

**All Is Flux**  
**September 12, 2010**

On September 14, 2001, Congresswoman Barbara Lee stood up in the House of Representatives and said these words: “Mr. Speaker, I rise today with a heavy heart, one that is filled with sorrow for the families and loved ones of those who were killed and injured in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. September 11 changed the world. Yet I am convinced,” Lee stated, “that military action will not prevent further acts of international terrorism.” She continued: “[Wayne] Morse, one of two lonely votes against the Tonkin Gulf resolution, declared: ‘I believe that history will record that we have made a grave mistake.’ Our greatest memorial to our fallen brothers and sisters,” Congresswoman Lee argued, “will be a world of peace, tolerance, and understanding. Let us not become the evil we deplore.” Barbara Lee then proceeded to cast the lone vote against the 2001 resolution to go to war in Afghanistan, as our country did just weeks later--launching a war in which we are still engaged nine years later.

For nine years, I have kept this statement, in the form of this postcard, taped somewhere visible in my home, so I can see it and remember that in every moment of our lives, no matter how significant or trivial, we have the opportunity to either react or respond to whatever comes our way; we can seek revenge, or we can work for justice; we can

try to squash out pain with ultimately more pain, or we can move *through* pain with a mindfulness that will allow us not only room for our hurt and anger, but also for true bereavement, understanding, acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Such choices are what I think of when I read about the Christian pastor in Gainesville, Florida, who had been set on burning copies of the Quran to commemorate September 11. This is what I think of when I read about the Muslim imam from the same community, who called upon this pastor to remember the teaching of Jesus to love one's enemies.

Some among us Unitarian Universalists don't want to hear about Jesus, or Christian teachings. We're too Christian if we sing a hymn with Jesus in it, or read from the New Testament. But, for me, to hear about a Muslim imam preaching Christian teachings to a Christian pastor is perfectly reflective of the beauty of the Unitarian Universalist perspective. Our Unitarian identity calls us to the oneness, or the unity of ultimate reality which some call God, some call the Goddess, others call mystery, and still others call the spirit of life and love. Our Universalist identity calls us to uphold the universal wisdom appearing in all the world religions--Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Paganism, and, among still others, Christianity.

So here is this imam, saying, even if we don't love each other, even if we do see each other as enemies, remember, we are all part of one human family. And here is this imam reaching across religious divides, to find the

wisdom of his own adversary's religious teachings, and upholding them as sacred. Love your enemies.

Love your enemies. Admittedly, when I think of the teaching of loving one's enemies I'm reminded of a bumper sticker I once saw. I may have mentioned it to you in the past, but it's worth repeating. The bumper sticker read, "When Jesus said, 'Love your enemies,' I'm pretty sure he meant don't kill them." Now, speaking of honoring the universal wisdom of *all* religions, at first sight, this statement of Jesus may seem contrary to the *Buddhist* koan, or teaching, "If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him." Well, which is it? To kill or not to kill?

Let me see if I can untangle these threads to reveal the true thread I wish to uphold. Jesus is essentially encouraging us not to try to suppress, or kill, our sources of pain, but instead to be with them, to seek to understand them. Similarly, but from the other end of things, the Buddhist koan is saying, "If you think you've seen and understand enlightenment, if you're convinced you've got it, that you've perfected yourself or that you're in control, let go of that thought, because there is *always* more to learn, always more to keep our minds open to."

Essentially, Jesus is calling on us not to resist or deny what is painful, while the Buddhist koan is calling on us not to cling or attach ourselves to pleasure or fixed ideas. In their own ways, *both* teachings speak to at least one given in our shared human lives, and that is that, in the words of the

Greek philosopher Hericlitus, “Everything flows, nothing stands still.” Or, as it’s said in another translation, “all is flux.”

All is flux. Now, for those of you who came here today thinking you were going to hear a sermon about addiction and recovery, as was advertised, have faith. Be, might I say, fluxible. You see, in my own journey of learning about and seeking to understand addictions and compulsive behaviors--my own, those of my family members, those of friends, of the stranger, of anyone who might walk through these doors--I have been moving more deeply into an exploration of, as David Richo calls them, the “givens of life,” and how, in our conditioning as children, as members of a particular society, we are too often taught to seek *escape* from those givens. Remember those givens, which Betty shared earlier:

1. Everything changes and ends
2. Things do not always go according to plan
3. Life is not always fair
4. Pain is part of life
5. People are not loving and loyal all the time.

