

“We See Our Faces in Each Other’s Eyes”

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While in seminary I spent a year working in Roxbury through the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry. For those of you not familiar with Boston, Roxbury is an old historic community that in the last century became one of the poorest, black ghettos in the country. Roxbury was and is regularly riddled with gunshots and gang wars. Ironically Roxbury sidles right up next to Brookline, full of wealthy white neighborhoods, museums, and prestigious hospitals. When I worked in Roxbury I took the orange line into the city. Riding the orange line was a daily experiment in race and class in the urban core. The orange line crosses from the all white gangland neighborhood of Charlestown (with gangsters that have names like “Whitey” and “Chuckie”) through Chinatown and into Roxbury. At a point, about mid-city the orange line population changes from all white to all black, and becomes poorer and poorer. Sometimes I would start to sweat as we crossed my mid-city comfort zone. Boston is a starkly segregated city. Unlike Cincinnati it has no middle-class, black neighborhoods.

My supervisor at the Urban Ministry, the Reverend Betty Ellis Hagler, was relentless. What happened that tested me that week? What did it mean theologically? What did I learn? How did it relate to my Unitarian Universalist faith? What did I see when I traveled from the church in Roxbury, for yes, I worked in a UU church in Roxbury, to my suburban UU church in wealthy, white Lexington.

What I remember most about the UU church in Roxbury was its after-school and summer programs for local children, all of who knew someone who had been killed in gun violence. Their poetry on the subject was electric. Their lives were full of poverty, missing people, and steely efforts to survive and thrive. I also remember the steeple. This bedraggled, old, beautiful white clapboard church had an unused and decaying sanctuary that seated 500 people – pews lined with red velvet covers. The building was barely holding its own, but the steeple could be seen for 6-12 city blocks because the church, built by old Puritans stood on a hill in what used to be marshy Roxbury. From the Museum of Art in Brookline I would search for the steeple (I still do) and find it, a beacon of hope in a segregated, impoverished urban core. I loved that steeple.

I wrote a lot about the steeple that year and about fear and faith. What drove me to enter a foreign land, a new place, which always creates fear but also unparalleled opportunities for growth and transformation? Why, a life of faith of course. Now the irony here is that most of us, including me, come to a congregation for stability, ritual, sanctuary, but a life of faith, that thing that actually drives a congregation and the people in it, well, an enriching faith life is anything but stable.

As evidence I offer our 2nd UU principle “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, “or our 6th UU principle “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” If those principles aren’t a challenge, you haven’t thought

about them enough. You need my supervisor, the Reverend Betty Ellis Hagler, here to extract the hard relevancy and revolutionary thought from our faith, from any faith (Whoever thought for example, it wouldn't take a revolution to love your neighbor as yourself? Most of us are still working on that one).

There's not a faith out there that isn't revolutionary in its premises of love, justice, compassion, equality, caring for the sick, hungry and poor. Its not easy being a person of faith, and it is not easy being a Unitarian Universalist. Our principals regularly call us into foreign lands. Which is how I witnessed a shooting last week with a member and visitor to our congregation.

Three shots to be specific fired by a suspect at police, at the corner of Blair and Reading, about a mile north of here. To the best of my knowledge no one was hurt and none of us were involved, other than witnessing it, which was enough.

On that day Joe Rohling, Lydia McMillen, and I answered CeaseFire Cincinnati's call to canvass the Ridgeway Blair area in Avondale. This area is known for gun violence, and CeaseFire Cincinnati wants to have a presence there in an attempt to stop the violence. Ridgeway and Blair is part of the area that we walked through on our march on September 30th.

It was a cold day, but the sun was out. April, from CeaseFire, was our leader and although no one said it, I think we were all surprised that so few people showed up. Where are all the people? I expected maybe ten. I silently considered two things. First, Saul Green said that on a regular basis the citizens of Cincinnati just haven't been here for the collaborative. Second, I thought of going into Roxbury. In Roxbury I went alone, rode the subway alone, walked to the site alone and the neighborhood I went through was much more dangerous than anywhere in Avondale. So I made a decision to walk and April gave us good rules, never walk in a building or house, always stay in a group, and don't place materials in mailboxes. Plus, we were told that the police knew we were walking there and would come through. In retrospect I wish I had shared my thoughts with the group, in order to fully discuss our options and risks, but sometimes in community work you live and learn. It was a day for that.

