



*April Theme: The Boundaries That Heal
and That Harm Us*

*When We Need Boundaries—
and When We Don't*

Sunday, April 2, 2017, 11:00 a.m. – 12:15 p.m.

First Unitarian Church of San José

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones, Senior Minister

Sermon

“Sheltering Walls, Open Borders”

Rev. Nancy Palmer Jones

The first time I really pay attention to the hymn we've just sung, “May Nothing Evil Cross This Door,” is on the Sunday after September 11, 2001. I am living on the East Coast where the tragedies of 9/11 feel very personal, very very close. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations sing hymn #1, also called “Hymn for This House,” on that Sunday. So many of us are looking for assurance, for comfort, for a sense of safety when all our earlier assumptions about security have been shattered.

But this hymn does not offer the message I need: it feels false and isolationist to pray for “ill fortune” to pass us by, as though *we* in the United States could get a “pass” on struggle and suffering when others around the world have been experiencing weekly, sometimes daily, the kinds of attacks we have just experienced—maybe not on the scale of 9/11 at one time, yet persistently for decades. To create an “us” and “them” feels like the opposite of what we need to do: that way more danger lies.

See, even in my grief and shock post 9/11, I want all of Life, even the hardest parts, to come into the sanctuaries of our faith so that we can face them and deal with them! “Don't leave your broken heart at the door,” the Rev. Angela Herrera writes, “bring it to the altar of life.” [These lines begin the beautiful Call to Worship we use on this Sunday, #110 in *Lifting Up Our Voices*.]

We human beings are a mixity, broken and beautiful streaky creatures every one of us, capable of great harm and of amazing healing. On that Sunday after 9/11, I don't want to close our doors and build up our walls. I want to feel how connected we all are.

And then I come to this congregation and learn how special this hymn is for long-time members, because of the very personal, very very close trauma of the fire in this building back in 1995. And I begin to see that I have built my own wall—against this song. I see how limited and idealistic my thinking is. You teach

me the companion truth to the one I already hold, about needing to face all of Life together. You teach me that sometimes we do need to shelter ourselves and each other, that sometimes we need to draw the line about when and how much we let in, sometimes we need to remember that we *can* create safer, deeply supportive, honest spaces where, while still acknowledging our struggles and our fears, we can rest for a few moments and regain our strength for all that we must face.

Thank you for showing me more of Life than I knew 12 years ago. This is exactly what living in community is about—we all grow and change from bumping up against each other here.

So when it comes to boundaries, it is, once again, as my own core theology states, *both/and*. On the one hand, we need to embrace and face the tragedies and the human brokenness that is sometimes called sin—by which I mean that falling away from what we humans can be at our best—*and* on the other, we need comfort and enough support and safety to get through the day.

As our worship team—Jeff and Rodney, John and Dianne and I—plan the service for this morning, I couldn't predict that my specific examples about boundaries would come right out of our own faith tradition this week. Why is it crucial for all of us to hear about these crises in the Unitarian Universalist world, even if this is your very first time worshipping with us?

- Because these crises, these brokennesses, are part of our being human, and that is exactly what we are here to explore and to redeem
- Because in our faith we know we are all interconnected, so these crises demand a response from *all* of us
- And because in naming them, we counteract the poison of secrets, and we lay the foundation for our own courageous, authentic, broken-openhearted way forward

The first of these crises may be triggering because it involves a suspected criminal breach of boundaries. If you need to step out, we understand. Take care of yourself. If you are able to stay, I can promise you that we are here to care for each other in this circle, and that I will speak mindfully—without detail—about this breach. But name it I will, because I believe that this honesty and transparency strengthen our capacity for keeping our children, youth, young adults, adults, and elders safe.

So, let's take a breath together.

This Thursday afternoon, after a long investigation, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Turley, Oklahoma, was arrested on child pornography charges, to

which he has apparently confessed. The harm done by such crimes must not be diminished: they abuse, exploit, and dehumanize the most powerless among us.

And what's *even* harder for our hearts and minds to grasp: This minister has been doing powerful public ministry, offering food, shelter, advocacy, and support to the most marginalized in a very poor area. He has been mentor and friend to a number of my colleagues, who would never have guessed about this deep sickness, if indeed it is true. My dear colleague the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar at the All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa is ministering to the accused's family and children, to all who have worked with this minister, and I believe that by now Marlin has visited the accused in jail, too. The national Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Team is also present on site. They have support; they are facing into this traumatic breach.

So how are *we* here at First Unitarian called to respond?

First, you need to know that we have what we call a "Significant Incident Procedure" in place, designed to alert our congregational leaders to any hints of misconduct or breaches of boundaries. I ask that the Board and Program and Operations Council make this available to all of you. When it comes to any form of sexual or physical abuse, we must and we will make our sheltering walls very strong indeed.

