

The Opposite of Love Is Not Hate

Alison Wohler, November 8, 2009

Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

I am so fortunate to have a place like Chautauqua, NY, in my life. Again this summer I was able to hear several really great speakers over the three weeks I was there. I sometimes see other people like myself taking notes at these lectures, and wonder if they are also ministers writing down quotes for next year's sermons.

Each week of the Chautauqua summer season is assigned a special theme and the lecturers are invited based on that theme. The theme for week five of this 2009 season was "What makes us moral?" Author and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, was the kick-off speaker that week and today I bring you some of his, and my, thoughts on the subject of indifference.

"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference," Elie Wiesel writes from what must be a very painful place of personal experience. He won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1986 but Elie Wiesel has been speaking out for over fifty years about what happened to his 15 year-old self and six million other Jews in the mid-twentieth century. At 80, his age when I heard him this summer, he is still a very powerful and emotional speaker. He said that it is immoral to be indifferent to someone else's hunger, whatever that hunger may be: food, education, freedom, love, or simple worth and dignity. "To be indifferent to suffering is what makes a human being inhuman. Indifference is always the friend of the aggressor, never the victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten." (Elie Wiesel, from *The Perils of Indifference*, April 1999)

Elie Wiesel says that indifference is more dangerous than anger or hatred. "Anger can, at times, be creative. One writes a great poem, a great symphony. But indifference is never creative. Even hatred at times may elicit a response. You fight it. You denounce it. You disarm it." (same source) Hatred is not indifferent.

In his Chautauqua lecture, Wiesel used the story of Job from the Bible to make one of his points. Job suffered unmercifully and undeservedly in his life. But when Job finally got a response from God (maybe not the one he wanted but a response nonetheless) then he knew that, at least, God was not indifferent. Along this same line of thinking, that anything is better than indifference, psychological studies have shown that marriages and relationships do better when the pair is attentive to each other, even if that attention is negative, than in relationships where the partners manifest indifference. My experience has shown me that I only get upset or angry if I actually care about the outcome of a situation.

Wiesel also acknowledges that "of course, indifference can be tempting – more than that, seductive. Can one possibly view indifference as a virtue? [he writes.] Is it necessary at times to practice it simply to keep one's sanity, live normally, enjoy a fine meal and a glass of wine, as the world around us experiences harrowing upheavals?"

Indifference can be the easy way out. “It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward and troublesome, to be involved in another person’s pain and despair. For the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbor is of no consequence, and, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Indifference reduces the Other to an abstraction.” (same source)

Indifference comes in more forms than that which let the atrocities of the Holocaust slip through the cracks in our humanity toward each other, or the kind that lets a man lie frozen in plain view for over a month till someone takes the time to treat his death with some of the dignity it deserves.

Despite last night’s vote in the House (in the right direction I might add), what about the indifference we have seen recently toward people unable to purchase or secure health insurance? There seems to me no other way than indifference to explain resistance to this basic need. Or, in the case of some politicians, they are more concerned that a woman might have an abortion, than they are that she has access to health insurance. Disgusting. It will be Death by Indifference for the undeserving men and women and children who die because they could not get the care they need.

What about the indifference of some in high places, to the religion and culture in Afghanistan and Iraq, when we attacked both of those countries. I am embarrassed and ashamed about how little our country appeared to care about the civilians who were the ones even more affected by our actions than the ones doing the fighting. In an article from iraqbodycount.org, the author calls it “adding indifference to injury.” Indifference is an insult indeed.

It’s called depraved indifference when a defendant’s conduct is “so wanton, so deficient in a moral sense of concern, so lacking for the life or lives of others, and so blameworthy as to warrant the same criminal liability as that which the law imposes upon a person who intentionally causes a crime.” (<http://definitions.uslegal.com/d/depraved-indifference/>) Sounds like the behavior of our country’s previous administration, doesn’t it? Or those who don’t care about equal health care privileges for every one of us. Depraved indifference.

