

## **Beyond No, Beyond Not, Beyond Don't: Affirmative Ethics for This Moment in Time**

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You may have seen a meme going around various social media. It involves a photo featuring a Muslim woman wearing the facial covering called niqab. She shares a New York City subway seat with a large drag queen. The two are simply sitting there quietly riding the W train from Queens to Manhattan. When a conservative social media participant saw this picture, they reposted it with the text, “The future that liberals want.” The meme went viral.

You may also know what happened next: liberals had a field day with the photo and its comment, first affirming that, yes, such a peaceful co-existence between different people, both members of devalued groups, is exactly what liberals want and not just in the future but now. Then a slew of alternative memes arose, keeping the “future that liberals want” text and sometimes the subway setting but replacing the Muslim woman and the drag queen with Power Rangers, dogs, space alien cats on flying frankfurters, Marvel Comic superheroes, Shrek, characters from Star Trek: The Next Generation, and undoubtedly many more. Personally I was sad not to see a Broadway musicals version since I believe strongly that the future that liberals want includes belting showtunes but you can't have everything.

A reporter tracked down the drag queen, whose real name is Samuel Themer but whose nom de drag is Gilda Wabbit. If you remember old Bugs Bunny cartoons, you should be hearing Wagner's “Flight of the Valkyries” right about now. Gilda told the reporter, “I won't speak for all liberals, but my goal...is for everyone to be able to exist as they choose without judgment or fear.” Gilda went on to comment on the current cultural divide between left and right, saying, “If we can come to have empathy for each other, we can come to a place where we can find common ground and move forward.”

I think those of us who identify as politically liberal or progressive, religiously liberal, or both, owe that right-wing meme-maker a huge thank-you. The original photo is lovely but that phrase “the future that liberals want” adds an important layer of meaning. Clearly, the meme-maker was trying to demonstrate how wrong-headed and dangerous liberals are, accepting both Muslim women and drag queens as normal, decent people. But the meme text reminds us of something else, something important, which is that we really had better keep the future we want in mind. And this is not just a matter for political liberals but for religious liberals as well.

Right now, keeping the future we want in mind can be hard. Many of us have found recent weeks exhausting and discouraging. Our values lead us to see much of what is happening politically as morally horrific, harmful to many people and to the planet on multiple levels. Yes, we may long for the time in which Star Trek: The Next Generation is set, a time when war, greed, and human suffering are things of the past. But the Star Trek universe is fictional. We don't live in it and it seems like we never will. So how can we take care of ourselves now? How can we make our work ahead sustainable? That's today's topic, and I think it comes down in large part to paying attention to what we affirm individually and collectively, not just what we oppose.

So today I will start by pointing to some of the positive values we hold dear. After that, I'll turn to the thornier problem of lifting up our ideals without devaluing people who don't share them, which can be very hard. I'll close with what I hope will be an interesting meditative exercise.

Rev. Scott Alexander's reading "We Need a Religion", which you heard today as the Call to Worship, brings us through six of the seven Principles and reminds us both why they are important and how they offer us a positive vision. He does so by contrasting the Principles with those aspects of our world that many people find dismaying and damaging. To take just one example, Alexander begins, "In a world with so much hatred and violence, we need a religion that proclaims the inherent worth and dignity of every person."

Alexander is doing several things here. He could have simply said that we live in a violent, hate-ridden world, which is true enough, but he didn't. He could have said that our society needs a religion that starts with our first Principle, but he didn't. He could, in fact, have said that society is violent and we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person without connecting the two points, but he didn't do that either. Instead, by linking the reality of our world's brokenness and the beauty and power of a core liberal religious ideal, Alexander called us to action. Implied in his connection between the world's pain and liberal religion's promise is our invitation to follow our ideal into that broken world and heal it. Alexander does not name and shame specific individuals or groups for being hateful or violent. Instead, he invites us to remember what we stand for and to keep it in front of us as we move forward. We could make the same observation about the other Principles, but I think this example suffices for today.

What about the Sources? In what sense do they offer positive ethical values? One way to answer that is to consider part of UUA President Peter Morales's opening essay for the spring 2017 UU World magazine. Morales says that our obligation as Unitarian Universalists in this time and place is to offer sanctuary and to preach our gospel. Since the term "gospel" translates to "good news", Morales's comment invites us to ponder what our good news might be. And how does Morales define this good news? He claims that it involves three central points.

First, Morales says, it doesn't have to be like this: our present divisions, inequality, and conflicts are not inevitable. We can move toward the beloved community. We can shape the future.

Second, love must guide us. Everyone matters. We are in this together. We are all part of one another. Your suffering is ultimately my suffering. If we are truly compassionate, that compassion will guide all our decisions.

Finally, it is up to us: we cannot rely on supernatural intervention or on someone else. For good or ill, we will create our shared future together.

