

## **Responding in Faith and Love**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 27, 2022**

There is a traditional Islamic tale about the power of kindness and forgiveness. The story focuses on the actions of the Prophet Muhammad. In his time, Muhammad was dedicated to spreading the word of God. Some followed his teachings while others treated him with disdain. Muhammad journeyed the same path day after day on the way to the mosque, and each time he traveled past one particular old woman, she taunted him while pelting him with garbage. Even when faced with such condemnation and disrespect, Muhammad never reciprocated the actions with anger or even annoyance. One day, while making his regular journey, Muhammad noticed the woman was not occupying her usual spot on the side of the road. He was curious and asked the woman's neighbor where she was. The neighbor informed Muhammad that the woman was at home, and very ill. Upon hearing this news, the Prophet asked permission to visit the woman who had treated him with such animosity. He entered her house, and the old woman immediately assumed he had come to her house to take revenge while she was in her weakened state. But that was not the goal of Muhammad, who was simply following the tenets of his faith. His God, Allah, instructed that if any Muslim encounters someone who is sick, they must offer to help, which is just what Muhammad offered this ailing woman. He came to care for her. Met with such kindness and unconditional love she understood him to be the Prophet of God, and accepted Islam as her faith. Muhammad acted in faith and love, and in doing so shifted a woman's worldview from one of disdain to one of love. Through meeting contempt and scorn with kindness and forgiveness, he widened his circle to include even the one who, in hate, showered him in garbage.<sup>1</sup>

When we widen our circles, it's not only those we are unfamiliar with who we are called to welcome in, but also those who we dislike, disagree with, or even feel contempt for. This is true community. And there are common obstacles to this. One, we are often sensitized towards binaries – good or bad, worthy of care or unworthy of even

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<sup>1</sup> One version: <https://www.al-islam.org/bilals-bedtime-stories-h-sheriff-s-alloo/kindness-and-forgiveness>

acknowledgement. Ancient Buddhist teachings remind us of the dangers of this binary, warning those of this faith to widen their understandings of those they encounter. Barbara O'Brien, student of Zen Buddhism, writes that dividing people into these two camps is a trap and allows people to justify doing harm to those deemed "bad."<sup>2</sup> Some binaries we face today are liberal versus conservative, and the many issues that stem from that. It also how we see individuals – a person as fully mean and angry versus their opposite – loving and kind. Binaries are seeds to actions of evil. In exploring the four Noble Truths of Buddhism, Buddhists understand suffering to be caused by "greed or thirst," but also the understanding of greed as based in the "delusion of an isolated, separate self." Separating ourselves from one another leads to suffering. Instead, we are called to understand all of humanity as deeply interconnected, each action and each person affecting the other.<sup>3</sup> What does it mean to see ourselves as separate from others? I wonder, can you think of a cantankerous person in your life, a person determined to foster anger and animosity? Determined to be right, them against the world. Is this person happy? For these reasons, and for the dangers that arise when any one person or group is seen as entirely bad, Buddhists are cautioned against this instinctive binary, and instead are called to see the world as a series of actions and reactions, all events the result of cause and effect.<sup>4</sup>

I think of perhaps the most common form of divisiveness we are faced with today – politics and the deep divisions we find ourselves in. Good on one side, bad on the other. No nuance. I observe the national harm these binaries create – the flames stoking the hate that led to the insurrection at our nation's Capitol. I observe the personal turmoil as well, creating rifts in families or friendships, or creating hateful assumptions about those we have never met. Whether politics or any other form of animosity, can we, instead of anger, meet these differences with curiosity? Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr wrote, "we must learn to live together as [siblings] or perish together as fools."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> O'Brien, Barbara. "Buddhism and Evil." Learn Religions, Aug. 27, 2020, [learnreligions.com/buddhism-and-evil-449720](https://www.learnreligions.com/buddhism-and-evil-449720).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> March 22, 1964, speech in St. Louis.

Zen teacher Taigen Leighton reflected on these Buddhist teachings after the September 11 terrorist attacks. In his teachings, in response to such horrors, he calls us to pay attention to the good and the bad around us and respond in good as we are able in each moment. The Buddhist idea of Karma, of cause and effect, means we take responsibility for our own actions, and calls us to a responsibility to act with good intent, in any way we can create a positive outcome. This is not, in Leighton's words, a "campaign against evil," but a basic acknowledgment of what is the right thing to do and focusing our actions on those basic assumptions.<sup>6</sup>

I find strength in this idea of simple responses, not only creating change and widening our circle through large-scale "campaign(s) against evil." That sounds daunting! But what else can we do? Center ourselves in each moment and direct each of our actions based on the best good we can do. Holding space for the pain of another, offering a smile to a stranger, or encouragement to a child. We can steer clear of good versus bad binaries - democrat versus republican, or understanding of people as either angry or pious – mean or loving - and explore with more depth the beliefs of those we disagree with. If someone throws garbage at us, we can still act with sympathy for their well-being. These things make a difference.

