



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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Building Bridges

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In the excerpt I just read by Eboo Patel, he talks about his heroes, heroes that have all since passed. But it's important to have heroes who are living too, who inspire us with their good works now. One of my living heroes is indisputably Dave Eggers, a peer and author of the book, *Zeitoun*, which I'll be speaking much more about today. You may be familiar with another of his excellent non-fiction books, *What Is the What*, about a refugee of the Darfur conflict. The subjects of both of these books went on to establish foundations that are making a real difference in areas of the world that need help very badly.

Dave Eggers is doing amazing work - he has his own publishing company, which publishes the Voice of Witness Series, a nonprofit book series that shares the personal stories of those who have suffered some of the worst human rights abuses. He co-founded a nonprofit tutoring and writing center for youth in San Francisco, and sister centers have opened up in six major cities across the country.

He's also my hero because he grew up in my 'hood, in the northern suburbs of Chicago. The book that propelled him into fame was his biography, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, about recovering from his parents' deaths from cancer. It is so well-written, and despite the subject, much of it is quite funny. I especially loved his references to the Chicago suburbs. I knew of the private high school for rich kids he and his friends made fun of, Country Day.

It may seem like I'm way off my subject matter here, but referencing the privileged educations of upper class kids is a relevant place to start. Even though Dave Eggers and I didn't go to Country Day, we still had some of the best public school educations available in the country. We are still among the privileged, educated elite.

We are in stark contrast to those who have very little or poor educations, which is often the starting point down the path to religious extremism. As Patel articulated so well, the fight for religious pluralism has far fewer foot-soldiers compared to those for totalitarians. He writes,

"Religious totalitarians have the unique advantage of being able to oppose each other and work together at the same time. Osama bin Laden says that Christians are out to destroy Muslims. Pat Robertson says that Muslims want only to dominate Christians . . . if you look from a certain angle, you see that they are not on opposite sides at all. They are right next to each other, standing shoulder to shoulder, a most unlikely pair, two totalitarians working collectively against the dream of a common life together."¹

Religious liberals, UUs among them, stand at the other end of the spectrum, well-educated, and supportive of religious pluralism, but not foot-soldier supportive. The truth is we are not only few in number, we are few in seeing the need to act. This sermon strives to convince you otherwise. This is a call-to-action sermon; some of you will answer the call, and many of you will not, and that's okay. The need to reach out to the Muslim-American community is a troublesome topic. A pastoral sermon, one that lavishes reflection upon our personal spirituality, is much easier for me to preach, and for you to receive. Why am I bothering with this topic - why should you care about the difficulties Muslims face in our country?

You should care because, like Dave Eggers, the tradition of liberal religion values the safeguarding of human and civil rights above all else. I would go so far as to say it is the foundation of our faith. It's from here that we understand how vital diversity is, and from here that we act on our compassion. We build everything on this foundation. It's not only written in our first Principle, that we recognize the worth and dignity of every human being, it's part of our history. It's the talk we walk. We've seen it lately in the work we've done for marriage equality, and most recently in protesting

¹ *Acts of Faith* by Eboo Patel, 2007, p. XV.

the new Arizona law that sanctions racial profiling. Hundreds of Unitarian Universalists will be participating in the huge demonstration in Phoenix next weekend.

In recent decades, Bill Schultz, former UUA president and UU minister, went on to lead Amnesty International for twelve years. Not surprisingly, he just became Interim President of the UU Service Committee. The UUSC has been serving the cause of human rights since World War II, when Unitarians went to Europe to help the Jews. Many of you know that the chalice became our symbol because it was a burning candle in the window of a house that signified to Jews they would be harbored there.

The UUSC is sponsoring an event on June 5th called Building Bridges. Today I'm hoping to inspire many of you to attend. It will be held at the Muslim school down the street, New Horizon.

The cause of religious plurality needs our help, because the fear of terrorism has demonized the faith of Islam wholesale. We don't often hear about the civil liberties infringements that occur for Muslims, or the hate crimes. We hear plenty about the Times Square would-be bomber, or the would-be Nigerian underwear bomber, but we don't hear anywhere near as much about the horrific experiences of innocent Muslims who are wrongly identified or persecuted as would-be terrorists.

Since 9-11, Muslims have faced a surge in hate crimes and civil liberties violations, both here and in Europe. While it's progress that we didn't round up all the Muslims and intern them, like we did to the Japanese in World War II, it's been a different kind of internment. One that is hidden and more insidious. You have to look closely to see it - you have to go out of your way to find the stories of civil liberties complaints and recorded violations, both great and small. The mainstream media rarely covers this; the mainstream media prefers a simple correlation: Islam is to Terrorism, as fear and loathing is to Islam.

