



Ministering Together

“News, Comments, and Events of concern to the Religious Community”

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County

Winter 2016-2017

From the Executive Director, Rev. Will McGarvey

Dear Friends,

We are living in disturbing times. Most of us had no idea that so much could be disrupted about the normalness of our everyday lives so quickly. Normal flights for students returning from trips home abroad were less full. Some scientists and doctors who teach and work around the country weren't allowed to come home. Knowing that our country held a 5-year-old boy in handcuffs and separated from his mother – as if he was capable of endangering us all – is beyond the pale.

A colleague of mine is going through a very hard time personally and they mentioned that having this much unsettled in our world, while also dealing the personal changes, was surreal.

For most of us, this is the most extreme swing we have seen with the transfer of power between elected Presidents. While a very few experienced direct persecution from those emboldened by that rhetoric before the inauguration, unfortunately, the troubling rhetoric continues to spill over into our present realities. Hearing the level of fear of outsiders ratcheted up to proportions we haven't heard since 9/11 doesn't quite match the calm of the last 12 years or so, and it feels as if the executive orders to ban immigrants – and even permanent residents – is unheard of. One third of our fellow US neighbors now believe that we are safer from terrorists, despite there being not even one such act from anyone from the named countries being watched. What led to this sharp divide?

It's almost as if we lived in two media worlds during the election, and the recent controversy over “fake news” has been further complicated by the proof of premeditated lying about certain issues coming out of the administration – almost as if they are trying to enforce their worldview on the country. In the rush to make his imprint on the country, the



**Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County
Responds to the Recent Ban of Muslims**
Sunday, January 29, 2017

“You must not oppress foreigners. You know what it's like to be a foreigner, for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.”

– Exodus 23:9

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County condemns the recent Executive actions of President Donald J. Trump against refugees and Muslims in particular. This kind of Executive Order is contrary to human decency, violating the human and moral rights of all people to seek safety and security. It also runs contrary to our Nation's struggle to be a respected beacon of hope and a safe haven for people who are threatened by war, hunger or persecution. To single out Muslims is dangerous to the safety and well-being of all citizens.

The rhetoric of President Trump over the past year has endangered the lives of Muslims not only in the United States but across the world. Such rhetoric emboldens terrorist groups and individuals. Unscrupulous people will be tempted to engage in aggressive action or vandalism against innocent people and houses of worship because of their religious affiliation. Associating all of Islam with terrorism and then suspecting all Muslims because of their religion cannot be allowed to stand.

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County stands in solidarity with the Muslim Community throughout the world. We call upon the President to rescind his Executive Order against Refugees and

President has signed many Executive orders and memorandums, some with questionable constitutionality.

I've never experienced such a President, but it is the rare occurrence that our country gives both houses of Congress and the Presidency to one party. I'm only middle aged, so perhaps I show my age.

What worries me the most is how callously the President has talked about racial and religious minorities. While pretending that there hasn't been a successful vetting process during the last two administrations, his order on extreme vetting has threatened the family unity of many. The United Nations estimates that the policy will affect up to 20,000 people by the end of the 90 days. Almost forgotten now, his Executive orders on the wall call for tripling the number of ICE agents and doubling the number of border police. That many ICE agents will most likely start targeting members of our own county and communities. He is trying to restore some of the same policies from the Bush administration that were unconstitutional, which could make it harder for undocumented and mixed documentation families alike.

These actions don't make our neighborhoods safer. If anything, our undocumented neighbors may become less likely to call the police when they see a crime or are victimized. Border policies such as the Muslim ban makes people who may look like or pray like those targeted more at risk of violence against them even here in California.

Our neighbors around the world are also worried about the recent changes in our society. They see the same impulses in the UK's recent Brexit election, and a rise in the far-right, xenophobic candidates around the world.

It's not time to join the fearful, but it is time to join the prayerful – and to learn how to pray well with others. Please read our recent response to the Ban on Muslims and attend some of our events. Or, you can do something like what Congregation B'nai Tikvah is doing – host an Interfaith Series with speakers from various faiths. Blessed be.

"Envisioning a World of Interfaith Peace"

Shalom, Peace, Salaam, Om Shanti, Solh, Amani, Paz, 평화, Ping On...