These Islamic and Buddhist teachings offer us guidance in engaging with the world, with others, with ourselves. We can center ourselves, as the Prophet Muhammad did, in forgiveness and kindness, or take heed from the Four Noble Truths and evade that suffering we endure when we separate ourselves as individuals, as not a part of the whole. These acts serve to widen the circle towards those we disagree with. What can our own faith history tell us? Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing taught us that humans were created for good and holy purposes. Not sinful, not damned, not bad in any way, but good and holy, inherently. What happens when we view those we feel contempt for as good and holy? In doing so, we see that each person has good in them. This, to me, flows into our first principle of inherent worth and

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<sup>6</sup> Taigen Leighton quoted in O'Brien, Barbara. "Buddhism and Evil." Learn Religions, Aug. 27, 2020, [learnreligions.com/buddhism-and-evil-449720](https://www.learnreligions.com/buddhism-and-evil-449720).

dignity – for all of those in our interdependent web. If people are acting in evil ways, I wonder if we can act to understand why – to figure out what led them astray from this inherent goodness. Our faiths are intimately connected with theirs. Each time a person acts in harm, we can respond by acting in love. I believe this calls us towards justice – living into our own goodness and holiness by creating meaningful lives for those who are oppressed due to this unfound evil. Our faith calls us to love. We are not the only faith that draws strength and direction from love. Judaism, Christianity – many faiths use this idea as a way of orienting ourselves in the world.

Both Judaism and Christianity draw strength from the writings in Leviticus, scripture that introduces what Jesus believed to be the most important act of all: to “love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>7</sup> In Christianity, I think of the parable of the Good Samaritan. This is Jesus’ response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” In this parable, a Jewish man is beaten and left on the side of the road to suffer. A Jewish priest and a Levite walk by, and both ignore him. Eventually, a Samaritan journeys past and, although Samaritans and those of the Jewish faith were enemies, the Samaritan took time to pause and care for the injured man. Taking care of an enemy – this is loving our neighbors.<sup>8</sup>

In talking about love as a crucial element of faith traditions I need to further explain my understanding of love. There are many different understandings of love in this world. There is romantic love, called “eros,” there is a familial love called “storge,” and several more. What we are focusing on – what revolutionaries and faith communities focus on – is “agape.” This is universal love – towards a stranger, nature, or the holy. A universal love that encompasses those we dislike. We are not called to hold affection towards those who cause great hate and harm, but to wish good will.<sup>9</sup> This is how Baptist minister Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. interpreted the love that Jesus commanded towards our neighbors – the love the Samaritan showed towards his injured enemy. We are called to spare others from pain and seek nothing

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<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 19:18

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:25-37

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hidden-and-see/201606/these-are-the-7-types-love>

in return. Responding to hate with more hate intensifies what King calls the “cleavages of broken community.”<sup>10</sup> Agape – love – offering prayers of wellbeing and a commitment to healing what has been broken – this restores community and restores relationships. These sentiments followed the teachings of another revolutionary – Gandhi. These are the words and teachings of these two men who dealt with much of the hate we are encountering in our lives today – pervasive divisiveness and racism. Love, in response to actions like this, may seem counterintuitive. But this is the response of two of the most powerful revolutionaries of our time.

I am reminded of the words of Parker Palmer that Pam read earlier: “we might define true community as the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.”<sup>11</sup> If we come out of our insular communities, as we discussed last week, we will inevitably end up in community with those we dislike or disagree with. But does this not stretch our mind, our strength, and our compassion? This is a realistic community, and if this community is grounded on these tenets of faith and love, all benefit and thrive.

And yet this is hard to put into practice, I understand that. I know it’s hard for me! How can we orient ourselves each day to widen our circles through love and faith? To me, the most important aspect of widening any circle is relationship and proximity. That’s how we get to know one another. That’s how we dismantle that good/bad binary that Buddhist teachings warn us of. Relationship starts with conversation – and any healthy conversation begins with thoughtful questions. These are questions, not focused on blame or judgment or animosity, but focused on curiosity. These are questions posed to truly understand the beliefs and convictions of another. Even something as simple as, “hm, I never thought of it that way. Can you tell me more?” We can see each other as fully human with different life experiences.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ajc.com/opinion/opinion-mlk-knew-power-of-redemptive-love/CUJ5SFFAAZFILE3Q5BFVFN3EJU/>

<sup>11</sup> From *Soul Matters Small Group Packet “Widening the Circle”*

Student of Buddhism Joanna Macy introduced her own understanding of widening the circle by teaching others to speak about an issue they hold near and dear to themselves – she laid out her thoughts into four steps – what she calls “four voices.” The purpose of this exercise is to take us beyond our own personal perspectives to see how our thoughts and convictions are perceived by and shape the world around us. I invite you into a short practice. First, think of an issue you are passionate about. Then, in your mind, speak about the issue in our own voice. [pause] Next, pause, and speak on the same issue from the opposite perspective. [pause] Third, look beyond the human realm and speak on behalf of a non-human. [pause] Fourth, move into the future, and identify how future generations will be affected. [pause].<sup>12</sup> Has this widened your perspective at all? It is so simple to get caught up in our own views and ideas and beliefs and in doing so perpetuate our own insular bubbles. This practice helps to take us beyond.

And. When faced with opposition, trust yourself. If you need to step away, step away. If conversations serve to perpetuate arguments, offer your counterpart redemptive love instead of reciprocating hate. We can practice not responding to anger with more anger, but pausing, leaving the space, and sincerely offering that person goodwill. Or in asking those calm, collected, curious questions. Those people we do not agree with – they are not all bad, as Buddhist teachings remind us. We do not have to agree with each other, and others do not have to agree with us. We will never create a world of mutual agreement. But what we can do is to ground ourselves in our Unitarian Universalist faith, remaining firm in our beliefs and our Principles, and our commitment to love.

I end with a call for hope. Hope for our nation, hope for our world, hope for each and every person held within our interdependent web. We need one another. Spirit of life, we bring to you hope that we can live together as siblings, that all neighbors will learn to love each other, that every human will live into that inherent goodness. May we act in each of our days with kindness and forgiveness, our campaigns against evil beginning one small step at a time.

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<sup>12</sup> *Widening Circles of Perspectives Exercise - Joanna Macy*

May it be so, and Amen.