issued his treatise on the doctrine of the atonement in 1805 he objected to the God of violence who required the death of his son to save humanity. Universalism proclaims that violence does not save the world. Our hope, rather, is in the creative activity of love.

Love is the active, creative force that repairs life's injuries, and brings new possibilities into being. Love speaks out in the face of injustice and oppression, calling leaders to account when policies and practices are injuring people. Love tends the wounds created by injustice and evil and offers compassion in the presence of life's suffering. Love builds communities of inclusiveness and friendship that break through the boundaries of prejudice and enmity. Love embraces the goodness of this world and seeks paradise on earth, a heaven of mutual respect. Love generates life -- from the first moment of conception of a child, to the last moment when love creates a way for those who have died to be remembered with gratitude and tenderness. And in the deepest night, when our hearts are breaking, it is the discovery of a love that chooses unshakeable fidelity to our common humanity that renews us and redirects us to a life of generosity.

In this time of war, when violence is a rising tide, our calling is to love – madly, truly and deeply. Our calling is to witness to a deeper wisdom regarding how security can be created, and how the anguishing aftermath of human violence can be healed. We must speak as public theologians and religious critics who address the theology of war and offer an alternative.

Such speaking will not suffice if we are merely idealistic, innocent as doves. Love is more than idealism. It is wisdom. And we need to speak as wise serpents. Wise serpents know the human capacity for atrocities, cruelties, stupidities, idolatries, and short-sighted, self-serving strategies. They do not flinch in the presence of evil, but press further with penetrating questions.

Here are a few we should be asking:

What is the toll of civilian casualties in Afghanistan and why is this information so hard to find? The Progressive reported "the number of civilian casualties in the first nine weeks of the war at 3,767." (Reported in The Progressive, February 2002, p. 9). An eyewitness account reported in War Times described an Afghan family that had sought refuge in a farm 50 miles away from Kandahar. "One evening while they were sleeping in the barn, U.S. airstrikes killed 19 family members." A survivor described "the scene where they were running with their kids in their arms, dodging bullets left and right, while they had balls of fire falling down to the earth....These people were not Taliban supporters. They weren't Al Qaeda fighters. They were simple Afghans trying to stay safe in their own country." (Reported by Jung Hee Choi, "From One Ground Zero to Another," War Times, February 2002.) Is the U.S. killing of 3,767 civilians morally justified? If not, where is the moral voice of protest? What would it take for Unitarian

Universalist ministers to be such a voice?

How many people who look Middle Eastern have been detained in the U.S. by the police and are still in custody without being charged with a crime? What would it take for us to come to their defense?

Who are the professors, writers and activists on Mrs. Chaney's list of unpatriotic Americans? What steps can we take to counter the silencing of dissent?

Which non-violent movements for justice and equity in human affairs will become targets for infiltration and suppression sanctioned by the Homeland Securities act?

Who will benefit economically and politically from the present popular confidence in the necessity of war? What would it take for us to remember Martin Luther King's growing clarity about the relationship between war, racism and poverty? Can we look through the lens of what we learned in the 1960's when King said, "this widened war has narrowed domestic welfare programs, making the poor white and Negro bear the burdens." (Quoted in War Times, February 2002). Last month Bush "canceled a planned increase of \$200 million to help abused children because, it was said the government 'can no longer afford it.' Twenty job-training programs have been axed, and \$200 million cut from new public housing." At the same time, "Bush asked for an additional \$48 billion for the military (which surprised even the Pentagon), plus \$10.7 billion for stiffer border control." (Reported in War Times, February 2002) What will it take for us to be clear advocates against racism and poverty in our present context?

The events of our time call us to make a religious response – publicly, pro-actively, and persistently. What we do in this time must be done out of ecstatic love for life -- because we have seen life's beauty and goodness and know this world must be embraced with unshakeable loyalty. What we do in this time must be done with fidelity to our hours of highest resolve, even when the task at hand seems like it cannot hold against an overwhelming tide. And what we do in this time must be done in communion -- deeply rooted in our relationship to one another and to those who have gone before us. They are with us still -- those whom we remember with gratitude because when the forces of injustice were at their strongest they had the courage to stand against the tide, and against all odds, witnessed for the things that make for peace.

Theologies of redemptive violence too easily obscure the saving message of the world's best spiritual wisdom. In the presence of the theology of war which sacrifices the poor to benefit the privileged and offers false consolation to the bereaved, our calling is to speak and act theologically. We are to proclaim what is moral, what is just, what reverences life, what gives hope in the face of violence, what restores life when it has been fractured by human cruelty, what is worthy of our ultimate loyalty, what sustains us in the long night of pain, what connects us in right relationship to our neighbor, what saves the world.

When the saints go marching in, O Lord, let us be in that number whose good deeds were recorded in the book of life by the FBI. Let us love – madly, truly and deeply.

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