Rev. Will McGarvey

Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County Responds to the Recent Ban of Muslims

Continued...

throughout the world. We call upon the President to rescind his Executive Order against Refugees and Muslims and to ensure that such tactics will not be entertained in the future. We call upon Congress and the Courts to block any implementation of this dangerous Executive Order or any like it.

It is simply irresponsible and life threatening to single out a particular religion and people for such Executive action. The President's Executive Order contravenes our most precious constitutional values of equal protection and due process, and ignores their cherished principles of anti-discriminatory development of remedies and evidence-based decision making. We are further concerned since most, if not all, of the would-be refugee entrants have already undergone two years or more of careful screening and comprehensive vetting under the well-established protocols of the last two administrations. Yet the Executive Order would allow individual agents at the port of entry to exercise their own discretion in selectively denying what has already been approved.

We are deeply concerned about those refugees who are fleeing dangerous situations to find a safe haven in America. President Trump's plan does not respond to the severity of the global refugee problem and must not destroy the aspirations of so many who look to us for hope. We are appalled and saddened the President would act in such a manner as this, as it betrays even those with permanent residency rights in the U.S. and divides families around the world. Xenophobia and Islamophobia must not be the basis for legislation or Executive Orders. We call upon the Interfaith Community to stand in solidarity with one another and the Muslim Community as we honor the founding principles upon which this country has been built and seek peace through justice and the welcoming of strangers.

Signed,

The Governing Board of the
Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County

***Thanks to all who came to the Ring
of Solidarity Event on Feb. 3rd at the
Walnut Creek Islamic Center.***

Religious and Cultural Observances

February

- 1
 - Vasant Panchami ** - **Hindu**
- 2
 - Candlemas - Presentation of Christ in the Temple - **Christian**
 - Imbolc - Lughnassah * - **Wicca/Pagan** Northern and Southern Hemispheres
 - Saint Brigid of Kildare - **Celtic Christian**
- 3
 - St. Blaze Day - **Christian**
 - Setsebun sai (*beginning of spring*) - **Shinto**
- 5
 - Four Chaplains Sunday - **Interfaith**
- 11
 - Tu BiShvat * - **Jewish**
- 12
 - Triodion - **Orthodox Christian**
- 14
 - St. Valentine's Day - **Christian**
- 15
 - Nirvana Day ** - **Buddhist - Jain - Sikh**
- 19
 - Meatfare Sunday - **Orthodox Christian**
- 25
 - Maha Shavaratri ** - **Hindu**
- 26
 - Cheese Fare Sunday - **Orthodox Christian**
 - Transfiguration Sunday - **Christian**
- 26-March 1
 - Intercalary - **Baha'i**
- 28
 - Shrove Tuesday - **Christian**

March

- 1
 - St. David of Wales - **Christian**
 - Ash Wednesday - **Christian**
- 2 - 20
 - Nineteen Day Fast * - **Baha'i**
- 5
 - Orthodox Sunday - **Orthodox Christian**
- 12
 - Purim - **Jewish**
 - Magha Puja Day ** - **Buddhist**
- 13
 - Holi ** - **Hindu**
 - Hola Mohalla - **Sikh**
- 17
 - St. Patrick's Day - **Christian**
- 19
 - St. Joseph's Day - **Christian**
- 20 Equinox
 - Ostara * - **Wicca/Pagan** northern hemisphere
 - Mabon * - **Wicca/Pagan** southern hemisphere

- 21
 - Norooz (New Year) - **Persian/Zoroastrian**
 - Naw-Rúz (New Year) * - **Baha'i**
- 25
 - Annunciation of the Virgin Mary - **Christian**
- 27
 - Great Lent begins - Clean Monday - **Orthodox Christian**
- 28
 - Hindu New Year ** - **Hindu**
- 28 - April 5
 - Ramayana ** - **Hindu**
- 28
 - Khordad Sal (Birth of Prophet Zaranthushtra) ** - **Zoroastrian**

