

Neighbors and Enemies: A Sermon for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Weekend

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Sunday, January 17, 2016
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

In 1942, soon after the United States entered the Second World War, the Reverend Sokei Kowta, a Japanese American minister in Los Angeles, said:

Every crisis is a testing time of one's character. Selfish people, during a crisis, show their selfishness to a greater measure than they do in ordinary times. Generous people reveal their generosity to a greater degree than they do at other times.

We live in a time of crisis, or of many crises. In our inter-connected world, people in every country feel it. The human family and our earthly home are in crisis.

How shall we show up on the test of character? Shall we turn away, or look? Pull into ourselves, or practice openness and curiosity? Jump to anxious conclusions, or work for clarity? Show more selfishness, or practice greater generosity?

Our problems can feel overwhelming. Problems have seemed overwhelming in earlier times of history, of course, but that doesn't make our current ones any easier. So many of the current challenges call for complex analysis and for wisdom. First, however, they call for clarity. Too often what we get are dishonesty and words intended to confuse and scare us.

In his book *Strength to Love*, Dr. Martin Luther King Junior said: "There is little hope for us until we become tough minded enough to break loose from the shackles of prejudice, half-truths, and downright ignorance."ⁱ

Consider the plight of Syrian refugees, trying to escape civil war, dictatorship, and starvation. Since 2011, four million Syrians have left their country. Most of them are trying to make it to Europe, but many are stuck somewhere in

between. A few have come here, but only a few are welcome. The Obama administration has proposed resettling only 10,000 Syrians in the current year. Even this little plan is not cheap: it would cost an estimated \$1.2 billion. Yet the government did not blink at spending \$5 billion in the past year and a half on a military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.ⁱⁱ

The good thing about spending money on refugees *here* is that it stays in local communities—money for food, housing, education, social services, a bus ride. Money stays here. Money spent on refugees locally is not money exploding in a mortar shell or a drone in the desert. It's not money going to a weapons manufacturing company, which turns around and gives some of it to costly campaigns of candidates for public office.

Yet we are afraid. Governors try to keep Syrians from coming to their states. Some presidential candidates want to keep them out, or allow only Syrian Christians, or suspend immigration by any Muslims at all. To be sure, the recent terrorist violence here and in France is heartbreaking. And we remember September 11 and become afraid – that could be us again. Fear is big. But it won't help us to foster suspicion of people fleeing violence. It will only distract and confuse us. We need clarity.

Consider this. We've had more murders by home grown killers than by immigrants—more shootings by white men and more by so-called Christians and avowedly patriotic Americans. Ratcheting up suspicion of Syrians or Muslims will make us fearful, but it won't stop the dreadful counting of lives lost from gun violence. "Break loose," Dr. King said, "from the shackles of prejudice, half truths, and... ignorance."

I'm heartened that some folks are seeking to do that. Some of you have made contributions to the [International Rescue Committee](#), [Doctors without Borders](#), [UNICEF](#) and other organizations doing work on the ground. Some have told me that you hope to learn how as a congregation we can support a Syrian family or an individual refugee. The UU Church of Davis has reached out to us to see how we might help refugees together. If you have an interest in these endeavors, send an email to a minister or give one of us a call.

I was amazed to read of the similarities between our fears of migrants and refugees today and the fears we had of Jewish refugees in the 1930s. Starting in 1933, Nazi anti-Jewish laws and violence spread through Germany and beyond it, as Germany annexed Austria and invaded Czechoslovakia, France, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania. Jewish and other refugees tried to flee, but many countries were not willing to receive them. Earlier, in the 1920s, the United States had established restrictive quotas on migrants, and we were not willing to raise them or to make any exceptions for refugees. The crisis grew, as some immigrated illegally to other lands, some dying on boats that sank in the sea. Most of them suffered and perished under the Nazis.ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1938 President Franklin Roosevelt invited several nations to a conference on the problem in a French/Belgian border town to discuss the refugee crisis, to little real effect. In June of 1941 the U.S. State Department was working to "discourage refugees [coming] from German-occupied lands." American policy reflected American fears and prejudice.

It's a June day in 1936, and a young Jewish couple are dressed up, side by side, on a sidewalk, which happens to be on Ellis Island, the federal immigration station, under the watch of the Statue of Liberty. Mr. and Mrs. Otto Richter are wearing sandwich boards. Her sign says: "HELP ME keep my husband here. He is a refugee facing death in Germany. He's too young to die! I'm too young to be a widow!"

