

“Good News”

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The Rev. Heather Janules

For a time when I was in college, I had the kind of alarm clock that would wake you up by switching on the radio. It wasn't a bad way to greet the day as I set the station to the local National Public Radio chapter. Then, as now, the announcers' calm and measured tones made it sound as if they had been deep in meditation right before they went on the air. Their voices were a gentle guide into each new morning.

Yet, no matter how quiet and soothing their delivery, there was no way to ignore the content they broadcast across the airwaves. This was the time of the Gulf War, the morning news often including updates on casualties, either of US service personnel or civilians. With part of me awake and part of me still in the land of dreams, I could easily imagine a middle-aged mother, parting the curtain at the glass pane in her front door, revealing a man in a military uniform on her front stoop, his face tense with the terrible news he was about to deliver. Or the weather-worn face of an elder in a distant country, informed of their grandchild's death not by a uniformed messenger but by finding the child's twisted body under rubble. For behind the abstract words of press releases are real people, real lives, lives ended or changed forever.

It did not matter that I was living on a college campus, amid gorgeous farm land in Western Massachusetts, surrounded by the smartest and strangest people I have ever met – my idea of paradise. Knowing that someone somewhere was grieving an unspeakable tragedy was important but a hard way to wake up. Eventually I changed the setting of the alarm to buzzer mode. The loud outburst when it was time to wake was jarring but, paradoxically, less upsetting than the daily news.

I imagine many of you have been in this place, needing to make a conscious choice to turn off the news of the day for...sanity? For balance? I know many who have recently gone on “social media fasts” to limit the amount of sorrow and suffering they consume.

The implied status quo of “news” is that life is working as it should and the world is a place of peace and plenty. What is “news” is what deviates from this norm.

And, perhaps beginning when cavemen began sharing the problems of the caves with each other, humans discovered a paradox of our psychology: people are often drawn to the dramatic, the diabolical, the unspeakable. This awareness likely generated the morbid maxim of journalism: “If it bleeds, it leads.” We want to know the many ways society is broken, violent, corrupt and deprived, at least until we can’t take it anymore.

For the news of the wider world comes to us as we try to cope with our own challenges. Perhaps, in the moment, we are not struggling with something as horrific as the death of a loved one in war, but, as the hymn we just sang affirms “life has its battles, sorrows and regrets.” At any time, the intersection of our personal news and the news of the world may inspire us to turn something off just to get through the day with some shred of hope or faith in humanity intact.

And the news has not been great lately. I remember gathering in this sanctuary the day after the 2016 presidential election. What was intended as a small, informal conversation about the electoral college became a public gathering of confusion, shock and grief. And what has followed has felt like an onslaught of bad news about policy, the state of our democracy, the health of the environment and the nation’s failing commitment to defend human rights in our multicultural society.

Lest you hear these words as a partisan screed, I am mindful of the people-of-color who have said, in person and through written commentary to the mainstream, “Welcome to our world.” Those who have learned to practice the current buzzwords of “resistance” and “resilience” across generations remind all of us that the news has always been bad. Perhaps now more of us just have a greater awareness of the functions of power, cruelty and greed.

So what are we to do? We *can* turn away from the news, finding respite in not knowing. Or we can counterbalance bad news with what brings us delight. I thank our administrator Alison for introducing me to the website “Eyebleach” on Reddit. “Eyebleach” is primarily a stream of photos and videos of cute animals, for those moments when you cannot “un-see” something repulsive or disturbing.

Or, there is a third path. I have cherished Barbara Brown Taylor’s piece “What’s New?” since she published it over a decade ago. I appreciate how Brown Taylor

does not hide from the world's horrors while also finding authentic reminders of human goodness: "where ferries are going down, brave people are diving into water to lift thrashing children to safety. Where crops are failing, generous people are providing relief for farmers and migrant workers...there are entire towns where nothing terrible is happening for an hour or two, where parents are caring for children with remarkable tenderness, where nurses are tending patients, mail carriers are delivering packages, and at least one man...is taking off work early to coach a girl's soccer team." Barbara Brown Taylor, like Lady Justice, has found a way to hold the raw sorrow of human life and its undeniable blessings together, the two hanging in natural balance.

I have been fatigued by the news as of late so I began a quest for stories that authentically point to something that might bring hope while not shying away from pain. Unitarian Universalists do believe in searches for meaning that are both "free *and* responsible," after all. I did find such a story on *The Moth* podcast, a story by comedian Omar Qureshi.

In the wake of 9/11, hate crimes against Muslims increased dramatically, jumping by 1100 incidents between the years 2000 and 2001.¹ It was in the midst of this hostile backlash that Qureshi and his family, Muslims originally from Pakistan, moved to rural Missouri when Omar was a young boy.²

Transferring into his new school, Qureshi heard the same question from many of his classmates: "Are you in Al-Qaeda?" Omar eventually became friends with another boy who was new to Joplin. This boy insisted that Omar and his father go to a particular barbershop, saying it is "the best."

At Omar's urging, his father took them to the barbershop for haircuts. The first thing Omar noticed was the enormous Confederate flag posted on the wall. The second thing he noticed was that the shop was entirely empty but, strangely, the barber said, "We're not taking any new clientele...and you better get home before it gets dark." Recalling his confusion as a child, Omar summarizes his experience as "their business model is flawed."

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Islamophobic_incidents#United_States

² https://player.themoth.org/#/?actionType=ADD_AND_PLAY&storyId=18344

As Qureshi grows into adulthood, he comes to appreciate his region of Missouri, a place where people are, in his words, “friendly and kind...but pretty racist.” Where Qureshi lives now, in San Francisco, people will protest for your civil rights but will not help you carry your bags of groceries.

