

The Obligating Imagination

Delivered at July 17m 2016 at
Spirit of Life Unitarian Universalists

SpiritofLifeUU.org

By Theresa Willingham

We are like islands in the sea, separated on the surface but connected in the deep, said 19th century philosopher, William James.

Given the current state of world affairs – in France, Turkey, Texas, Minnesota, Louisiana, Orlando – it seems now more than ever that the sea that separates us is an angry one, hurling tsunamis of the overwhelming grief and heartache of war, terrorism, poverty, disease and madness, against our isolated shores.

But most of us probably know it's not the world that generates those metaphorical waves, it's us – the humans who inhabit the world, and it's we who have the power to calm the sea.

As we hashtag our way around the issues, though: #blacklivesmatter #Bluelivesmatter #alllivesmatter #OneOrlando #PrayforNice #PrayforTurkey #UnitedAgainstHate – it can be hard to see how.

This natural world – that is, the world without us – can at best be described as simply existing. Without the moral codes we impose upon it, it simply is. Animals eat each other, rivers breach banks, earthquakes and volcanoes terraform, lightening sparks fires that consume plains and forests, plants seed and blossom, insects whir , whales breach, glaciers calve and so forth.

It is only when we come up against the world that it becomes overwhelming, that rivers breaching banks and earthquakes and fires become disasters, and flowers and whales become beautiful and glaciers calving become spectacular – or overwhelming.

The alligator attack at Disney World that claimed the life of a two year old, something that as a parent I can't even begin to put my mind around to

understand so unspeakable a loss – as overwhelming as the whole thing is, was created by an alligator simply being an alligator.

Had the attack occurred while kayaking or swimming in a lake or pond anywhere else but Disney World, the incident would have been tragic. Because it happened in a totally unexpected environment, it was tragic and overwhelming. But both places are the same – the World; not Disney World, but the world in which we all live, with its unsettling keep-you-guard-up environment, no matter the pastel colors with which we paint it.

Yet, however tragic, I can still make sense of an alligator acting on instinct. It did what alligators do, and the question is not of the moral rectitude of the alligator but, if anything, perhaps of the vigilance of Disney to ensure the façade of safety is as inviolable as possible.

The Orlando night club tragedy that left 50 people dead and another 50 injured, is something else. That is a tragic and horrifying tale of human madness. Or the truck plowing through Bastille Day celebrants in France, or the shooter in Dallas, or... insert overwhelming human induced tragedy here.

There will continue to be endless discussion and reflective retrospective decision making after each of these atrocities. Should people have flagged shooters or extremists better, or responded more definitively when others alerted them to concerns? That's the type of speculative soothsaying that will continue in perpetuity, the oily subject matter that greases the wheels of idle talk shows where people speak loudly but change goes nowhere.

There are also more well intentioned efforts that can also ring hollow.

"We're left heartbroken yet again in the wake of deadly acts of violence against police and our fellow citizens. Our hearts go out to the loved ones of all those whose lives were taken." said a note from Change.org that I found in my mailbox the other day.

"Together," it went on to say, "we at Change.org reject the notion that violence is inevitable or must be tolerated. These are the times that can divide us, but we

don't have to take sides. If you believe in peace, understanding and justice, we are on the same side. We can make a choice to join one another in solidarity, and work together to build the world we want to live in. Right now."

I read on hopefully for proposed solutions. Maybe there was something I could actually do here to make a difference, something to make me feel less useless.

The week's been hard, the letter went on to observe, referring to Dallas tragedy, fresh on the heels of the Orlando Pulse nightclub killings.

"But I'm also hopeful that we can find some solace by sharing our stories, and in working together to make change."

Awesome! What's on the table?! I wondered, hopefully, as I read on.

"I invite you to express your feelings and perspectives," the next part read. "Share your stories and engage with other Change.org users by leaving a comment on this blog post. How did the news this week affect you? What actions do you think everyday people can take to address violence in our communities? What should we be working on together?"

Darn! And here I thought they knew!

I went to the website link where, within a few hours of that email nearly 1300 people had already shared their comments, ranging from the poignant – "I just want the killings to stop!" – to the ridiculous "It's a government conspiracy."

"If you're ready to put those perspectives into action, " the website urged, "we invite you to start a petition and share it with our community."

Start a petition? That's it? I felt like Ralphie in the Christmas Story film, finally decoding the Orphan Annie message only to find a "crummy commercial." A petition?

What am I going to create a petition about? Gun control? Less police brutality? Ending racial profiling? No violence on law enforcement? No hate crimes against people of color or the LGBTQ community? A petition to "Be Nice"?

I like Change.org, but we're way past petitions here. Petitions and "thoughts and prayers" are not changing anything. Those of us who subscribe to Change.org and follow sites like the Southern Poverty Law Center, and all these similar great, reasonable, common sense and compassionate resources and groups already stand together in solidarity for compassion and against violence; we care for one another and do the best we can where we are to be decent and kind, like the majority of folks in the world. And no one we'd write a petition to would be hearing our calls for gun control and social justice for the first time.