The Boston Film Festival 2000 award for Best Documentary went to a film called Reckless Indifference. The reckless indifference of a justice system that refused to use common sense and look past selected laws that helped convict some teenage boys to an undeserved life in prison, and in the process boosted the prosecution’s record.

Systemic indifference is what is taking place in such places as the Medical Insurance business or the unethical practices of some mortgage lenders that allows the people in charge of cases or loans to act with indifference to the truth as they rely on purposefully limited information at each step that enables a disregard for diligence and accuracy. Our bank will loan you money because we won’t look into your real financial situation and what we don’t know we’ll ignore in the name of making money off of you. We are

indifferent to what this might mean to you in the future. This is an indifference built right into widely used and accepted systems of doing business. A reckless indifference. (www.pointoflaw.com/archives/2009/08/systemic-indiff.php)

There's also deadly indifference. In Naples, Italy, just last month a hit man, clearly photographed by surveillance cameras while shooting another man outside a restaurant, has not yet been identified because no one will come forward. On one side I can understand their reluctance – it was a mafia related murder – but on the other side it feels like a gross example of indifference. Who cares? It was just another bad guy who got shot.

We are aghast when we hear a story like the one I read to you earlier about the frozen man in the deserted warehouse. How can we care so little about each other, how can *we* be so frozen in our indifference, to let this kind of thing can happen? It's an uncomfortable story to hear. This kind of thing happens here in our own town, too.

Homelessness is something we've talked about here before, in sermons and projects to raise money or feed the hungry. Right now it is estimated that there are at least 17 homeless people in our downtown midst. The Committee on Homelessness and the Center for Human Development are working very hard right now to find a space, or spaces, perhaps even in churches and meetinghouses, that can be used as Warming Centers for the homeless as the weather gets dangerous. Could our sanctuary be used as such a place? I don't know the answer to that, (there are certainly limits to our facility) but it is worth considering.

When we think about what we want in an expanded or new meetinghouse, what are things we might consider that would enable us to provide services such as are needed in our town? Like showers, for example. I have a colleague in CT whose recent building expansion included showers (which at the time were a questionable luxury), but, now, just having those showers has helped them provide something desperately needed in their community.

Will it be indifference that prevents finding a place for a Warming Center in Amherst? Some might say it will be finances, or restrictive zoning laws and building codes, but what might be accomplished, or overcome, if the will was there to do this? I do not want to think or feel that I have been indifferent to the possible death by freezing of anyone.

What are some ways to counter indifference? Education, involvement, a sensitivity born of getting to know not only the facts and figures, but the people. The men, the women, the families. I have heard from many of you that the most significant part of your experience volunteering with Not Bread Alone or The Cot Shelter has been talking to the people and hearing their stories. I just found out yesterday that my parents will be the dinner-time hosts once a month when their church in Cleveland hosts the traveling homeless shelter. My mom said that one of the guests will be a woman with her two children, and she is hoping to learn more about the story of this woman's life, where it has been and where it might be going.

Earlier this Fall I met a man out in front of our meetinghouse who is homeless. I needed to ask him to move some of his things because we were about to gather on the front patio before our Water Ingathering Processional. But what was fascinating is that this man immediately started asking me about William Ellery Channing, one of our most famous early Unitarians. He wanted to read his legendary speech and he even knew the year it was delivered. I didn't have a copy on me, but I did bring it in with me the next day, although the man seemed to have forgotten our conversation by then. But what an interesting story there must be behind whatever has brought this person to his knees on our street.

Elie Wiesel, writing about his career as a writer and a teacher asks "What is the goal of the writer or the teacher but to sensitize the student or the reader to make them more sensitive? Once you become sensitive to one family you become sensitive to all families. One people, all people. Sensitivity is as contagious as insensitivity." (same source)

Here, in this religious community, in this spiritual family, we have the opportunity to practice this sensitivity as the antidote to indifference. Let us practice caring about each other and listening to each other's stories – and not just when someone is in crisis. Indifference here breeds indifference elsewhere. Sensitivity here breeds sensitivity there.

The opposite of love is not hate.