Standing next to her, he's holding a sign that says; "Shoot me. I am a refugee. I don't want to be tortured to death by Hitler. I'll be deported to Germany unless you stop it now." At the bottom of each of the signboards it says: "Please sign petitions." The government was deporting him and three other refugees "on the basis of invalid entry permits to the U.S. Following a public outcry the government granted a temporary stay, permitting [them] to depart to another country."^{iv}

Isn't this like the Central American refugees who cross Mexico on foot and enter this country through our southern border--an invalid entry, crossing without a permit? The mothers who bring their children up here--or send them unaccompanied--are so desperate to get them away from killers and hunger at home in Honduras or Guatemala. They don't want to go back. That young Jewish couple was dressed up, looking much better than a Syrian in torn clothes or Guatemalan in a tee shirt, but the reception they get is the same: We have enough problems here without more immigrants and refugees. We can't afford the risk.

Fear builds in our country when we're told that some terrorist recruits might come in with refugees from the Middle East. During the Second World War, the government had a similar worry--that some Nazi spies might slip through in the hordes of asylum seekers, or Jews might be blackmailed into spying on us. Anti-Jewish bias was widespread. Some Jews could be communist agitators. There was "a toxic fear of Jewish subversion" in America, according to Peter A. Shulman, a historian at Case Western Reserve University. He says: "For decades, Jews had been linked to various strains of un-American threats: socialism, communism, and anarchism." At the same time, they were suspect for being aggressive capitalists, seeking "too much power in the business world," according to a poll.^v

Shulman cites a Roper organization poll for *Fortune* magazine, published in 1939. He writes: nearly a third of respondents "asked that 'some measures be taken to prevent Jews from getting too much power in the business world.'" Forty-eight

percent of those polled “agreed [with the statement] that the persecution of Jews in Europe [had] been [partly] their own fault” and another 10 percent said “entirely their own fault.”^{vi} That’s 58 percent who said persecution was partly or fully their own fault.

There was a proposal in this country for the government to permit 10,000 refugee children from Germany—most of them Jewish—to be taken care of in American homes. Surveyed for their opinion, 61 percent said no.^{vii} The U.S. Congress took no action.

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Some Americans oppose helping refugees because it’s costly and there are too many to manage. We did eventually manage to receive over 90,000 Jewish refugees by 1940, and accepted even more after the end of the war, in spite of so many other demands on our money and attention. We did so in spite of our widespread suspicion of Jews. And speaking of suspicion, this country also managed to move and hold over 120,000 Japanese Americans in camps, at no small cost, during the Second World War.

Recently, at least one candidate for president and several talk-radio commentators have spoken of that undertaking with praise, indicating that we could do this again with Muslim Americans and immigrants.

During World War II, two months after Japan attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. By this time the government already had arrested 5,500 Japanese American community leaders and was holding them in custody, because of the surprise attack by Imperial Japan. The executive order authorized the Army to move Japanese immigrants and Americans of Japanese parents out of the states on the West coast.

Over 120,000 adults and children were moved inland to Assembly Centers and Relocation Camps. Many of them were citizens. The security concern went like this: Our enemy is beyond the coast, across the Pacific--but maybe our neighbor is an enemy too.

Our country learned rather late, or admitted late, that it was wrong have interned the Japanese Americans. One man’s legal appeal of his detention was rejected by the Supreme Court in 1944. It was 1980 when President Carter opened an investigation into the matter. In 1988 Congress passed and President Reagan signed a law to pay reparations to the survivors of the internment, and to apologize formally. Not until then did the country admit that the internment was “based on race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”^{viii}

In a worship service on a Sunday morning in May of 1942, at the Japanese Methodist Church in Fresno, the young minister Hideo Hashimoto said: “The order has definitely been issued that we are to be evacuated, beginning this coming Friday. This is the last Sunday of our life outside the barbed wire fences.”^{ix}

In his sermon, Reverend Hashimoto compared their coming journey to the exile of the Jews and their captivity in Babylon in 586 BCE. He said: “We are branded as enemy aliens. We are to be uprooted from home as we knew and loved it. We must cast away ... endeavors... built after a generation of toil and sweat. We are to be carried away.”^x

The printed version of his sermon is archived along with six other sermons given by Japanese American pastors on the Sunday before evacuation to the Assembly Centers in 1942.

