

“Testing Our Tolerance for Diversity”
Rev. Greg Ward and Moses Canales
Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley
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BEGINNING THE JOURNEY: <<Moses Canales>>

In the mid-1960s I grew up with my nine member family in San Bernardino. Today, San Bernardino is known world-wide as the place where our nation's second largest terrorist attack on America occurred after 9/11. But back when I was nine, it was a typical town.

Typical, especially in being racially divided. Large black, Chicano and Anglo populations remained segregated from each other by custom and prejudice. My father was serving as the minister of a Mexican Baptist Church there.

One day, my father and Rev. Bob - the Yale educated pastor of the large, prosperous and neighboring all white Calvary Baptist Church – got together and committed to an experiment in social and religious diversity.

They combined two very separate, distinct cultures – very close to where the massacre occurred a few weeks ago.

I remember as a boy walking down the center aisle of this grand and imposing sanctuary and witnessing the self segregated seating: on the left side all the finely dressed Anglo families and on the right side the simply dressed Mexican families.

Over time, with persistent coaching from the ministers, the two groups slowly began to intermingle. Language and rituals and food were shared. And many relationships formed – including my two oldest brothers who met their future brides on the other side of the aisle. And with the influence and help of their in-laws, education and new career options opened up for them.

This "brief shining moment" of diversity was not to last. Over time both ministers were pressured to discontinue. But to this day, when I see and hear from the children of my brothers' families, I can't help but think this experiment toward diversity was wildly successful. And I wonder what tragedies might have been avoided and what successes might be possible if all of us committed to being so brave.

Come, let us worship together.

REFLECTION <<Rev. Greg>>

I've set up this morning's service as a test – a hypothetical chance to see how our Unitarian Universalist religion calls us to act from useful principles in a fearful and conflict ridden world. Here are the circumstances I would like you to imagine. They are centered around five hypothetical suppositions.

Supposition one:

You work for a division of homeland security which oversees commercial aviation. Your job is to study the reservation lists for international carriers and identify possible security threats, request the detention or arrest of suspicious passengers and, if necessary, cancel flights.

Supposition two:

On a passengers list of a major airliner you've noticed the name, Tariq Ramadan. You've pulled up his file... a Muslim... with published CIA documents which include phrases, 'known radical' and

‘terrorist threat.’ He’s an academic and has written much commentary about the Koran and the negative stereotypes cast by Western culture. You have a picture of Mr. Ramadan. It shows a man with dark complexion, unshaven, urgent, no smile. You notice that Mr. Ramadan’s flight from Geneva to New York City is set to take off in 8 hours.

Supposition three:

You see that your daughter also holds a reservation on this same flight from Geneva to New York City.

Supposition four:

The security code for international travel as suggested by Homeland Security – the agency you work for – went from yellow to orange that morning.

Supposition five:

Your boss, who is a rather impatient, anal-retentive, rules bound fellow, is coming down the hall because he wants to know if you have any reservation changes to suggest.

You have access to all the information you need. And you have the power to decide what happens next. The test before you this morning is what you do. How will Unitarian Universalism help you pass this test?

SERMON <<Rev. Greg>> "Testing Our Tolerance for Diversity"

During the interview in which you got the job you let it slip that you were a leader in your church. Your boss showed a smile of approval. You decided not to mention you were Unitarian Universalist. But you are glad, now, to have some principles that help you face the moral challenges of the job.

You admit that when reading Mr. Ramadan’s file you felt some concern. More accurately, you felt the urge to run screaming down the concourse and yank your child off the plane. Reading the history, the policies and reading into your co-workers attitudes, you feel pretty sure that such fear would be supported. But you’re pretty sure that running and screaming in airports isn’t one of your faith community’s seven principles and purposes.

You look at the large thermometer above your desk indicating the ‘national terror alert.’ It is orange. Almost red. You’ve struggled with that sign ever since it first appeared. You’ve been told it’s about ‘preparedness.’ But sometimes it feels more about keeping people afraid. Prompting us to be reactive, suspicious – even paranoid.’ ‘Why is it always so high?’ you wonder.