Second, if you or someone you know struggles with addictive behaviors, seek professional help NOW. It is the most courageous and compassionate thing you can do for yourself and for all around you. In this congregation, we don't have the staff to offer that help directly, but as we can, we will walk with you on your journey toward wholeness.

Third, we need to wrestle, individually and communally, with our theology. "Come, come, whoever you are," we sing, and we want to mean it, we want it to be true—so much so that sometimes we Unitarian Universalists aren't sure whether we should set *any* boundaries. When is it OK to say "no"—no, we can't do that; no, that behavior is not congruent with our mission; no, those words are hurtful and thus they disrupt our community, they can even be community destroying? Those behaviors, those words, are not OK here—because we are called to Make Love Visible in all that we say and do. Our theology is radically inclusive—but it is *not* "anything goes." Yes, our theology calls us to say no to harm.

At the same time, our theology calls for radical compassion and mutual respect. We often stumble over how to set a healthy boundary while simultaneously offering compassion for ourselves—staying firm about what is healthy for us, for *all* of us—and yet still demonstrating respect for the other person's humanity. It is hard when we are triggered to figure out how to care for ourselves in new ways that allow us to live out our faith.

Still, in the face of trauma, we can learn to breathe, to ground ourselves in our bodies, to ask for help, and then to experi-learn—to experiment with how we set our boundaries and to learn from that experimenting. We don't have to be stuck in reactive mode.

Yes, we are called to face this crisis in our Unitarian Universalist world—so familiar to religious institutions of all kinds. We face it, knowing that it breaks our hearts open to the terrible streakiness of our human nature. We grieve for the children harmed by any person or industry that abuses or exploits them; we grieve with the family and the children of the accused, and with all whose lives are deeply affected by his apparent breach of the most sacred trust; and if we are Universalist enough, we grieve too for the broken person who resorted to such harmful behaviors. At the same time, we say a firm and steady “NO” *always* to any harmful, hurtful boundary breaches here. “May nothing evil cross this door”—indeed, and we will do all we can to make that so.

Let's take a restorative breath.

The second crisis that has risen to the surface in Unitarian Universalism in recent weeks will be the focus of a whole worship service at the beginning of May, when one of the candidates for president of the Unitarian Universalist Association will share the pulpit with me. Here's what's going on:

In a staff hiring decision a couple of weeks ago, a white non-local, male Unitarian Universalist minister is selected to lead the Southern Region of our faith over an equally qualified, local, Unitarian Universalist religious educator of color. For Unitarian Universalist religious leaders of color and for all of us allies, it is the last straw, because this specific instance of pushing aside a person of color is part of a larger pattern in our faith. The names for that pattern are many; the two that we name today are *white supremacy*—which is not about the Klan or the Aryan Nation but about the deep systemic sometimes-subtle sometimes-violently obvious privileges that keep white people and white culture calling the shots in Unitarian Universalism, just as people like me are still calling the shots in most of our country—and the second name for this larger pattern is *patriarchy*, which does the same for men, even across class and other differences. This language—white supremacy and patriarchy—may be confusing or triggering for some here. That's because, my friends, we all have work to do. At the same time, I can promise you that this language, this naming, is also a vast relief to others here, because it represents a truth-telling that is our only hope for change.

As a beautiful letter from the Office of Youth and Young Adults at the UUA says, “The first step in healing from the damage [that] white supremacy does to our spirit is to face our reality, process our defensiveness as it arises, so that we can be

truly honest about our starting place. As James Baldwin said, ‘Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.’”

As a result of the demand for accountability and action, and in the face of ongoing missteps, the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Rev. Peter Morales, resigned effective yesterday, just three months short of completing his full eight years of service. The resignation shocks almost all of us on Thursday. Some of us wanted him to stay and prove that he too can change and offer the leadership we need. Others feel heartbroken that this human being of color must take the fall for a wider systemic issue.

But let’s not let this disruption in leadership distract us from the real work we are called to do. For we Unitarian Universalists have the chance right now, with all of this truth-telling and revealing of long-sustained harmful patterns, we have the chance to *break through* to being the faith and the humans that we have said we want to be: to breaking down those oppressive boundaries and becoming the multicultural, antiracist, antioppressive Beloved Community to which we aspire. With hard analysis and revolutionary paradigm shifts and deep deep listening to voices that have not been heard, together we can achieve true behavioral change in each of us and in our institutions.

These crises are heart breaking. And that very heartbreak calls for the good kind of boundary-breaking, the kind I call “living with broken-openheartedness.” May our broken-open hearts grow larger, as they burst free of any shell of security or sleep. May our empathy for the pain around us and for the pain in us lead us to action and always to the creation of deeper, more authentic, life-changing relationships.

Amen, I love you, let us learn to Love each other.