

An Ethic of Care and Respect
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

In Richard Gilbert's Unitarian Universalist adult religious education curriculum Building Your Own Theology he tells this story, "Hosea Ballou, that nineteenth-century preacher of universal salvation, was riding the circuit in the New Hampshire hills with a Baptist minister one afternoon. They argued theology as they traveled. At one point, the Baptist looked over and said, 'Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven.' Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, 'If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.'"

I do not think that Ballou meant that universalists are inherently better people than anyone else. I think he meant that universalists know in the depths of our souls that we are all connected. What we do to someone else we do to ourselves. It is said that when the Baptists and Methodists had a conversion experience, they knew they were saved themselves, but when the universalists had a conversion experience, they knew they and every other person on the earth was saved.

David Robinson in his book The Unitarians and the Universalists says of George de Benneville, "He explained this faith in his account of his inquisition on religious matters by the French authorities, who almost executed him: 'They asked me many questions, but we could not agree, for they held predestination, and I held the restoration of all souls; because having myself been the chief of sinners, and that God, through Jesus Christ, by the efficacy of his holy spirit, had granted me the mercy and pardon of all my sins, and had plucked me as a brand out of hell, I could not have a doubt but the whole world would be saved by the same power.'"

As Ballou suggested in his conversation with the Baptist circuit rider a belief in universal salvation influenced a person's ethics or at least should. In a story about George de Benneville in The UU Kids' Book it was noted that after his migration to America, "DeBenneville taught school, doctored, and twice a year he traveled all over the colonies, preaching his universalist ideas. Many colonists thought the native American Indians around Philadelphia were no good, but George learned their language and made friends with them. They taught him which plants to use for healing. The colonists in Philadelphia were suffering from a yellow fever epidemic. He doctored them without pay....He made a dictionary of Indian, German and English words so that the colonists and Indians could talk together and become friends. One time when the Indians were going to attack new white settlers George went alone to their campfire circle and talked them into peace. During the Revolutionary War DeBenneville doctored both the enemy soldiers and the American soldiers wounded on the battlefield, by then he was 75 years old!"

I often mix up George DeBenneville and another eighteenth century Pennsylvania universalist physician, Benjamin Rush. In 1791 Rush wrote to Jeremy Belknap, "A belief in God's universal love for all (God's) creatures, and that (God) will finally restore all those of them that are miserable to happiness, is a *polar* truth. It leads to truths upon all subjects, more especially upon the subject of government. It establishes the equality of (hu)mankind—it abolishes the punishment of death for any crime—and converts jails into houses of repentance and reformation."

David Robinson in The Unitarians and the Universalists includes that Rush quote and also says of Rush, "He was passionate about Revolutionary politics and saw in the American Revolution a promise of a new age of democracy on earth, ordained by God...this notion was not unusual among revolutionary thinkers, but Rush's theological reasons for holding it suggest that the American Revolution was a product of religious faith as well as enlightenment doctrine. For him the connection between a politics of universal faith in humanity and a belief in the eventual universal salvation of humanity was inevitable."

Other traditions have ways of getting to the same understanding. In our opening words Stellan Skarsgard said of his humanism, "I believe that we should treat each other with respect and care and look after each other. All human beings should have an equal chance to survive in society." The Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism says to remember that everyone was, is or will be your mother. Think how remembering that would affect your actions toward another. Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh used the phrase interbeing to note how we are all connected. He wrote a poem that is one of my favorites. It is long so I will not share it all, but it says in part,

"Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
because even today I still arrive. ...

"I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

"I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to
Uganda.

"I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea
pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and
loving.

"Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

"Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion."

Compassion. That is what I am aiming for in my ethics. I use the words care and respect. Care without respect is pity not compassion. And respect without care is fear, and again not compassion.