April

- 1
 - Lazarus Saturday - **Orthodox Christian**
- 2
 - Palm Sunday - **Orthodox Christian**
- 5
 - Ramanavami ** - **Hindu**
- 9
 - Palm Sunday - **Christian**
- 10
 - Mahavir Jayanti ** - **Jain**
- 11
 - Lord's Evening Meal - **Jehovah's Witness Christian**
 - Hanuman Jayanti - **Hindu**
- 11-14
 - Theravadin Mew Year ** - **Buddhist**
- 11-18
 - Pesach (Passover) * - **Jewish**
- 13
 - Maundy Thursday - **Christian**
- 14
 - Holy Friday - **Orthodox Christian**
 - Baisakhi (Vaisakhi) - **Sikh**
 - Good Friday - **Christian**
- 16
 - Easter - **Christian**
 - Pascha (Easter) - **Orthodox Christian**
- 21
 - First Day of Ridvan * - **Baha'i**
- 23
 - St. George's Day - **Christian**
 - Yom HaShoah * - **Jewish**
- 24
 - Lailat al Miraj * - **Islam**
- 29
 - Ninth Day of Ridvan * - **Baha'i**
- 30
 - St. James the Great Day - **Orthodox Christian**

Chaplain's Corner



Rev. Dr. Charles Tinsley
Juvenile Detention Facilities Chaplain

The Ups and the Downs, Highs and
Lows; the Vicissitudes of Life.

Over the past two years, forty groups of young people, the majority while in custody, have accompanied me on college visitations. Butte College in Oroville has been the most frequent destination. In twenty years time, about three hundred kids have gone there with me, where they have visited the school.

On numerous occasions I was able to take van loads, the largest group was 13, to tour the campus and the dormitory in Chico and to sample the bill of fare at the local buffet. One especially hungry group of travelers, all then-residents of the Orin Allen facility in Byron, ate a total of 57 plates of food!

Since 2015 a dozen groups of young people, also the majority while in custody, have journeyed with me to visit Antioch College and Central State University, both in Ohio, and Kentucky State University. (Noteworthy: Three young men have recently graduated from Central State University.)

"Side trips" have included attendance at, and actual participation in, the Tri-State Diversity Conference in Northern Kentucky (three years in a row) and the biennial convention of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus in July 2015 at Charlotte, NC.

Additionally, this past summer I took several individuals to the PCUSA General Assembly in Portland and to the Annual Convention of the NAACP held last summer in Cincinnati.

While attending the NAACP Convention, I happened upon the health screening booth on the exhibits floor. One of the two young people who accompanied me on the trip was with me as I sat down to have my blood pressure taken.

Surprisingly enough, although I was not feeling poorly, and while the blood pressure was relatively normal, the heart rate was double the usual rate.

The next morning I was hospitalized. Following the necessary and appropriate treatment in Ohio, I returned here only to be hospitalized a day later. Between August and November what was diagnosed as a rather serious condition, worsened rapidly.

It was determined that life-saving open heart surgery needed to be performed. Pre-operative tests only revealed a part of the problems with which I was dealing.

Once the chest was opened and the heart exposed, the surgeon found more serious issues that required immediate attention. The initial estimated time of the operation was four to five hours. The surgery ultimately lasted more than ten hours. Without the surgery, the surgeon later shared, I likely may have not survived the month.

"Life is like a roller coaster. Sometimes you close your eyes and hold on in sheer terror & other times, you just have to raise your hands up in the air and enjoy the ride."

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/52072939416111115/>

In the forty-eighth year of working with young people, the thirty- fifth year serving in this county, and the twenty- third year in this particular considerably special service, I am, with one very important, significant and notable exception, indeed "enjoying the ride."

MARTIN LUTHER KING CELEBRATION

SOJA's twenty-fourth annual celebration honoring Dr. Martin Luther King was held on the same day as past years, and at the same time, but 2017's event was in a new place: the Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church. Four hundred friends joined us at noon to hear the keynote address of Father Kwame Assenyoh, the gospel music of St. Benedict's Choir, the musical selections of pianist Dwight Stone, messages of public officials, and refreshments and conversation at the end.

The compelling topic and title were: "TRANSFORMING OUR SOCIETY: DR. KING'S TOUGH MIND AND TENDER HEART. This is an important topic for us because many of us are searching for truth and hope that will help us prepare for and influence the changes that will soon be proposed nationally.

Please see the insert for his sermon!

Our speaker, Father Kwame Assenyoh, was especially qualified to speak on this subject. He is a scholar, completing his doctorate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley; a lecturer in African languages and literature at Stanford University; and an adjunct faculty member at GTU and the San Francisco Theological Seminary. Fr. Kwame is Associate Pastor of the Catholic Community of Pleasanton, California. He hails from Ghana, West Africa, a home in the 1500s to slave dungeons as part of the Triangular Slave Trade. He was well qualified to speak to us on The Tough Mind and Tender Heart of Dr. Martin Luther King. .

