

"RELIGIOUS WITNESS AGAINST RACISM AND HATE

IN OUR GENERATION" Sermon by Rev. Lynn Strauss

The Reverend A.J. Muste, an antiwar activist in the 1960s was asked at a candlelight vigil outside the White House whether such protests would alter national policy. "I don't do this to change the country," he said, "I do this so the country won't change me."

Aren't there times when you have feared being changed by the hate and anger around you? Times when you must turn off the TV -so the violence, so graphically pictured, there won't seep into your thoughts, your dreams, your language.

Haven't you experienced moments at a peace march when you were appalled by some of the vulgar words and pictures used in the name of peace.

Or times when an argument with a co-worker or family member degenerated into attack mode and you found yourself responding in kind.

One of the dangers of colonialism, militarism, dictatorships, gangs, hate speech, torture, and clubs formed for the purpose of hate, domination, or suppression of the rights of others...one of the many dangers of these violent, hate-filled times...is that hate can change us.

That's why church going is so good for us...that's why we talk about love guiding us, that's why we sing praises of gratitude and hope. Hate has the power to change us...but so too does love.

And what better day than Mother's Day to think about what influences us toward the good. What better day than Mother's Day to think about how we pass on our knowledge and works for love and justice to the next generation.

The work of human love will never be fully realized. The work of acting for peace and justice and fairness and equality will always be with us.

If we think that the work we do, the actions we take will change the country or the world...we are bound to be disheartened, bitter, cynical, tired...

In my youth, I thought I could change the world...in community, in religious community, I thought I could change the world...and on some days...I still cling to that possibility...but in these hard times...perhaps the first and hardest task is to refuse to let the meanness, the hate, the violence in the world change us. To hold onto love and soul-force as our guiding principle.

Elizabeth Marsh and I attended a ministers' retreat this week on the Eastern shore...it was great and fun and restful...we also had a wonderful presentation on the history of theology by Galen Guenerich, the senior minister at All Souls NYC. And we had some wonderful worship together.

A continuing thread of conversation circled around generational differences among clergy. We discussed our differing perspectives regarding the needs of different generations in our congregations and different hopes and dreams for change in the world...and differing ideas about how to get there.

We had a half dozen enthusiastic new generation X ministers like Elizabeth there...ministers in their thirties. And they told us what it was like for them in UU congregations filled with baby boomers and members of the greatest generation.

They love and respect us older folks, but...they know they need to find their own path to action in the world...they need to use their own resources and technologies, they need to identify their own issues.

I am grateful for the legacy my mother has left me. My mother was born in 1925, part of the greatest generation.

My mother took us to the small activist Methodist church that ultimately changed by life. She worked part-time as the church secretary – her office, like the minister's office was up in the loft over the gym. Working so closely with the minister...it was a staff of two...she learned a lot and she was changed by what she observed close-up of ministry. Ours was a very public church with very practical forms of ministry.

My mother was a Sunday school teacher on Sunday mornings and during the week a volunteer at the local Alderman's Office. My mother didn't write letters to the editor, but she encouraged others to do that. My mother didn't speak in services, or attend the many ecumenical meetings, but she encouraged others to.

My mother didn't sing in the choir, or serve on a committee, but she took the offering home every Sunday and counted it and took it to the bank.

And when our minister, after careful discernment-amid some serious controversy within the congregation, decided to go to the Civil Rights March in Selma Alabama and some families left the church over it...my mother, though other members of the church didn't approve of mixing politics with religion...my mother, stayed and continued her quiet service behind the scenes, and she continued her public service at the Alderman's office.

My mother may not have felt confident enough to try and change the world...but through duty and service, she influenced others and she didn't let the racism of the times or the horrors of war, change her.

My own children, my three daughters and my son...all in their 20s and 30s...represent generation X and the millennial generation...and they are preachers' kids...

They are children of parents who are peace activists and feminists and radical workers for change. Their college-educated parents took them on protests and marches carrying them in snuggles and pushing them in strollers.

As children they sat around the Saturday morning brunch table with neighborhood activists and friends whose lives were defined by the issues of the day...equal rights for women, the Cuban revolution, the role of the arts and literature in social change, confronting police brutality, black power, urban riots, and the role of the Unitarian Church in a poor black neighborhood.

All of this their legacy.

My grandchildren are growing up under the influence of their parents...who create community around biking and walking rather than driving, sharing healthy foods, gardening together, making music with friends, starting a theater collective, and contributing to their neighborhoods.

Noah and Sasha and Maddie will be influenced by parents who work for labor unions, for public health, for children's religious education, and in support of troubled teens and their families.

They'll be influenced by parents who put family and community first... who don't watch much television, and prefer artistic movies and children's museums.

The issues are different in their multi-racial, multi-cultural world...they live justice locally and believe that play and arts and family are as important as changing the world.

I have no doubt that their local forms of organizing and celebrating life...are a way of resisting hate and a path toward changing the world through love. Each generation has a responsibility to help heal the world, to create the world we dream about.

Each generation will face the issues of their day in their own way...the issues of war and peace, of saving the earth, of race and multi-culturalism, of poverty and human rights, will long be with us...

I pray that Unitarian Universalism will always be a place to grow souls for the journey...for the work of peace and justice.

I pray that we won't let hate, violence and despair change us.

So May It Be/Amen