

**“Scaling the Empathy Wall”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
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**Reading**

“One Hundred and Eighty Degrees” by Federico Moramarco

Have you considered the possibility  
that everything you believe is wrong,  
not merely off a bit, but totally wrong,  
nothing like things as they really are?  
If you've done this, you know how durably fragile  
those phantoms we hold in our heads are,  
those wisps of thought that people die and kill for,  
betray lovers for, give up lifelong friendships for.  
If you've not done this, you probably don't understand this poem,  
or think it's not even a poem, but a bit of opaque nonsense,  
occupying too much of your day's time,  
so you probably should stop reading it here, now.  
But if you've arrived at this line,  
maybe, just maybe, you're open to that possibility,  
the possibility of being absolutely completely wrong,  
about everything that matters.  
How different the world seems then:  
everyone who was your enemy is your friend,  
everything you hated, you now love,  
and everything you love slips through your fingers like sand.

## Sermon

This sermon begins one Sunday in October. During coffee hour downstairs in the Vestry, I noticed three women standing together who didn't look familiar to me. I went up to say hello to them and they very politely thanked me for the service and noted how warm and loving the community seems to be. They told me that they were visiting from Alabama and were here on a mission trip planning to volunteer at some local organizations including the food pantry across the street. Hearing that they had come from Alabama and knowing that the density of UU congregations in the south isn't quite as high as New England, I asked if they had ever been to a UU congregation before. "No, ma'am," they replied. "This is our first time, but we very much enjoyed the service."

I wished them well during their visit and moved on to another conversation.

A couple of weeks later, the phone in my church office rang and I noticed it was an out of state number. I answered the phone, and it was one of the women I had spoken with that October Sunday during coffee hour. I'll call her Sandy.

Sandy told me that she had been thinking about us ever since she had returned to Alabama. She was very respectful and referred to me as Pastor. "Pastor," she said, "Everything in the service was just so lovely. It was so warm and welcoming and loving. But, what about Jesus, Pastor? Do you ever talk about Christ?" She told me how she worried deeply for the souls of the children, for the souls of all those in the cemeteries around town that she passed on her visit. For her, she explained, salvation in the afterlife is of the utmost importance and belief leads to salvation. "You can't be saved if you don't believe in Christ," she said.

Now, you can imagine, that as a former Catholic now Unitarian Universalist minister, there are a lot of reactions I could have been having in that moment.

I did feel the flaring up of indignation and defensiveness rising in my body and warming my cheeks. I noticed the litany of very rational responses that I could interject beginning to form in my mind. But, I tried hard to focus on the deep and sincere caring and concern this woman was sharing with me which was so apparent.

I gently explained that in our congregation people hold a diversity of theological beliefs and for many people salvation in the afterlife is not their focus. I explained that no, one does not have to believe in the saving power of Jesus Christ, to be a part of our

religious community. I explained that yes, some people do read the bible here, but come to their own interpretations of what that scripture means. I told her that in our religious community we hold open the possibility for multiple sources of theological meaning and truth and that, with these differences, we can remain united in our grounding in love for one another and our planet and our commitment to making our world a more loving and compassionate place.

In the end, Sandy was still worried about our souls. I acknowledged her anguish and suggested that perhaps we could continue to pray for one another. I did this knowing that we probably had very different understandings of what prayer means and what prayer might look like. Nonetheless, I acknowledged how much she seems to care about us and that keeping all of us in her prayers could be a way to show that care. And, I said, I would do the same for her.

I haven't heard from her since then, and I don't know if I will again.

If in sharing this story, I sound at all judgmental of this person's religious belief, I want you to know that I truly hold her with respect and honor her beliefs and most especially the sincere love and care that she communicated during our conversation. And, I hope that I conveyed this to her as well.

This conversation got me thinking about the emotional walls we create around ourselves. About the continuing social, religious, and political isolation we continue to fall into as Subaru-driving, NPR-listening, East coasters vote one way and Chevy-driving, Fox News-watching, middle America votes another way. As we too often hear certain words or phrases in our discourse and then tune each other out. As we make assumptions about one another's religious beliefs and practices and dismiss each other's points of view.

Here in Vermont, the ethos and tradition of public dialogue and local democratic engagement makes our communities a little less siloed than other parts of the country. Yet, we are not immune to putting up those walls of us versus them along obvious lines of politics and race and less obvious lines of economic and social class or theological belief. Polarization certainly exists right here in our community.

This was made apparent to me on two occasions over the last couple of years, the only two occasions in my ministry here thus far that I have ever received what you might call "opposition" e-mail from the general public. I spoke at a rally almost two years ago now

against the Muslim travel ban and received an e-mail lambasting me and my “liberal cohorts.” When I spoke at a rally in June against the separation of migrant children from their families at the border, I received another e-mail from the same person questioning whether I and “those of my ilk” had opposed similar immigration policies of previous administrations.

For this person, I am clearly the “them” in the “us” vs. “them” equation.

With this climate of division and polarization, I know that many have found solace within Unitarian Universalist communities, including this congregation. Many of you find comfort in being with “like-minded” people. The insanity and chaos of the world out there has driven many people to search for places where their own views and understandings of the world can find resonance and be met with sympathy. Many of you, and I as well, have looked for those places where we are empowered to speak the truth, to defy all that is ailing our broader society and systems.