A complete copy of the Keynote Address can be obtained by sending your email address to: animo3@pacbell.net.

Special thanks to: Mary Silva, Chair, 2017 MLK Celebration; Frank Burroughs, Facility Chair; Margli Auclair, Mt. Diablo Peace & Justice Center, Co-Sponsor; Jo Kerner, Ushers Chair & Collection Chair; Delores Loague, Collection Introduction Chair; Will McGarvey, Planning Committee Member & Program Chair; Gwen Watson, Planning Committee; Mary Silva, Reception and Refreshments Chair; and Planning Committee; Pat Stevens and Pat Kramer, Mary's Assistants for Reception; Lisa Miller and Marcus Combs, WC Presbyterian Staff members; and we want to particularly remember our years at St. Paul's Episcopal Church with great appreciation and affection. To those mentioned and unmentioned, we are grateful for your help in making this year's celebration very successful.

- Gwen Watson, Chair
SOJA

Your Words – continued...

❖ Dr. Amer Araim

*President of the Islamic Community Outreach of California,
member of the Walnut Creek Islamic Center*

The faith community under the leadership of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County, has been deeply alarmed by recent Islamophobic utterances as well as violent attacks against Muslim places of worship particularly the death of worshipers in Canada. In addition, there is a hate campaign not only against Muslims but also against Mexicans and other Latinos and all hard working people who have been in this country, and they have United States born children. Our beloved country, the United States of America was the welcoming of all peoples fleeing persecution and poverty. God bestowed so many bounties on our country and, as part of action to thank God, we have to provide shelter for those in need, and to stand against hate, violence and intimidation to any group or individual. We all belong to one human race, we are the creation of One God who commanded us to help and protect each other.

In view of the recent development targeting Muslim immigrants, as well as American Muslims, The Interfaith Council invited all faith groups and every person concerned about these developments and determined to stand with what is just to join us in the ring of solidarity.

In response to this invitation hundred leaders and individuals from all faith groups joined hands at 12:30 PM, Friday February 3, the day of Prayers for Muslim, and assured their Muslim brothers and sisters of their solidarity, and that would continue to press the media and elected officials to put an end to Islamophobia, and hatred against Muslims, and all people of faith as well as immigrants and the minorities.



Dr. Amer Araim, Terry Clark, Pres., Dr. Harmesh Kumar, Rev. Will McGarvey, Exec. Dir. at the Ring of Solidarity.

❖ Rev. Ron Dunn

*San Ramon Valley United
Methodist Church*



As we enter into a New Year together, many of us wonder what the next 365 days will bring. No doubt we will experience a great many changes in various aspects of our life, community and country in the year 2017. Some of these changes we can clearly see coming, while others will take us by total surprise.

This Christmas season was a unique time for my family. This was the first Christmas for us that my son Caleb was aware that something special was going on. He understood that when he took the wrapping paper off of the box that there was going to be a gift waiting for him underneath. While shopping for Caleb's gifts this year, I reflected back to the gifts I received as a child. One of these gifts was a toy that many of us have given or received...it is called a "Slinky."

But did you know that the Slinky didn't start out as a toy? A navel engineer named Richard James was working with springs during World War II in the hopes that it could be used in battleships. One day, as he worked, one of the springs fell off his workbench and instead of simply rolling, it did the funny "walking" thing that is so familiar to us today.

At that moment, Mr. James stopped thinking about wars and battleships and thought that this was something he could turn into a toy and make children happy. And that is how the Slinky was invented.

Now maybe that spring just accidentally rolled off Mr. James' workbench all those years ago. It is certainly possible... accidents happen. But I choose to believe that God's love was at work that day. A love that could help this man see a spring not as equipment for a warship, but a toy that would bring joy to millions of children.

It is my hope as we journey together into 2017 that we choose to believe in the power of God's transforming love. That we put our faith in a God who can take obstacles and turn them into opportunities. A God who can take instruments of destruction and turn them into something constructive. May we share in that power and that love as we strive to be a Christ-like community together. I pray that you will join me in doing our best to hold one another accountable this year to the three simple rules of our Methodist Heritage: Do No Harm, Do Good, and Stay in Love with God.

Happy New Year!

