

**Carter Reconciliation Sermon**  
**18 January 2009**  
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**Reading: *The Hug* by Tess Gallagher**

A woman is reading a poem on the street  
and another woman stops to listen. We stop too,  
with our arms around each other. The poem  
is being read and listened to out here  
in the open. Behind us  
no one is entering or leaving the houses.  
Suddenly a hug comes over me and I'm  
giving it to you, like a variable star shooting light  
off to make itself comfortable, then  
subsiding. I finish but keep on holding  
you. A man walks up to us and we know he hasn't  
come out of nowhere, but if he could, he  
would have. He looks homeless because of how  
he needs. "Can I have one of those?" he asks you,  
and I feel you nod. I'm surprised,  
surprised you don't tell him how  
it is – that I'm yours, only  
yours, etc., exclusive as a nose to  
its face. Love – that's what we're talking about, love  
that nabs you with "for me  
only" and holds on.

So I walk over to him and put my  
arms around him and try to  
hug him like I mean it. He's got an overcoat on  
so thick I can't feel  
him past it. I'm starting the hug  
and thinking, "How big a hug is this supposed to be?  
How long shall I hold this hug?" Already  
we could be eternal, his arms falling over my  
shoulders, my hands not  
meeting behind his back, he is so big!

I put my head into his chest and snuggle  
in. I lean into him. I lean my blood and my wishes  
into him. He stands for it. This is his  
and he's starting to give it back so well I know he's  
getting it. This hug. So truly, so tenderly  
we stop having arms and I don't know if  
my lover has walked away or what, or  
if the woman is still reading the poem, or the houses –  
What about them? – the houses.

Clearly a little permission is a dangerous thing.  
But when you hug someone you want it  
to be a masterpiece of connection, the way the button  
on his coat will leave the imprint of  
a planet in my cheek  
when I walk away. When I try to find some place  
to go back to.

### **Sermon:**

Unitarian Universalists have a great history and tradition of doing works of justice in the world. We are, after all, a worldly faith, a faith that calls us to create the heaven we wish to see here on earth. But as we celebrate the life and works of Rev. W.H.G. Carter this Sunday, we also mark a time in this church's history when we did not live up to the challenge of our faith. Rev. Carter was a prophet when this church dared not be; Rev. Carter offered his works up for the poor when we looked the other way; Rev. Carter paid for justice out of his own pockets when our own pockets were overflowing. This congregation failed then when we chose to do nothing. And we will fail again. Ugh.

I don't know about you, but I have found in my own life, again and again, that I fear failure so much that it stops me from acting on my conscience. And even more troubling to me, I am more afraid of being shown to be ignorant or small-minded than I am of any tangible danger. And so, when I came to First Church Cincinnati, I came in no small part because of the courage you showed and continue to show in pursuing the Carter Reconciliation Process. You might not realize how well you are known throughout the Unitarian Universalist Association, but this program is at the vanguard of the religious racial reconciliation movement. We knew about it in Concord, MA, we knew about it in Oakland, CA. These seven years of partnership and leadership have catapulted this congregation to the status of an exemplar of justice in our religious community. Because of that status, because of your hard work before I got here, because you have indeed

faced that fear of failure and come out the other side, and because of the enormity of the task that still stretches before us, I am quite intimidated and honored to preach today.

Carter Sunday is about honoring the man, Rev. W. H. G. Carter and his accomplishments. It is about acknowledging and working to remediate a past failure of this congregation, and to support in building a relationship of reconciliation with Rev. Carter's family. But we cannot stop there. As hard as it can be to face an injustice of the past, as difficult as it is to build new just relationships where old unjust ones existed, as complex as it is to face our own ignorance of the past, it is much harder to remind ourselves of the injustices that remain, the injustices that we must continue to fight against. So today, in Rev. Carter's memory, I will preach about reconciliation – that uncomfortable and terrifying imperative of intimacy, that hug, that is required to build sustainable, just, and accountable relationships.

Now, I went to Oberlin College in northern Ohio, known best for training world class musicians and top notch rabble-rousers. I was trained well by the UUs and my parents to care about the injustice in the world and to do my part to change the world for the better, but I was unprepared for the enormity of the challenge, or the emotional toll that opening my heart to injustice could take. My first year at college, I learned about the local and the global, hunger and poverty in Lorain County, racial profiling, queer bashing in Cleveland, the aftermath of apartheid in South Africa, colonization and religious repression in Tibet, a military junta imprisoning human rights activists in Burma, a civil war in Somalia, effects of the drug war in Colombia, the violence of corporate greed in Nigeria, US training of war criminals in Latin America, and more and more and more. As a newly minted activist who took every death and every act of violence personally, I was quickly overwhelmed. I had no tools for channeling my grief. I hurt from the ills of the world and so I had to act to alleviate my own suffering. This kind of activism was soul sucking for me. I could not cure the pain I felt, and I so worked until I couldn't work anymore and didn't ever feel like I did enough. The problems were too big for me, and I couldn't see my piece of the puzzle. I couldn't see how I made a difference. I never felt fulfilled by my work. And I still hurt.

