

"Seeking Understanding"  
Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
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*A sermon is meant to be heard rather than read. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

Reading, "The Place Where We Are Right" by Yehuda Amichai

I'd like you to think for a moment back to the first time you can distinctly remember disagreeing with someone.

The occasion I remember happened when I was about eight or nine years-old. I'm sure I had many disagreements with my brothers before then, but this day sticks in my memory. We were outside playing with some neighbors, and one of them, a boy about my age, was trying to tell us the rules of the game. I thought his rules made no sense, and I proceeded to tell him so.

More than the content of what I said to him or the particular disagreement we were having, I remember the bodily feeling of disagreeing with him - the blood rising to my head, my body tensing, and the certainty I felt that I was right and he was wrong. I don't know how the conflict resolved. I just remember rushing into the house and still feeling puffed up and indignant going straight to my mother and telling her I wanted to be a lawyer when I grew up.

That same sensation of tension in my body and my heart rate rising has been present with me for the last several months. Perhaps you've noticing something similar within yourself.

I have come to recognize this in myself as low level, election-induced anxiety.

For many of us, this election season has illustrated the deep political and ideological divisions in our country. This climate of division and polarized partisanship isn't particularly new, however, and in many ways is the result of years of growing entrenchment between the two major parties, the divergence in interest

and values between urban and rural areas, and a media and political environment that has made it more difficult for elected officials to work across party lines.

I, like most of you I believe, care a lot about the outcome of the presidential election and also our local races. And, from this place of caring, it is easy for me to feel so right in my views and to see others as absolutely wrong.

Yet, there have been moments when I've caught myself and wondered how we, as a society, might reclaim a sense of common purpose.

Yehuda Amichai, whose poem I shared earlier, was an Israeli poet. He was born in Germany in 1924 and left at the age of 12 with his family for Palestine. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, he fought for the Israeli defense forces. His service in that war and also the backdrop of World War II inform his poetry, and for me, bring even more depth to his poem, "The Place Where We Are Right."

"The place where we are right is hard and trampled like a yard," he writes.

When we get too attached to the idea that we are right, we trample the ground beneath us squashing any ability to grow something fruitful.

We lose interest in one another.

True curiosity in one another is fueled by the desire to understand and the openness to be changed by that understanding.

Now, I want to say, too, that moral righteousness is also absolutely needed. People of faith in particular need to continue to appeal to the morals that seek to protect and empower the vulnerable and to promote peace and environmental sustainability.

Yet, as we hold this moral righteousness, I believe we must also hold the moral humility to be open to hearing the truth of another's experience and to even be changed by it.

Moral humility allows us to admit that we don't have all the answers and that what we need to know, we can learn from others.

Several years ago now, the small nonprofit organization I worked for convened a staff retreat. The facilitator was wonderfully skilled and one of the pieces of advice she gave us as we sat in a circle in a drab, windowless room, was to “seek to understand.” This simple admonition felt like an invitation to lower my guard, to take the boxing gloves off and to move beyond my own need to make my point. Her call to us to “seek to understand” was a call to humbly and attentively listen to one another.

Those simple words stuck with me throughout the retreat and in the years since and has resonated as I have experienced again and again that meeting our need to be understood is often more powerful than meeting our need to be right.

I have learned that it is mostly through relationship and through getting to know the particular concrete experiences of others that greater understanding is possible.

One of the relationships that has stretched me the most was with my father-in-law. Bill was different in so many ways from anyone I had ever known. He was a native Vermonter with a do-it-yourself attitude. In the time I knew him, he worked several odd jobs mostly as a handyman for people much wealthier than himself. His education ended with high school after which he had served in the navy. Bill never talked much with me about politics or religion, but I knew he had an independent streak, a general disdain for politicians, and had long ago given up on the Catholic church. If I had never known Bill or lived with him on a few occasions, it would be pretty easy for me, an overly educated citified person, to make some wrong assumptions about poor, rural Vermonters. Being around Bill wasn't always easy, but being witness to and part of the particularities of his life, as challenging as they sometimes were, gave me a new understanding and a deep love for him.

In her sermon delivered at the Sunday morning worship service at General Assembly this past June, the Unitarian Universalist minister Nancy McDonald Ladd spoke of the possibility for change in encountering difference.

First, she quoted the anti-racist organizer Micky Scottbey Jones who has said, “Relationship is the sandpaper that wears away our resistance to change.” And then, McDonald Ladd continued saying, “Relationship is the abrasion that agitates enough to make a way forward. Relationship, consistent and ongoing encounter

with people and perspectives different from our own, smoothes the way for the sacred even as it rubs us raw. And, there is a holy abrasion of the spirit that is born in deep relational encounters across differences.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, as Unitarian Universalists, we like to think of ourselves as tolerant and respectful people on the whole. We work hard to maintain covenants of right relationship with one another.

Yet, if we took a hard look at our networks and the circles we are a part of, we would probably conclude that we spend the vast majority of our time with people who share our basic world views.

This is certainly true in my own life.

The people who I have the most contact with on a regular basis are typically more on the liberal side – politically and religiously. They are mostly of a similar educational background. And, we probably learn about the world through similar media and news outlets.

