

“These Are the Days of Miracle and Wonder: Don’t Cry, Baby, Don’t Cry”

(Thank you to the band for working hard to prepare that song! You’re the best!)

Driving up the Coast this August, I was listening to Paul Simon’s recording of the “Boy in the Bubble,” and I finally **really** heard the lyrics. With a start, I thought, “That’s it! We are living in the days of miracle and wonder. But also the bomb in the baby carriage is wired to the radio.”

This morning we’ve read our principles, the most basic theological statement of our faith. In our bedrock First Principle we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person and, even though we’re a covenantal religion, without a creed, we try to live up to our principles every day as faithful UUs. While we may not be successful, we nevertheless try. So how do we experience and exult in the miracle and wonder we’re lucky enough to often see, and how do we at the same time deal with evil--the bomb in the baby carriage wired to the radio? These are theological questions I think we all have to face: how do we both recognize and promote miracles and wonder and at the same time counter evil? What are our responsibilities to the world that we affirm and promote?

I want to tell you straight off, I have precious few answers, but I’m going to tell you my story as a kind of case study in change and hope that it encourages your questions about how you want to be in the world. At one level, this sermon is a story of me grappling with some big questions and reminds me of the very first UU joke I ever heard, just after I joined our congregation more than 30 years ago: One new KKK member asked another old time KKK member: “How do you get Unitarians out of the neighborhood? I tried burning a cross, but it didn’t do anything.” “Oh,” said the old timer, “Yeah, to get rid of them, you have to burn a question mark. It gets them every time!”

So, here’s my story and how I’ve asked, answered and then changed my mind on some of the big questions that are central to my sense of self, how I want to be in the world, and how I want the world to be.

I’m 71 years old, born in May 1945. My father was a Navy officer in the North Atlantic during WWII, joining as soon as he finished law school. In July of 1945, his ship was headed to Japan for the invasion, when we

dropped the atomic bombs and the war ended. For my father, unleashing the power, horror and wonder of atomic weaponry was always a good thing. It saved his life, allowed my two younger brothers to be born, and avoided what he deeply believed would have been a horrific fight to the end, killing hundreds of thousands of American soldiers and Japanese civilians. I was taught to believe that, though war was **terrible**, the United States had commitments to freedom, and to aid our allies in working for true peace, no matter the cost in money or American lives.

I grew up in an upper middle class family, with first generation college parents, moderate Republicans, who were card carrying members of the ACLU and Planned Parenthood and who saw no incongruities in that. It was a '50s family, completely accepting of the Cold War and the ideal of American Exceptionalism, though both my parents were opposed to McCarthy's anti-Communist witch hunts. We went every Sunday to a liberal Congregational Church and everything about the Bible that contradicted science was seen "as a metaphor of God's power and love, but of course wasn't **actually** true." My parents were deeply committed to expanding civil rights for African Americans and to equality more generally, especially for Asian Americans, some of whom were good friends.

While my mother stayed home, the willing tutor to four rambunctious children, she did challenge conventional norms for women, in small, and not so small, ways. When my father, who was the officer on his ship who used his white glove to find dirt in the corner at inspections, was incredibly annoyed by the dust on the hall ceiling, he got on a chair and wrote, "Dusty!" with his finger before he left for work. When he came home, he immediately looked up at the ceiling to see that my mother had written with her finger, "Yes, isn't it?" He announced to the family that night, if he found housekeeping things that annoyed him in the future, he would fix them, that after all, my mother had her hands full with four children, three of them born in three years.

I had a happy childhood, made even happier by our move to a farm near Carnation, Washington, when I was 8. We had horses, 80 acres of woods to play in and chores which mattered, because if cattle aren't cared for, there are terrible consequences. My father commuted daily to Seattle and his work which actually paid the bills.

A week after my 18th birthday, in 1963, I graduated from tiny Tolt High School and took off for Europe, as I had managed to get into Wye College of the University of London, and so my parents let me leave early to travel by car with 3 Belgian kids, one of whom we had met the summer before. Eric and Paul, both 21, were best friends and studying law, and Eric's sister, Annette, was, like me, 18, and finishing lycee. I met them in Antwerp, where they lived, and we drove through the Middle East and back for almost 4 months. It was a life-changing trip! They were all sophisticated socialists, Eric's and Annette's grandfather a founder of the Socialist Party in Belgium, who was in hiding from the Nazis during WW II. They were all atheists. They thought a country's flag was just a piece of cloth, and they were stunned I believed our flag was more than that, and had to be burned if it touched the ground.