Now, of course, these givens are put before us not so we can then resign to a depressing, depressed, nihilistic attitude toward life. On the contrary, the

givens remind us that, if “everything flows, nothing stands still,” then we are better off not trying to make things otherwise.

Still, we are tempted, again and again, to burn or squash or suppress or deny or reject those givens in order to get at least some temporary relief. And in our temptation, our biggest mistake is often in believing that the more relief we seek, and maybe the more extreme the relief we seek, the more permanent it will be. So, for instance: Burn the Quran. That’ll show ‘em, those evil terrorists. We don’t feel the actual pain of 9/11. We don’t remember our bewilderment of nine years ago, or our horror or our fear or our sense of powerlessness. We don’t feel the pain. Just burn it. Just send it to the fires of hell where it belongs.

But the problem is, hell isn’t somewhere else. Hell is what we make of our lives, here, on *this* earth--societally, familially, and individually--when we seek to end pain through ultimately painful means; when we seek to put pain out there, somewhere, rather than to own it, be with it, and move through it ourselves. As David Richo says, “Life happens to us in its own way, no matter how much we protest or seek to dodge it. No one has ever been exempt from life’s uncompromising givens. If we cannot tolerate them,” continues Richo, “we add stress to our lives by fighting a losing game.”

Jesus understood this losing game as well, when he said, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but not notice the log in your own

eye?” It’s easy, and it’s so tempting, to project onto others as a means to protect ourselves from feeling that which we are afraid of feeling. But you know that such projection, or any other such defense mechanism, never actually heals.

Similarly, a cigarette, a drink, a shopping spree, a sleeping pill, a feast in front of the fridge, a day at the horse track, a few hours of internet pornography, a bag of heroin, all will make us feel, for a moment, like things are getting better. Look! The pain went away!

I, luckily, only drank seriously from the ages of 17 to 22, with the qualifier that four years into my sobriety I had one beer in a moment of self-pity, so I now mark March 24, 1991, as my sobriety date. As most of you have heard before, growing up, I had the very mixed blessing of watching my dad die of alcoholism at the age of 54, and of witnessing my oldest brother struggle with heroin addiction from the age of about 16 until he was 32 or so, before he finally got clean. Additionally, my mom, living mostly in the role of an alcoholic’s spouse and an addict’s mother, quit drinking, *and* smoking, herself, at the age of 60. So I had some models for where life could take me, and by 22, I was already calculating, “Man, if Dad died from drinking at 54, and Mom didn’t quit till she was sixty, I’ve got thirty or forty years before I quit! I can’t handle this!” The “this” I couldn’t handle was the blackouts and the vomiting and the hangovers and the embarrassed remorse I too often felt.

Still, I still remember the *beginning* of those five years of serious drinking. I was seventeen, on my way to my first party with upper classmen, and I knew that this girl I had a crush on would be there. What could I do to calm my nerves? Instinctively I knew--not to breathe deeply and slowly, not to affirm that I was lovable even if she didn't love me, not to permit myself to be vulnerable. Nope. Instinctively, I knew to slam down a beer. And that's what I did, and I went to that party, and then, for the next few years, I went to other parties, and keggers, and more parties, and I was charming and entertaining and funny and I was drunk. And, I believed, I was *able* to be charming and entertaining and funny *only* by being drunk. It's no surprise then that in my senior year of high school, when I had to memorize a poem in French, I chose one by Charles Baudelaire, the opening line of which was: "Il faut etre toujours en ivré." It is necessary to be drunk all the time.

I'm relieved to say that a few years after memorizing that poem, a moment of grace appeared in which I realized that for me, at least, it is necessary to be *sober* all the time.

That's the personal testimony part so you know I'm not just theorizing. I've done the field work. And in some ways, I'm still in the field, and always will be in the field, just as you all are and will be, navigating this life in which "everything flows, nothing stands still." For me, the navigating is a little easier when I remember the givens of life. Yes, yes, everything *does* change and end. No, things *don't* always go according to plan. Life is

*not* always fair, pain *is* a part of life, and yes, it's true, even in this beloved community, people--myself included--are *not* loving and loyal all the time.

Knowing this to be so, and *accepting* it to be so, that's why we have things like our covenant of right relations, so we can call ourselves back to the best in ourselves, so we can communicate directly and respectfully with those with whom we're in conflict, and so we can take seriously the need to balance care for the community with care for ourselves. Our covenant helps us to live with the givens of our lives, rather than rail against them.