Your boss comes into your office and asks if you have any changes. Part of you, initially, wants to say, ‘yes’ – to alert your boss to Mr. Ramadan. Take your child off the plane – whatever. Another part wants to say, ‘no’ – not to give in to reactionary fear. You feel the pressure to decide quickly but something about snap decisions from limited circumstantial information seems prejudicial. So, you muster up the courage to tell your impatient boss to come back in fifteen minutes. He’s not happy but concedes.

You use the time to Google Tariq Ramadan. You discover that he is considered a leader in the Islamic community: a professor of Islamic studies – specializing in Religion and Philosophy. He’s lectured at Oxford, Kyoto, Holland and Brussels. He was named by TIME magazine as one of the 100 most important innovators of the 21st century. And he was recently named the Luce Professor of Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend Indiana.

Interesting, you think. But is he a threat to security?

You also read that Ramadan is the grandson of Hasan al-Banna, the man who, in 1928, founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt - probably the single most powerful Islamist institution of the twentieth century. You know that some tie the Brotherhood to extremism, but it is hard to untangle these accusations from anti-Muslim prejudice.

You pull up an article taken from Tariq Ramadan's comments at the Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona in 2004. The address begins by his quotation of the 49th chapter of the Koran: "Oh humankind!" it reads, "We created you male and female, and made you into tribes and nations that ye may know each other - not that you would grow to despise (each other)." ¹

You read Ramadan's comments on that passage. He writes:

"Knowing the other – (those different from us) – is a process that is unavoidable if fear of difference is to be overcome and mutual respect is to be attained. Human beings live within a test which they can –and must–master by making the effort to know and recognize those who are not of their tribe, their country, their race, or their religion. Dialogue, particularly inter-religious dialogue, is indispensable." ²

Peaceful enough, you think. But there is more. You see that Ramadan recently published a new piece entitled "Manifesto for a new 'WE'" You begin reading a part which talks about terrorism.

"The situation of Muslims in Western societies has, for the last 20 years, been fraught with difficulty. If anything, this situation has worsened since the "war against terror" was launched after 9/11. Repeated terrorist attacks throughout the world, and increased tensions stemming from social, economic and immigration issues have combined to portray Islam and Muslims as a threat to the societies of the West. Fear has become a part of the public mindset. This fear, which is sometimes legitimate and understandable, is being exploited with increasing frequency for political gain."

Suddenly, you begin to wonder if the government's documentation of Mr. Ramadan as a radical is a safety strategy or a political one. You read more.

"...Muslims must rise," he says. "They must grow in confidence, clarify their values, communicate the serenity of their faith in Western societies. The revolution of trust-building we're part of will depend on our ability to re-claim our religious heritage from the violent kidnapping it has experienced and carry it back toward positive regard. We must stress social goodwill and civil accountability and emphasize the Islamic focus on introspection and self-reform."

"The policies of those who profit from mounting fear... create precisely what they claim to combat: By perpetually accusing Muslims of not being integrated, of setting themselves apart, of setting up barriers of "them" and "us," the politicians... spread suspicion, scapegoat and isolate Muslims."

"If there is a contribution that Muslim Westerners can bring to their respective societies, it is reconciliation. Our societies are awaiting the emergence of a new "We". A "We" that would bring together men and women, citizens of all religions — and those without religion —who would undertake together to resolve the contradictions of their society: the right to work, to housing, to respect; [to take up the struggle] against racism and all forms of discrimination, all offenses against human dignity. Such a "We" would become a defender of pluralism and a greater global unity." ³

¹ Surah al-Hujurat (49:13)

² Remarks from Ramadan's speech in 2004 at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona.