❖ **Rev. Glenda**

St. Luke's Lutheran Church, Walnut Creek

"Sometimes, when I was working with someone in spiritual direction, I hear the longing from them to know the path God is calling us to, to have some certainty they are making the "right" choice. This way of thinking about God is limiting. I have come to believe that God does not call us to one particular path that we scrutinizingly discover. God calls us to fullness of living which can be manifested in a multitude of ways. We have to listen closely for what is truly life-giving, and there lies the struggle. We resist trusting ourselves. We tell ourselves stories about why we should stay stuck."

Christine Valters Painter, *The Soul of a Pilgrim*.

The ancient Celtic monks had a practice of peregrinatio. Peregrinatio was the call to wander for the love of God. They would get into their little boats, called coracles, with no oars or rudder and simple trust the wind and God would lead them to a place of rest.

This is such a foreign concept to us. Who has time or inclination to go to a place without a reason, an agenda, a task to do? Our schedules don't allow space for this kind of, what we might call, aimless wandering.

In past decades, children were fortunate to have this kind of freedom. They had hours of explorations and playtime but, for most adults or children, these days are now a thing of the past. There is simply no space, no time to discover anything new about ourselves or God, and many people find themselves spiritually depleted which manifests itself in a feeling of being stuck.

Today, everything is scheduled. Spiritual nourishment, what there is of it, is briefly squeezed in here or there between pressing appointments. This kind of living, yields little satisfaction for a weary soul. Soul care takes time and it needs space. It's in the quiet moments God speaks and guides. We need to be alone, without a list of list of things to do in our heads, we need that sense of yielding the ancient monks had. When the monks got into their little boats, they let go of their own agendas and opened their hearts to another way. They had no idea where God would lead. The ancient people believed in a creative, unpredictable, mysterious, loving God that was forever showing them new things about themselves and the world.

While it's impossible for us to climb into a coracle today and let the wind blow us to a new place, perhaps there are other ways we can loosen the restrictions we place upon ourselves. Anytime we break a long established pattern, we open ourselves up to something new and fresh. Anytime we pause and turn our attention to God during the day, we open ourselves up to hearing holy wisdom we have previously missed. There is something to be learned, I think, from our ancestors who deliberately put themselves in positions where God could carry them to a new place full of new possibility.

❖ **Rabbi Rebecca Gutterman**

Congregation B'nai Tikvah, Walnut Creek

Shortly after I arrived at our congregation, we expanded the practice of saying the Mi Shebeirach from occasional Friday night services and the High Holidays to every Kabbalat Shabbat. The moment may be brief, but even so it illustrates the Jewish value of remembering sorrow even at times of joy such as Shabbat. When I meet the eyes of each of you sitting in the Sanctuary on these evenings and encourage you to share the names of your family members or friends who are ill, the seriousness in the room is palpable. Sometimes there are many names to share, sometimes just a few. Sometimes it is the first our congregation hears that one among us is facing injury or surgery. Sometimes there are tears. Always, there is a feeling that we are held together in a web of caring and connection, whether our prayer is for someone we know or don't know, or whether we ourselves are recovering from a bad blow and leaning on B'nai Tikvah for solace.

The Talmud tells us that one who visits the sick removes one sixtieth of that person's illness. Why one sixtieth? It's a curious fraction to be sure. Perhaps this teaching is communicating something about both our capabilities and our limitations when it comes to caring for those living through dark times of sickness and suffering. Our prayers cannot take away someone's difficult or diminished circumstances. On the other hand, the knowledge that we are thinking of them and including them in our Mi Shebeirach has the potential to let the light in, even if just a little bit. It is also a healing opportunity for the prayers (us, in other words) to bring the name and essence of someone we love into the room with us, and to know that we are not alone in our fears and concerns.

Another thing that makes a difference from one Shabbat to the next is our willingness to show up for B'nai Tikvah members who need it. We are always striving to find new and better ways of answering that call, and responding to the overall Jewish imperative to care for those in need. Did you know, for example, that our congregation has a Chesed Committee? Chesed means kindness, and this is a group of volunteers who are on hand for practical assistance like making meals, providing a ride to or from medical appointments and other such tasks. We are always looking for more people to be a part of this committee, and in particular now, for someone to take over the volunteer coordination when the need arises....

As simple as it sounds, the speaking of names and the act of being there assures our fellow community members that we care about them, and will not abandon them or let them fall.

In these ways, we will continue to evolve into a caring community in letter and in spirit; in word, and in deed.