This week I heard about an annual day of mourning I had never heard of before. March 1 was Disability Day of Mourning. "The Disability Day of Mourning is observed annually on 1 March as a commemoration

of disabled people who have been murdered by caregivers, especially parents. First observed in 2012 and propagated by disability rights organizations such as Not Dead Yet and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, the Disability Day of Mourning aims to bring attention to the issue of filicide of disabled children and adults, and the degree to which such murders are treated as different to or more 'acceptable' than similar murders of abled people," [Disability Day of Mourning | The Facts App](#).

I know a family, a husband and wife, both doctors and a daughter who has Down's Syndrome. Her parents would not kill her, because they have both care and respect for her. They take extra precautions like registering her with the local police department in case she should get lost, but they also allow her to do the things any child would do; play baseball, go to camp, go to Sunday School. It is a special baseball team with helpers at the positions as well as players. It is a camp designed for special needs children. And Dad volunteers in the Sunday School classroom to make sure his daughter can fully participate. It is having both care and respect for their daughter that makes these parents seek out or create these opportunities for her.

On March 2 there was an opinion piece by Christina Cipriano, a mother, one of whose children has a disability and uses an adaptive wheelchair trike, in [The Washington Post](#). The piece was titled, "Dear parents: Don't just tell your kids not to 'stare' at mine." She says, "We can't expect our children to embrace differences and learn together if we fail to teach them how. So when you see a child staring at someone who is different from them, take that as an invitation to show the other person that you see them — with a wave, a question or a smile. You can support your child by saying: I see you're staring. What questions do you have?"

"Parents can model humanity and, with their children, develop scripts of what to say in the name of healthy inquiry: My name is ... What's your name?"

"You can direct your child to find something in common to open a conversation: That's a cool bike. I like to ride my bike, too!"

"Or you can be direct with the person your child is staring at and introduce your child to help them make a connection: My child is curious to learn about you and your bike. This is his name, and he likes to ride his bike, too."

"Inclusion requires actively including everyone. Anything less is merely performative."

"We know you see us. And we see you, too. Let's start with hello," [Opinion | Dear parents: Please don't tell your kids not to 'stare' at mine - The Washington Post](#).

Care and respect.

It is when we see someone as different from us as someone to whom we have no connection that we can lose our compassion, our base of care and respect for ethical treatment of others. I heard a piece on NPR this week on the show "The Take Away" about how Afro-Ukrainians and African students who had been studying in Ukraine were being turned away at the borders while white Ukrainians were being welcomed into neighboring countries as refugees, [The Takeaway : NPR](#).

This brings up the issue of how all the world's refugees are treated. On February 28 on "All Things Considered" on NPR Ari Shapiro spoke with Andrew Limbong.

Shapiro: In the wall-to-wall coverage of the crisis in Ukraine, a certain pattern has sometimes emerged that positions Ukrainians as different from other victims of conflict. The way we talk about conflicts can impact those who are already most directly affected by war, refugees....

ANDREW LIMBONG: On Friday, CBS News senior foreign correspondent Charlie D'Agata framed the fighting in Kyiv like this.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

CHARLIE D'AGATA: You know, this is a relatively civilized, relatively European - I have to choose those words carefully, too - city where you wouldn't expect that...

LIMBONG: The phrasing rankled enough people that he (Agata) issued a clarifying apology a day later...

LIMBONG: But it wasn't just CBS. In The Telegraph, Daniel Hannan wrote an article about Ukraine that led, they seem so like us. That's what makes it so shocking. An anchor for Al-Jazeera English called Ukrainian refugees, quote, "middle-class people," in comparison to refugees from the Middle East and North Africa....

LIMBONG: Rana Khoury, a research associate at Princeton University focusing on conflict and displacement, says this language has impacts on global refugee policy.

RANA KHOURY: We certainly do see it play out in terms of the politics of refugee reception in the idea of whose burden should it be to take refugees who are from the global South, the Middle East, Africa, versus, you know, who is welcome and who can be brought in here.

LIMBONG: Keshavarz points to Poland accepting Ukrainian refugees when not that long ago, the country was telling scores of Afghans, Syrians and Iraqis, no, the country's full.