Slowly I learned to cope, by replace that constant pain with intellectualized action plans; I called it strategic thinking. I planned my next action, I planned the next protest, I planned the overthrow of the imperialist state, I planned for that future utopian society. I found by stopping up the pain, I could bear it. I learned to channel that anger and sadness into action without really feeling it in between. I learned to put as much distance between myself and those who galvanized me to action as I could. I couldn't look at the faces of those affected by violence. I couldn't watch the news. I let injustice wash over me without touching my heart. I found protection by living in my head and not my heart. In a roomful of UUs, I'm guessing I'm not the only one in the room who uses

intellectualism as an avoidance technique, but you might also have also found another way to cope with the pain of injustice in the world. What I found is that my intellectualism preventing me from processing the pain I felt but didn't acknowledge, it prevented me from finding support and connection through that pain, and this new form of action was just as soul sucking as before. I failed. I burned out. I wanted to quit.

In this time of intense activism, I also protected myself by claiming the role of volunteer. I found that with a trick of my brain, I could convince myself that none of this injustice was affecting me, and I certainly wasn't accountable to anyone for my actions. Yes, it hurt that people were dying and starving and being treated badly, but I wasn't responsible for them, and any work that I did on their behalf reflected well on my character but I couldn't be blamed if it became too much for me! I always left myself an out, and option to leave. When the struggle became too hard, instead of figuring out how to work for justice AND keep myself whole, I could simply choose to quit.

This is where I am especially impressed with First Church. What you have done here is not just offer your condolences for a past injustice of this congregation, you have instead given yourself a reason to keep the promise today. You are not volunteers, you have made yourselves accountable to and partners with the family of Rev. Carter. This accountability requires you to keep going, to make it work. You have made it difficult to quit. You have made it difficult to do bad with your good intentions. I don't know if you realize how unique that is in this world of paternalism, volunteerism, and one sided charity, you have enacted a real ministry. I am awed by the trust and courage that it took for the family of Rev. Carter to join as partners with a church that treated your family so badly previously, and I am awed by the humbleness and courage that it took for this congregation to say, "We're sorry. We will work to make amends."

That may not seem huge, but take a moment to think about all the things that prevent you in your personal life from simply saying I'm sorry, or accepting another's apology. It requires a lot to do either: empathy, trust, compassion, commitment, connection, acknowledgement of interdependence, knowledge, and willingness to face shame and guilt. This simple process, the giving a receiving of apologies, and the partnership it requires to make amends, this is reconciliation. And it is so simple, and so difficult that it is almost unheard of here in the US. We are not a nation of reconcilers. We instead have focused on a form of justice that requires little relationship and little healing. Reconciliation is hard, because saying "I'm sorry" is hard, but more importantly, it is hard because it requires so much trust and faith of the person accepting that apology.

I continued searching for reconciliation in my life through a cycle of activism-burnout-activism. I hurt and I spent most of my activist hours trying to avoid hurting more, and was young and afraid of hearing from another adult that I would "grow out" of my years

of caring. It seemed like most middle aged adults I met in this period were all ex-Vietnam War protesters, or ex-Civil Rights activists, who “settled down” after a short period of activism and who encouraged me to do the same. Whether from burnout or a change in politics, or simply inertia, these naysayers reminded me of what I already knew; it is hard to stay committed for the long haul. What was to keep me from burning out for good? What example was I going to set for the next generation of idealists and activists? I couldn’t answer these questions on my own, and the only people I could find who were going strong after years of disappointments and gradualism were people strongly informed by their faith, the Catholic Workers. Could I, by exploring my connection to Unitarian Universalism more deeply, find the connection that would make me a stronger, more consistent worker for justice? I went to seminary to find out.

There I had a professor, the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, a scholar-activist and president of Starr King School for the Ministry, who offered me new insight into the work for justice. I spent so much time of my youth and young adulthood doing activism to avoid or alleviate my pain at the injustice and violence of the world, and she reminded me that underlying a risk of pain and sadness is a core of love. I could not feel the pain of the world if I did not love the world that pained me. Love hurts because with love comes investment, and risk of disappointment and loss. She insists that there is something in the world as it is (not the world in my mind, the utopian world I want to be a part of creating) that makes me love it and therefore pains me when I lose a part of it. Wow, I wanted to believe her.