That trip to Muslim countries, in towns that had never seen 2 young men and 2 young women traveling by car together, independently, was an astonishing and broadening adventure. We had no idea how controversial we must have been and I, certainly, didn't really have any idea about how shocking we were culturally. We were there during a coup in Syria, the first time I experienced civil unrest. We were shot at in a crowd, were under marshall law in Aleppo and saw Russian MIGS strafing the post office in Damascus, opposite our hotel balcony. I went to Jericho, Jerusalem and Bethlehem to all the holy sites, and Annette and I flew for a few days to Egypt, where we climbed the pyramids and saw the Nile. That trip and the year in England began a time of profound questioning of everything I had grown up to believe. When I came home, furious that my parents made me return to the US to finish college, I was not the same girl who had left 15 months before.

I think my earliest political memory, when I was 4, was standing in line at Brenner Brothers, the only Jewish bakery in Seattle, and looking at the woman in front of us waiting to pick up her loaf of rye bread. We were waiting for poppy seed cakes, something we kids all loved. I can see the woman, dressed in a long beige wool coat and wearing a head scarf for the rain, as clear as day in my mind. She raised her arm to pick up the bread and as her sleeve drew up, I noticed she had numbers written on her arm. "Mommy," I asked, "why does that lady have numbers on her arm?" And instead of answering, my mother shushed me with a hiss. I think I may remember it, because Mom **didn't** answer me and my mother **always** answered our questions. Always. Without fail.

When we got out to the car, she told me that there was a terrible man in Germany, who did evil things. He was cruel and he didn't believe in freedom or that people should be able to worship however they wanted and he had rounded up Jewish people and others he didn't like and put them in horrible, unspeakable, prisons that were called concentration camps and he killed most of them. He put numbers on everyone in the camps, so that poor woman had been in a camp, but lived through it, and wasn't it wonderful that she was now in the US? She had been a refugee and we brought refugees from Europe into our country. Daddy had fought in the war to stop Hitler and Hitler's evil was why that war was so terrible and Daddy's Navy work was so crucial. I have never forgotten seeing that woman's tattoo or learning why it was so important that we had not let evil prevail, how we had stood for goodness and generosity. I remember feeling proud to be an American.

When, grumpily and without any grace at all, I began my second year of college at the University of Washington, I leapt into my new politics, identifying as a liberal Democrat and working for Lyndon Johnson, who had just signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and was up for election. I couldn't yet vote, but I could work. The Civil Rights Movement completely engaged me and I was a member of Friends of SNCC and the CORE chapter on campus.

By the winter of 1966, I began to participate in the weekly silent vigils against the increasingly visible Vietnam War and Lyndon Johnson was no longer my guy. I hated what we were doing in Southeast Asia and fought intellectually with my father about the domino theory. I remember telling him that we were becoming an imperialist country and that we were on the wrong side of history. He didn't agree.

I started reading pacifist literature seriously and I came to believe I was truly a pacifist. That bedrock commandment "Thou shalt not kill" was fundamental to all civilization and goodness. War was **never** the right answer: we had instead to fiercely "wage peace." I took training at the American Friends Service Committee to counsel young men on avoiding the draft and I took some men to Canada to avoid it. I marched and leafletted and I'm afraid I was probably pretty smug to people who opposed my views. I was passionate about ending the war and worked several

primaries in 1968 for Eugene McCarthy, the first anti-war candidate to challenge Lyndon Johnson.

My mother began to change her views about the war and my father said things like, "Well, if you're not a radical when you're in your 20s, you're not thinking, but if you're not conservative by your 40's you haven't learned anything." He was right about me on the first point, but not so much the second. By the bombing of Cambodia, however, everyone in my family was opposed to the War, including my father.

In my early 20s, I saw evil and I believed my beloved country was perpetrating it. I embraced pacifism as a religious and political philosophy and raised my sons to believe killing was always, always wrong. We should "wage peace" with the same dedication we had previously put into waging war. I desperately wanted an all volunteer military and no more draft. I was clear and certain. I wanted change, but I only saw myself working within the system to affect it. My wholehearted conversion to feminism in 1970 and my work, for my entire life, in the new field of Women's Studies, cemented my politics. When I joined this congregation in 1985, it was with joy that I was back in a liberal church community, especially one that didn't require me to explain, over and over again, "really, it's just a metaphor." My church and my politics in sync, I thought I had figured out the world and my theological and political place in it.

And then we began to really learn about the genocide in Cambodia, that Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge had killed 1.5 million people out of their population of around 7 million. Further, we learned that we were quietly supporting them during the '80s. I remember being unnerved when I learned this, because we had set the standard for defining crimes against humanity with the Nuremburg Trials. Surely, we couldn't have been supporting Pol Pot, could we?

