

This past June I attended the annual, national gathering of Unitarian Universalists, our General Assembly, in Phoenix Arizona. It was a GA unlike any GA I've ever attended. It was called a Justice GA, because we as a denomination went to Phoenix to be in solidarity with the downtrodden and marginalized. We went to protest against the dehumanizing laws that were taking a heavy toll on mostly the Hispanic community and anyone who looked like they might be of Mexican or South American decent. That GA was designed to amass Unitarian Universalists to visibly stand on the side of love.

More than 3700 people attended. The focus was on education about "Justice", being a witness to injustice, it was about learning and being in collaboration with local immigration oriented partner groups. Presentations and panels were focused on some aspect of immigration and justice. Many of those who presented were local non-Unitarian Universalists partners.

A number of the presentations I attended were designed to educate us about the realities of life in Arizona for those who were deemed to not look like "real Americans". People deemed to "look like they don't belong here," were regularly stopped by the police. Work places and neighborhoods were raided in efforts to find people who were in the country illegally. A significant side affect of those impromptu raids was to deliver an unequivocal message: "You are not wanted here." Those unfortunate enough to be taken into custody were not always non-citizens. Some were lifelong Arizona citizens who would be required to prove their nationality.

Can you imagine being stopped on main street and being asked to prove you are an American citizen? Can you imagine being detained and thrown into a detention center because you could not immediately prove citizenship? Imagine how that would shake your sense of safety. Imagine how that would affront your sense of self, your dignity. Imagine the message that is sent when you know you were stopped because of the way you looked.

Imagine too the impact on your husband or wife, your kids, your family. Imagine arriving home and finding the kids alone because the mother hasn't come home and appears to have just disappeared. Imagine a father simply taken from the life of a child, from a family. Imagine both parents disappearing.

One of the highlights of my week in Phoenix was attending a candlelight vigil at Tent City Jail. Over 2000 Unitarian Universalists, most wearing our yellow Standing On The Side of Love T-shirts, joined to protest the inhumane conditions maintained by Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio. UUA President Rev. Peter Morales, United Church of Christ President Rev. Geoffrey A. Black, a local Baptist clergyman, and local UU and human rights leaders spoke. One of the speakers said that "tent city" was worst than some jail and detention centers he'd seen in the so-called third world. Tent City is so-called because its detainees are jailed in very large tents, with one or only a couple windows for ventilation. The tents are in Phoenix where daily temperatures, while I was there, were regularly 105 degrees.

Arizona is not the only place in this country where people are essentially routinely rounded up or intimidated by police because of how they look. Right here in NYC, there is an odious policy of "Stop and Frisk". It's a retched program that turns police offices into an invading force and dehumanizes its victims.

According to the New York Times, "In stop-and-frisk, officers approach, question and sometimes pat down people police say were behaving suspiciously — acting like a lookout or carrying a pry bar, for example — but weren't necessarily sought in any particular crime."

"The stops became an integral part of the city's law enforcement in the mid-1990s, but the numbers have risen since... Officers made a record 684,330 of the stops last year, seven times the number in 2002. They stopped about 337,000 in the first six months of this year."

The article continues by saying that city officials “credit the practice with deterring violence and helping drive down New York's crime rate to the lowest among the country's 25 most populous cities, as measured by the FBI... But stop-and-frisk critics point to other statistics: Some 87 percent of those stopped last year involved blacks or Hispanics, and about 12 percent of the stops resulted in arrests or tickets. Opponents say the figures add up to racial profiling that does little for public safety.”

Let me give you some other data points according to the NY Times.

