

***When Love for Labor Is Lost: The Defamation of “Kumbaya” and
Overcoming Compassion Fatigue***

Sermon for Aug. 31 Service, by Dane Smith, Unity Unitarian Church,
St. Paul, Minnesota

A couple years ago National Public Radio produced an intriguing story, noting how the memorable African-American song, “Kumbaya,” had fallen into disrepute. Within the space of a few days, each of three Republican candidates for president had assured audiences that they did not intend to be kind or agreeable, even to each other, and each invoked scorn for “Kumbaya” to assert this oh-so-manly truculence.

Mike Huckabee , former Arkansas governor, said: “There's not going to be some magic moment at which three or four of these people sit around a campfire toasting marshmallows, singing 'Kumbaya' and giving the nod to one of their competitors.”

Rick Perry, Texas governor, said: “If you’re looking for somebody that's going to say, 'Hey listen we're not going to make it hard on you, it's all going to work out, and it's just, you know, "Kumbaya," ' I'm not your guy.” The accent is authentic; my Texas roots are kicking in there.

And then candidate Herman Cain, who is an African-American, got a lot of laughs at an event when he said: “Singing "Kumbaya” is not a foreign policy strategy.”

And then, and then, just to establish bipartisan contempt, and not to be out-machoed, White House press secretary Jay Carney, the official spokesman for our first African-American president, actually chimed in, saying: "I don't think that anybody expected or expects Washington to be a campfire where everybody holds hands together and sings 'Kumbaya,' " ...That's not what the nation's business is about."

As the great newsman Seth Meyers frequently on Weekend Update: Really? Really? Let's consider and ask ourselves what our nation's business really is all about.

How is Kumbaya's soulful affirmation of spiritual and human harmony significantly different from E Pluribus Unum, from many one, our national motto, the ONLY words on the Great Seal of the United States? How is it Kumbaya, an authentically American, that is African-American, plea, for God to intervene and to "come by here," different from the anthem that is beloved by so many white country-and-western fans, "God Bless the U.S.A.?" Which stands by the way for the United States of America. How is Kumbaya different from a Pledge of Allegiance to "one nation, under God, indivisible, with not just liberty but also justice for all?" Excuse my slight rewording. But really, if this nation is not about people joining arms, working together in united democratic and spiritual way to form a more perfect union, and to provide for our general welfare, two phrases right there in the preamble to the Constitution of the United States, what is it about?

Let's not leave these as rhetorical questions. We know the answer. This nation's business, right in the mission statements and the branding, to borrow from business jargon, is all about Kumbaya, about a spiritual togetherness and a basic equality at our very creation, in the opening words of the Declaration of Interdependence, which could have very well been its more accurate title.

So how did "Kumbaya" become so disrespected? It doesn't take much research to find threads of subtle racism and white backlash to the civil rights movement, good old American triumphalism in foreign policy and ethno-centrism, and a heavy dose of always fashionable cynicism and contempt for communitarian values and goals, in the news media and elsewhere in popular culture.

The exact origin of the song is somewhat mysterious, but there seems to be consensus that it came from the Gullah people, descendants of slaves who lived on the islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. The first audio recordings of the song go back to the 1920s. Historians agree that it was a soulful cry for divine intervention on behalf of oppressed people suffering under the brutal oppression of Jim Crow laws, lynch mobs and sharecropping.

By the late 1930s, according to one historian, folklorists had made recordings of the song as far afield as Lubbock, Texas, and the Florida women's penitentiary. Folk legends Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul and Mary and others recorded versions. It became one of THE most important songs of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, an anthem for young white and black civil rights activists who risked life and limb together for the movement. This actually was a fight song, not a feel-good sentimentalism. Kumbaya actually replaced a more oblivious white middle-class happy-camper sentiment that set in after World War II and during the 1950s, and which ignored deep and dark human rights inequities for women and communities of color and for gays and lesbians, and all manner of marginalized people.