This is both understandable and needed.

Yet, what the conversation with our visitor from Alabama reminded me, is that it is far too easy now to stay within these safe places of like-mindedness and from within our own constructed walls to put one another in boxes and categories. We do this from all points on the religious spectrum, from conversation to liberal, just as we do on the political spectrum.

The troubling thing to me is that this categorization of people is fundamentally dehumanizing. It takes away worth and dignity rather than honoring it through an empathetic approach to difference.

As we reflect on our theme this month, I wonder what does it mean to be people of possibility in this context?

Some of you may be familiar with the work of Arlie Hochschild. She is a sociologist, writer, and professor at the University of California-Berkeley. As the presidential election of 2016 approached, she was finishing up five years of research and writing on a community that she had before that point found completely foreign - Tea Party supporters living in Louisiana. With her sociologist hat on, Hochschild was motivated by deepening divisions in our national civic life to head out from liberal-leaning Berkeley, California to predominantly conservative Lake Charles, Louisiana to try to understand

more intimately the life experiences that led to viewpoints on the right of the political spectrum. In describing her approach to learning about the lives of the people she was encountering, she said it was “empathy walls” that interested her.

She writes, “An empathy wall is an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances. In a period of political tumult, we grasp for quick certainties. We shoehorn new information into ways we already think.”<sup>1</sup>

In my conversation with the woman from Alabama, and even in reading those accusatory e-mails I mentioned earlier, I could sense my own empathy wall creeping up, brick by brick. (No government shutdown needed to build that wall.) This wall so easily emerges for me when I am faced with a worldview that is drastically different from my own whether it is a view based on religion, theology, identity or politics or all of the above.

Hochschild asks, “But is it possible, without changing our beliefs, to know others from the inside, to see reality through their eyes, to understand the links between life, feeling, and politics; that is, to cross the empathy wall?”<sup>2</sup>

This question of how to cross the empathy wall is one that is so important right now. This may be with a stranger or more likely it may be with a neighbor or family member.

One tidbit about Hochschild’s background I was interested to learn is that she was raised by parents who, as she describes were “very religious Unitarians.” And she summarizes her religious upbringing in this way, “For Unitarians, the message I took away is that it’s a very big world, and we have to learn to get to know and empathize with people in radically different cultures.”<sup>3</sup>

I do think that Unitarian Universalism can offer a foundation to engage in crossing the empathy wall as this fundamentally requires an openness to possibility. From our Unitarian roots, we have an emphasis on rationalist inquiry which is a seed for

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<sup>1</sup> Arlie Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Hochschild, *Strangers*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/arlie-hochschild-the-deep-stories-of-our-time-oct2018/>

possibility. Universalism, with its emphasis on an all-encompassing universal love, provides another seed for possibility and the possibility the lies in our expansive empathy - a place from which we can try to understand one another across our differences and also hold open the possibility of loving one another despite those differences.

In our Seven Principles, we affirm and promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth and also a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Both of these principles are grounded in a belief in possibility - the possibility that we can grow and change by seeking out truth and meaning beyond ourselves.

To be open to discovering this truth and meaning we have to believe it's possible that we don't have it all figured out on our own. The controversial British military leader, Oliver Cromwell, famously wrote, "I beseech you...think it possible you may be mistaken."<sup>4</sup>

And, in our reading, Federico Moramarco asks, have you considered the possibility that everything you believe is wrong, not merely off a bit, but totally wrong...? When I first read those lines, my immediate reaction was, "Of course, not! Who, me? Wrong?" I so want to be right. All the time. This may be in part because I am a "1" in the Enneagram personality type - the "Idealist." It might be because I am a fiercely independent middle child. Maybe, it's just because I'm human.

I don't think I'm alone in wanting to be right, to have it all figured out, and to have the rest of the world agree with my point of view.

What I find striking in Moramarco's suggestion is that being open to the possibility of being wrong can turn the whole world upside down to the point that "everyone who was your enemy is your friend" and "everything you hated, you now love."

Now, what a transformation that would be!

I don't think we need to give up on everything we believe to turn the world upside down. The paradox is that to do this I believe we each need to hold onto a vision of goodness and justice and peace while also remaining open enough to be changed by the stories and experiences of people who may be very different from us.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.olivercromwell.org/Letters\\_and\\_speeches/letters/Letter\\_129.pdf](http://www.olivercromwell.org/Letters_and_speeches/letters/Letter_129.pdf)

At the end of her book, Arlie Hochschild imagines writing a letter to the people on the political right that she met and be-friended in Louisiana and also to her liberal-leaning friends. In both letters, she suggests that there might be more that they can find in common with one another's stories than might seem apparent on the surface.

Though outside the realm of politics, even in my brief conversation with Sandy, I sensed that we share a number of things in common. We both believe that helping our neighbors is a good thing to do. We both value warmth and welcoming in community. We both worry about what the future might have in store for our children.

There is so much more that I know I need to do to, and we all need to do, to bring down the walls that divide us. Yet, I hold hope that we can each find those places where our own walls can come down, where understanding and compassion can emerge in unlikely conversations, where we can hold to what and whom we cherish and make space with loving compassion for another person's story.

I hold hope that this world is still possible.

So may it be.