



## **Defying Hate Resources** **Theological Reflections by Rev. Paul Langston-Daley**

The opposite of love is not hate. It is indifference. In order to have hate, one must have an attachment, a connection, a reason to bring passion to the issue, whatever the issue may be.

So how then, does this explain the Islamophobia, immigrant bashing, racism, homophobia, and sexism that we face? People would not be so passionate if they didn't have some investment, if they didn't care. Their hatred would be indifference, and for anyone who has felt indifference, that often stings worse than hatred. Indifference is invisibility, and while that may seem desirable, in the long run it's actually worse (consider the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's). At least with hatred you know someone is invested, they care...which means they can also be moved.

So what is it they hate? What is it that makes some people so angry and, in some cases, angry enough to resort to violence? Though anecdotal evidence, I have found that anger often seems to be a secondary emotion – one that has other, more foundational reactions beneath it. Anger is a reaction to a threat, and fear is very often at its root. Fear of other, fear of harm, fear of change, fear of difference, fear of what is unknown.

When fear arises, we often move into protection mode – to protect ourselves or those we love. We jump into fight, flight, or freeze. But human brains are far more complex than fight, flight, or freeze. When we are using all of our brain, we use it to parse out and refine our emotions. Is it dislike, distaste, disgust, or hatred? What is it we are really experiencing? We use our memory, our experience, our knowledge of others and the world, and our reason to help us in that refinement of emotion. We talk with friends and mentors to help us get clarity.

Hatred is an emotion that almost all human beings experience at one time or another, and some feel it all the time. It is a painful place to live, a place of distrust and disconnection. To drive out hatred, only patience and love can be effective.

In the struggle for human rights (and the rights of all living beings), love must be at the center.

If we respond to anger with anger, nothing will be resolved. We will be like two rams, banging our heads together in an effort to get the other to back down. While this is effective for rams, whose heavy thick skulls have evolved for this purpose, humans are not designed in this way. We must seek and find other ways to connect and engage with our fellow humans, to build relationships and build trust, to be vulnerable and open.

I believe in the evolutionary process of species. I believe that we are evolving. But what we are evolving into is up to us. We can continue on the track we seem to be on – using fear, anger and violence to drive an idea or a certain way of thinking (an ideology or theology), or a political

agenda, or even our own reactions. And we *all* do this – the irrational anger that wells up in me when I think of the damage done to our planet by strip mining, fracking, wage theft, and so many other evils can overtake me and make it impossible for me to think clearly, or sanely, or with any self-reflection at all.

Spiritual discipline is what religions have taught for centuries as a way help people respond to those overwhelming initial first reactions to fear. Spiritual practice shows us, as we watch ourselves, that it is not easy to get our emotions under control, and it also teaches us that emotions pass if we let them.

Liberation and salvation come when we begin to understand that whatever fear of the other we may feel prevents us from being fully and completely free. Not in a material sense, but in a spiritual sense, we can never escape shame, guilt, or fear as long as others are oppressed, and as long as our actions – made in ignorance or willful ignorance – perpetuate that oppression. Because this is so, we find ourselves in what the Buddhist refer to as the cycle of samsara.

Another way to say it simply is to say that “hurt people hurt people.” Over and over again.

Through our own and pain, we lash out, we act out, we slice and dice, we jab and “joke” in cynical ways that undermine our capacity to care, and to connect, limiting our compassion and love. Titrating them as if there were a finite supply.

To truly defy hate, we must have the courage to be vulnerable, in body, mind, and spirit. Vulnerability is the key, and that means stepping into what we don’t know with curiosity and humility. As my colleague Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd said, we become sandpaper to one another, smoothing the rough edges.

To truly defy hate, we must exercise the ability to critique our actions and the actions of our leaders. This means self-reflection and honest critique that seeks to improve and build up, rather than damage and tear down.

To truly defy hate we must be willing to engage in a practice of self-discipline, training ourselves to act and not react to the world around us. That means noticing when our temper begins to flare, or when we are responding from fear, and taking a deep, calming breath, in order to open ourselves to be vulnerable and to listen.

To defy hate we must embrace the beauty and the diversity of the world around us, both the natural world and our fellow human beings. We must think more broadly about life beyond human life, so we can embrace all life and consider the impact of our choices on the next seven generations.

To defy hate we must step into curiosity and ask, “Why do they think they way they do?” – not as a calculation for how to change their minds, but rather as an opportunity for connection – to better understand one another, to find common ground, to reduce fear, and to smooth each others’ rough edges.

To defy hatred takes courage and conviction, but if we are not committed to our convictions in word and deed, then disconnection takes over – and with it, indifference. We cannot afford indifference – ever . As John Fitzgerald Kennedy said: *The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good [people] do nothing.*