Nevertheless, after great victories were achieved and as opposition to the realities of integration and to the civil rights movement and other reactionary trends began to build in the 1980s, the song began to be mocked, and by 2008, observer Michael Ross noted that "Derision of the song and its emotional foundation has become a required sign of toughness and pragmatism in American politics today, and this is especially true since the Sept. 11 attacks."

To be fair, says Richard. Vatz, a professor of political rhetoric at Towson State University, most people who mock it are simply unaware of its origins and importance, and it is invoked to sarcastically disparage

consensus "that allegedly does not examine the issues , or is revelatory of cockeyed optimism."

OK. Our optimism probably shouldn't be cockeyed. We much prefer clear-eyed optimism. But if we're going to assert our mental toughness and wave off cockeyed optimism, let's never express it by picking on a song that is so sacred and special to the African-American community and to the civil rights and anti-war and social justice movements. Next time you want to express an unsentimental toughness, say something like, we're not going to sit around the campfire and sing Yankee Doodle Dandy, or God Bless America, and we're certainly not going to be whistling Dixie. Whistling Dixie, by the way, is defined in the Urban Dictionary as "unrealistically rosy fantasizing" and it implies support for the segregation and the slave-state confederacy. As a Texas native with slave-owning and Confederate ancestors, I will personally lead the way in defaming Dixie instead of Kumbaya to dispel cockeyed optimism.

Much more seriously, the broader thing we have to guard against is our own personal backlash, this weariness, this cynicism, this despair, about the way of the world, losing our love and our faith and our energy for the labor necessary to bend the arc of history toward justice. We can reflect here about "loves labor lost" with two meanings, losing love for our own labors for justice, in part because we're losing our love, if we're relatively privileged and affluent, for all of those who are on the laboring end of labor-management disagreements. And more broadly all of our sisters and brothers who are statistically in the bottom half of the economy, the poor and the near poor, those who are one or two paychecks away from real trouble.

Tomorrow is Labor Day and this loss of love and respect for unions and organized labor is just one of the more worrisome trends in American popular culture. I hear too many progressives fall prey to dissing labor,

teachers in particular, or minimizing the importance of organizing day-care workers and personal care attendants, or building union strength. And it's disconcerting to see how far this disrespect can spread. In the last election for instance, one candidate did not confine his contempt to unionized workers, but to an entire 47 percent of the American populations that labors on in the bottom half of the economy who actually work, play by the rules of the so-called meritocracy, but do not make enough money to pay a federal income tax, and were thus dismissed as "takers" or moochers off us "makers" at the top of the heap. Don't get me started on the utter falsehood of the insinuation that the bottom half pay no taxes.

This tiredness with the plight of the less fortunate, and a waning passion for improving or addressing it, is not entirely indefensible. We need to acknowledge that for just about all of us enthusiastic do-gooders, there is a point where personal compassion fatigue sets in. Most of us actually have worked very hard for a very long time for various social and racial justice causes.

Compassion fatigue is an officially recognized mental health affliction. Also known as secondary traumatic stress, it was first diagnosed among nurses in the 1950s. Let's acknowledge that for very many of us, a chronic depression can be part of this, and this especially is a physiological condition, not laziness or cynicism, and not a moral failing.

Clinical symptoms of STS include an inability to experience pleasure, hopelessness, constant stress and anxiety, an inability to focus and feelings of incompetency and self-doubt, ORrr, a failure to respond to pleas to donate campaign contributions to worthy candidate, or help with phone calling and get-out-the-vote efforts, or to get involved with the Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Alliance. OK, those last symptoms are not in the medical books, but now you see where I'm goin' with this.

And in the spirit of mental toughness, let's submit that much of what we might call ennui, world-weariness, compassion fatigue can be a sin of omission, a failure to try harder to love each other enough, and a failure to use our brains to sort out the trivial from the essential .

As UnitarianUniversalists, we may be especially vulnerable to paralyzing pessimism. We are often defined by our skepticism, we are so oh-so-sophisticated, intellectual, eager to confront and understand even embrace the darkness in the heart of humans and the frightening blackness and bleakness and unknowables of our human condition, and our fate. Many of us scoff at people who are happy in their less skeptical faith.

