

## WHAT IF MY ENEMIES DON'T DESERVE TO BE LOVED?

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt  
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I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe:  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,  
Night and morning with my tears;  
And I sunned it with smiles,  
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,  
Till it bore an apple bright.  
And my foe beheld it shine.  
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole  
When the night had veiled the pole;  
In the morning glad I see  
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

(William Blake)

On the wall of the dining room of the little house where I spent my growing-up years hung one of those dreadful paintings of Jesus in which, despite the specifics of Biblical stories that identify him as a Middle Eastern Jewish man, he has blond hair, blue eyes, and porcelain skin. The painting was perfectly attuned to the many non-Biblical assumptions we held in rural Texas, namely that Jesus was one of us, white and middle-class, with the only difference being that he wore his hair too long to be a real Texan (but

then so did all the men of his time). He wears a Mona Lisa smile and his skin is unlined, further corresponding to the teachings we learned about Jesus as someone who was gentle, enjoyed the company of women and children, and never, ever raised his hand or his voice in anger.

My parents did a fine job of aligning family values with the values our church presented as those of Jesus. We were not to hit one another, nor raise our voices in anger (though my parents did both whenever my siblings or I disobeyed). We were never to fight or argue, never to disagree, never to show any signs of being mad about anything. To do so was to incur punishment and sermonettes about the incompatibility of love and anger. My parents could get mad, for their anger was justified; my siblings and I were to be always pleasant and polite.

“I told it not, my wrath did grow . . . . it grew both day and night.” A combination of adult life experience and therapy subsequently showed me the error of my parents’ teachings, while seminary training showed me the church error in trying to ignore what I once heard called God’s anger management issues. As Blake’s poem, aptly titled “The Poison Tree,” observes, unexpressed anger rarely goes away; instead, it simmers beneath the surface, sprouts roots and spreads. To dissipate anger, some expression

of it is usually needed; again, in the poem's words, when the speaker "told my friend" of his wrath, that "wrath did end."

But this is all common knowledge for us Unitarian Universalists, is it not? We have discarded all those dysfunctional anger images from traditional religion like hell and punishment, the wrath of God, the Last Judgment, sin and stoning of sinners, scapegoats and sacrificial appeasement and white-bread and mashed potato Jesuses who never get mad about anything (and also never stand up for themselves, never show a healthy self-assertion). Ours is a straightforward spiritual style: we tell it like it is regardless of whether anyone pays attention or wants to hear us, we confront directly anyone we disagree with and let them know our disagreement, we critique, we greet authoritative religious pronouncements with skepticism, we tell our friends when we are angry and our wrath does end—sometimes. Occasionally. In a few select circumstances.

I was angry with my foe:  
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I always wondered about the twist in this poem: Blake has the speaker willing to tell his anger to his friend, which seems the riskier route, but not

tell his anger to his foe. For me, getting noticeably angry at someone I already dislike, disrespect, detest, is relatively easy. Being angry with someone I care about, by contrast, is harder because I want to keep the relationship, because I care about the other person's feelings and well-being, because I want to be seen as trustworthy. We struggle with this in our spiritual community where we all strive to be kind and accepting of one another: when the inevitable disappointments and frustrations come that always come in community life, the anger so readily gets misshapen, sent into indirect communications, sideways comments, a willingness to tell everybody how mad that one person made us--except for that person himself, herself.

But Blake has the friend being told the anger, and the foe being spared, in order to hang onto the anger, to nurse and cultivate it and watch it blossom. The poem suggests that we want to rid ourselves of anger at those we love, and so we are (sometimes) willing to risk telling that anger in order to have it go away. The anger at an enemy, by contrast, is a feeling the poem says we take delight in and have no desire to see dissipated.

All truths that Unitarian Universalists again know well, and even practice (sometimes). We do confront one another (sometimes), particularly when we feel at cross-purposes with one another about a decision made affecting

our church life here. We hope with our confrontations to make a change and be relieved of the unpleasant negative emotion. Or, perhaps even more typically, we confront one another over and over again in the spirit of discussing ideas, sometimes like a debating society, hoping thereby to work our way through the differences to some bit of truth and common understanding. We tell our wrath to one another, our friends and fellow travelers, and find that in so doing (sometimes) it comes to an end.

And then, like the scenario in the poem, we have those foes who provoke us and who are spared hearing our anger in order that the anger might be kept intact and nurtured. In the time I have been a Unitarian Universalist, over decades and in different parts of the country, I have seen us remain outraged and estranged from the same two foes, over and over, with the anger not only not dissipating but actually blossoming. Those well-loved enemies, I believe, are traditional Christians (and much of the Christian tradition) and traditional conservatives (particularly of the Republican variety). Sometimes, though rarely, we do engage them in confrontation—but we are usually the ones to pull back and end the confrontation lest we become inappropriately angry. We politely agree to disagree and promptly stop speaking, saving up the anger until we meet a kindred spirit and can tell them what an impossibly narrow person we just made the mistake of getting

into an argument with. Then we shake our heads and resolve anew not to even bother talking to such people since the conversation goes nowhere. And months, years go by, and our anger remains, righteous and clear. It becomes such a part of our tradition that I wonder what would happen to us if we ever lost it, if Christians and conservatives somehow, someday, no longer provoked us. Would we still look like Unitarian Universalists if we ceased to define ourselves as not them?