Social Justice Alliance
of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County
SOJA meets the second Wednesday of each month
7 PM - 8:30 PM at the Walnut Creek United Methodist Church in the Library
All Are Welcome!

WINTER NIGHTS

Jo Kerner, Grant Writer for Winter Nights Family Homeless Shelter, reports that 26 individuals (8 families with a total of 15 children) are currently in the Winter Nights Shelter. Two parents are at the daytime Oasis Center in the St. Vincent de Paul Headquarters in Pittsburg. The remaining adults are all working. Fifty-six homeless individuals are on the Waiting List for placement in Shelter.

RENT PROBLEMS IN CONCORD

Delores Loague, SOJA's Representative to the Concord Naval Weapons Station Re-use Project, briefed us about the Hot Line which started on January 17, with Mediation beginning January 30. The Mediation Board will consist of two renters, two landlords, and one independent person. Delores will keep us informed of this new group's effectiveness.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Rev. Will McGarvey reported on a meeting with the County Probation Chief which Michael Fisher set up. Additional meetings will be needed. Will also reported on the MLK Celebration program that he was helping to organize with desktop publishing.

MIDEAST MATTERS

Our congratulations to Dr. Amer Araim for the Op-Ed piece in the January 23 issue of the East Bay Times: "Please don't bash the UN over Israeli Settlement Vote." Dr. Araim is a dedicated SOJA member; he chairs our Mideast Matters Committee.

REMEMBERING DEAN COONS

Chris Coons called to tell us that her husband Dean died on Sunday, December 17 at 12:15 pm. Chris is consoled by his peaceful passing. She was surrounded by family members during the holidays. Chris and Dean have been dedicated members of SOJA since its earliest days. Dean's two social justice activities were homelessness and immigration. He was appointed to the Homeless Continuum of Care Board by former Supervisor Gayle Uilkema and served there for many years. Following that commitment he and Chris were part of the MICA Board for immigrant issues and the DACA program. He was an active member of the Lafayette United Methodist Church.

We'll all miss Dean. We send our condolences to Chris and his family.

INVITATION TO JOIN

Our next meeting is Wednesday, February 8, 7:00 PM, at Walnut Creek United Methodist Church Library. All are welcome.

- **Gwen Watson, SOJA Chair**

INTERFAITH CLIMATE ACTION NETWORK. Stewards of the Earth Advocacy Training Day. Saturday, April 1st from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm. @St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 1924 Trinity Ave., WC. Please RSVP to Jan Warren at jtxwarren@gmail.com Free, but please RSVP so we know how many lunches to have. This is a great opportunity to learn how to advocate with elected officials on regional and local issues around climate, pollution and sustainability. We will have great sharing from regional and local leaders. For more info contact Jan or Rev. Will McGarvey at eye4cee@gmail.com.

The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County

1543 Sunnyvale Avenue
Walnut Creek, CA 94597
www.interfaithccc.org

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Please send copy marked to the attention of:
Interfaith Council Newsletter, 1543 Sunnyvale Ave, Ste. 103, Walnut Creek, CA 94597-1903
PH: (925) 933-6030 FAX: (925) 952-4554 E-Mail: eye4cee@aol.com
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The Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County depends on contributions from member congregations and individuals who support our mission of promoting interfaith understanding. To make a tax deductible donation, please make your check to Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County and mail it to our office at 1543 Sunnyvale Ave, Ste. 103, Walnut Creek, CA 94597. For credit card donations, please visit our website: www.interfaithccc.org . Thank you!

THANK YOU CORNER:
The Interfaith Council is blessed to have dedicated volunteers who come together to collate, fold, sticker and label our newsletter in preparation for mailing. We'd like to thank the teens at People Who Care for their help with the winter edition.
If you are interested in being part of this joyous band or interested in taking on the role of mail-out coordinator, contact Jessica at (925) 933-6030 or eye4cee@aol.com.

PLEASE PRAY FOR... (in our rotating circle of prayer):
St. Peter Martyr Catholic Church • Shri Guru Ravidass Sabha Sikh Temple • Stewart Memorial CME • Interfaith Peace Project • Baha'i Spiritual Assembly, Pleasant Hill • Center for Spiritual Living Concord • Christ the King Catholic church • Episcopal Church of the Resurrection • Faith Lutheran Church • Hillcrest Congregational Church • St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church • St. Mark's Lutheran Church • Islamic Center of Zahra • First Baptist Church, Richmond • For those that experience Islamaphobia • For the Interfaith Youth Council • Congregations going through clergy transition. • The kind-hearted souls who deliver Meals on Wheels • Those seeking employment • Those that are homeless • Those that are ill • For you and me.