Journalism experts have long argued that the media has caused widespread compassion fatigue in society by saturating us in stories of tragedy and suffering that lack context. One of the first mentions of the term was in the 1980s by the news media to describe the public's lack of patience, or rather the editors' lack of patience and fatigue, with the homeless problem and other stubborn challenges in the effort to reduce poverty and racism. I plead guilty to being a nattering nabob of negativism. I was a newsman for 30 years, and I always used to say to those who complained about what I did, that, just as no news is good news, good news is not news. I also know very well how cool it is to be cynical, I fancied myself at times the worldly and weary savant, the French existentialist with the cigarette dangling from his mouth, spouting Dorothy Parker and H.L. Mencken and all the other great cynics. My favorite poem about journalism goes like this: "The journalist surveys the slaughter, the best in years without a doubt, he pours himself another gin and water, and wonders how it call came about."

We do get weary and this summer the news media has given us plenty of reason to despair. Outside the little joys we hopefully have been able to seize in our personal lives, this has been a bummer of a summer.

The Middle East looks more hopeless than ever, as governments or rebellious murderous religious zealots and separatists who oppose them rape and murder, and celebrate their barbarity with public beheadings of children and journalists. It's frightfully complicated because the entire region seems to be incapable of forming and sustaining a legitimate government that ensures human rights and governs by the consent of the governed. Nationalistic violence is erupting in Russia and Ukraine and a planeload of innocent people died in the crossfire. On the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act, unarmed black men are being shot dead in New York and Florida and Missouri. Uncompromising separatist zealots in our own political system obstruct needed public policies that would reduce economic and racial inequality in our nation.

In the face of all this, we grow not so much cynical and angry as just plain weary, tired of it all, wondering whether anything we do in the public square and on a planet of 7 billion others, where the wrong-headed and mean-spirited prevail, can do any lasting good. We wonder whether all we have done is in vain, whether we ought not just retreat to our private worlds and try to take care of our nuclear family and our inner circle of friends and acquaintances. This separatism and aloneness actually IS the anthem of today's anti-social extremists, gun

fanatics and property rights advocates, no better summed up than in the title of Grover Norquist's book, LEAVE US ALONE.

Well, buck up mateys, we can't and won't be alone, for we are the togetherness people, and most people of other faiths are too. If you are fatigued and tired from witnessing all the oppression and suffering, imagine what it's like to actually live it, every day of your life.

One thing we Unitarians are not is separatist. We are all about e pluribus unum, oneness is our very name and repeated for emphasis now, as in Unitarian and Universalist and we are very much partners in the United States and the United Nations and the oneness of humanity. It would be a sin, or as close to it as we come as Uni-Unitis, to separate ourselves from our fellow human, disregarding our commonality and mutuality, leaving the campfire, refusing to sing Kumbaya, securing a separate place for ourselves and our smaller tribal units.

Fact is we can clear away the weariness, find abundant reason for hope and clear-eyed optimism, by using our minds to inform our hearts. We don't have to sugar-coat it, there is ample documentation about all the ways in which the arc is bending. The news media overlooks the context, the billions of ways every day in which humans are making progress, solving problems, working together, improving their lives and helping and loving each other. Despite the Middle East mess, hard as it is to believe, violence is in decline in the world. Despite the worrisome growth of inequality within nations, inequality between nations is declining. In the last 30 years, an estimated 1 billion humans have escaped abject poverty and achieved some level of middle-class status and economic security. Despite Ferguson, academic

achievement and attainment is steadily improving for African-Americans and all communities of color in this nation and state, AND studies show a steady decline in white racist attitudes in this nation. Who knew? As Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz recently wrote in the New York Times, economic inequality is NOT inevitable, we know how to achieve more equitable results and we will find our way.

Just this month, in a victory for labor that was described as the largest in decades, tens of thousands of personal care attendants, who are among our lowest paid workers, won the right to unionize.