I'll talk about the greater implications of fearing and hating Islam later, but first let's look at the story of Zeitoun. You can find many examples and statistics of Muslim civil liberties violations and complaints by doing some research online; the Council on American-Islam Relations has the best data, CAIR for short. But Zeitoun is the most compelling example I've come across, probably because his story is told in a book, rather than in an impersonal news article.

Abdulahman Zeitoun was born in Syria, from a remarkable family of achievers. His brother was the best long-distance ocean swimmer in the world. From a young age, Zeitoun was a self-motivated observer and learned many trades. For ten years he was a professional sailor before he ported in Houston, and explored until he found New Orleans. He called New Orleans home in 1988, and has lived there ever since.

Zeitoun is a model immigrant. He's a builder. He is as hard-working as you can be, and though he started with nothing, with his wife Kathy he built a very successful contracting business whose rainbow logo is recognized all over the city. They are a Muslim family with four children.

When the big storm hit in 2005, Kathy and the kids evacuated. But Zeitoun insisted on staying behind, to look after the house, and his business. He had a canoe that he paddled around the city, and during the first few days after the levees broke, he helped many people to safety. He even went out of his way to feed some dogs left behind by neighbors, every day that he could.

Kathy and Zeitoun's siblings kept insisting that he ought to leave, that the news reports were terrible, that there was danger - armed roving gangs and looters. But Zeitoun would reply that he's seen no such danger where he is, and furthermore, he was helping. In fact, Zeitoun believed that it was the will of Allah, God's will, that he should still be in New Orleans after disaster had struck. He was there to help anyone he could.

But Kathy and Zeitoun's family were right - danger was imminent, and it came in the form of FEMA law-enforcement. Zeitoun, along with three other men, were arrested, about ten days after the storm. At first Zeitoun just thought it was part of the forced evacuation, and he wasn't worried. But he soon understood that he was in deep trouble.

The men, two Muslims and two white non-Muslims were taken to the makeshift prison at the Grayhound Bus Station, that had been constructed two days after the storm by Angola prisoners. They confiscated all their possessions, calling it evidence. They were all strip-searched. After brief interrogations, they were all put in a cage, their charges unclear. The prison looked like Guantanamo Bay. When one of the men asked a passing soldier why they were there, he replied, "You guys are al Qaeda."

There's a reason why due process is the cornerstone of a democratic judicial system. It helps ensure that standards of humane treatment are as high as possible, that innocent people are not incorrectly locked up. It ensures that a democracy stays democratic. It's incredible to consider how dire the right to a phone call was in Zeitoun's situation. And yet all of the men arrested were denied this right.

By this point, Kathy and the kids were in Arizona, staying with a friend. Every day Zeitoun had called Kathy at noon. Suddenly his calls stopped, and Kathy, the kids, and Zeitoun's family in Syria had no idea what happened to him. It was an excruciating *twelve* days before a pastor visiting the prison took mercy on Zeitoun, wrote down his wife's cell phone number, and called her, letting her know where he was, and more importantly, that he was alive.

I can't go in to all the details of what Zeitoun suffered during his time of wrongful incarceration, but in the period of three weeks, he lost twenty pounds and all his hair had turned white.

We could say but, yes, the confusion after Katrina made for unusual circumstances. Many, many people were wrongly arrested by FEMA after the hurricane. Is it racial profiling, or a degraded judicial system? Both factors contributed to Zeitoun's nightmare. After 9/11 FEMA had been folded into the Department of Homeland Security, so it's not a coincidence that their tactics were reminiscent of Guantanamo. The larger questions are, how many people today still aren't getting their phone-call? How many of them are treated differently because they are Muslim? How many families are suffering from this oppression?

Years later, Kathy still has severe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Here's a passage toward the end of the book,

"She finds herself wondering . . . *Did all that really happen? Did it happen in the United States? To us?* It could have been avoided, she thinks. So many people let it happen. So many looked away. She wants to find out who that missionary was, the man who met her husband in prison and took her phone number. The man who risked something in the name of mercy.

But did he risk so much? Not really . . . To dial a number given to you by a man in a cage, to tell the voice on the other end, 'I saw him.' Is that complicated? Is that an act of great heroism in the United States of America? It should not be so."