In reading them, I’m struck by the humility shown in the face of injustice. Whether experienced or novice pastors, they show acceptance of their fate, but not approval of it. Reverend Hashimoto said they were striving to leave without bitterness toward the Army or the nation. He said: “We have grave doubts as to the wisdom of this procedure and as to the motives of some of the groups that engineered this evacuation. Yet we have nothing but good will and loyalty to the people and the nation.”^{xi}

Many of the observations of those pastors provide wisdom now to those of us trying to face these times of crisis. Reverend Hashimoto noted

that living in the camps would put their faith and their values to the test. Amid the pressures to get ahead in a competitive and open society, he explained, it can be hard to practice the values of human kinship and cooperation. Yet in those camps, he said, the values of kinship and cooperation will be an “absolute minimum requirement.”^{xii}

Though Dr. King probably didn’t read that 1942 sermon, he would later echo its wisdom when saying: “We must learn to live together as brothers or perish as fools.” Today we might say, “We must learn to live together as kindred or perish as fools.”^{xiii}

The Reverend Royden Susu-Mago gave his departing sermon to his Los Angeles congregation very soon after he had been ordained. He found hope in the fact that African Americans, no strangers to persecution and racist suspicion, had refrained from, as he put it, “joining the nation in oppressing us.” He advised: “Having learned the result of intolerance, let us be tolerant of others.”^{xiv}

“This is a testing time for us,” he said. Yet it also is a “testing time for America herself...[In] the confusion of the ordeal, reason has left a portion of the nation.”

Dr. King said, “Break loose from the shackles of prejudice, half truths, and... ignorance.”

As did the other pastors, Reverend Susu-Mago counseled against bitterness: “Under the pressure of this situation, some of us may be led to talk irrationally about packing up and going back to Japan after the war. Go back? How can we go 'back' to a place we have never been?” Instead he looked forward to the day of going back to the life of this country, in order to “build it up, to help purify it, to improve it from within.” He asked: “Have we never sung, ‘America the Beautiful, God mend thine every flaw,’ and thrilled to the song? God cannot mend the nation, except through those who work from inside it.”^{xv}

In his farewell sermon in Wintersberg, the Reverend Sokei Kowta said he could understand the complaints at how few items his people were

permitted to take with them to the camp. That restriction is true, he told them, but for life at the camps, we won’t need very many things.

For him, this ordeal would strip life down to show what really matters, what is really important in life.^{xvi} As Dr. King would say: “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”

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In these testing times, these trying times of our own, how do we seek to show up? May we have the grace to answer with integrity.

How will our deeds and our words reflect on our character? Shall we turn away, or look? Pull into ourselves, or practice openness and curiosity? *Give in* to suspicion or call for cooperation? Jump to anxious conclusions, or invite reflection and work for clarity? Show more selfishness, or greater generosity? May we have the grace to answer with integrity. Amen.

End Notes

ⁱ <http://www.thekingcenter.org/blog/mlk-quote-week-lifes-most-persistent-and-urgent-question>

ⁱⁱ “By the Numbers,” *The Nation*, December 7, 2015, p. 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Refugees,” by Aviva Halamish, *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 2001) ed. Walter Laqueur *et al.*, p. 519-524. In the same book see “Chronology,” p. xxii-xxx.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 527. See or buy the photo online at www.google.com/search?q=otto+richter&espv=2&biw=1050&bih=701&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjwxri-k7fKAhVM1mMKHVjpANAQ_AUIBygC-imgrc=R6jqNaYY0PjafM%3A

^v “How America’s Response to Jewish and Syrian Refugees is Eerily Similar,” Peter A. Schulman, *Fortune*, November 21, 2015, accessed January 16, 2016.

<http://fortune.com/2015/11/21/syrian-jewish-refugees-america/>

^{vi} “How America’s Response to Jewish and Syrian Refugees is Eerily Similar,” Peter A. Schulman, *Fortune*, November 21, 2015, accessed January 16, 2016.

<http://fortune.com/2015/11/21/syrian-jewish-refugees-america/>

^{vii} “What Americans Thought of Jewish Refugees on the Eve of World War II,” Washington Post website, November 17, 2015, accessed January 16, 2016.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/11/17/what-americans-thought-of-jewish-refugees-on-the-eve-of-world-war-ii/>

^{viii} “Internment of Japanese Americans,” *Wikipedia*, accessed January 16, 2016.

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internment_of_Japanese_Americans

^{ix} *The Sunday Before*, sermons given by Japanese American pastors on May 10, 1942, Allan A. Hunter and Gurney Binford, eds., in the Archives of the Graduate Theological Union, accessed January 15, 2016, p. 26. All page citations refer to this mimeographed collection of sermons.

<http://www.gtuarchives.org/documents/sundaybefore-small.pdf>

^x *Ibid.*, p. 27.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 30.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 31.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 26.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 25.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 37.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 36.