Actually, there's no better example of this bending arc than right here in Minnesota, because of YOUR exertions in recent years as citizens seeking justice. In the Star Tribune Op-Ex section two Sundays ago, there was a very clear-eyed optimistic overview of public policy in this state and a "turn toward equity." The author ticked off an astonishing list of equity-providing policies and investments enacted the last two years: a partial restoration of progressive tax incidence, a minimum wage increase from near lowest to near highest in the nation, a Dream Act that removes obstacles to higher education for Latino kids, a Women's Economic Security Act, marriage equality, anti-bullying legislation, and on and on. I highly recommend the article and agree almost 100 percent with its contents. Some parts of it are pure cockeyed optimism, however, and I oughta know, because I wrote it.

So it's often three steps forward, two steps back, exhilarating progress and depressing setbacks, and Rochelle and Amber have lead us in musical harmonies that both embrace our weariness and fatigue our resolve to overcome it. We chose the African-American spirituals to

express this weariness, because they almost perfectly capture weariness and resolve simultaneously. Sometimes we do feel like a motherless child, and nobody really knows the trouble in our souls. But the heavens break and love comes down, amazing grace of a divine human loving kindness steps in, we pick ourselves up and climb Jacob's ladder and get back in the race, as Frank Sinatra said, because that's life.

I love how this was expressed in the most recent letter from the recipients of today's offering, MUUSJA, the Minnesota Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Alliance. After noting the bleakness, the letter said: It follows, then, that it is always better to show up than to stay home; always better to speak out than to keep silent; always better to be in solidarity with others than to say, "That's not my issue." In these times of turmoil and tragedy, we must remember that we are deeply connected-and therefore, we are called to rise up together whenever and however we can to build a more just and loving world."

I want to conclude with a scripture from the Christian tradition, which suffuses our African-American culture and inspired many of the great spirituals, as well as my own fundamentalist Jehovah's Witness upbringing. You can take the boy away from JWs, but you can't entirely remove the evangelical Bible-thumping impulse.

In the last paragraph of his recent book "The Good Fight" Walter F. Mondale, the son of a minister, talked about his many years of public service fighting for racial and social justice, and how almost 50 years ago at a speech on civil rights on the steps of the capitol, he quoted Apostle Paul, 2 Timothy Chapter 4, verse 7, who was near the end of his life and telling the disciples this new religion, based on universal

human loving kindness, that he had done all he could do. You may have forgotten that these ringing phrases are biblical.

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.”

And that’s what we all aspire to do, so we can be counted in that number, among those saints who go marching in, when the revolution comes, and when the rich work, and when the air is clean and we all have food to eat and the leaders learn to cry.

“Fight that good fight, finish the course, keep that faith.” Annnnnddd:
GET OUT THE VOTE!! Amen!!!

BENEDICTION

One more thump on the Bible: From the apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, Chapter 6, Verse 9.

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time, we will reap a harvest, IF we do not give up.”

Treatment for it, advice,

So do that, take care of ourselves, we're not good to the movement otherwise. Lick your wounds, repair to the woods or the lakes, while fatigue is temporary, do not allow yourselves to lapse into a much more serious despair or cynicism.

We also need to note that especially among us over-educated smart people, CHRONIC CYNICISM AND DESPAIR IS always more fashionable and cool than optimism, cockeyed or otherwise.

Rolling our eyes at the cockeyed optimist, wallowing in cynicism and despair, picture the alienated French existentialist with the cigarette dangling from his mouth, is actually always fashionable, cool. As a journalist for some 30 years, I sometimes fancied myself that person, but my inner .

Unitarians are at our very core are intellectual and skeptical and iconoclastic and we embrace the mystery and the dark side,

Contempt for Kumbaya is part of a broader cynicism and always fashionable existential skepticism about our ability as humans to ever improve, much less perfect, our communities and our world. I myself as a journalist for some 30 decades. The journalist surveys the slaughter, the worst in years without a doubt. He pours himself another gin and water, and wonders how it all came about". We UUs are ourselves prone to skepticism and doubt.