The real challenge here is getting out there where the message really needs to be heard, rather than commiserating among ourselves and endlessly consoling and reassuring one another. How do we get where change needs to happen – not here, where we already agree – but among the violent and politically opportunistic minority who wield the power, money, weapons and authority to benefit from social chaos? How do we become feet on the ground instead of hashtags on the Internet?

We need more than petitions. We need to make it loud in person for social justice and peace. We need to be present and accounted for in caring for each other, in speaking out for one another, and in using the common language of shared humanity in refusing enmass to accept any of this any longer.

Because as awful as the recent atrocities have been, the news isn't new; it's simply traveling at the speed of the internet now. But it's been going on a really long time; think Colliseum, Inquisitions, the Crusades, tribal warfare, Holocaust, slavery and human trafficking, genocide ... the list of human violence is as sadly endless as it timeless.

Petitions and hashtags simply won't cut it. What's required is a systemic cultural sea change, a complete change of meme, as originally defined; not the variously iconic internet posters of cats and celebrities, but "an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture."

There are inklings that we can do that, that we can change the story of racism and violence shaking us to our human core. And it's that outpouring of kindness and

compassion that follow immediately on the heels of the most heinous of crimes and disasters that most interest me.

In three days, the One Orlando Trust Fund raised \$7.5 million for victims. 7500 blood donors gave blood in one day alone, prompting one blood bank to report they actually had sufficiently safe levels of blood inventory now.

\$55,000 was raised in one day for the Copeland family, who lost a father and son in the Nice attack. Similar expressions of compassion and support are always evident after big public devastations.

So the question is: What if we did that all the time? Why do we need a tragedy to be proactive in caring for each other? If we can raise \$7.5 million in 3 days, what could we do if we always gave at that level? If we can gather in force for massive candlelight vigils to show our support for peace and tolerance after hate has prevailed, why can't we head off the hate in the first place.

It's hard, of course, because we're human, the very challenge that causes us self-inflicted pain; because the day to day of caring for ourselves and our immediate families is work enough for many of us. The sloshing waves of life often obscure our view of one another. The real miracle, perhaps, is that so many people can turn outward so quickly, and so effectively. We do what we can when we have to, in our shared collective horror at tragedy, because most people, even adrift in the sea of life, are good and decent.

But maybe we can do more sooner, towards building a force for good that can't be shaken, that can strengthen those deep connections we already have and help us rise above the rough seas of social unrest that devastate us and perhaps finally quiet them.

In an address to the American Relief Coalition for Syria, delivered in Virginia in March, Leon Wieseltier (Weezleteer) an American writer and magazine editor, currently the Isaiah Berlin Senior Fellow in Culture and Policy at the Brookings Institution, says that perhaps what we really need to be inspired to act and care is our imagination.

“Morality is often regarded as a creation of reason, an affair of concepts and principles;” he said. “but it may be that the imagination is a more necessary foundation for morality than reason, because the injustices that we are asked to relieve and to abolish are most often injustices that we ourselves have not known. The narrowness of experience is one of the primary impediments to compassion. We will never give help if we cannot picture need.

“And this obligating imagination,” he goes on to say, “—of the pains of others, of the needs of others—will not happen unless in the others we see the same— unless we regard our general humanity as more ethically significant than our specific constructions of it. Before we are Muslims and Christians and Jews, we are brothers and sisters. If we allow our identification with each other to be obscured by our identities, then we are lost. “

That’s why we can act so effectively when we see tragedy unfold before us. We don’t need to imagine it; it is made manifest and we can feel more palpably the pain of others that compels us to action.

The real challenge is to remember, after the talking heads move on to the next thing, to care without being told to care, without having to be so shockingly reminded of why we need to care.

How do we bridge that gap between acting when tragedy strikes, and caring before it does, maybe better averting tragedy altogether? How do we activate that “obligating imagination” that helps us see ourselves in others?

One way is to simply look at each other.

Last year, an organization called Liberators International staged a global experiment that encouraged people everywhere to take a minute, and just look into each other’s eyes. On October 15th, 2015, 100,000 people in more than 156 countries shared a minute of eye contact with strangers in public to experience a shift of human connection.

And maybe, in the end, this is the best way to enable that obligating imagination, the best way to make sense of a big overwhelming world where even to imagine suffering at the global scale at which it exists may inspire only hopelessness.

By taking the time to look up and actually see one another, we can scale it all down, down from the global, down from the national, and the state, to the local – to our community, and our neighbors, to the personal, where perhaps we can be kind and caring people on a daily basis.

Perhaps, by looking at one another, and actually seeing one another, and seeing ourselves reflected back, maybe we can care better because then there will be no us and them – just all of us.

So here's your take away: Go out there and look everyone you meet, every day, in the eye, see yourself in them, and care. Yes, even you aspies – you can do it for a second or two: at the grocery store, or at work, at school, or on the street – look at the other person you encounter and see our shared humanity and then focus on that deep connection that binds us - and never let it go.

Remember, as Walt Whitman said, that “ every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

When you find that common ground , stand firmly on it. Be slow to take offense, quick with a kind word or to lend a hand. Be the person who smiles instead of the one who doesn't smile back. And speak out thoughtfully but firmly against intolerance, hate and injustice when you see it.

Somebody does have to do something about all this. It doesn't take that much imagination to see who that somebody is.

Tag! We're it.