

WHY WOULD YOU EVEN BOTHER?

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt
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I noticed them as we were streaming out with the thousands of other people, leaving the fair. Why I noticed them I cannot say, for they were an unremarkable family, husband, wife, and child. The husband kept bumping into the wife, knocking her over a few steps, upsetting her balance. I sometimes play the same game with my own family while walking, a physical kind of teasing and foolishness, done affectionately.

The little family was moving faster than we were out of the fairgrounds, so I lost sight of them until we reached the parking area. Suddenly there they were again, husband and wife and daughter, now in their car, and still playing some sort of game. The husband dangled the car keys out the window. Whenever the wife reached for the keys, the husband pushed her back across the seat. The daughter noticed that I was watching her family. Our eyes met, and she ducked down in the car, out of sight—but not before I had seen the look of fear on her face. As we moved past the family's car, I felt a distinct unease about the interactions I had observed. However, I am first and foremost a polite person, respectful of others' boundaries, so I continued walking.

We reached our own car, wove through the fair's traffic jam, and headed home. Ahead of us, parked on the roadside, I saw the car of the disturbing, haunting family. All three of them were standing in the weeds in front of the car. We drew closer, moving slowly because of the still heavy traffic. We came even with the parked car. And at just that moment, I saw the husband draw back and hit the wife, knocking her into the ditch. Horrified, I kept watching the drama unfold in my rearview mirror, saw the husband head down into the ditch, fist cocked, preparing to strike again, followed by the distraught, frightened daughter. I watched until the tragic little family disappeared from view. And we frantically began trying to make an emergency call on our cell phones, getting "no signal" messages in the rural hillsides, feeling helpless, not knowing what else to do.

The German language has a useful concept for which there is no English equivalent, called *schadenfreude*. Literally translated as "joy at hurt," we are more familiar with *schadenfreude* as it appears in common situations. Have you ever happened upon a traffic accident before the highway patrol and the medical team have cleaned everything up? Did you notice how many drivers, perhaps including yourself, slowed down to take a look, despite patrol officers' efforts to urge them on? This is *schadenfreude*, joy at hurt—not literally joy at the suffering of the victims of the accident, but

curiosity about it, coupled with a quick, scarcely acknowledged, sense of relief that “whew, it wasn’t me this time.” The desire to survey the damage after a natural disaster, either in person or watching media coverage, to see the ravaged homes and ravaged lives, represents another common instance of *schadenfreude*, relief at being spared and curiosity about the situation of those who were not so lucky. The saturation coverage of horrific events now common in our culture may be driven by a desire to understand and help and heal—but a large element of *schadenfreude* is present as well in the detail, the intimacy, and the endless repetition of the images.

Schadenfreude, joy at hurting. It begins with a relatively harmless rubbernecking at accidents and disasters. Then one day we read another disturbing story about a crime committed in full view of witnesses, and no one comes to the victim’s aid or calls the police because all assume somebody else has already done just that. I sensed violence brewing among the family at the fair; why was I content to watch? *Schadenfreude*, joy at hurting. Another time we walk along a downtown street and pass a woman carrying all her belongings in a shopping bag, wearing several outfits, conversing with herself. “There but for the grace of God go I,” we think: *schadenfreude*, thank God it isn’t me. We are encouraged from every corner of our society not to see, not to hear, not to speak, not to pay attention to

suffering because somehow it would be impolite, an intrusion into another's life—and besides, each one of us bears responsibility for whatever life situation we find ourselves in. And if we learn these lessons well, we become skilled at stepping around the homeless woman, driving past the man holding the “will work for food” sign, averting our gaze from the violent family, the disabled, the poor, the oppressed, the desperate and despairing who block our smooth passage, thinking all the while, “there but for the grace of God go I,” *schadenfreude*.

Unitarian Universalists are proud, and justifiably so, of a long tradition of effective, unceasing effort to improve the community, to ease suffering, to achieve a measure of social justice. Somehow we have not learned so well as many others how to ignore the evils around us or give them some sort of strange spiritual justification, and have instead been drawn into action on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized again and again. Yet it seems to me that we religious liberals, too, harbor a spirit of *schadenfreude* that appears, ironically, in the very moment of our efforts to help.

During my years of ministry while living in the Twin Cities of Minnesota, I would hear variations of a story at clergy meetings and conferences that had undoubtedly been embroidered and mythologized a good deal in the telling and retelling, but which was always presented as

true. A wealthy and well-known woman who was a member of a large UU congregation had become known for her vigorous support of local programs for social change. She gave money, served on committees, was courted by all sorts of organizations, even lobbied her wealthy conservative friends when necessary. One day, while driving from her home to the inner city offices of a social service agency for a photo opportunity while signing a large check, she stopped at a red light in the poor minority neighborhood adjacent to the agency. Suddenly a couple of African American teenagers darted over to her car and tried to coax her to lower her window. Frightened by what she perceived as a carjacking attempt, the woman sped away, nearly running over the teenagers. Word went out about the incident, anger grew—until somehow it was discovered that the teenagers had recognized the woman from media stories as a longtime benefactor of the outstanding community center in the neighborhood and had simply wanted to thank her. Whenever this story was recounted, it typically was intended as an illustration of social justice work gone awry, transformed into a kind of “limousine liberalism” in which persons are truly motivated to work on behalf of the oppressed, provided the oppressed never come too close, never force themselves into actual contact with their helpers. Good deeds are done

from the safety of a limousine, from a distance, through check-writing and petition-signing.