And again, living with such givens doesn't mean just miserably resigning to a fatalistic attitude toward life. That's not going with the flow; that's bailing ship and choosing to become a cynical bystander. And, once a cynical bystander, all the better excuse to drink or use or binge or sleep with whomever. Doesn't matter. Might as well.

But of course it does matter. It matters, because what we do affects everyone else. Even if we *try* to bail ship from the ever changing nature of life, try to step aside while everyone else works at going with the flow, we *can't* step off the interdependent web. What I do--and I know this from experience--affects you all. What you do will, on one thread of the web or the next, affect everyone else in this room. Does that mean you better watch out and you better be perfect? No. Impossible. Such efforts at perfection would make us all pretty anxious, pretty worrisome, and Jesus, or someone who can quote him, might feel obligated to ask us, if a bit

rhetorically, “Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?”

Similarly, can worrying truly help any of us in our confrontation with the givens of life? See how worrying can become a kind of compulsive behavior in itself? It makes us grip. It makes fortress ourselves from the truth that everything flows, nothing stands still. We end up like Siddhartha Gautama’s father, the king, guarding the prince from “encountering pain and pleasure.”

But we know that it is only when the prince leaves the palace, only when he witnesses “sickness, old age, and death--the natural conditions of every life,” as David Richo notes, that he begins his spiritual journey toward enlightenment. It is a long journey, a journey in which Siddhartha experiments with different practices, sometimes doing yoga, sometimes only eating a grain of rice a day. But he never gives up. He keeps being open to change, keeps witnessing and experiencing and seeking to understand the presence of suffering, and how to live with it, rather than fight against it.

His journey is like the journey written about by the Muslim poet Mohammed Iqbal, who states, “The journey of love is a very long journey, but sometimes with a sigh you can cross that vast desert. Search and search again without losing hope; you may find sometimes a treasure on your way. My heart and my eyes are all devoted to the vision.”

Are our hearts and our eyes all devoted to the vision? Rather than hold our breath in worry, are we willing to sigh, to exhale, and cross that seemingly vast desert of unknowing toward love? Are we willing to work with the flux of life, to “search and search again without losing hope”?

Perhaps, at least for a time, the pastor in Florida had given up hope. Given up hope even in the teachings of his own Lord and Savior. It took a Muslim imam (and yes, the Secretary of State, and the President, and the military commander of the war in Afghanistan) to remind him that committing a hateful act such as burning another religion’s sacred text would only generate more hate.

Similarly, perhaps we, here, in this sanctuary, need occasional reminders that compulsively reaching for our drug of choice (and I’m guessing you know what yours is), while not necessarily a hateful act, is at the very least self-medicating, self-destructive. The belief that a drink or a drug or some other substance or act will kill the inner enemy of our own pain is a belief with serious consequences. Really, our drug of choice will gratify us mostly as it goes down and as the chemicals of our own bodies as well as of what we consume do their work. It *will* feel good, for a moment. And then it will not feel good. Even if we cleverly take in a little more, a little hair of the dog that bit us, to ease the consequences of our first attempts at relief, in the end, feeding our addictions and compulsions is

like building a bridge out of band-aids. The bridge itself, unable to uphold us, leads to our fall.

Better to seek ongoing, unfolding wisdom, than quick relief. Better to work with the givens of life, and to call on the spirit of life and love rather than on our own egos. That being true, and these being the high holy days of yet another world religion, Judaism, the *oldest* of the three Abrahamic religions, I would like to end this morning with a reading from the Wisdom of Solomon.

I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me.

I preferred her to scepters and thrones,

And I accounted wealth as nothing in comparison with her.

Neither did I liken to her any priceless gem,

Because all gold is but a little sand in her sight,

And silver will be accounted as clay before her.

I loved her more than health and beauty,

And I chose to have her rather than light,

Because her radiance never ceases.

All good things came to me along with her,

And in her hands uncounted wealth.

I rejoiced in them all, because wisdom leads them;

But I did not know that she was their mother.

I learned without guile and I impart without grudging;  
I do not hide her wealth,  
For it is an unfailing treasure for mortals.

So may it be that we mortals take in the unfailing treasure of wisdom--  
wisdom to love our enemies, inside and out, to work with the givens of life  
that will always come our way, and to celebrate the spirit of life and love  
that is among us, that is the bridge, that is the destination. May our hearts  
and eyes be devoted to this vision.

Amen.