

Standing Together
Arlington Street Church
February 15, 2009

An amazing thing happened on the night of September 11th, 2001. As millions and millions of Americans stared in numb disbelief and staggering terror at television coverage of the shocking attacks on our homeland, a small group of elderly Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area were meeting and preparing an action plan for outreach to and solidarity with Arab and Muslim Americans.

This small band of elderly Americans were also numb with disbelief and staggered by terror. Yet their own lived experience as witnesses and victims of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, some 60 years earlier, had called them to rise above the fear and recrimination that hung so heavily over our American psyche on that awful and anguished night.

This small, but mighty, group of seniors consisted of survivors of World War II. They were the survivors of Concentration Camps - of our American Concentration Camps.

You see, just 67 years ago this week, on February 19, 1942, that icon of American optimism and hope, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, signed Executive Order 9066. This Order exercised the Commander-in-Chief's war powers to send ethnic groups of "Foreign Enemy Ancestry"

– regardless of their citizenship status - to interment camps for the duration of the war, and beyond.¹

This sad and shameful chapter of our history, from just two generations past, is a little known fact by most Americans today. I know that we are a congregation brimming with accomplished historians and dynamic social activists, so I'm wondering how many of us here gathered are aware of – as FDR himself called them - our American Concentration Camps? Please raise your hands if you know about or have heard about these camps that existed across our country during World War II. *Comment on number/percentage.*

We all need to learn about and know it because that is the only way that we, as people of faith and of love, can ever prevent it from happening again.

The Order did not specify the ethnic groups for whom the *Writ of Habeus Corpus* – the very foundation of American jurisprudence – was suspended. In practice, several thousand Italian, German and Jewish Americans were involuntarily relocated and some were interned in camps or with other similar arrangements, mostly in the East and South.

But in the West, some 120,000 Japanese Americans had their personal property, bank accounts, homes and businesses confiscated – most without any compensation –

¹ Executive Order 9099. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_9066

and were forcibly relocated to FDR's Concentration Camps; dreadful and deplorable prison camps in the most desolate, harsh and extreme locations in our country.

Japanese-Americans were singled out for the most draconian treatment for racial reasons. As another stalwart of American liberalism, Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren (then Attorney General for California) put it, "When we are dealing with the Caucasian race we have methods that will test the loyalty of them. But when we deal with the Japanese, we are on an entirely different field."²

As we have seen time and time again in our history, it was a matter of race over rights – race trumping our enshrined civil and human rights. Nearly 70,000 of the Japanese-Americans who were interned were United States citizens. Tens of thousands more were children. The racism ran so deep that infants of even partial Japanese ancestry were removed from orphanages, the foster care system and from the white families whose adoptions of them had not yet been finalized.³

The conditions under which these innocent and profoundly loyal Americans were incarcerated, and the indignities that they were forced to endure, make Guantanamo Bay look like a Royal Caribbean Cruise. The deceptively worded loyalty oaths and the unjust interrogation techniques, inflicted on even the frailest of the elderly and the youngest

² <http://www.santacruzpl.org/history/ww2/male.shtml>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Executive_Order_9066

children, presage the “enhanced interrogation” and sophisticated torture techniques of our own contemporary war on terror.

And what they suffered before and after internment are yet others chapters in this tragedy. Then there are the stories of the succeeding generations of those who were interned. Like the children of many Holocaust survivors, they have lived their lives in the shadow of their parents and grandparents unspoken shame and humiliation. As parents and elders sought to protect their progeny from the horror and despair of their own pasts with silence, they created silent shadows that pervaded every aspect of their children’s lives. As the succeeding generations grappled with these powerful shadows, they in turn uncovered and awoke the anguish of their progenitor’s times in the camps and of living in times with the racism that gave rise to the camps.

You see, for these Japanese-Americans, internment did not end when the camps were closed. Indeed, it continued in the succeeding generations, fed by shame and secrecy – but mostly by silence.

The Japanese-American internment experience – including both the incarceration and the subsequent Japanese-American response to it – is worthy of its own, several, sermons. We look at this one aspect of that internment because we, as a people of faith and of love, know the Japanese-American story is our story too. Even though

many of us stand outside of the barbed wire and the gun turrets of the camps - we are there nonetheless.

There is even more to why this story of injustice and oppression is our story too. Last Sunday Reverend Kim spoke of the Season for Nonviolence. That it is the sixty-four days between the January 30th assassination of Mahatma Ghandi and the April 4th murder of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King.