In the early days of UU history, our spiritual ancestors took a giant theological step forward when they rejected a belief in original sin, claiming instead that each of us, whoever we may be, whatever our circumstances, each of us is essentially good. With this step we were freed from endless wallowing in a sense of unworthiness, from threats of hell and everlasting punishment, lifted from darkness into light. With this step, however, we also paid a price: in casting out our shadows, we also cast out some of our capacity for empathy with those whose lives are made up primarily of shadows. We distanced ourselves from suffering, made of evil a wholly external thing which resides outside the sphere of light and rationality and goodness that we inhabit. As a consequence, our helping gestures, however skillful and well-intentioned they may be, can lack the real empathy that would only result from having been there, from spending time in the darkness ourselves. We give money, we serve on committees, we form task forces and study groups, we listen to speakers, we discuss, endlessly discuss issues and concerns and strategies for change and how to raise awareness. And all the while, through all this worthy and necessary effort, we sidestep the opportunity to make contact, literally and emotionally and spiritually

make contact, with the very people we seek to help. Living in the light, holding darkness at arm's length, out there, our efforts to achieve social justice become tainted by a spirit of *schadenfreude*.

Spiritual traditions everywhere, at all times, have struggled to formulate answers to questions of suffering, what causes it, how does one gain release from it, is there some sort of purpose for it, why does it occur. Perhaps the most urgent facet of the suffering question involves release from suffering, ending the pain, and we have no shortage of possibilities offered by different paths. One route to release, perhaps the route most favored by Unitarian Universalists, also articulated powerfully by the Jewish tradition, comes through revolution and separation, casting aside all the old structures and stepping out on an entirely new path. Suffering ends, from this perspective, with the destruction of the forces responsible for causing suffering. Signing petitions and writing to congressional representatives, any sort of advocacy work, are familiar examples of this response to suffering. And I believe this is a response that we religious liberals have become very effective at using. While desperately needed, I also believe it is not sufficient, that in fact used too often or too exclusively, it draws us into the unhelpful position of *schadenfreude*.

A contrasting response to the question of finding release from suffering comes from those traditions that focus on compassion as key, such as many varieties of Buddhism. Compassion is rooted in a particular quality of heart that draws one into a relationship of sharing and connection with the other. And that sharing and connection cannot happen if I never spend time with those I intend to help, if I keep my distance or become so focused on a particular result I want that I lose sight of the actual person on the other end of my helping efforts. In compassion, “there but for the grace of God go I” collapses, transformed by connection into “there go I”: beggar, outcast, bag lady, homeless, battering husband, battered wife, desperate, poor, marginalized, you: you there, I see you there in the shadows, I am a part of you, there go I.

And not only there go I, in the person of the one suffering. One of the quintessential teachings on responses to suffering in the Christian tradition comes in the form of a parable, in which Jesus suggests that at the end of time individuals will be sorted into those headed for heaven and those headed for damnation not so much according to deeds done, but specifically according to how, with what sort of attitude and understanding, they undertook the work of justice. The heaven-goers, the sheep in the parable, receive their reward because of having offered help to Jesus in his times of

suffering: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matthew 25:35-36). When these social activists reply that they cannot recall having ever even seen Jesus in such dire straits, much less helped him out of them, he explains, “as you did it to the least of these, my people, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). Alongside all the familiar, powerful images of God, Jesus places the image of God as victim, as suffering outcast, in need of human care. There go I, in the person of the one suffering—and now, there goes God as well.

Writings about trends among congregations of all kinds frequently worry about a shift in the expectations of churchgoers from “doing good” to “feeling good.” I heard your own BUC version of this trend during some of the conversations of candidating week, when some of you wondered whether I would be able to reverse a movement in this church from the strong activism of Reverend Bob Marshall’s days to what seems to be a current time of inwardness and minimal justice activities. That such a trend shows up in congregations is curious to me, given that surveys of young people and persons who were not raised in traditional churches suggest that when someone begins to seek out a church, s/he is typically most interested in

churches that offer opportunities for spiritual growth *and* opportunities for justice work—or, if you will, both the chance to “feel good” and the chance to “do good,” not simply one or the other. The two must be linked: that is, the work of justice must be connected to spiritual growth, otherwise it falls into *schadenfreude*, and spiritual growth must be given expression in the work of justice, otherwise it becomes one more way of retreating from life.

During times of transition, congregations do typically turn inward, using the transition as an opportunity to reconsider matters of governance, staffing, overall church functioning. But you tell me you are relieved that the transition is ended. The community in which we live is in such desperate straits, requiring our creativity and our actual presence if it is to be transformed. Our church does call for our work and our care; our neighbors also call for us to live out that interdependent web of existence that we celebrate by feeding those who are hungry, by sheltering those who are homeless, by clothing those who are naked, by healing those who are sick, by aiding those imprisoned, by stepping into that darkness where people are in need and finding ourselves and the sacred there as well, and. There but for the grace of God go I; there go I; there goes God.