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When the night had veiled the pole;  
In the morning glad I see  
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One of the many reasons William Blake found himself ostracized, his poetry trashed during his lifetime, can be seen in the startling conclusion of his deceptively pretty poem. The speaker, having kept and nurtured his wrath at his foe, is delighted one morning to discover that his anger has succeeded, finally, in killing his foe—which is what we sometimes secretly hope will happen to our enemies, though unlike Blake we are usually much too polite to say so. Blake said it, and was vilified as a result.

“Glad I see/My foe outstretched beneath the tree.”

“Love your enemies, do good to those that hate you, pray for those who spitefully use you” (Matthew 5:44). Blake incurred the wrath of his neighbors because the ethic all were supposedly trying to live by is captured in the familiar commandment from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Rather than taking delight in our enemies’ downfall and working to accomplish it, we are to respond to enmity, so Jesus advises, with love, goodness, even prayer. All spiritual traditions, in fact, have some version of this teaching, calling for followers to abstain from vindictive, hostile responses to perceived slights or cruelties. Instead of anger and aggression, we are taught, in all traditions, to respond nonviolently, with compassion, with peace and love.

A hard, hard ethic to follow; Blake’s response of nurturing anger and enjoying the comeuppance of enemies is so much easier, comes much more naturally, than the spiritual response of love. And yet, I am happy to tell you this morning, that I have learned to do this. Aren’t you impressed, and even happier you installed me as your senior minister? Oh yes, I love enemies: I make admiring observations about Muslims; I advocate rehabilitation rather than punishment for convicted criminals; I feel pity for those who make racist remarks; I only shake my head and smile sadly at all the competitive materialism of our culture. I have learned to love enemies—

--provided they are *your* enemies, or someone else's enemies, or enemies in the media, or abstract enemies, or enemies who are so very different from me, so removed from my daily experience, that I know our paths will never cross. The enemies I have not yet learned to love, may never learn to love in my lifetime though I keep trying, are the enemies who are close to me, even kin to me, those people who think differently than me, hold different opinions than mine. Those people I find it impossible to love because—because—because they are so pigheaded, so narrowminded, so *wrong* in their thinking. Why can they not see the error of their ways and change accordingly? My neighbor seems like a bright guy; why does he have a Tea Party bumper sticker on his car? My youngest sister is a thoughtful person; why does she subscribe to a fundamentalist version of Christianity? My minister colleague and I were such good friends in seminary; how can he be so critical of my use of religious language and be so offended when I challenge his avoidance of it? I love enemies at a distance, enemies in general—but these enemies who populate my life these particular people who have such (I believe) absolutely wrong ways of thinking, are the enemies I struggle, usually unsuccessfully, to love. With these enemies, I am more likely to end up, like the speaker in Blake's poem, rejoicing when I best them in an argument, or manage to avoid speaking to them at all, or

deciding I will have nothing more to do with them because they are so hopelessly, complete, wrong. Enemies of thought: those are the enemies I would rather fight than even pretend to love.

But the spiritual teachings on enemies and love do not allow for exceptions or special cases. The commandment is absolute, covering everyone and every situation: love your enemies, do good to them that hate you, pray for those who are disrespectful to you, love those who hold different opinions than you, respond with compassion to those who think differently than you. Mere tolerance does *not* suffice; refusing to speak to the enemy is *not* an option; trying to change the enemy's mind is *not* the desired course of action. No matter the nature of the enemy, no matter the reason for the enmity, the response is to be the same: love, nonviolence, compassion, kindness.

“In the morning glad I see/My foe outstretched beneath the tree.” Our social and political landscape has become so polarized, creating such deep divisions between us that we would rather fight gleefully to the point of destruction than work constructively together, with compromises, on the economic and environmental and spiritual crises that challenge us. When you see the side you favor winning in some battle over spending cuts or policy issues or military engagements, do you rejoice to see your foe

outstretched beneath the tree, vanquished by your position? If you are on the losing side, will you hold close your anger at the winners, water it with fears and tears, sun it with smiles and wiles, until you have just the poison you need to put the winners out of business? Given how polarized we seem to be, I have trouble imagining any result other than what Blake describes. In our own BUC community, we have seen our music staff decisions become the stuff of polarization, with positions declared, lines in the sand drawn, trust damaged. Because these decisions seemed to continue an already troubling pattern of polarization around personnel matters, the process of healing and restoring trust looks daunting.

But there is still time. Perhaps any one of us, or all of us, can try anew to love those wrongheaded enemies of ours—or, if we cannot yet manage to love them, perhaps at least we can let some of our anger go, so that yet another poison tree of resentment does not take root among us. We already have all the poison trees we need.