But finally, completely aside from all these indefensible reasons for dissing Kumbaya, let's acknowledge a very legitimate thing that happens to all of us who know we are supposed to be eternally optimistic and energetic and confident about bringing the (invoke the songs)

JUST A FEW GOOD THINGS

The vote makes the United Home Care Workers the largest unit in Minnesota to seek union certification since the Wagner Act was passed in 1935. Minnesota now joins 14 other states where home care workers are represented by unions.

A parallel battle is raging between attempts by Minnesota day care providers to unionize under the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). A lawsuit on behalf of Minnesota child care providers to stop the unionization is on hold pending an election, but Jennifer Parrish, a Rochester day care provider and leader of the Coalition of Union Free Providers, said they have a chance of stopping that election. "This election was a clear sign of exactly why we don't want the union to take place." she said.

Actually rooted in a positive thing. Before the great and momentous struggles of the 60s and 70s, our campfire singing might have been a little happier because we actually IGNORED the racism and sexism and homophobia and . the news media in the 60s and 70s largely earned its reputation for liberalism because it exposed these injustices and was smmpathetic to civil righrts, womens rights, labor rights, environmentalism and peace movements. By the early 80s, compassion fatigue began to set it.

What to do:

Look up Star Tribune op-ed of Aug. 17 that describes how public policy in Minnesota has taken a turn for the better and how the last two years were the greatest advance for racial and economic equity in 40 years.

Get involved in this falls campaigns specifically in boosting voter turnout. The drop-off in turnout in non-presidential election years is clear and present threat to equity policy, get on the phones and get people who voted in 2012 to press the case.

Resign yourself to doing this until you die. Our lives are better compared to the nasty, brutish and short existence that most humans knew just a century ago.

Ridiculing Kumbaya come easy and has spread in part because it is always so cool to be cynical, the ennui, the despair, existentialists, the brooding James Dean, the shrug, the drop out, to throw up one's hands, seek your own space, withdraw. Another thing that was big in the 1960s was all too much of this existential angst and anger, nihilism,

AND SOME OF THIS IS ACTUALLY OK, MENTALLY HEALTHY. We do get weary and this summer has given us plenty of reason to despair. Outside the little joys we hopefully have been able to seize in our personal lives, this has been a bummer of a summer.

The Middle East looks more hopeless than ever, as murderous religious fundamentalists rape and terrorize, and celebrate their barbarity with public beheadings of children and journalists. Nationalistic violence is erupting in Russia and Ukraine and a planeload of innocent people die in the crossfire. On the 50th anniversary of the civil rights movement, unarmed black men are being shot dead in New York and Florida and Missouri. Uncompromising fundamentalists in our political system obstruct needed public policies that would bring economic and racial equity to our nation.

In the face of all this, we grow not so much cynical and angry as just plain weary, tired of it all, wondering whether anything we do in the public square and on a planet of 7 billion other mostly wrong-headed and mean-spirited humans really can matter, whether all we have done is in vain, whether we ought not just retreat to our private worlds and try to take care of our nuclear family and our inner circle of friends and acquaintances. This actually IS the anthem of the fundamentalist right, no better summed up than in the title of Grover Norquist's book, LEAVE US ALONE.

We can't do that. It would be a sin, or as close to it as we come as Unitarians, the idea of separating oneself from our fellow humans, disregarding our commonality and mutuality, leaving the campfire, refusing to sing Kumbaya.

Fact is, reason for hope abounds. Despite the Middle East mess, hard as it is to believe, violence is in decline. More than a billion have escaped poverty and achieved some level of middle-class status.

So I feel a little bit like a football coach with a losing team at halftime, but get your asses back out there and win this one for the Gipper.

Need to confront, accept, understand, even embrace the darkness, the failures, the horrors, the human inhumanity to other humans, the lack of progress, the horrors. Stuff on this summer

Here's the great news. Minne

Fact is, there is such a thing as compassion fatigue, and we shouldn't make light of it.

And then there is the compassion fatigue from exertion for progressive outcomes in politics and public policy.

How do we guard against

Lack of respect for

Weariness is OK, a natural state of. Compassion fatigue. Clinical depression. Accept it. Wallow in it. Get some professional help.

