

## **On Being “Pro-Lives”**

Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains UU Church, November 16, 2008

On Election Day, California passed Proposition 8, which amends the California constitution to define marriage as being between a man and a woman. When reporters asked supporters of Proposition 8 why they supported it, some hastened to say that they didn't have anything against gay and lesbian people; it's just that marriage needed supporting as an institution.

Closer to home, Colorado rejected Amendment 48, which would have defined life as beginning at conception. The amendment's original creator said that she wanted to contribute to the development of a “culture of life.”

I think these two cases are worth our reflecting on as Unitarian Universalists. Two different states, two different issues – marriage equality and abortion – and two different outcomes, and yet both amendments were proposed on behalf of an abstract principle or institution deemed crucial for society – marriage in the one case, “life” in the other. Perhaps more importantly to us as UUs, both amendments may provide great support for abstractions but they are harmful to actual human beings. Proposition 8 hurts living, breathing same-sex-loving people who want to get married, and Amendment 48 could have put grave restrictions on women's lives. Both amendments may sound good in the abstract, since most people want to support both marriage and “life,” but both amendments turn out to limit the well-being of real, flesh-and-blood people.

Unitarian Universalism has long been proud of standing for deeds rather than creeds, of focusing on this life rather than some putative life after death, and for living our values. Today, I'd like to propose the one principle that I think we all share in common: we are all pro-lives. That is, while we may disagree on other principles and we may even disagree on some specifics of what it means to be pro-lives, we all care about real people, here and now, actual people with bodies and spirits, people who could live lives of great flourishing or who could be broken by the thousand harms and injustices of the world. We don't think it's inconsequential whether or not people live happily and well. In fact, any principle we claim to support comes down to human and planetary flourishing sooner or later. If we have a creed, the well-being of people and other living beings is it, and our values and deeds reveal this in spades.

Consider the First and Seventh Principle of the UUA. We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Abstract language? Perhaps. But each of us could say something about what these principles mean to us in terms of human flourishing.

For example, I'm not broken-hearted about Proposition 8's passing just because it fails to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of LGBT people in the abstract. No, I am more torn up about the specific individuals who will lose out on important material

and symbolic benefits, who will remain or once again become second-class citizens in the eyes of the law. I am also angry about the couples who will have a harder time staying together without the public witness and support provided by legal marriage. And, of course, I weep with the millions of others who are wounded by the pain of devaluation. Let's face it: marriage doesn't care who participates in it. Institutions don't ache. Symbols don't sob. Those values and burdens belong only to people. Consider my response a way of affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of a particular set of people, so often robbed of the kind of treatment that inherent worth and dignity presumes. Consider my response one example of being pro-lives.

In this context, it's worth saying something about today's second song earlier. Holly Near originally wrote it following the assassination of San Francisco's first openly gay city supervisor, Harvey Milk. The song is a protest against a society that devalues one group of people enough to enable other people to attack and kill them. It is a gentle, angry challenge to a society that has not made a sufficiently strong and broad commitment to being pro-lives. We could sing the song about any form of social inequality that limits human flourishing, which is to say, every form of social inequality. We are always singing for our lives, not just that they may be long but that they may be rich, meaningful and joyful. This, after all, is what it means to flourish.

Think again about the First Principle, that of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. I've given you an example of how I bring the Principle's abstract language back down to earth. What about you? What does the First Principle mean to you in terms of actual people, day-to-day lives, human well-being where it counts? I hope that you will provide some answers to this question during the reflection period following the message.

Being pro-lives is not a new phenomenon, nor is it restricted to today's Unitarian Universalists. Jesus, after all, is reputed to have both healed and plucked grain on the Sabbath – both actions forbidden by the Torah in which Jesus believed as an observant Jew. When challenged as to how he could act against the commandments of his faith, Jesus is reported to have said that the Sabbath is made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath. Human well-being comes first, and not just in the abstract but in the sating of specific hunger and the relief of specific pain.

Our reading today was from the letter of James, considered by some to have been the brother of Jesus. Whoever actually authored the letter attributed to James, they had at least a degree of pro-lives sensibility. Unitarian Universalists have long known that faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead, and we have by our works shown the world our faith. This reading may come originally from the Christian Testament, but it resonates well enough with UUs for us to have included it in our hymnal.