The police did come through, many times. One time they asked us if we had seen a particular person. We had not, so we leafleted doorways and talked to neighbors. Here are some things I saw while walking. The poverty is unmistakable, decaying homes, ruined sidewalks and streets, overgrown trees and shrubs and basically, not a person in sight. Folks weren't just sitting on their front porches. That said, the neighbors were grateful we were there, extremely grateful. And everyone remembered that CeaseFire had come through three weeks ago in a march. Everyone. The organization was known.

Sometimes after I dropped a flyer at a porch I would walk to the next house. While I was on the next porch, the person from the former house would open the door a crack, look at the materials and say thank-you, sincerely open the door wide and say "thank you." One woman came out of her apartment to talk to us and thanked us profusely. Joe and I met another man, hearing impaired. He made a hand sign for guns, then crossed his arms, and gave us sign language for "thank you." I know some of you have worried that local residents would be resentful. That was not my experience at all. People were grateful, vocally grateful.

And while walking, I looked people in the eye in order to read them, the man who finally had a good job, the deaf man, the men at the shop, the woman with the baby. All

those faces, all those stories, all those eyes. All those stories like my own human story, and yet not like mine at all. I remembered having this experience in Roxbury all the time. I go home and feel safe at night. The residents of Blair and Ridgeway live here day and night. This is their daily life and I can find no justice, equity, or compassion in this reality.

As we finished our task at the corner of Reading and Blair we heard three shots. It took me a few seconds to register everything. Were they shots or were cars going over metal plates in the road? No, they were shots from across Reading and down Blair a bit the other way. The police were there around someone. The police had their guns drawn. I had never seen a gun drawn before for real.

My view was somewhat blocked by parked cars and trees. In less than a minute a SWAT team arrived. I watched police run towards the gunshots and I thought, "I want to leave and they are running towards the danger to protect and serve." Our group thought the suspect fired the shots, not the police, and Doreen Cudnik from the Community Police Partnering Center confirmed this for me. The police did not fire their guns, nor did they use a taser, nor did they hit anyone. I was and am deeply impressed by the police commitment, restraint, teamwork, and professionalism I witnessed.

And then there were the local residents. The woman we met just as this happened who uses a prayer from the Bible when things like this happen and she gets scared. A few minutes after the shots were fired I watched two sets of mothers with elementary age children walk right in front of the police barrier, not twenty feet from the shooting, on their way to the nearby market.

There was a man coming home from a long day's hard work, very dirty in his orange work suit. He lived two blocks away and he was going to light his niece's furnace because it was going to be cold. He told me he hears gunshots day and night, especially at night. My guess is that he is my age, maybe a bit younger, but the lines on his face made him look about 50. He looked tired. So tired. .

Later that evening I was giving my son a bath. At 4 ½ he is very interested in superheroes and their weapons. Peter and I regularly get questions about boomerangs, shields, spidey powers, swords, and guns. While playing with his tub toys he looked at me and asked "Mommy, do bullets go through skin?" Inside I flinched. Outside I said calmly (I hope) "Yes honey, they do." Earlier in the week he pronounced "There aren't any guns in Cincinnati. I haven't seen any."

I thought about those children and their mother on the way to the market. Those children, same age as my son, know there are guns in Cincinnati and they have seen them and they know that bullets go through skin. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations this is not. Every four year old should say, "I've never seen a gun."

This past week when I spoke with Doreen she told me that the planning team at the Center was surprised and disappointed that more people had not come for the canvass walk and that the Steering Committee is talking about this a lot. Before they do another canvass walk they will make sure there are at least ten people committed to be there because there is safety in numbers. She also said "We need more black men there to change the norms with their peers." We discussed the importance of encouraging participants to talk openly about their concerns when they are having them, to empower canvassers to make decisions to walk or not if it doesn't feel right, or to change your mind midstream and go home, and to support all these conversations and decisions.

CeaseFire now knows that the police had heard gunshots in the neighborhood earlier and that is why they were patrolling so often during our canvass. Doreen says she wishes CeaseFire had known this, but communication is a difficult dynamic. The police keep information to themselves, but again, CeaseFire is going to work on this and see if they can get the police to share more information when canvassers go out. But if you or I go on another canvass walk we need to assume that there could have been shots fired there earlier that day, and make decisions accordingly. After the events of two Thursdays ago CeaseFire is also concerned that residents will think that canvasses are done in conjunction with police “sweeps” which is not the case.

Doreen said “I hope that you will stay the course with us while we figure this out. Your congregation added a terrific presence at the march and rally. Perhaps your members would feel better-matched serving at our monthly advisory meetings. There are lots of ways to participate that don’t involve canvassing. I hope you will weather this with us.”

Marge Piercy writes

The work of the world is common as mud. Botched it smears the hands, crumbles to dust. But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.