This is a pretty good gospel, right? Can you get behind it? I can. And I don't know whether this was Morales's intent, but these three elements of our gospel line up just about perfectly with three of our sources. I'm going to read each element again, followed by the relevant Source.

It doesn't have to be like this: our present divisions, inequality, and conflicts are not inevitable. We can move toward the beloved community. We can shape the future. Source two: words and

deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

Love must guide us. Everyone matters. We are in this together. We are all part of one another. Your suffering is ultimately my suffering. If we are truly compassionate, that compassion will guide all our decisions. Source four: Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as our selves.

It is up to us: we cannot rely on supernatural intervention or on someone else. For good or ill, we will create our shared future together. Source five: humanist teachings which...warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit. In other words, humanism is all about our shared responsibility for making the world we want to live in and not waiting for a hand to reach down from the skies.

So what do these affirmative ethics look like among us? Last week, they looked like Keely and Ben Heimer's beautiful chalice lighting, which gave me serious hope for humanity. They look like the affirmation that we sang for our opening hymn today. Here are those lyrics again: All of us are loved. Each of us is welcome. No one is a stranger. No one is an outcast. No one is alone. Everything we do when our hearts are grateful and our lives are faithful makes a better world, one that we can call everybody's home. OK, I wrote that. But is that not simply a different way of phrasing the Principles, one that almost rhymes? The First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque sings it with some regularity, in Spanish as well as English. It is part of what they affirm as liberal religionists. No broken-heartedness there, just – I keep using this phrase – an invitation.

Those of you who grew up in Methodist or Lutheran traditions know that a lot of the best known mainline Christian hymns were an attempt to make theology accessible to the average churchgoer. I believe in doing that too, thus the universalist theology and good news that hell is a human invention. All that song really does is take eighteenth-century Universalist John Murray's exhortation to "give them, not hell, but hope and courage" and set it to a tango. And really, I cannot imagine better news for terrified Calvinists circa 1790 than the truth that they would not burn for eternity. Though they might have been lukewarm on the tango bit.

Finally, my song *The Difference* is inspired by the second Source, those prophetic women and men who have made such a difference. It's an attempt to situate myself, and all of us, among our forebears, ancient and recent, to honor their work and commit to doing it ourselves because it matters, because we matter, because the hurting matter and because all people have inherent dignity and worth and should be treated accordingly.

Now, it's very tempting to stop there but it would be disingenuous. Because we all know how easy it is to live in an echo chamber these days, to huddle close to those who share this particular set of affirmative values and to have conversations only among whichever version of "ourselves" is relevant for a given political topic. But that is not how we bring our positive values into the larger society and invite other people to engage with them. Marches are a wonderful thing. Strikes are a wonderful thing. But eventually we have to talk to those who seem not to share some of these values or who interpret them differently. How might we think about doing that?

We begin, I think, by acknowledging that such conversations are risky. Our church theme this month is risk, and lifting up our ideas without devaluing those who don't share them is risky. Lifting up our ideals in front of people who may share them but interpret them differently is risky. We risk offending people. We risk alienating people. We risk doing that thing that infuriates us when conservative Christians do it about LGBT people, namely claiming to love the sinner while hating the sin. So what should those of us whose liberal religious values inform our liberal or progressive political values do here?

First, we can acknowledge that all people are equally valuable and good but not all ideas are. As Rev. Dana said in church a month ago, we are not the church of anything goes. We believe that racial diversity is morally right and racial inequality is morally wrong. We welcome someone who is trying to unlearn her homophobia, but if she wants to convince everyone else here that homosexuality is a sin she will probably be informed, hopefully gently, that this congregation may not be the best fit for her. And our commitment to humanism, though it is only one of the Sources that guides us, leads us to reject so-called alternative facts in favor of scientific reality. We must never apologize for rejecting either social inequality or political decisions that despoil the planet. Our Principles and Sources are the grounds for those stances.

That said, there are ways to bring our respect for the inherent worth and dignity of those with whom we disagree to the forefront. A politically progressive friend of mine put it this way:

“The one thing that tends to work (for me) is to avoid talking about specific PEOPLE, (e.g. Trump or Obama) but instead to focus on VALUES (human rights, security--financial, food, legislative and otherwise, individual freedoms, etc.) What is interesting to me is that this kind of conversation can quickly come to common ground. Harder to get those people to actually acknowledge that what Trump is doing might undermine all those things, but still--a starting point might be accomplished.”

Put differently, as Janet Hayes noted in a recent UU World article [“Field Notes for the Resistance,” spring 2017], it's not about what's wrong with our opponents, it's about what's right with our ideals.

This extends to how we frame issues. When it's possible to talk about the immigration issue in terms of patriotism instead of fairness, we who lean liberal or left may reach more conservative people, since social science research suggests that fairness as a value moves liberals more than conservatives, but patriotism moves conservatives more than liberals. Here's Janet Hayes again:

“We won't persuade opponents by denouncing them as jingoistic, racist, or cruel. We reach more voters by reminding them that immigrants are our neighbors, people like us who work hard, sacrifice for their children, love the United States, and believe in the American Dream. When our language reflects familiar, positive values, we begin to seem less threatening.”

