

The Colors of Oppression and the Art of Endurance

Rev. Roger Jones
Sunday, September 4, 2016
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #100, Peace Like a River; #159, This Is My Song; #121, We'll Build a Land.

Ritual: Dedication of the New Sanctuary Banners

Sermon

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is full, also, of the overcoming of it.”

These are the words of Helen Keller, an American writer. She was born in 1890. At age 19, an illness left her deaf and blind. Her struggle to regain the ability to communicate was made famous in the play *The Miracle Worker*.

Although the world is full of suffering, it is *full also* of the overcoming of suffering.

While much suffering comes from natural disasters, injuries and illnesses, the suffering that is the hardest to make sense of is the suffering that we human beings cause to one another. We cause harm through unjust social systems, through selfishness, fear, ignorance, and outright cruelty. Helen Keller became an activist not only for people with disabilities like herself, but for ordinary workers and labor unions, which in her day were forming to protect workers. She was a socialist and an anti-war activist. Helen Keller said that her sense of optimism “does not rest on the absence of evil, but on ...belief in the preponderance of good and a willing effort always to cooperate with the good, [so] that it may prevail.”

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In her mind, to overcome suffering was to work to end it, and to relieve the suffering of others when we can.

Yet what can be said about the victims who have lost everything, or those no longer with us? Not all suffering can be stopped, not all can be undone. Not all of yours or mine, or

the suffering of so many others beyond these walls and beyond our borders.

In some cases, it's too late for protesting or strategizing against organized evil. It may not be possible to heal the physical wounds or bring back the dead. In such cases, the first thing we can do is confront the suffering, and be honest about it. And later, in the midst of honest engagement with it, perhaps we can make something new, even create beauty. We can offer inspiration to one another.

The spirit of creativity can use the truth of suffering in ways to cooperate with the good, as Keller would say. One example of this is the art currently on exhibit on our walls in this room, our sanctuary. Titled “Manzanar,” this exhibit will conclude in a few days, so here are a few words about the man behind it.

Henry Fukuhara was born in 1913, in Humboldt County, California, to Japanese immigrant parents. He was one of 10 children. He dropped out of art school to help his family in the Depression. In the Second World War the family was interned at one of many relocation centers run by the U.S. government for people of Japanese, German and Italian heritage.

In the camp known as Manzanar, Henry lived in one room with his family: his wife, daughter, parents, brother, and sister-in-law. Like most internment camps, it was a small city. The barracks had thin walls, hardly protecting people from the hot summers and cold winters of that place in Inyo County, in the Owens Valley, along the Sierra Nevada. Mattresses were filled with straw and rooms lighted with a single bare bulb. [Manzanar is now part of the National Park system as a historic site.](#)

Henry didn't pursue watercolor painting until age 60. He painted many scenes and subjects, including the camp where he had been kept. When he was 85, he began holding workshops at Manzanar, first inviting artists like himself who had been held there, and later expanding the workshop to welcome painters who hadn't been there before.¹

Though Henry passed away at age 91, [his workshops continued](#).

One painting we can see by Henry shows a view of the sky from behind a barbed wire fence; the viewer can see black birds flying... outside the fence. Three painters who were inspired by Henry provided their works for this exhibit, and we give thanks to them: David Peterson, Woody Hansen, and Rebecca Jagers.

Among many features of their works, I appreciate the purple and orange of the sky in the Owens Valley, the light green of sagebrush flowing freely beyond confinement, and the grays and browns of barracks and guard towers. Black angles represent the nearby Sierra Nevada as well as the fenceposts, barbed wire, and lookout posts in the facility. The paintings are both gorgeous and painful.

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The works of art made in those Manzanar workshops demonstrate one way of responding to suffering. Henry Fukuhara rendered a communal and personal experience of suffering into works of beauty. By encouraging fellow artists, he not only aligned himself with the good in the world, he extended it. He inspired others to bear witness to a tragedy that many of them had not lived through.

By creating works of beauty, starkness, and subtlety out of that event, they have expanded our understanding and enriched our spirits. So, one way to respond to suffering is to make a new thing out of the facts of it, to find ways to affirm life, to strive to bring more beauty to life, for ourselves and for everyone.