The next challenge to my pacifist world view was Rwanda, that astonishing genocide that happened in just three months, from April to July, 1994, when 800,000, mostly Tutsi people, were murdered in extraordinarily brutal fashion, and about 2 million Rwandans became refugees, mostly Hutus. Although the United Nations finally got involved, the Secretary General sadly said that because this genocide was playing out in Africa, most of the major Western countries, including the United States, "sat on the sidelines." In some real ways, Rwanda seemed like what had happened with Hitler,

because the Tutsi and the Hutus spoke the same language, held the same religious beliefs and lived the same culture. The Tutsi were the minority cattle herders, but with high status given decades before by European colonial powers, and the Hutus were the majority, low status, farmers. How different was that from Christian Germans and Jewish Germans, who before Hitler had lived and worked together for centuries?

And then with Bosnia, the questions overwhelmed me and I found myself unable to hold on to pacifism, while men, women and children were being massacred right before our eyes every night on television. In the madness that was the breakup of the former Yugoslavia, we watched ethnic cleansing again take place in Europe. Of the 156,000 documented murdered civilians, all but 10,000 were Muslim. Rape became a part of the Serbian strategy to defeat the Bosnian people, concentration camps were started again, and communities destroyed. The United Nations declared in the World Court, after it was all over, it was a clear “crime against humanity.”

Watching the Serbs attack civilians in Bosnia and Herzegovina broke me and my political certitude. Along with thousands of other citizens, I wrote to President Clinton, begging him to send American troops to the Balkans to stop the genocide, and, of course, we did go in with NATO and the United Nations Peace Keeping Force in 1994, which ultimately stopped the horror.

I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how I could really live our first principle and support sending troops into war to kill other people. In the end, it came back to my first political memory: we had an obligation as individuals and as a country to engage against, and defeat, evil. That was why WWII was “a good war” and why we needed to intervene in Bosnia. We had responsibilities to the people of the world that we couldn’t ignore.

When I left my absolute pacifism behind, I started thinking about other issues, too, a virtual cascade of them. It began to seem like an ongoing case of the old Chinese proverb, “be careful what you wish, for you will surely get it.”

I’ll give you a few examples:

During the Vietnam War, I longed for an all volunteer military. We have it now, but it hadn’t occurred to me that that would lead to a military staffed at

the lower ranks by men and women who feel they have very few options. I never thought that an all volunteer military would be overwhelmingly disproportionately staffed with minority kids, who just want some skills and a chance to get help with going to college. But that's what we have now. Middle class and upper class kids don't have to go, and they don't: they, as my sons did, have a "class pass." When the 535 members of the Senate and House of Representatives voted to go into Iraq, there were only seven members who had children in the military (most of them, officers). If it doesn't affect you, if it's not your family's sacrifice, it may well be easier to vote to send troops into battle.

How have I changed on the draft and the all volunteer military? I now believe we should have mandatory public service for 2 years for all citizens, men and women, any two years beginning from age 18 to 22, which would include a military option, but also offer working in the Peace Corps, Americorps, underfunded schools, public hospitals, non-profit organizations like food banks, and other public service positions.

Another example of how thinking about the question of war has changed my mind:

When it began, I thought the development of drones and drone warfare was potentially a good thing, that it might save American, and also civilian, lives, the infamous "collateral damage" that comes with warfare. Now, having seen a drone fly over me and driving past the biggest drone base in the US in the bleak Nevada desert, I feel much more ambivalent. I think it's true that using drones in Afghanistan and Iraq has saved American lives and probably lessened civilian deaths, but it's still killing, and very intimate killing, at that. The incidents of PTSD among the soldiers who fire drones, after following their targets, often for months at a time, is actually higher than the PTSD of soldiers in traditional combat. It turns out killing people you have watched for a long time, whose family you "know," whose children you recognize onscreen, is hard on the soul.

I'm not saying we shouldn't use drones: I'm saying that it's **complicated** and when we look at our principles, as faithful UUs, the answers to **what** we should support are not necessarily easy. Because we believe in the democratic process and the ultimate goal of world peace, however, we can't just **not** think about it. We are called to be engaged citizens, to figure out where we stand and what we support. Our principles call us to know,

or at least seriously consider, what we affirm and promote. For instance, if we accept that some situations demand military intervention, how do we still try to effectively work for peace?

I could continue to focus on the fear of the bomb in the baby carriage, but I want to get back to the days of miracle and wonder, because they, happily, are also real.

Let me give you some news of the miracles we are witnessing today pulled together by my favorite op ed writer, Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times (“The Best News You Don’t Know,” NY Times, 9/22/16). Although 90% of Americans believe global poverty has worsened or stayed the same over the last 20 years, in fact, the number of people in “extreme poverty” (\$1.90 per person per day) has dropped to about 10% of the world’s population since 1981. As Kim Yong Kim, the President of the World Bank, says, “This is the best story in the world today.” The number of small children around the world dying before the age of 6 has also dropped by half because of vaccines, breast feeding promotion, pneumonia medicine and diarrhea treatments. That’s 6 million young lives a year that are now being saved. And, while, for the whole history of humanity until the 1960s, the majority of the world was illiterate, now about 85% of the world’s adults are literate and that rate is rising. With education and literacy, birth rates world wide in the poorest countries are tumbling. When women have access to education and birth control, they have smaller families. The birthrate in India now is 2.4, in Indonesia 2.5, and in Mexico 2.2. Lastly, it is possible that by 2030, we will have wiped out extreme poverty.