Transforming Our Society: King's "Tough Mind and Tender Heart"

By Kwame Assenyoh

b.kwame617@gmail.com

A keynote speech presented at the Dr. Martin Luther King's Celebration
Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church, 1801 Lacassie Avenue, Walnut Creek, California
January 16, 2017 @ 12 Noon

Roots of Violence: Displacing the Value of Humanity

My grandfather once told me: "anyone who thinks small things don't matter has never slept in a room with a mosquito in it." He said this in order to advise me to value and respect the little things in life. Violence in our society started when human beings began to belittle and devalue the preciousness and sacredness of "other" human beings because they looked different, strange and unknown – *small*.

The problem our society faces today is no more that there is violence everywhere we turn. Rather, our problem now has to do with how we respond to the problem of violence: (1) *what do we understand by violence? – the nature of violence*; (2) *how do we resolve issues of violence? – the approaches and methods to address violence*; (3) *what do we intend to achieve when we address violent situations? – the target goal*. When we misplace or misunderstand any of these things we end up perpetrating violence in order to fight violence. For instance, many a people of faith have long subscribed to a "Just War" theory to address violence (see Dennis and McCarthy).

In the nutshell, what we must be concerned about is that religious people often try to address violence by catering to its physical appearance, its flowering, and its effects, for example, murder, theft, assault, etc. By attending to only these, we often only renew or recycle violence in our communities; we do not deal with the roots of violence, so the roots reproduce more and renewed violence. The roots of violence are the social and cultural climate that allowed someone to violate the humanity of another. Hence, what we need is, not only to renew, but to **transform** by uprooting or catering to the roots of violence.

Violence is Symbolic; We Play a Role

Violence in our society is fundamentally *symbolic*, by which I mean, the physical violence we experience in our society is a **culture, or a whole cultural system in which the human being or humanity is considered no more as the goal, the center, the epitome of creation**. We often fail to see that, as religious people, we contribute to the building of this cultural system that promotes violence. And, because we often only see violence as physical occurrence, we miss the fact that we play a role in it – we often say, at least we religious people didn't commit the murder. I mean, we often approach the issue as outsiders, and are blind to our role in it. I submit here that, it is only when religious people, and people of faith, see violence as a cultural (symbolic) phenomenon, will we recognize that we played a role. And therefore, only then

can we find effective solution, medicine to violence in society. From this perspective of violence, our fight against violence would be working on our religious selves, beliefs, and practices, rather than working on “violent people” outsider of ourselves.

Enter Martin Luther King, Jr.

If violence in our society is a cultural system that disregards the specialty, beauty, and therefore the preservation of humanity, then Martin Luther King, Jr. proposes an approach to address it: King admonishes us to adopt non-violence as antitheses of “toughmindedness and tenderheartedness.”

In his book entitled *Strength to Love*, published in 1963, King reflects, from Christian Scripture, on the Gospel of Matthew 10:16 which reads: “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (King James Version).

On one hand, King understands being “wise as serpents” to be “tough-mindedness.” Being toughminded involves hard-thinking by unleashing our mental capabilities to learn. It involves “incisive thinking, realistic appraisal, and decisive judgment... [It] is sharp and penetrating, breaking through the crust of legends and myths and sifting the true from the false” (King 14). A tough mind refuses easy answers and solutions; instead it takes the time to work hard, because a tough mind recognizes that life is full of *complex and special* situations that is worthy of patience and time.

King points out, however that, in our world today, “soft-mindedness” has taken over. A soft mind is gullible and it is vulnerable to shallow slogans, tweets,¹ headlines, etc. A soft mind accepts writings uncritically as objective facts – newspaper or TV reports, even historical accounts, constitutions, and yes, scripture, without question or interpretation. A soft mind sees sacred narratives, myths and legends as dropping literally from the hands of the Divine – scripture was dictated verbatim not only inspired for the soft mind. A soft mind fears change and progress; it prefers the status-quo, sameness, and upholds traditionalism. In the world of soft-mindedness, religion and science are at war. Religious soft-minds cultivated hegemony, and understood the difference in humanity to mean hierarchy in humanity – someone or some culture must be superior than another. In our human history, it was religious missionaries’ interpretation of “different” people and cultures as inferior, bad evil that led to terrorism, imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, homophobia, racism, slavery, classism and discrimination of all kinds. Soft minds created a male dominated world – the oldest violence against femininity. Soft minds can’t handle difference; Soft minds accept only those minds that are the same as themselves, or else, accept the minds that they can change by force – symbolic violence! For King then “A nation or civilization that continues to produce soft