Let me switch gears at this point, and state that I know this issue is not as simple as I'm making it out to be. Yes, Zeitoun's story is regrettable, but . . . what about the extremists, or what about, for instance, how women seem to be 2nd class citizens in Islam? What about the women?

This is complicated, which is why it is worthy of our UU brains to wrestle with. A few weeks ago, on a Sunday evening, Kit and I were strolling down Colorado Blvd. in Old Town Pasadena. Across the street, we saw what can only be assumed to be a woman, in a full burka. She was being escorted by an African American man, presumably her husband. I was a bit shocked, to be honest.

If the hope I put the most faith in is in the advancement of women, how am I to respond to the sight of a burka in Pasadena? Well, I need to keep it in perspective. It's what makes the US so great - that such a profusion of religious expression is at liberty to exist here. This has to include the extremes - extremes that, historically in our country, only small numbers of people embrace. Somehow I have to hold my dearest hope - the steady advancement of women - as I hold another of my dearest values: that religious pluralism is key to maintaining a high standard of liberty in our democracy. Religious freedom actually keeps our democracy in check.

And religious freedom tends to be a value of the well-educated. For religious liberals, salvation is worldly, and education is a top vehicle of worldly salvation. We always have been, and we always will be advocates of education. Just as author of *Three Cups of Tea*, Greg Mortenson, believes, the man who has established over 130 schools, mostly for girls, in Pakistan and Afghanistan, we also believe that it is books and not bombs that counter terror more effectively. While we can't turn stones into schools ourselves in these kinds of places, there is something we can do at home.

We can be advocates for a more accurate understanding of the Muslim religion, advocates of religious pluralism. We can raise awareness about the degradation of Muslims' civil liberties since 9/11. Here's some good news: the incidents of civil liberties infringements have gone down in Southern California over the past few years. Southern California is actually a leader in addressing the problem - in 2007, the LA County Sheriff's Department established an outreach program, training the officers and staff on cultural sensitivity about Muslims and Islam. Again, it's education that is the saving grace.

It's education, and it's gaining some greater self-awareness as a country about the challenges of our time. Have you ever considered that it's awfully convenient to hate a people who live in countries that have something we want so much? This horrific oil spill in the gulf cries out for rigorous self-examination. How are we going to make the identity shift from a way of life utterly dependent on fossil fuels to one that is not? If we look at the bigger picture of humanity's current predicament, we see that the smearing of Muslims has much to do with economic and environmental realities.

As time goes on, my fear is that global competition for finite resources is going to get uglier than it already is. It's another reason why we have to call out ethnic hatred for what it so often is: a by-product of fierce economic competition.

Our current approach of war and more war is self-destructive, and is neither affordable nor effective. We have got to advocate for an alternative, more enlightened approach.

The key to that approach is rooted in the founding principles of both our faith and our highest democratic ideals: freedom, education, and the highest standards of human and civil rights. We have a moral obligation to fight for this foundation. Everything else this country is about is built on that foundation.

I want to conclude with the wonderful concluding paragraphs of *Zeitoun*:

"More than anything else, Zeitoun is simply happy to be free and in his city. It's the place of his dreams, the place where he was married, where his children were born, where he was given the trust of his neighbors. So every day he gets in his white van, still with its rainbow logo, and makes his way through the city, watching it rise again.

It was a test, Zeitoun thinks. Who among us could deny that we were tested? But now look at us, he says. Every person is stronger now. Every person who was forgotten by God or country is now louder, more defiant, and more determined. . . He can only have faith that he will never again be forgotten, denied, called by a name other than his own. He must trust, and he must have faith. And so he builds, because what is building, and rebuilding and rebuilding again, but an act of faith? . . . there is no better way to prove to God and neighbor that you were there, that you are there, that you are human, than to build. Who could ever again deny he belonged here? If he needs to restore every home in this city, he will, to prove he is part of this place.

As he drives through the city during the day and dreams of it at night, his mind vaults into glorious reveries - he envisions this city and this country not just as it was, but better, far better. It can be. Yes, a dark time passed over this land, but now there is something like light. Progress is being made. It's so slow sometimes, so terribly slow sometimes, but progress is being made. We have removed the rot, we are strengthening the foundations. There is much work to do, and we all know what needs to be done. We can only do the work, he tells Kathy, and his children, and his crew, his friends, anyone he sees. So let us get up early and stay late, and, brick by brick and block by block, let us get that work done. If he can picture it, it can be. This has been the pattern of his life: ludicrous dreams followed by hours and days and years of work and then a reality surpassing his wildest hopes and expectations.

And so why should this be any different?"