KESHAVARZ: So as journalists, I think it's really critical that we look at that duality, and we question why that is. You know, looking and seeing why African migrants aren't allowed to cross into Hungary is just as valid as just asking why Ukrainians are," [Why Ukrainians are being treated differently than refugees from other countries : NPR.](#)

And if we think of refugees from different parts of the world differently then also how do we think about the use of violence or of war. Do we do it differently depending on where it is? To move from war to the personal, I don't think I would kill anyone over stealing something from me no matter how valuable, but if they were trying to rape or kill me or my daughter or one of my grandsons or anyone for that matter, I think I would be willing to kill them to protect myself, someone I love or anyone being attacked. I very much want to be a pacifist, but I'm not. If it is a choice between my life, the life of one I love or the life of anyone being attacked in front of me or the life of one threatening one of those lives I am going to choose me and mine or the attacked over the attacker.

Is that fair? Maybe not. The attacker is a human being too. As Thich Nhat Hanh says of the sea pirate rapist, the attacker may be someone whose heart is not yet capable of seeing and loving.

To move back from me to nations, is war ever justified? Is there anything a nation should be willing to fight for or against? Freedom? Tyranny? In 1943 Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies said, "From the beginning, (humanity) has struggled to be free. Through countless generations, (we) ha(ve) fought to liberate (ourselves) from limitations in the natural world about (us), from fear and ignorance, and from

the tyrannies imposed by other(s). In this (we) ha(ve) fulfilled a natural law of life, which, as it climbs to higher levels in the scale, requires the growth of freedom. Once reached, this higher level cannot be debased without disaster. Retreat from freedom, therefore, or its degradation, is defiance of a natural law which, now as always, must invite calamity. (Humanity), to be equal to (our) future, must be free.

“But freedom cannot live unless it grows. The time has come to make it universal. When in the 18th century, it was declared that all (people) are created equal and endowed with freedom as a natural right, not only was a new and different kind of nation dedicated to a universal principle, but the declaration heralded the freedom of the world. This is the deeper issue of the present war. The age-long struggle has achieved its universal scope. The earth is now a neighborhood. (Hu)mankind is bound together in a common fate. Freedom must in the end be indivisible.”

If another threatens my freedom does care and respect for self overtake care and respect for the one threatening me? Is war then justified? Are there other options? I can't answer that for you. I can only present the question.

Think about a few of our Unitarian Universalist principles. “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;...

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” [The Seven Principles | UUA.org](http://TheSevenPrinciples.org).

I think all of those words can be reduced to two, care and respect. Do we have both for everyone? The disabled, people of color, the poor, ourselves, our enemies?

There is a word from the Nguni languages of Zulu and Xhosa used in South Africa which can lead to the same place as Skarsgard's humanism, Ballou, DeBonneville and Rush's “universal salvation” and Thich Nhat Hanh's “interbeing”. The word is Ubuntu.

“Nelson Mandela, South Africa's first democratically elected president, in a preface to Richard Stengel's Mandela's Way: Fifteen Lessons on Life, Love, and Courage (2009), encapsulated the many interpretations by calling ubuntu an African concept that means ‘the profound sense that we are human only through the humanity of others; that if we are to accomplish anything in this world, it will in equal measure be due to the work and achievements of others,” [Understanding the Meaning of Ubuntu: A Proudly South African Philosophy \(theculturetrip.com\)](http://UnderstandingtheMeaningofUbuntu.AProudlySouthAfricanPhilosophy(theculturetrip.com)).

Humanism, Universalism, Interbeing, Ubuntu, they all lead to compassion, to care and respect for self and others. We must decide for ourselves what that means we need to do or not do in specific situations, but care and respect are a fine base on which to build our ethics.

Let us pray using words from the South African Anglican bishop and human rights activist Desmond Tutu, “...remember that liberation is costly. It needs unity. We must hold hands and refuse to be divided. We must be ready...Let us be united, let us be filled with hope, let us be those who respect one another.” Amen.