You may have heard that there are [66 million refugees or displaced people around the globe right now](#). That was the number at the start of the year, and it reflected an increase of six million adults and children from the year before. This is the largest number of displaced people in history. The danger and fear that causes many of them to flee is incalculable. Refugees come to this country after a lengthy review by the U.S. government. They come

with only as much as they can wear or carry in a purse or small bag. With the help of government supported resettlement agencies and local volunteers, they begin to construct a new life, and even to create beauty.

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Later this month, some of us will go downtown to an event called [Art for Humanity](#). This is the annual fundraising event for the International Rescue Committee in town. In addition to refreshments, it features an exhibition works of art by local refugee artists. Feel free to join us on the last Thursday night of September [6:30-9:00 p.m., 1108 R Street].

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“Although the world is full of suffering, it is full, also, of the overcoming of it.”

To overcome suffering does not mean forgetting it, ignoring it, or minimizing the experience. Keeping secrets about it only prolongs the pain. It isolates us. Hence, whether suffering is a personal pain or a social injustice, responding to it must include telling the truth. This may include lamenting, grieving, and giving voice to the pain. It may include confession and apology by those responsible. It may include forgiveness, even reconciliation. Secret-keeping enhances isolation and causes shame.

For example, for decades after the end of the Second World War, most Americans didn't know that our government had not only held 120,000 Japanese American residents and citizens in relocation centers, but the government had also targeted many residents of German or Italian origin. As author Lawrence DiStasi has written, even many Italian Americans were not aware of the suffering that so many in their own community had undergone—because they had not wanted to mention it. Families kept the humiliation to themselves. Scholars began piecing together the hidden history in the late 1990s.ⁱⁱ

Here's the background. In the 1930s, Italian immigrants made up the largest foreign-born group in America. Most of them lived in

specific neighborhoods across the country. They did this in part for ease of communicating and conducting business, but also in response to hostility they faced as foreigners and as Roman Catholicsⁱⁱⁱ. Many of them had not received American citizenship, or had not pursued it. In Italy, Fascist ruler Benito Mussolini exploited their sense of not belonging in America by funding Italian language schools in America. He envisioned making Italy a world power. The United States watched the Second World War/ from afar. However, anticipating that we might enter the war, the Federal Bureau of Investigation collected the names of residents of German, Italian and Japanese background.

Right after Japan's attack on the U.S. base at Pearl Harbor, arrests began in this country: 1,540 Japanese Americans, 1,260 German Americans, and 231 Italian Americans. The Italians included writers at Italian newspapers, language teachers, and Italian veterans of the First World War. In addition, 600,000 non-citizen Italian immigrants were labeled as "enemy aliens." They had to carry ID booklets, showing their mug shots and finger prints. They had to turn in their shortwave radios and cameras. In California, 52,000 lived under nighttime curfews, and 10,000 had to move; their homes were in prohibited areas.^{iv}

Several hundred were interned, spread out among seven camps, often with Japanese and German Americans. There were no criminal convictions for espionage, there was only the suspicion or accusation of being "potentially dangerous."^v

Recently collected memoirs and letters between people in camps and those at home tell of the shock and sadness of the time. They also give signs of the art of endurance.

Here's one family's story. Carmelo Ilacqua lived with his wife and little girl in San Francisco and he had a clerical job at the Italian Consulate. Twelve days after the Pearl Harbor attack, he was arrested: December 19. His internment hearing was five weeks later, and he was not allowed to have an attorney. For a year

and a half, he lived in camps in three different states.

As with most internees, he was far from his wife and child, so they exchanged letters. At first, he was limited to two letters a week, and only 29 lines per letter. Later on, he had to use a special government form. In a letter to him, his wife said: "Why don't you write as much as you want, keep the letters, and I shall read all [of them] when you come back?" He said he didn't have the heart for it.^{vi}

He could not take photographs, so he cut out magazine pictures to send to his wife and child; government censors took these out of his letters.^{vii}

In March of 1942, Ilacqua described the springtime activities of the Italian sailors in the camp in Missoula, Montana: "Near my barrack a [bocce ball court] is being built. Some are planting sweet pea and other flowers; others are preparing the ground to plant vegetables."

The next month, he wrote from Fort Sam Houston, in Texas, saying he was treated much better than in Missoula, "where the authorities' attitude was as though we had broken laws." Two months later, he was transferred to Tennessee.