Another way to think about what being pro-lives has meant through the centuries is to revisit the Golden Rule. We encountered one variety of it in the story for all ages. The Golden Rule sounds abstract in the same way that our First Principle does, but it need not be. Living the Golden Rule could simply mean allowing the idea of treating others as one would want to be treated to guide our actions, especially when we are unclear about the

right thing to do or are inclined to act unethically. If I come upon a wallet on the street and am tempted to keep it, I only have to think about what I would hope for if I dropped my wallet in the street. I'm pretty sure I would not want someone else to abscond with it. Similarly, and here I will with some trepidation reveal some of my own politics, if I were a country that had not invaded another country, I would not want yet a third country invading me preemptively.

Now, the Golden Rule has faced some legitimate criticisms. Sometimes, after all, I may not know what you want, and what you want may be very different from what I anticipate. Perhaps the Golden Rule really should be to do unto others as they want to be done unto. Fair enough. But for now, the Golden Rule as it stands is a pretty good start. Religious leaders over thousands of years have turned to it. We could do worse than join them.

What might a national pro-lives commitment look like? Let me propose just a single item for such a commitment, then turn to you. This past Tuesday was Veterans' Day. It is good to honor those who sacrifice so much for our country. But I would like to add some other, equally solemn days, to Veterans Day. Soldiers may protect us, but artists, educators and healthcare professionals all enrich our lives tremendously by stretching our minds; offering us beauty; helping us become citizens of the neighborhood, nation and world; and keeping us healthy or helping us get our health back. The lives that our soldiers protect would be far poorer in many ways without artists, educators and healthcare professionals. They deserve far more praise than they get. How about Creativity Day to honor and celebrate artists? Or Wellness Day to honor and celebrate health care professionals? How about "The Mind Matters" Day to honor and celebrate educators of all sorts?

As we will see later, our final song, Wake Now, My Senses, is a pro-lives manifesto. It is pro-inherent worth and dignity of all people, pro-web of creation, pro-questing pilgrim, pro-stranger, pro-friend, pro-justice, pro-ministry to the world. I hope we will sing it with gusto.

I'd like to end with a wonderful pro-lives story, brought to my attention by another Unitarian Universalist. Last fall, This American Life broadcast the story of Sam Slaven, a US soldier who came to hate Muslims during his tour in Iraq. While there, Sam saw some pretty horrible things and got PTSD. Once Sam came back to the US and went to college, he realized that his hatred of Muslims was out of control, particularly after he found himself wanting to murder one. So, Sam joined his college's Muslim student organization in order to confront his demons, and over time became friends with the very member of the organization who he had wanted to kill before they actually knew each other. At least as importantly, Sam asked endless questions of the students and came to understand that all Muslims were not like the ones who had been firing on him in Baghdad. Eventually, Sam began to speak with other students, explaining to them why their stereotypes of Muslims were wrong. He went from hating and fearing Muslims to helping others understand who they were.

Sam's eventual ability to do the pro-lives thing is all the more amazing given how anti-lives he was set up to be by the US military. While in Iraq, Sam's unit had been fond of sharing jokes that dehumanized Iraqis, the better to kill them effectively. Sam's favorite joke to tell, and I warn you that this is offensive, was: Why do Iraqi men grow mustaches? To look like their mothers. Later, reflecting on having told such a joke, Sam said, "you don't care that it's perceived as bigoted or just inhumane. It doesn't matter to you because you were in this situation where they were trying to kill you and when somebody is trying to kill you everything you believed up to the point when bullets started flying by your head changes. It didn't bring out the very worst in me, but it is the worst I'm ever going to be in my life, I can tell you that." In confronting his demons, Sam made a conscious decision to become better than he had been. If Sam Slaven can do that, we can figure out how to do the hard work of living in as pro-lives a way as possible.

Institutions don't lose their civil rights, but people do. When we are tempted to protect institutions, let us ask instead how to protect people. Symbols don't get assassinated, but people do. When we contemplate working to develop a culture of life, let us consider the lives around us and support their development. For that matter, abstractions don't suffer from global warming, but animals and plants do. When we ask what to do about global warming, let's be sure that we take up the work of Dr. Seuss's Lorax and speak for the trees. Human well-being and the well-being of the planet matter above all; if we are to have principles, let these be our principles, and let them infuse and inform our lives daily. Amen, and blessed be.