I wanted to believe that this world is more than a disappointment, more than the violence and injustice that plagues it. She was talking about a big reconciliation, reconciliation with the world as it is. How refreshing it would be (and terrifying, I’m not gonna lie) to love the world so much that I am fed by working to save it?! To touch the pain of the world and not feel overwhelmed or overwrought, but energized and committed, seemed like a fairy tale, however. Love is so PC, so new age, so messy. How could that work?

But then, something broke through that self-imposed isolation, that cold-hearted intellectualism that I constructed to protect my heart. I happened in a courtroom. I was part of a movement of people, called School of the Americas Watch, that used civil disobedience as a tactic to stop US imperialism and militarization in Latin America. As an employee of the organization one of my tasks was to prepare activists for their trial dates after their acts of civil disobedience. The people of Latin America were a blur to me; I had never been there, didn’t know Spanish, and as a self-protective measure, I was actively trying to distance myself from the results of US foreign policy. But the activists were right there, risking their freedom, their jobs, their families, their safety for this group of unfaced strangers. After preparing the activists for trial, I sat in the courtroom watching them get sentenced to prison one at a time. One after another received a six month sentence. For the first time since my freshman year at college I cried. I cried right

there in the courtroom because I was so proud of these friends, and so scared for them. I was awed by their commitment, and in that moment something broke open in me. The suffering of Latin Americans must be real, present, and current, because these friends in front of me were real, present, and current. They must be human, because my friends were human. I found my connection, I found my sorrow and anger, and it didn't break me. It made sense. Of course I needed to act, not out of guilt or volunteerism, but because it was my right and duty and privilege to act. It was almost unbearably overwhelming, but it didn't defeat me. Oh it hurt, but it hurt so good! I walked out of that courtroom in the middle of the sentencing, overwhelmed by this feeling and need to act. I engaged in civil disobedience myself that day, and for once my activism was healing, heartening, and fulfilling, not soul sucking and guilt-ridden. It felt natural to do something rather than to do nothing. For once, it fed my soul as much as it fed the movement.

This is my best example of reconciliation. In that moment, that moment that I had unknowingly prepared for 5 years, and that resulted in another 2 years of consequences, I found the people I was accountable to, so much so that there was no option but to act. I found the accountability by marching right up to the risk that I had been avoiding for years, the risk that I might be broken open by the pain of others pain. I was broken open, but it didn't break me like a feared. It was messy, and scary, and close, and uncomfortable, and full of all the things that relationships are. It didn't follow my self-imposed plan or strategy, but I learned in that moment that activism isn't just about those things, it is also about building strong and dynamic relationships. This is now what I strive for in human relationships, and in my activism. This is what I see in you, this is what I see in this Carter Reconciliation Process.

I am quite amazed and honored to be part of a church with a flagship racial reconciliation project. I am amazed and honored to know all of you who came up with it, who built it from an idea into reality, who continue the long and arduous and rewarding process year after year. In my role as your religious educator, I can only hope to offer your vision to our children and youth as inspiration. I can only hope that I pass on your work with a sense of awe at your boldness, while still making it accessible and possible for our kids to follow in your footsteps.

I've learned from our kids at First Church that we all need something tangible to hang our hats on. We learn best when we can touch and manipulate as we learn. The kids are spending time downstairs today learning about prejudice by deciding whether they like fruits that they have never tasted. As grown-ups, we think we are beyond such exercises sometimes, but I don't think so. So, just like our kids get, I have a take home exercise for you today. You've heard, I'm sure, of the very effective grassroots anti-violence organization in Cincinnati called CeaseFire. You've heard from this pulpit that CeaseFire

just got defunded by the Cincinnati city council in the last few weeks. You've also been invited over the First Church listserv to CeaseFire demonstrations whenever there is a local Avondale shooting. Next time you see one of those announcements, before you delete the message, take a moment and try to access the love under the pain. Someone just got shot in the neighborhood where you go to church. The neighborhood where we need police presence to feel safe going to worship. The neighborhood where we send mittens to the children of the local grade school every year. This neighborhood. Our neighborhood. What is your response of reconciliation? What risk are you called to take? Can you write a letter to city council? Can you pick up your family and show up at the next demonstration? What will you risk if you do so? What do you stand to gain?

This is what feeds me. This is what keeps me coming back in the face of my failures, my inadequacies. I know that I will fall, and I know that we will fail, and I know that someone, somewhere, maybe someone I love or maybe someone I don't know will suffer for that failure. It's not OK, but it is inevitable. But I keep on because it is possible to be more than I am; because as hard as it is, it is possible for us to reconcile. I work on this in church because here we rest from the everyday, so that we may return to the everyday with more inspiration, with more trust, and with more humanity. We grow our souls here, we lament our mistakes, we learn to risk loss and pain, because we are also growing a healing, reconciling community of love. Messy, intimate, unrestrained, new agey love. Isn't it grand?