And so, we awkwardly lurch forward, in community. No one ever said the goal of world peace, let alone neighborhood peace, was going to be easily communicated, well-managed, perfectly planned, quick, safe, and easy.

This past week someone asked me if I thought First Church was a sanctuary church, by which I assumed he meant a church where members and visitors could contribute just to the inside and not to the outside community. I immediately answered, “Yes.” As active as First Church is in issues, and as active as individual members are in multiple causes, we must be a sanctuary for those who feel misunderstood by orthodox or conservative neighbors, co-workers, and family members. We get to just come here and celebrate UU values of freedom, reason, tolerance and love (and by the way, if we could get that right here within these walls that would be a relevant social justice ministry). And let me reassure you that there are a variety of services coming up this fall. We have spent more time on social justice than usual because of local events and because I want us to be transparent about those events and what they mean, but we have many interests here and they will be honored over time.

In addition, every congregation must offer sanctuary for those that hurt, and some of us here hurt very badly. Maybe both your parents died last year and the family dog just needed to be put to sleep. Maybe you can’t get out of debt. Maybe your children have become your social justice project. Come here for sanctuary. Find a ministry within these walls that allows you to give in a quieter, less stressful way. Maybe you are an aide in the infant room and feel grateful for life, while the exhausted parents of those infants sit up here and have blessed adult thoughts. Maybe you give extra generously at canvass time, and that is your ministry here.

In addition, some of us need rest. You may remember that almost three years ago I stood up at this pulpit and said I was burnt out on social justice, and I was. I told you the truth then and I am telling you the truth now, because I believe in transparency. I am

not keeping secrets. Sustainable social justice requires rest and renewal. If you need rest, take it. I got my rest and renewal and now I am ready for action, and apparently I am scaring quite a few of you. You wish I would not go on canvas walks, and if I do, to please wear a Kevlar vest, which I am not going to do.

My experience in the urban core is that if I use what I have learned, I am no more a target for any crime than the local residents and anyone of any race who appears to have money, and that frankly, is the problem. The local residents, the toddlers singing Barney songs on their porches, the kids walking to school, the man standing at the bus stop, the woman collecting her mail, can easily become innocent victims of gun violence. We are not special enough to be targeted by other people (even when we are white); rather we are so insignificant to people drawn to violence that we become collateral damage. I can't live in a world like this without trying to change it. It is the way I am.

And it does take a toll. For the first two days after the shooting I talked to no one about it except my husband and I didn't sleep well. I knew I needed to get help so I spoke to a colleague who has done police chaplaincy. She was very helpful. So if you ever do social justice work and feel like you are in over your head, talk to people, and get help. Silence is deadly. Without mentioning it to one another, neither Lydia, nor Joe, nor I told anyone at First, and when I realized this I knew I needed to preach on this.

I followed up with Joe and Lydia to find out how they were doing. Like me, Lydia had some stress after the walk and her back hurt for three days. Joe felt OK. I learned that Lydia had reasons for being there. Several years ago she worked in human resources and a store manager for the company was shot and killed doing a bank drop. Like me, Lydia said she would go on another canvas. I wouldn't do one every week, but maybe every other month. Joe was not sure. He thought perhaps not. There isn't a right or wrong answer, just your decision based on what you know and how you feel.

I don't want members to walk with me to "protect" me. I think your desire to do so means that you love me and I am deeply honored and touched. I was actually surprised when I realized people were thinking about that, but I don't want you to care for me that way. I want you to care for yourself as best you know how. Maybe this means you go on a canvas walk, or maybe it means you attend advisory meetings for CeaseFire, or maybe it means you go visit your brother in the rest home, or maybe it means you go home and take a nap. That's what I did on my sabbatical.

Let me be a true Unitarian Universalist here, and say how much I believe in you, and I trust that wherever you go and whatever you do, you have a more significant purpose and need than I could ever know or need to know. Some folks help with membership, some usher, some cook, some sing, some do canvas walks. I'm grateful to all of you equally. I don't have a hierarchy of appreciation for participation because it's all ministry, although you can get extra points for good behavior.

In my ministry I look people in the eyes, and I listen long and hard to stories because I am a selfish person and I am interested in understanding myself and the only way I have found to do this is to know you, and the people I meet everywhere, like on Ridgeway and Blair. What I can't put together is how we are so similar when seen through the eyes, yet live so differently and sometimes so unfairly in our lives. Entering these paradoxes make me tick as a minister – fear and faith, knowing me through you, the illogically cruel injustice of want and plenty. Faith is a shining affliction, taking us through fear and ignorance, deeper and deeper into the rest of the human heart.