³ "Manifesto for a new 'WE' – An Appeal to the Western Muslims, and their Fellow Citizens" July 7, 2006, by Tariq Ramadan

You are startled by your boss – now standing over you in your office. He sees your reading the file on your desk with Ramadan's name circled. He looks expectantly. You tell him that you found something that needs a little more research. "You have to ACT if lives are on the line," he says brusquely and walks out.

You feel the expectation to identify Ramadan as a problem. But he doesn't seem like a problem. He also seems to portray Islam differently than you've been hearing - the car bombings, the suicide attacks... Where does all the anger come from if it isn't part of their religion you wonder.

You realize you don't know much about Islam. World religions is one of the sources of wisdom of Unitarian Universalism – and you've heard a good bit about Judaism and Buddhism and Taoism... even Humanism. But you can't remember hearing much about Islam.

You think about your church – and your denomination... There is no UUs for Muslim Awareness or UU Muslim Fellowship or UU covenant of Muslims. The hymnal only has a couple selections adapted from Islam. And you don't remember hearing your minister preach on it.

And yet, as you Google it you discover that Islam is the second largest and arguably the fastest growing religion in the world. It is the third largest religion in the United States – soon to surpass Judaism as the second. You discover it has 1.2 billion followers world wide. It is the dominant religion in 56 countries and a major religious presence in almost all others. You learn, contrary to what you thought, that less than 20% of all Muslims are Arab. The majority of Muslims live in Asia and Africa. The largest Muslim communities are in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria – not one Arab country. You discover it is a religion comprised of many peoples, cultures, races, languages and ethnicities.⁴

You begin to understand the complex diversity of Islam. You realize that although women in some Muslim societies are required to be fully covered in public, cannot drive cars or participate in all activities, women in many Muslim societies wear a rich variety of clothing styles, drive cars, ride motorcycles and are among the top students of Universities. Indeed, women have served as prime minister or president of Muslim dominated countries such as Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia.⁵ You try to remember the last female president of the United States. Or Vice President.

You look at the history of Islam and discover that it came from the prophet Mohammed who spoke of one God, Allah. It was Mohammed that wrote the Koran – a book describing God's power and goodness, the importance of prayer, humility, generosity and sharing privilege – especially with the poor and weak.

As Mohammed became recognized as a prophet, he was called to mediate skirmishes between rival tribes, eventually uniting them into one brotherhood. His abilities at dialogue and diplomacy became a very influential part of Islam.

The meaning of Islam, you learn, comes from the Arabic letters S – L – M: Salam – which means 'peace' or 'surrender to God's unity.' Followers of Islam – or the path of surrender and peace – are Muslim.

Islam formed in the 7th century. It recognized Jews and Christians as kin – saw Abraham as prophet as well as Moses and Jesus – they just didn't recognize Jesus as divine – nor do they consider Mohammed divine.

⁴ New Internatioanalst – The people, the ideas, the action in the fight for global justice – May 2002, Issue 345

⁵ http://www.meccacentric.com/30_facts.html

You discover Muslims were, for centuries, influential in art and literature and science. They contributed new theories of geologic formation and metals and magnetism. They developed the science of mathematics and gave the world the Arabic numerals and the decimal system. They developed trigonometry and algebra.

They published geographic encyclopedias, including the first complete map of the Eurasian continent, inspiring Columbus to explore the globe. They wrote authoritative works in medicine and pharmacology. They discovered the use of the pendulum and made clocks long before they were used in Europe. They developed the use of public sanitation in the 9th and 10th centuries 700 years before Christian Europe recognized the importance of taking baths.⁶

This is all good, you think. But if this is true, what is all the violence about? What is the whole notion of Jihad?

