

**“I Don’t Want to Add to the Hate”:
A Letter to President-Elect Donald Trump**
Sermon by Deane M. Perkins, November 20, 2016
Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast, Belfast, Maine

Dear President-Elect Donald Trump,

I was in New York City this past weekend visiting my two children. When we’re together we like to walk for miles, whether it be to go to a fabulous ice-cream shop in Chinatown, a restaurant in Little Italy, a Jewish Deli near Times Square, and to so many other wonderful places in the city. I enjoy so very much the diversity of people I see, the many languages I hear, the different cultures I encounter. More than any other city in the Northeast, New York City seems to be a world unto its own with its incredible diversity.

My trip to New York City this time was also unlike any that I have had before. I heard and saw thousands of people protesting your election to the presidency of our country—at your own building in downtown Manhattan and at parks throughout the city. Except perhaps for Richard Nixon’s election, I’m not sure I have ever seen such a thing occur immediately following a presidential election. That these protests have occurred in many parts of our country is, I think, an opportunity for *every* American to pause and ponder.

You said during your campaign that what you were discovering was that people supporting you felt disenfranchised. I agree. But what was disconcerting to me was that such support occurred at the expense of those who are historically disenfranchised, which is everyone except for straight, white males like you and me. You won the election from those of us who are white. But I’m hardly convinced that we whites are the victims. To assume otherwise is to reveal starkly how privileged we truly are. And privilege—because it always entails inequities and inequalities—is neither honorable nor patriotic.

It was disconcerting to me, as well, to watch political correctness being eroded during the election season. Political correctness is “a general plea for people not to be as awful as they have been in the past; it asks that people put more effort into being decent.” (Kali Holloway, AlterNet article) Given the history of our country in relation to the historically disenfranchised—indigenous peoples, African-Americans, women, LGBTQ, people of color, those with different religious beliefs than our own—the least we can do is make an effort to be civil.

In my line of work—I am a Unitarian Universalist minister and a student of religious studies—I am always questioning things that smack of absolutism. Part of my job is to call out that which is idolatrous; that is, that which is established as

something absolute when it can never be, because it is not God. Freedom of speech in this country has become an absolute. It seems okay to say anything you want even though it denigrates other people or is hate-filled. But to make freedom of speech an absolute is to be idolatrous; it is to be a worshiper of the Golden Calf, it is to idolize the mundane.

I don't want to add to the hate. I don't want to do violence to my neighbors or to strangers through physical means, through speech, through emotional put-downs. Violent speech and incivility are not the way to win peoples' hearts. It might appeal to some people, but not to the majority. We need to be better than our base selves; we need to eradicate the hate and violence in our selves, and in our world.

You spoke passionately during the campaign of promises you would keep if you became President. You would return jobs to the United States. With your experience as a businessman, you would dramatically increase jobs and people would be saved economically. You would become the means by which people would be saved.

I, too, once thought that my job was to save people. I soon realized that it was not my job at all; in fact, it was pretty presumptuous to assume such stature and power, since it was both paternalistic and privileged.

When I was in seminary in the 70's, I read Dostoyevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. There is a story within the book itself called the Grand Inquisitor. The story has Jesus returning during the years of the Inquisition in Europe. But the Grand Inquisitor, when he sees Jesus on the streets healing people, has Jesus imprisoned. Jesus never says a word. In a brilliant monologue, the Grand Inquisitor tells Jesus why it is he will have Jesus burned at the stake.

People, the Grand Inquisitor says, will follow anyone as long as you promise them bread and salvation. Just tell people that they are free and they will follow the footsteps of those who know, those who grant them penance and a place in heaven, like the Grand Inquisitor himself.

Jesus, on the other hand, asked too much of people; he asked them to engage in a deep spiritual life while serving the needy and poor. People don't want this kind of deeper life, claims the Grand Inquisitor, this life of truth that makes people *truly* free. People simply want to follow, to be told what to do, to believe they are saved.

The Grand Inquisitor finally admits to Jesus that everything he and the church have created is a lie. There is no salvation; there is no freedom. But it doesn't matter. Just make the masses think they are happy and free, give them enough food, and they will gladly give up their soul and follow.

I see the Grand Inquisitor as a master politician, but Machiavellian at his core. I see you, Mr. Trump, as having to make the critical decision as to what kind of politician and president you will be. And I beseech you not to tell people you can save them, not to fabricate myths that are lies, not to create stories that will endanger the lives of those who are *truly* disenfranchised.

What I have come to understand in my study of religion is that there are two basic concepts that are germane to all the major world religions. First, “all faiths insist that compassion is the test of true spirituality and that it brings us into relation with the transcendent we call God, Yahweh, Allah, Brahman, Nirvana, or Tao. Each has formulated its own version of what is sometimes called the Golden Rule, “Do not treat others as you would not like them to treat you.” (Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, pgs. 3-4) I understand compassion to mean that we endure something with other people, whether it be others’ difficulties, troubles, and pain, or their perspective and point of view.

I am also quite aware that people do horrible things in the name of religion. It is easy to use religion to support one’s own beliefs and actions. Ministers in slave states before and during the Civil War found passages in the Bible to support slavery at the same time that ministers in the North found passages from the same Bible to oppose slavery. We are all well aware of the way that religion can be used for violence and abuse. And the horrors that are committed by the flagrant abuse of religion clouds the very essence of all religions as compassion.

More than ever, however, “the compassionate voice of religion is sorely needed. Our world is dangerously polarized. There is a worrying imbalance of power and wealth and, as a result, a growing rage, malaise, alienation, and humiliation that have erupted in atrocities that endanger us all.... In a world in which small groups will increasingly have powers of destruction hitherto confined to the nation-state, it has become imperative to apply the Golden Rule globally [and environmentally], ensuring that *all* peoples are treated as we would wish to be treated ourselves.” (Ibid., pg. 5)

Moreover, all religions insist that you cannot confine your compassion and benevolence to your own small group of people. There must be concern for everyone and everything, including our neighbor, our stranger, our enemy, our earth. Our purpose on earth has nothing to do with ambition, greed, or power, but is all about service. We are to serve others; we are to be stewards of the earth. And those of us who are leaders are to help bring shalom to *all*—a deep and abiding peace to peoples’ hearts and souls; a deep and abiding love for our earth. There is no greater work that we can do.

It's Thanksgiving week this week. I liked the story in my childhood about the first Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims, the Indians. I grew up in Massachusetts and would sometimes go down to Plymouth and wonder about the people who came from England, and the indigenous peoples who were already here. I was also proud of the fact that our family was somehow related to Myles Standish. And then I discovered that Myles Standish was essentially a mercenary, a captain hired by the Pilgrims who engaged in unthinkable atrocities against the native peoples.

Like most people in our country, I think of Thanksgiving as a time for family and friends to be together if it is all possible. It is certainly a time to think upon our blessings and the things for which we are grateful. But I will admit to you that Thanksgiving also holds a lot of sadness for me. Thanksgiving reminds me of the very same kind of attitude and reality that existed in the past—white privilege and power. All we have to do is look at Standing Rock to know this truth.

So during this holiday and your entire presidency, Mr. Trump, I call upon you to exemplify compassion in all you do. To serve *all* the people, and not just the few. To be a steward of the earth. To help assure that our children—*all* our children world-wide—can sleep in peace. May it be so.