To be clear, this is not a matter of lying or pretending to believe something we don't. It is instead an empathetic attempt on the part of liberals to speak a language that might not be our first language but that might help build bridges. At the end of the day, if something is the right thing to do ethically, it is probably the right thing to do for many reasons. If treating immigrants well is

the right thing to do, surely it is the right thing to do both because it helps immigrants flourish and because they are patriotic people who will deepen and extend patriotism in this country.

One more story about connecting across powerful differences. Some months ago, New York Magazine published an article about an organization called Narrative 4 that brought people strongly opposed to gun control together with gun control activists and put them through several days of exercises in which they had to listen to each other's stories in pairs and eventually each person had to tell their counterpart's story in the first person. Talk about risk! Family members of young black men shot to death by police officers sat with police officers. Survivors of mass shootings paired up with women who had avoided sexual assault by brandishing a gun. Everyone in the circle had a personal story about guns, but their personal stories had led them to opposite conclusions about gun regulation. And then the moment of truth hit. Here's the direct quote:

“In that moment, the commonality of experience, the universality of human vulnerability, had been so obvious — and so breathtaking. Everyone in the room was separated not by a deep canyon but by a thin line. The dividing factor wasn't really beliefs about gun control; it was about fear and how you respond to it. There were those who held to their gun ownership as an instrument of power and security in a world that too often seemed unsafe and uncertain, and there were those who knew too well that nothing on earth can guarantee safety and certainty for the people you love. They had lived through what the others so desperately feared. As David Peters, the former Marine, put it, “Am I safe or am I not safe?” That is, at some very basic level, always the question. No one quite knew where to go from there, but it seemed promising, this collective realization that all of their beliefs were coming from essentially the same human place.”

Now, there was no ultimate reconciliation. The fragility did not hold and everyone retreated to their respective positions. But imagine the possibility that any of us, in the right setting, could learn to both listen and be heard in such a way. When our positive values of love and compassion inform and infuse our work in the world, they may also come to inform and infuse our conversations even with those who we believe support politicians and policies that cause harm. Maybe not. But maybe. It is a risk worth considering and, perhaps, taking.

With that in mind, I want to close with a meditation exercise. Some of you are familiar with Metta, or loving-kindness meditation. It is built around some variant of the following mantra:

May I be filled with loving kindness. May I be well. May I be peaceful and at ease. May I be whole.

There are several extensions of the meditation; here's the one I used to practice. After the self-focused mantra comes the form addressed to someone you know and love. The form then repeats with an emotionally neutral person in mind. I used to practice Metta meditation while driving and I would often direct the neutral mantra toward someone I did not know in a car near me. The mantra next focuses on someone who you experience as emotionally difficult. The final form blesses the world: “May all beings be filled with loving kindness. May all beings be well. May all beings be peaceful and at ease. May all beings be whole.

So now I invite us to practice a loving-kindness variant based on several UU Principles. Let's see if this exercise softens our hearts, awakens our compassion, and sustains us for the work ahead. As I read the mantra aloud, please follow along silently.

May my worth and dignity be affirmed by others. May my life be filled with justice equity, and compassion. May I be accepted and encouraged to grow spiritually. May my role in the interdependent web of all existence be respected.

Now, direct the mantra to someone you love. Try to really visualize them.

May your worth and dignity be affirmed by others. May your life be filled with justice, equity, and compassion. May you be accepted and encouraged to grow spiritually. May your role in the interdependent web of all existence be respected.

Now, direct the mantra to someone neutral, someone you may not even know.

May your worth and dignity be affirmed by others. May your life be filled with justice, equity, and compassion. May you be accepted and encouraged to grow spiritually. May your role in the interdependent web of all existence be respected.

Now, direct the mantra to someone who is difficult for you. Try to see their face clearly.

May your worth and dignity be affirmed by others. May your life be filled with justice, equity, and compassion. May you be accepted and encouraged to grow spiritually. May your role in the interdependent web of all existence be respected.

Finally, bless the world:

May the worth and dignity of all people be affirmed by others. May all lives be filled with justice, equity, and compassion. May all people be accepted and encouraged to grow spiritually. May the role of all beings in the interdependent web of all existence be respected.

Remember Gilda Wabbit, the drag queen on the subway? Gilda wanted everyone to be able to exist as they chose without judgment or fear. A good liberal religious value, I think we can all agree. And Gilda offered hope for how to lift up our liberal religious values respectfully by inviting us to have empathy for each other and come to a place of common ground so we can move forward. I suspect we all see the value there, even as we know how challenging and, yes, risky it will be. But this is the future that liberal religious people want. May we keep it sight as we move forward, taking care of ourselves, each other, and the world. Amen and blessed be.