You discover that Jihad is a term which means to "struggle in the way of God" or "to struggle to improve one's self and/or society."⁷ It's mention in the Koran is more about an internal battle to resist human temptations of power and greed. However, you discover that when Granada, Spain - one of the great centers of Muslim life – was conquered by Christians during their Crusades (when all Muslims and Jews were forced to convert, flee or die) many Muslims began interpreting 'jihad' as a physical holy struggle – even a call to war.⁸

This interpretation surfaced during a time when Muslims were under the threat of having everything precious to them taken away – life, family, religion, land. You recall your earlier thought: wanting to run down the concourse screaming, because your child – something precious to you – might be in danger. As repulsive as religious extremism is, you suddenly understand the desperation at the heart of it. The spiritual understanding of jihad talks about the battle within our own mind between urges toward peace and those toward violence. The extremist version of jihad is simply losing the battle and succumbing to violence.

Your boss walks into your office. He is wanting an answer. "Any changes?" he asks impatiently.

You feel the impulse to do the right thing... protect what is dear... but also to do a good job. To be true to your country and your religion.

This feels like a religious test. And you wonder, how a UU can pass this kind of test?

An epiphany flashes before you. You realize you already passed this test when you found the courage to tell your boss to wait until you were able to find out more. You passed this test when you took the time to read Tariq Ramadan, himself. You passed when you began considering others' security as carefully as your own. And began to see beyond this black and white, desperate, fear-based world.

"Any changes?" your boss growls once more. You look at the orange rating on the national terror alert poster above your desk.

"Yes," you reply. "I have a change request." And you ask to have your child moved – so she can sit next to Tariq Ramadan. Because you realize that if any of us is ever going to rise above the terror, it

⁶ <http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/overview.html>

⁷ Rueven Firestone – "The Origin of Holy War in Islam" – Oxford University Press (1999)

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jihad>

will come from dialogue and learning about the differences that usher in a new 'WE.' It will only happen when, as Ramadan urges, "we bring together men and women, citizens of all religions — and those without religion — who would undertake together to resolve the conflicts and contradictions of their society."

Your boss is speechless. And when he does speak, he probably fires you. But it doesn't matter because this is a hypothetical situation.

What is not hypothetical, however, is Tariq Ramadan and his relationship to Homeland Security.

In August 2004, on the eve of his departure from Europe to America to move into his newly purchased home, take his children to the schools in which he enrolled them and begin his job as Professor of Peace Studies at Notre Dame, his visa was revoked by the Department of State and Homeland Security. They said he had "endorsed" or "espoused" terrorism. No evidence was given.

The international academic community was astonished. After months of patient inquiry - and stony silence on the part of the U.S. government - Ramadan finally had no alternative but to resign his professorship at Notre Dame. His furniture and household belongings were sent back from South Bend to Geneva. Oxford University offered him a professorship in Islamic studies and Ramadan went on to become an adviser to the British government.⁹

Meanwhile, our government's 'no fly list' – created by the Terrorist Screening Center of Homeland Security – increases dramatically every year – largely without ways to be removed from the list – despite evidence of false positives and rights violations.¹⁰

Friends, the situation I created was hypothetical, but the test before us is real. It is a test to see if religion can become more than a comfort for the frightened masses. It is a test to see if religion can provide a moral compass in the distribution of rights and resources around the globe. It is a test to see if our ethical principles – which are all too often relegated to religious sanctuaries – can offer a voice of accountability when political offices – and political candidates like Trump – speak of 'security' while targeting and waging war on other cultures.

There are several ways we can fail this test – either by allowing religion to dictate violence as Muslim extremists have done; or by allowing religion to remain complacent in the face of violence as is so often the case in the US.

There is only one way to pass this religious test – and that is to make part of your religion learning to dialogue with those who are different. Listen to other points of view without feeling the need to give up your own. As Ramadan says, 'deconstructing without disconnecting.' Pursuing religion as a means towards reason, helping us rise above the impulses of our existential fears.

I ask you today to be ready for this test. It will come before us soon – indeed, it is already upon us.

Our test of peace-making will be graded by future generations. The answer is written in the back of the book of life. And it calls us to be bridge builders toward a new 'We.'

To the Glory of Life.

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⁹ Article in *Washington Post*, Paul Donnelly - former head of the Immigration Reform Coalition, August 28, 2004

¹⁰ Wikipedia – 'No Fly List'