Heart disease is a significant problem in rural Missouri and there are many Muslims who are cardiologists so the Muslim community grew in Joplin. Eventually, there were enough Muslim families to build a mosque. The mosque became an important place, not only because they had a place to worship together but because no one noticed their accents or asked the girls why they wore hijabs. The mosque provided space for members of the congregation to deepen their identity as Muslims and to grow in confidence. It was one of the significant places Qureshi left behind when he began college on the east coast.

At college, Qureshi remembers going to the website of his hometown newspaper one evening to see how the high school football team was doing. He was shocked to read the headline: “Joplin Mosque Burned to the Ground.” It was Ramadan; his whole family would have been at the mosque when the fire began the night before. He tried calling his father; no answer. He tried his mother; no answer. He tried his brother and sister; nothing. Omar kept calling throughout the night until finally, around dawn, his father picked up. They had left right before the fire began. His family was okay.

Later, Qureshi saw the security footage revealing a black-and-white image of the arsonist’s smiling face, framed by the flames behind him. Seeing the hatred in this man’s eyes, Qureshi vowed he would do what he could to prevent anyone from rebuilding the mosque. No building was worth a human life.

When Omar came home during holiday break, he visited the burnt remains of his house of worship, a mailbox at the edge of the property the only thing still standing. Qureshi opened the mailbox and was surprised to find a letter inside addressed “To the Muslims.”

The letter referenced the mosque’s past ministries. A few years before, a tornado had flattened many buildings in Joplin. The mosque opened a free clinic to provide medical care to the community, alleviating pressure on the local emergency room. The letter read:

When the tornado struck I had no where to go. No one would take my daughter and my wife. But you did. I don't understand you and I don't understand your religion. But what I do understand is this: when we needed you, you were there for us. But when you needed us, we were not there for you.

Omar Qureshi concludes, "It matters. It's worth it. So we keep trying."

As I hear Qureshi's story, I am inspired to wonder "what if?" What if the people around him hadn't been so afraid of his race? Of his faith? What if his mosque hadn't been destroyed by a hateful act? These are the kind of questions we ask in our troubling world.

But Qureshi's story also inspires me to ask other questions. What if the Muslims in Joplin never built a mosque in the first place? What if they never offered the free medical clinic to victims of the tornado? What if the letter writer remained silent and never bore witness to the Muslims' service and the community's indifference? What if people from around the country did not contribute to the mosque's rebuilding?³ What if, in this hostile place, there were no "bursts of gratuitous kindness...the mustard seeds from which healing bushes sometimes grow?"

I recall my minister, Kim Crawford Harvie, inviting us – when despair for the world renders us paralyzed with fear or grief – to find something small we can do. Maybe it is picking up trash on our walk to the train each morning. Maybe it is stocking our glove compartment with food to place in the hands of those begging on median strips. Maybe it is filling a bird feeder or talking with a stranger on the bus or buying a cup of lemonade we do not want just because our neighbor's daughter set up a stand.

Or, in the words of Adrienne Maree Brown, each day we are encouraged to remember our power. She affirms "I am a cell-sized unit of the human organism and I have to use my life to leverage a shift in the system by how I am, as much as with the things I do. This means actually being in my life and it means bringing my values into my daily decision-making. Each day should be lived on purpose."

³ <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-05-29/how-muslim-community-missouri-rose-ashes-arson-attack>

However we choose, we always have the opportunity to invest in the “divine economy” of the world. We always have the opportunity to serve life. Our simple gestures of compassion or intentional presence in our sin-sick world do not erase the heartache and suffering around us. And, yet, each defiant expression of humanity is like planting a seed for a stalk or a blossom we may not even be able to imagine. “It matters. It’s worth it. So we keep trying.”

And, for all we know, our weary “trying” may be what turns things around in the end. I was recently reminded of the words of civil rights lawyer and Sikh interfaith leader Valarie Kaur who said, in that time right after the 2016 election, “The mother in me asks, what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead, but a country that is waiting to be born?”⁴

Some of the news that has troubled many of us has been news about migrants – the stories of children separated from their families, the images of desperate people teargassed as they legally sought asylum. So few of us have the influence or authority to change what seems like a brutal system. It is easy to feel overwhelmed and helpless.

And, yet. Those who have been coming to the Winchester Unitarian Society for awhile know that we have been lending volunteer and financial support to First Parish Bedford, providing sanctuary from deportation for an immigrant they call “Maria.”

This sanctuary coalition has been asked to raise \$25,000 for the Beyond Bond and Legal Defense Fund, a ministry of the Episcopal City Mission. This fund releases immigrants from detention, returning them to family and work. Those who are released have better legal and personal outcomes than those who are not. The Fund also provides for legal fees and funds immigrant-led organizations.

We have set a goal of raising \$5,000 to contribute to the needed \$25,000. Along with individual contributions, we have taken the unprecedented step of making this fund the Share the Plate recipient for all of January. It is our weekly practice of sharing the gifts placed in the offering plate with organizations serving

⁴ <https://www.stillharbor.org/daily-news-blog/2017/2/1/darkness-of-the-womb-valarie-kaur>

Unitarian Universalist values. Our Social Action and Outreach Committee is dedicating \$2000 of its grant resources to match individual donations. Right now, donations have reached \$1909, meaning we have secured \$3818 for Beyond Bond.

It is my pleasure to introduce Heather Vickery, a local Unitarian Universalist leader, who will speak to the importance of supporting the Fund. Ms. Vickery is the Senior Associate for Outreach, Enrollment and Administration at the UU College of Social Justice and President of the Board of First Parish in Malden, Universalist. Welcome, Heather!