



Defying Hate Resources
Theological Reflection
Rev. Sara LaWall, Minister of the Boise UU Fellowship

My state of Idaho presents a paradox. On the one hand, Boise, its capital city, where my family and I moved last year for my first settled ministry, was named one of the most welcoming cities in the nation--the people here are beautifully (but unusually) friendly. That sense of welcoming comes alive in our forty plus-year history of refugee resettlement. It is not unusual to see African women in colorful dresses made from the fabric and designs of their home country. The Saturday farmer's market stalls are filled with refugee families selling vegetables from their gardens. I anticipate my favorite weekly treat at one of the food stalls, the savory, fried, east African sambusa.

On the other hand, when I arrived at the Boise UU Fellowship last fall to begin my ministry, the people of the congregation and the city were already deeply wounded by the rising hate toward refugees and growing Islamophobia. Anti-government extremists and a militia group calling themselves "III Percenters," were riding the growing wave of Islamophobia, leading anti-refugee protests and actions to attempt to close down a refugee resettlement center in nearby Twin Falls; it had been operating for more than 30 years. Our governor was one of the twenty-one governors who signed a letter to President Obama demanding the immediate cessation of refugee resettlement. And conservative members of our state legislature had invited known anti-Islamic speakers to a pre-legislative presentation in the statehouse, outlining a fear-filled, factually unstable platform against refugees.

I could not help but wonder about this new state to which I had committed my family and my ministry. How can we pride ourselves on being so welcoming while allowing violent hate speech to dominate our public conversation, and when our government leaders appear to be anti-refugee? The short answer is we can't. We must bring our voices to the fore; loudly, boldly, and courageously, with more spiritual grounding than those using fear to divide and conquer.

I noticed that many in my congregation and the community at large felt a deep despair over the crisis point with Syrian Refugees. Many came to me asking what we *should* be doing, feeling the call of the world to be of use, to help, to make the world whole. The blessing came when local clergy and interfaith leaders came together out of concern for the hate-filled messages permeating our media. We worried about their negative impact on our Muslim community. Collectively we all felt called by our separate faith traditions to, simply put, be good neighbors; to demonstrate faith-driven public witness in solidarity with

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST SERVICE COMMITTEE

689 Massachusetts Avenue • Cambridge, MA 02139-3302 • 617-868-6600 • fax: 617-868-7102
www.uusc.org

refugees and Muslims. What we all innately understood, what the Syrian crisis shows us, is that when one is in peril, we all are in peril.

The grief and despair we feel is our spiritual response calling us to action. We cannot grow spiritually, we cannot deepen our faith or our religious lives, without connection to others – without engagement in a deeper connection to humanity. Our Unitarian Universalist tradition and principles speak to this understanding rather clearly in our commitment not only to the inherent worth and dignity of all people, but also in our understanding of interdependence.

Process Theology teaches us about the moral urgency of understanding our interconnections; that our choices, actions, and words have consequences beyond our individual selves and lives.

If we live our lives cut-off and disconnected from our fellow human beings, no moral vision is possible.ⁱ When we ground ourselves in this interconnection, we cannot help but feel called by a greater vision of what is possible. A vision fueled by the values of our liberal religious tradition, compassion, love, justice – values shared by many faith traditions, as I came to intimately experience in our interfaith gatherings. In our interfaith response, we reminded one another that our words matter and that our community is desperate to hear the words of love and welcome, over and over again as long as it takes to make them reality. Our choice to be the love is how we actively defy hate. Our witness reminds the people (and us) of our historical legacies in which our great religious prophets spoke truth to power. We must continue that legacy today. We must be the prophets of our time.

My faith, my UU faith, has shown me that religion, spirituality, and justice are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are inextricably linked. I am called by a practice of Liberation Theology that reminds us religion is not a road purely for the journey toward self-fulfillment. Faith points us down the road of the vulnerable, the oppressed, the marginalized. We understand that none of us is truly free until the margins are brought fully into the center, until the circle of compassion widens enough that there is truly room for all.

ⁱ Mesle, C. Robert (2008-11-01). *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead* (p. 18). Templeton Press. Kindle Edition.