She spoke of *satyagraha*, Ghandi's philosophy and practice of nonviolent resistance and how "it admits of no violence under any circumstance whatsoever; and it ever insists upon truth."⁴ *Satyagraha* comes from the Sanskrit words for "Force which is born of Truth and Love" or the idea of truth-force.⁵ As Ghandi and King taught and exemplified, the power of the truth is enough force to resist injustice. The power of violence is not.

Japanese-American Days of Remembrance take place in Little Tokyos and Japantowns around this country, each year, on the weekends following February 19th. Since 2002, those Days of Remembrance have become occasions in which Arab and Muslim-Americans are key participants. It is fitting that these Days of Remembrance occur in the middle of the Season for Nonviolence. Because in the work and community building of those elderly internment

⁴ *Season for Nonviolence* Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie. 8 February 2009. Arlington Street Church.

⁵ *Ibid.*

survivors from San Francisco, we witness truth-force – *satyagraha* – at its very best.

On September 11th – not the 12th or sometime in December or in 2005 – but on the very night of the attacks, these people reached beyond their own shock, horror and fear to immediately come together and to immediately commit to guaranteeing that Arab and Muslim-Americans of today would never, ever suffer the heinousness of internment.

These people, almost all of them comfortably retired and living their golden years, risked once again being labeled “disloyal” by pledging to protect the rights and dignities of this century’s citizens and residents of “Foreign Enemy Ancestry.”

These people who had suffered some of the worst that America had to offer, chose to work through their own generalized fear of Arab or Muslim-looking people in order to embody the very essence of the American promise – though not always our practice – of innocent until proven guilty. They embodied Dr. King’s promise that we all will someday be judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin.

And they did do something on September 12th. They spent that day, and many days following that, at local mosques and Islamic Cultural Centers, supporting public expressions of their cause as well as bearing witness to and offering comfort to the family members whose loved ones had been

made to disappear or had been apprehended or deported. They had lived through this too.⁶

As people of faith and of love, this example calls to us. As people who have covenanted to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and justice, equity and compassion in all relations as well as to create a global community with justice and peace for all, this example is compelling. It is *satyagraha*. Truth-Force.

The very physical presence of those elderly Japanese-American internment survivors sitting beside the now-suspect Arab and Muslim Americans created a truth-force barrier to the calls for a twenty-first century style Arab and Muslim-American internment.

And with this profound act of faith and of love, in the promise that *is* America, those to whom it had been denied were the ones who then went on to do the work that would fulfill the promise. They fulfilled the promise - *The Idea of Democracy* as reflected in the words of Abraham Lincoln that we read responsively earlier this morning.

In that reading we professed that *our reliance is in our love for liberty; our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all people in all lands everywhere*. We were asked, *why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people- is there any better or equal hope in the world?* And we responded, *let us have*

⁶ *CaughtinBetween.org* distributes a film about this work.

faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us, to the end, dare to do our duty as we understand it.

Lincoln's words are so meaningful at this bicentennial of his birth. And they are meaningful to us, as Unitarian Universalists, every single day, as we have covenanted to affirm and promote our fifth principle, "the right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large." That is why Abraham Lincoln's words appear in our hymnal; they are not just meant to be read on milestone Lincoln anniversaries.

Lincoln ascribes to individual conscience the ultimate understanding of how to live the democratic ideal, just as we ascribe to individual conscience the ultimate understanding of our personal theology or understanding of this life and this universe.

Lincoln calls us to love liberty and to live with a spirit that prizes liberty. We are called to both a spiritual and a secular understanding of liberty and justice. We are called to create, both spiritually and secularly, that liberty and ultimate justice.

But that is not all, Lincoln then calls us to "have faith that right makes might." This sounds a lot like Lincoln's nineteenth century version of *satyagraha*, of truth-force. Let us be guided by truth-force in our love of liberty and in the spirit of ultimate justice.

My friends, the example of the Japanese-American internment survivors who had themselves been denied liberty and justice and then went on to create that liberty and sustain ultimate justice, in another time of great crisis, is the very essence of Lincoln's *Ideal of Democracy*.

It is such a powerful example of *satyagraha* – of love and truth. In the words of Rumi, “out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.”⁷

It is up to us to find “that field” that is “out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing.” It is our field to nurture, cherish and protect. We are blessed by a faith that calls us to do that. We are blessed with the duty to make it happen. May we always do so.

Amen

⁷ Rumi, *Out Beyond Ideas*.