¹ There is a reason why Donald Trump prefers to tweet his messages to his followers. Religious fundamentalists also look into their scriptures with the same expectation: a search for easy answers, literal meanings, etc.

minded [people] purchases its own spiritual death on an installment plan” (King 17).

On the other hand, King warns us, that the practice of non-violence to transform our society does not require toughmindedness only. We must couple toughmindedness with “tenderheartedness”. In his reflection on the gospel text, being “harmless as doves” means being soft-hearted or “tenderhearted.” A tender heart is compassionate, loving, and affectionate.

The heart must not be hard like the mind. A hard heart is inconsiderate of other human beings; a hard heart is a lonely and cold heart! It may pretend to be compassionate and loving but it involves ulterior and selfish motives. Hardheartedness doesn’t see people as people or persons but as objects, as digits, impersonal entities, as numbers, etc. Hardhearted persons love to give (dollars) in charity, and they give out of their excesses not essences. They avoid working in the frontiers, frontlines or the trenches of justice which requires their essence and personal presence. This kind of heart is incapable of sympathy, compassion or solidarity.

Non-Violence: Both Antitheses

Here therefore, is the teaching from King: “We must combine strongly marked antitheses” (King 18). Admonishing his fellow freedom seekers King writes:

... our quest for freedom, namely, nonviolence resistance ... combines toughmindedness and tenderheartedness and avoids the complacency and do-nothingness of the softminded and the violence and bitterness of the hardhearted. My belief is that this method must guide our action in the present crisis in race relations (King 19).

In our religious practices, the way we often understand our sacred narratives (written or unwritten) has often led us to disregard other human perspectives and cultures. We set the cycle of violence in motion when we normalize and universalize our own scriptures both in time and in space, and require other people to conform to it by force. For example, when we get stuck in the way our forebears understood human living expressions such as marriage, sexuality, the sacred and secular, etc., we perpetrate violence against people who live these things differently. We commit violence with our religious practice when we require human beings to serve religious doctrines and institutions rather than interpreting our doctrines to serve and preserve the richness, freshness, diversity, and complexity of our humanity. When we fail to see that we, in our 2017 world, have more information and are more knowledgeable about humanity than those who wrote our scriptures and constitutions, we get stuck in the mud of ancient myths; and this leads us to abdicate our responsibility to “increase, multiply, and dominate [transform] the world” as the book of Genesis implies (Genesis 1:28).

King’s antitheses of both “tough mind and tender heart” relates with what we know in cultural studies as the “logic of coupling” which was

developed by the late Jamaican British scholar Stuart Hall. According to Hall, sameness is not the only pretext to unity, but more so, difference is (see Hall 472). We don't come together because we think in the same way, eat the same food, love the same, worship the same way, etc. Sameness is boring, poor and stinky! Instead, difference helps us to see the bigger picture, makes us colorful, gain wider knowledge and perspective and yes, see God much better. So, King and Hall are saying that we must couple both sameness and difference to get the bigger and richer picture of humanity. It is our responsibility to interpret our scriptures and narratives to breathe life into humanity in all its diverse cultures and natures. It is a violent mistake to think our religious perspective in scripture, creed and practice, and that alone, is normal, human, superior, and universal.

Conclusion

We religious folks must continue to address the physical violence in our communities, but we must begin to address also, its symbolic or cultural nature, of which we are significant contributors. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks to us anew: the way to effectively address violence, and transform our society from the inside, involves being toughminded and tenderhearted in the practice of our faiths. It is the way we can resolve the problem of violence from its roots without being complacent! We must begin to teach our young – in our Catechisms, for example – how to “enculturate” King’s antitheses of “tough mind and tender heart” and to create a new culture in our society. It is by valuing small things, by writing significance back into *other* and *different* human cultures than our own, that we can uproot the culture of violence and stop producing violent people. It is then can religious folks begin to forge a transformed society.

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