*Only some 5% of all stops in a recent five-year period resulted in an arrest. Meaning many people stopped did nothing wrong.*

*In 2009, 36% of the time officers failed to list an acceptable “suspected crime.” Reasonable suspicion of a crime is required to make a stop.*

*More than half of all stops last year were conducted “because the individual displayed ‘furtive movement’, which means every cop gets to define the term.*

*Even in overwhelmingly white neighborhoods, police stopped more blacks than whites.*

*And according to the NY Civil Liberties Union Young black and Latino men account for 4.7% of NYC's population but 41.6% of the stops in 2011.*

Another odious aspect of the Stop and Fisk program is the NYPD's longstanding Clean Halls program, in which private residential buildings enroll the police to patrol the hallways and stairwells. The program is said to give tenants an increased level of police protection. In the Bronx, at least 5,000 buildings have posted the blue Clean Halls signs. Critics argue the police are using the program as a pretext to stop people leaving those buildings, regardless of whether they are behaving suspiciously. (NYT)

According to reports, people have been stopped and arrested for trespassing in their own buildings. I can't imagine what it must be like to be arrested for trespassing while on the sidewalk outside a rental building. Even worst, imagine being arrested in the hallway or stairwell of the building you pay rent to live in!

Currently, “there is a court hearing examining police stops of people suspected of trespassing in these buildings. The lawsuit is focused only on a fraction of the overall number of police stops, but represents the first time a federal judge is expected to rule whether the Police Department has engaged in a pattern of unconstitutional stops under the city's current administration” (NYT).

So what is one to do when you are a person of color and live in places like Phoenix or New York City? Interestingly, I found one answer here in Poughkeepsie. This summer I went to the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Poughkeepsie Latin American Festival, at Waryas Park. While wondering around checking out the information booths, I stopped at the NY Civil Liberties Union table and found this card. In big yellow letters it says “What to do if you're stopped by the police.” In smaller black letters it says “keep this card handy if you have a police encounter, you can protect yourself.”

I was taken aback, yet pleased to see it. I took the card and as I read it, I thought to myself, this is not information most white people would feel a need to know. And yet, its information that may prove critical for anyone to have. Then the words of that old Crosby Stills and Nash song came to mind: “Teach your children well...”

The instructions the card gives are these: stay calm and in control of your words, body language and emotions. Don't get into an argument with the police. Never bad-mouth a police officer. Remember, anything you say or do can be used against you. Keep your hands where the police can see them. Don't run. Don't touch any police officer. Don't resist even if you believe you are innocent.

If you complain at the scene or tell the police they are wrong, do so in a non-confrontational way that will not intensify the scene. Do not make any statements regarding the incident. If you are arrested, ask for a lawyer immediately. Remember officer's badge numbers, patrol car numbers and physical descriptions. Write down everything you can remember ASAP. Try to find witnesses and their names and phone numbers. If you are injured take photos of the injuries...but get medical attention first. Ask for copies of your medical treatment files.

The card tells you that you have the right not to speak and that you can exercise that right by saying "I would like to remain silent". It tells you that you do not have to consent to a search of yourself, your belongings, your car or house. If the police say they have a search warrant, ask to see it. If they don't, say, "I do not consent to this search."

The card has four additional areas of instruction: "If you are stopped in your car", "If police come to your home", "If you are arrested or taken to a police station," and "If you are stopped, questioned and/or frisked." The common thread of instruction through-out is the statement; "I do not consent to a search." The purpose of these instructions is to protect one's civil rights. But one then needs the knowledge, time and usually, the money to press one's case to prove your rights have been abridged. Proof occurs, if at all, after the fact.

Life can indeed be precarious if you happen to live in certain areas and if you happen to look a particular way. Civil rights and social justice issues are easiest to address if they are right in front of your nose, and even then, they generally remain hard to acknowledge, address and rectify. We've just heard two such cases. There are a tremendous number of other cases that present themselves in different forms.

Yet, (thank God for yet), yet, on the days I feel reasonably grounded I can find a sense of optimism. I can find a sense of hope. On those days, I can remind myself of the power of our Unitarian Universalist principles. I sincerely believe that if we as a society, we as a people, are to find a way to rectify these affronts to human dignity, we will have to employ some or all of our UU principles.

I believe when we as individuals and we as a society live out our particular set of principles, there will be more love in the world, people will be acquitted more dignity. I believe when we live out our UU principles, we will automatically find ourselves on the right side of issues, "standing on the side of love." This is why I think it is important for us not to close our eyes in order to avoid seeing or having to engage human reality. I believe we as Unitarian Universalist are called not only to care, but to actively engage the world around us. I think this is what our faith demands of us. And may we be strong enough to meet the challenge.

Amen