

Sermon for February 19, 2006.

*Can we all get along?* By The Reverend Lone Jensen

Sometimes I wonder if the Universe or God has a strange sense of humor. While I think this may well be true generally I doubt very much that it is directed at me personally. Or maybe it is Karma or Kismet that makes sure we learn our life lessons. Months ago I decided on this sermon topic and back then I planned a nice fairly neutral and well researched sermon. My plan was to talk about America's home grown fundamentalism and explore how we Unitarian Universalists might find a way to begin a dialogue. We UU's are, according to our ideals, accepting, affirming and respectful of other faiths. We seem to be natural bridge builders and I wonder why we do not take the opportunity to do so more often than we do. Another reason to tackle this topic was the stories you told me of how difficult it was for some of you to talk to your own families who were deeply committed to a religion you had left behind. The sticky spot seem to be that the religion you left would not accept anything but surrender to that particular religion's own absolute idea of truth. Hence the title: Can we all get along? Is there a bridge across this religious divide?

It is not that topic was not personal before. Two of Bruce's grown sons are full card carrying "born again, taking the

Bible literally” kind of Christians and we have had many arguments over evolution and Jesus’ divinity. Not to mention the perennial favorites: Heaven, Hell and Salvation. I usually say: I am already saved, as is everyone and Bruce tends to say that he was born right the first time and see no reason to go through that process again. But we are lucky, the arguments are friendly and do not usually end in anger. So I approached this Sunday with relative calm. Because you see Fundamentalism is still utterly foreign to my innermost heart. It does not cut me to the quick. It is just too well, alien to me.

But then the Universe had a lesson for me. The Danish Mohammad cartoon debacle began. This is the story. A provincial Danish newspaper Jyllandsposten decided on a protest against self censorship after several artists refused to illustrate a children’s book about Mohammad. So they asked 40 artists to draw their image of the prophet. They got back 8 drawings, some that did not show his face, some that did, some that were respectful and some that were not. Then they decided to ask their own cartoonists to add four more before they published them. It was no doubt a very stupid, insensitive and ultimately disrespectful decision but I doubt they realized the implications. Freedom of speech was their reason and Danes will make fun of absolutely anything. But they can hardly expect the rest of the world to know that cultural irony and

oddity. Since the cartoons were published in September 2005 the editor has apologized and the website now has an open letter of apology in Arabic. The entire staff is under constant police protection. But the genie is out of the bottle. These past two weeks I have watched the flag of my childhood burn, saw embassies being torched, heard threats issued against Danes in general and worst of all learned that 29 people had died in the riots. My neutrality melted like snow on a hot day. Instead I stand here filled with red hot anger, weighed down with deep sadness, disturbed at the growing chasm in our world, worried about the future and even divided within myself. Because I am also the former daughter in law of Renee, Um-Fakhri, a devout Shiite Muslim woman. So I do know what that cartoon did to Muslim hearts. But I also know she would never have condoned or accepted such violence, as many moderate Muslims have done, she would have condemned the riots. Emran Qureshi writes: *The controversy comes at a time when many in the Islamic world view the war on terrorism as a war on Islam. They draw on memories of colonization and of the Crusades. Sadly, the recent polarization obscures a rich humanistic tradition within Islam - one in which pluralism and a spirit of open-minded inquiry once constituted a dominant ethos.*

*The loudest and most murderous forces have chosen to forget the spirit of the Koran, which opens with an invocation of God's mercy and compassion and which repeatedly urges believers to practice patience and kindness.* He is right. Patience and kindness are not seen much lately in this latest religious and culture war. Extremist everywhere fan the flames. One of the saddest results to come out of this whole firestorm is that anti-immigration parties, which are often extremely xenophobic and some openly fascist in their goals have gained in strength and power all over Europe. The long shadows those political parties cast are frankly frightening to anyone with a memory of WWII or anyone who loves freedom. One Danish politician even dared to say these parties stood for Christian values, which may however backfire in a country where only 3% of people attend church at all.

So yes, I feel bombarded by symbols. A cross was burned outside a Danish embassy. I wonder if the rioters knew what ugly ghosts that evoked in the American mind. Then there was the mundane and the silly. Danish cheese is now boycotted in the Muslim world and I wonder if that means that cows now also have to declare their religion? I can see it now. "Grass is green, grass is good and I thank thee for my food?" Maybe in India, cows do have religion but I really doubt any of the cattle involved are members of the Danish Lutheran Church. The Danish American

town of Solvang experienced a run of mail orders on Danish chocolate as a gesture of solidarity with Denmark. Now there is something with a future: Chocolates as a secret weapon of mass - not destruction but mass bliss. That one I could go for. There are other encouraging signs: Danish bookstores ran out of copies of the Koran after this incident. Like it was in this country after 9/ 11 many people wanted to know more. And that is good.