Cynicism and despair are not OK. It's the opposite of love for fellow humans.

President Obama warned against cynicism.

"I'm not cynical nor a pessimist. I'm just an experienced optimist." Unknown British commenter in response to

Despair is a deadly sin.

Sloth is one of the [seven deadly sins](#) in [Christian moral tradition](#), particularly within [Catholicism](#), that refers to [laziness](#).

Sloth is defined as spiritual or emotional [apathy](#), neglecting what God has spoken, and being physically and emotionally inactive. It can also be either an outright refusal or merely a carelessness in the performance of one's obligations, especially spiritual, moral or legal obligations. Sloth can also indicate a wasting due to lack of use, concerning a person, place, thing, skill, or intangible ideal that would require maintenance, refinement, or support to continue to exist.

Religious views concerning the need for one to work to support society and further God's plan and work also suggest that, through inactivity, one invites the desire to sin. "For Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do." ("Against Idleness and Mischief" by [Isaac Watts](#)).

In the [Philokalia](#), *The Philokalia* ([Ancient Greek](#): φιλοκαλία "love of the beautiful, the good", from [φιλία](#) *philia* "love" and [κάλλος](#) *kallos* "beauty") is "a collection of texts written between the 4th and 15th centuries by spiritual masters"^[1] of the [Eastern Orthodox hesychast](#) tradition. the word [dejection](#) is used instead of *sloth*, for the person who falls into dejection will lose interest in life. Laziness is not considered becoming in many traditional customs.

Election results are important.

Dear (Contact First Name),

For many among us, this has been a difficult summer. From Ukraine to Palestine to Minneapolis to Ferguson to Iraq, there is unrest and conflict. I know my heart has both ached and raged as I have watched violence being perpetrated over and over again--not just by individuals, but by entire institutions, nations, and systems.

This week, at a vigil for the National Moment of Silence that I attended with several other Twin Cities area Unitarian Universalists, one of the speakers reminded us that we are, once again, confronted by what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called "the fierce urgency of now." In other words, it is no longer enough to sit by and lament; we must find ways to reflect critically, and to act courageously to bend that proverbial moral arc of the universe toward justice.



Twin Cities UUs gather at the Minneapolis Urban League for the National Moment of Silence (#NMOS14) on August 14.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I am fundamentally grounded in a theology of interdependence and intercon

nection. On the one hand, this belief that I am a part of that great "web of all existence" means that I believe that what harms one of us harms us all. We may not live in Gaza or Missouri or Baghdad, but as Dr. King also reminds us, our fates are all entwined together in "a single garment of destiny." And so I *must* pay attention; I *must* allow those stories to break my heart.

On the other hand, though, just as what others do impacts me, so do my own actions-however small-have the potential to impact others. **It follows, then, that it is *always* better to show up than to stay home; *always* better to speak out than to keep silent; *always* better to be in solidarity with others than to say, "That's not my issue."** In these times of turmoil and tragedy, we must remember that we are deeply connected-and therefore, we are called to rise up together whenever and however we can to build a more just and loving world.

This is why MUUSJA exists-to connect Minnesota Unitarian Universalists and remind us of our interconnectedness, and to amplify the reach of our voices and the impact of our work and witness.

This coming Thursday, August 21, many of our MUUSJA supporters and friends will gather for our annual House Party Fundraiser here in Minneapolis. (If you want to join us and haven't RSVPed yet, [please click here](#) or [email us here](#) to let us know you're coming!) If you can't make it, though, **please consider making a financial contribution to MUUSJA's work.** We are working hard to help Minnesota Unitarian Universalists respond-collectively, effectively, and faithfully-to the complex and heartbreaking injustices that confront our world every day, and we cannot do this essential work without your support. **You can make your tax-deductible contribution by clicking [here](#).**

Thank you for your generosity, and your commitment to this work that both breaks our hearts and makes us more whole.

In faith and solidarity,
Ashley

End with Kumba Yah

Songs

Follow the Drinkin' Gourd

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Kumba Yah