The truth is that my own tendency has been to shy away from the conflict that can arise from acknowledging or probing strong differences of opinion with others. And, being in community with like-minded people has also been a source of healing and comfort when I have felt alienated from other communities in my life.

There are certainly reasons we want that sense of safety and security that comes from being amongst like-minded people.

Yet, it is through the sometimes rough and messy relational encounters with difference, through that holy abrasion of the spirit, that change is possible.

Kwame Anthony Appiah is a professor of philosophy and the product of an interracial marriage in 1950s Ghana. He suggests that rather than taking on differences in political positions or moral questions directly we can try sidling up to

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<sup>1</sup> “In All Thy Getting, Get Understanding,” Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd, <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2016/worship/sunday>

these differences by finding ways of having simple, human encounters with others whose views of the world or identities are vastly different than our own.

In the British teen drama, *Skins*, a young, white, gay, English teenager and a young Muslim English teen who is of Pakistani descent are best friends. The Pakistani kid who's straight is having a birthday party, and the friend arrives but stands outside and says to him, "I'm not coming in because you promised to tell your parents that I was gay and you haven't done it and this is it. This is my ultimatum. I'm not coming in." So he just stands outside.

Finally, the father comes out and says, "What are you doing outside?" He said, "I'm not coming in because your son won't tell you that I'm gay." The man looks at him and says, "You know, Islam means a lot to me and when I go to mosque on Fridays, it's one of the great moments in my week." He said, "But I don't understand everything. One thing I do understand is that you're my son's best friend, so please come in."

Through simple, human encounters like this one, we can begin to understand the humanity of others beyond the differences we might first see.

And, if we do this enough within our families and neighborhoods, perhaps it can even happen in the broader communities of which we are a part.

Frances Kissling is a scholar and activist and served as president of Catholics for a Free Choice for twenty-five years. In her decades as an advocate for women's reproductive rights, she found herself at the front-lines of the cultural and political wars around abortion. An issue about which there can be vast differences of opinion. But, in Kissling's decades working on the issue, she says that she came to a new understanding of the importance of engaging with others in the midst of deep differences. She says, "You have got to approach differences with this notion that there is good in the other." Speaking of political polarizations, she says, "if there isn't the crack in the middle where there's some people on both sides who absolutely refuse to see the other as evil, this is going to continue."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Listening Beyond Life and Choice," August 11, 2011, Frances Kissling interview, On Being with Krista Tippett. [http://www.onbeing.org/program/listening-beyond-life-and-choice/transcript/504#main\\_content](http://www.onbeing.org/program/listening-beyond-life-and-choice/transcript/504#main_content)

The crack in the middle where people on both sides absolutely refuse to see the other as evil.

We must inhabit this small but vital space where the goodness of one another might just be revealed.

We affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, as our first principle states, when we refuse to see the other as evil even when our differences seem insurmountable.

I believe that we as a religious community can strive to be a place where we are held together by a common purpose and yet embrace our ideological, political, and spiritual differences. We can affirm that love is the doctrine of this church while engaging in vastly different spiritual practices. We can seek knowledge in freedom while differing in the sources of truth we find most meaningful. We can serve human need while having different opinions about the public policies that address poverty and hunger. We can be a place of connection and belonging where we love one another because, and not despite, the fundamental differences we hold.

I am inspired by the words of the activist and public theologian Ruby Sales. In engaging with others, Sales encourages us to ask the question, “where does it hurt?” This is such a humanizing question. It automatically forces us to move beyond the labels and assumptions we might make of others because of certain beliefs or opinions they hold. Asking, “where does it hurt?” beckons us to find connection in the common reality of our suffering.

The story of the unlikely friendship of Bassam Aramin and Rami Elhannan illustrates what can happen when we become interested once again in understanding one another’s humanity.

Bassam Aramin is a Muslim Palestinian and Rami Elhannan is a Jewish Israeli. They are both members of the organization Combatants for Peace, a group of former Israeli and Palestinian fighters united in the search for peace. Besides both having fought at different times in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, they have both also lost daughters in the conflict. Rami’s fourteen year-old daughter was killed by a

Palestinian suicide bomber in a street mall in Jerusalem in 1997. In 2007, Bassam's ten year-old daughter was shot and killed by an Israeli soldier after she had left school. Despite coming from different sides of an entrenched and deep-seated conflict, Bassam and Rami consider themselves to be brothers in the struggle for peace. Bassam says that a key moment for him came while he was in prison and watched a film about the Holocaust. He says, "One of the problems with our communities is that we are shielded from ever seeing things from the point of view of the other side."<sup>3</sup> After years working towards peace together, Bassam and Rami and their families get together for dinner every couple of months or so and the gatherings now include their grandchildren which Bassam says is a constant reminder of what is at stake. And, they continue working towards peace.

May we, too, live in the space where we are open to encountering one another's humanity in the midst of our differences.

May we find that crack in the middle where we strive always to see the good in others and to be humbly changed by that greater understanding.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Joanna Moorhead, 'Why are men so angry that they kill children to get what they want?' The Guardian, August 3, 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/aug/03/men-kill-children-middle-east-israel-palestine>