Fundamentalism is growing in the world. No major religion seems to be immune to its seductive power. Hinduism and yes, even Buddhism can morph into caricatures of their message. Queresh writes: *Sunni Muslim fundamentalist leaders express anger over the Danish cartoons, but no comparable indignation over suicide bombers who attacked Shiite Muslim mosques during Ramadan in Iraq. In Pakistan, blasphemy laws have been used by fundamentalists to attack Christians and Hindus. All this is a far cry from the Islamic humanism of Ibn al-Arabi, the Andalusian philosopher and mystic, or of Rumi, the Persian Sufi Poet.*

He is right. The battle is not between religions it is within the religions themselves. The riots happened in countries where there was no freedom and very little hope. Those in power benefited greatly for the anger could be directed outward at a tiny nation who would not retaliate and not at them. My sermon title:

Can we all get along is of course a quote from the African American man whose merciless beating by police officers and their subsequent acquittal started the Los Angeles riots. The disenfranchised and powerless riot, the privileged write editorial pages.

So can we all get along? Without being overrun? How do we build bridges across such chasms? How do we talk to our neighbor who believes in their heart that we are going to hell? We have to understand our differences and our own fears as well as theirs. Since this firestorm began I have yet to see a single newspaper article deal with a very basic and obvious ethical and religious issue: Guilt by association is wrong! All Danes are not responsible for what one newspaper did. All Muslims are not responsible for what the rioters did. It is a very ancient and fear driven instinct to stick with your tribe. And paint the enemy with a very broad brush. It begins when a teacher says: unless the guilty one comes forward you will all be punished. Effective but unjust! It goes on to bulldozing houses where one suspected suicide bomber lived regardless of the guilt of the rest of the family. The Nazis used it when they took hostages, famous authors, actors, and artists and killed one of them, innocent of anything, whenever the underground committed an act of sabotage. It has become increasingly common and accepted. It is so easy for demagogues,

and for any politician in search of a vote. Divide the world into us and them. It works nearly every time. Those ungodly liberals or those ignorant benighted fundamentalist!

For a bridge to stand it must have a foundation. For all of us the foundation is clearly our beliefs. Without understanding those beliefs we do not even speak the same language. In the fall issues of the *World* 2005 Dough Muder describes the differences and misunderstandings between religious liberals and the Christian right. It comes down to two slogans: we choose versus thou shall. *In one view a child is born into a network of mutual obligations and fixed roles. It is the world of thou shall. At no point in the process is the individual in a position to stand outside the network and choose whether or not its obligations apply to him or her. The only choice the individual has is whether to fulfill his/her obligations or to renege on them. This is what fundamentalists mean when they say that moral values are "absolute" rather than "relative."*

*The liberal worldview puts a much greater emphasis on commitments undertaken by choice. Choice is entirely a good thing in the liberal worldview, whereas it is ambiguous to the Christian Right. He writes: "It is choice that is the snake in the garden of obligations. " So when we say that the Christian Right lifestyle is a valid choice we move the discussion onto our turf. In our*

Coming of Age program each young person writes her or his credo: this I believe. In the Christian Right a young person is examined on his knowledge of the accepted creed. *To understand why a fundamentalist might be afraid of us, consider this: What happens to a system of obligations when the notion of obligation, the "thou shall" comes into question?*

Unitarian Universalists believe fiercely in our right to choose, love to question and insist on crafting our own faith and make our own commitments. How can we be bridge builders?

I have no easy answers for you. *But liberal religious traditions recognize understanding as a source of strength, not a sign of weakness. "Give them not hell," advised Universalist pioneer John Murray, "but hope and courage:"*

Here are a few helpful hints and suggestions: Speak your truth in love. Answer from your heart and agree that it is a matter of faith after all. Work for justice and love your enemies. Support those who want peace and dialogue instead of destruction and war. Glorify peacemakers. Tear down walls dividing people. Be brave. Speak up. Stand up for what you believe. But do so in a spirit of love. You are talking to another with inherent worth and dignity. No matter what they believe.

These past few weeks I have had my own inner battles between my Unitarian Universalist faith and my angry Danish

child. My father had his own battles too but in Nazi occupied Denmark where he had to make his choices they could have life and death consequences. He was the principal of a large high school in Copenhagen. The Nazis came one day and ceremoniously took down the red and white flag, called Dannebrog, that is said to have fallen down from heaven, some 800 years ago. The soldiers raised the German flag, read a proclamation and left. The anger was intense. Some of the students and a few of the teachers came to see my father. This is an insult! They said. Let us take that damn Nazi flag down and put up our Dannebrog! My father spoke these words: If you do this the soldiers will surely come and take you to prison. They may well shoot some of you. They will certainly close the school and all the students will lose their education. It is only a flag. It is not worth a human life.

With all due respect: *It is only a cartoon. It is not worth a human life.*