Ilacqua's camp letters reflected the diversity that immigrants had brought to this country. On a recent evening, "the German internees' homemade orchestra played and sang several popular German songs," said one letter. In another, he wrote about Catholic Mass. During the service, he "could hear the melancholic chant of a Buddhist service in the Japanese quarters." Then he began a sentence, "Life here..." and the censor cut out the rest of it.^{viii}

In August of 1942, Carmelo Ilacqua wrote home that he was teaching English to others at the camp, and giving lessons in citizenship. He added: "I'm reading about U.S. history in the camp library."^{ix} One response to suffering is not to give up on yourself or your

potential, not to surrender hope that more good is possible.

After he was relocated from Texas to Tennessee he wrote: “On the train we ate in the diner [car]. For the first time since they took me away from home, I ate at a table set with table cloth and napkins, and myself and the others felt again that we are human beings.”^x

In a letter to her husband in August of 1942, Carmelo’s wife Bruna wrote this: “I am sorry that it is almost 8 months that you are missing your little girl. All her little and cute ways, the way she is progressing, rather intelligent and pretty. She is not the baby that was hiding under your coat that evening...when the authorities took you away.”^{xi}

After a year and a half and four internment relocations, Carmelo was released. Not long after his return to San Francisco, Carmelo and another internee were hired by the Army. As the U.S. military prepared to occupy Italy after the war, these men taught the Italian language to officers in training at Stanford University.^{xii}

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Last January I gave a sermon about the internment of Japanese Americans during the war. I quoted from Christian sermons given in English by Japanese immigrant pastors to their congregations, sermons all given on the final Sunday before they all were evacuated for internment. One of them, Reverend Lester Suzuki said it was his prayer that the time in the camps would provide “an opportunity... to make living beautiful, and not merely busy ourselves with making a living.”^{xiii} He is trying to show that one response to suffering is to take the experience and create something good for the future, to look at ugliness and make something better than ugliness. The spirit of creativity and the spirit of generosity can help us affirm life in the face of injustice and suffering. But first we must face the suffering.

After my sermon January, a member spoke to me about the treatment of Italian

Americans during the Second World War. I hadn’t known. Maybe some of you didn’t either. Then I read about that history of suspicion, restriction, and internment. While doing so I learned some of the history of similar treatment of German immigrants. I hadn’t known that either. From confronting these histories, we can learn and remember how a country beset by danger and fear, can give up its Constitutional principles. How a country infected by prejudice can give up rational deliberation as well as compassion.

This is important for us to remember, as we live now in our own times of uncertainty and fear. Yet from exploring these histories, we can learn also how people can respond to oppression and suffering. We can respond with something as rich and complex as creating works of art. Or something as basic and simple as keeping a diary or sending letters to loved ones. Something as ordinary as the ritual of a meal shared with others at a table, instead of just eating to survive. We can respond with deeds of generosity and those essential gestures of kindness.

A week ago this congregation launched a new Refugee Support Program. At a potluck supper we learned about the ways we can participate as volunteers with the International Rescue Committee in this area. By extending hospitality to these new neighbors, we try to offer warmth, help, and perhaps the opportunity to create for themselves, new times of beauty and joy.

After a hardship or in the middle of it, there can be opportunities for appreciating beauty. The spirit of creativity makes it possible for human beings to look at ugliness and make something better than ugliness.

In the midst of sad ordeals, there can be moments of gratitude and gestures of kindness, generosity and joy. The enduring spirit of life makes it possible for human beings to give, to help, and to add to the good in the world, for this is what our world needs. So may it be.

ⁱ Elaine Woo, "Henry Fukuhara Dies at 96...." *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 14, 2010. Accessed Sept. 3, 2016:

<http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-henry-fukuhara14-2010feb14-story.html>

ⁱⁱ Lawrence DiStasi, *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment during World War II* (Berkeley, 2001: Heydey Books), xix in Introduction.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 1.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, xxxvii.

^v *Ibid.*, 12.

^{vi} Rose D. Scherini, "Letters to 3024 Pierce," in *Una Storia Segreta...*, 229.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 231.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 239.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 235.

^x *Ibid.*, 229.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 231.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 235.

^{xiii} *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, p. 17. A mimeographed collection of sermons accessed online January 15, 2016.

[http://www.gtuarchives.org/documents/sundaybefore - small.pdf](http://www.gtuarchives.org/documents/sundaybefore-small.pdf)