These are all miracles, Friends, and we should acknowledge them with wonder!

But along side these miracles, we are watching genocide take place right now in Syria. Seeing Aleppo be destroyed daily on television, watching the Assad government bomb its own people, turn off water to 100,000 civilians and, with Russian help, bomb UN Aid Convoys, I find myself screaming at my television, “How is it possible this is happening in 2016?” Because we have instant communication, we know what’s going on in Syria every day and, unfortunately, we are responding as a nation in almost exactly the same way we did before we were forced into WWII by Pearl Harbor. Just as we turned away Jews and refused visas for refugees from the Nazis



prior to 1941, we are refusing to take in more than a tiny number of refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq.

I hope some of you watched the PBS show, “Defying the Nazis: The Sharps’ War,” which documented the work of Martha and Waitstill Sharps sent by the Unitarian Association to Czechoslovakia to help refugees out of Europe in 1939. They rescued a significant number of people at great risk to themselves, and mourned the ones they could not save. As Martha Sharps was arranging her last rescue, she wrote to her husband, who was back in Massachusetts, “Every life we touched had its own drama. One can only manage a miracle every so often, but a series of miracles can happen when many people become concerned and are willing to act at the right time.”

I love that quote and it is prodding me to do whatever I can do to motivate us to intervene in Syria and help change the climate for refugees. Our principles call us to that “series of miracles [that] can happen when many people become concerned and are willing to act.” While I don’t know exactly what to do, I’m trying to do something, even if it’s only writing letters to my Senators and the President, talking about refugees with my friends and neighbors, posting articles on social media, and donating to the International Refugee Committee. The burning question of how we wage peace often haunts me.

In 1938, after Kristallnacht, a poll found 94% of Americans disapproved of what the Nazis were doing to Jews, but 72% were against admitting large numbers of Jewish refugees into the country. Americans’ opposition then sounds very contemporary: we don’t have the money to house them; they might be dangerous; they’ll take American jobs; they could be Nazi spies. It’s shockingly similar to what we are hearing today about bringing in refugees from Syria and other places in the Middle East. As Nic Kristof said so brilliantly, “Today, to our shame, Anne Frank is a Syrian girl.” (Nicholas Kristof, “Anne Frank Today Is a Syrian Girl,” NY Times, 8/25/16)

I want to end this sermon by going back to the joke I started with, because a version of it actually happened. The Smithsonian has one KKK half-burned cross, given to them by my college friend, Missy Duniway’s, mother and step-father, who were faithful Unitarians from Oregon. In the early ’60’s, Missy’s stepfather, who was a white law professor, joined the faculty at a historically black law school in the South and taught his students civil

rights law, his specialty. The couple attracted a lot of local attention and, within months, found a group of white hooded men torching a cross on their front lawn. When the men left, they went out, turned on a hose, put out the fire, and shook with fear. It was evil they had witnessed and they'd had a significant message to get out of town immediately. Instead of doing that, however, they took the cross to the back yard to let it dry and Missy's mom called the Smithsonian American History Museum the next morning in Washington, DC. She asked the startled archivist on the other end of the phone, if the Smithsonian had any KKK crosses and if not, would they like one? The next day, Missy's mom wrapped up the cross, fashioned a cardboard box and shipped it to DC. I saw that cross in the "We the People" exhibit. It's the only one the Smithsonian has and it documents a time and incident of evil in our country. Missy's mom and step-dad looked evil in the face and found a way to turn it into good, to veer to the side of wonder, so that maybe evil would be less likely to exist in the future. With that act, they bent the arc of history a little bit toward justice.

My hope is that our community and our principles help all of us to face evil and wrong doing and take that experience to bend the arc. I hope they urge us to ask the questions we need to ask as faithful UUs and engaged American citizens. I want to be clear that **our answers may well differ, but our obligation to ask the questions does not.** Additionally, however, I want us all to actively work for miracles--in science, politics, art, teaching Sunday School. And I hope that we more often take the time to appreciate wonder--a gorgeous Arizona sunset, a child reading her first word, the communities we fashion and support, a meteor soaring across the sky. "These are the days of miracle and wonder" and if we truly engage big questions to live our principles, we can face and diminish evil, bending the arc just a little bit toward humanity and justice. With any luck at all, we can also make more miracles and experience more wonder. Amen! May it be so!