

The Confusion of Empathy with Ethics

Readings from 'The Sacrament of Divorce' by Ann Patchett
'To those born later' by Bertolt Brecht

I listen to news radio as I drive to church on Sunday mornings. I need to know if something has happened in the world that I should respond to as we gather together. I feel dread, hold my breath, think, 'please, world, hold it together today,' turn on the radio and hope nothing too terrible has happened. Usually, the news is just the regular amount of terrible and our gathering can continue the way I had planned it. I suspect there are others of us who regularly turn on news radio or look at the front page of the newspaper with a sense of dread. What terrible things have happened today?

And sometimes what I hear on the radio is something that informs a Sunday service months later. In November, I heard an interview that is my jumping off point for today. The radio host was interviewing Gina Apostol, a Filipina American novelist and teacher, about her most recent book, called *Insurrecto*. *Insurrecto* is a novel about a white American filmmaker who wants to make a movie about atrocities that happened in the Philippines during the Philippine-American War. On the Philippine island of Samar in 1901, Filipino revolutionaries attacked an American garrison and killed about 45 soldiers. In retaliation, the commander of American forces in the region said, I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn; the more you kill and burn, the better it will please me... The interior of Samar must be made a howling wilderness...¹ In the ten days that followed, American soldiers burned hundreds of homes and killed an unknown number of Filipinos, estimates range from 39 to 50,000. The commanding general who gave the command was later court-martialed, found guilty and forced to retire. This history is fascinating and heartbreaking.

Apostol's novel is told from many different perspectives, including those of the filmmaker, her Filipina translator, and the filmmaker's mother in the present day and the rebels, the soldiers, and a white American photographer involved in the events of 1901. The interviewer asked Apostol about that, about how she can write from so many perspectives – and maintain a clear sense of what is right and what is wrong, what is moral and what is immoral. She said,

'Just because we need to see in multiple ways does not mean we don't take a side... That this confusion of empathy with ethics sometimes is problematic, because yes, as a writer I empathize with my character, the U.S. soldier, Army soldier; I empathize with the white woman photographer. But I also recognize that for my novel, [the rebel] is the heart of the story — that we need to, in some ways, side with her revolutionary rage.'

Apostol continues, 'because I think atrocity happens, this war happened, because of the inability of, let's say, the invaders, the U.S. Army soldier, the white woman photographer — all of whom I empathize with — could not imagine the agency and aspirations of [the rebel]. So the way she's put into that story, which is spiraled through layers and layers of narration, I think is, for me, a way to resolve my own dilemma about empathy and ethics.'²

¹ 'President Retires Gen. Jacob H. Smith.' *The New York Times*. July 17, 1902. Retrieved from <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1902/07/17/101959147.pdf>

² Simon, Scott. 'An American and Her Filipina Translator Exhume a Massacre in "Insurrecto."' *National Public Radio*. November 10, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/10/666360732/an-american-and-her-filipina-translator-exhume-a-massacre-in-insurrecto>

'The confusion of empathy with ethics.' As soon as I heard the author say that phrase, I thought to myself 'I need to spend time with that idea.' I then thought, 'that will preach.' So here I am. That phrase has been rattling in my mind for months. I've been thinking about how I see many of us, myself included, struggle in this confusion of empathy with ethics, about balancing compassion for all with knowing what is right. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, the ability to see the world from someone else's perspective. Empathy is our moral principles that govern how we act. They can easily be out of balance. 'Just because we need to see in multiple ways does not mean we don't take a side.' Apostol instructs.

If empathy carries the day we can become moral relativists or apologists for bad behavior, thinking everything is equally good, that if something seems right from a particular perspective, it is right. If our ethics, our moral principles, are our only guide, we can become judgmental and unforgiving, convinced that our truth is the only truth. That sort of certainty closes us off from new learning and rarely allows us to be effective change makers.

I suspect we are all at a slightly different point in this confusion of empathy with ethics, this balancing act. Some of us might need to cultivate more empathy, might need to be better at the art of seeing in multiple ways, while others might be too quick to compromise our ethics, our convictions, our willingness to clearly state what is right and what is wrong and act from those convictions.

In my months of reflecting on this, I have realized that the skill we need to resolve the dilemma of empathy and ethics is the ability to say, 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' in the same breath. As Unitarian Universalists our principles, and the tension between them, call us to say 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' in the same breath over and over again.

On one side of the dilemma, there is 'I love you,' our commitment to respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person, our belief that no one is outside the circle of love and care, that everyone deserves kindness, no matter what, no exceptions.

Our first reading today, part of a beautiful essay by Ann Patchett that I commend to you in its entirety speaks to cultivating empathy, that ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Once Patchett is divorced, she stumbles into 'the world's largest club. The Divorced.' She gives and receives so much empathy with her fellow club members. We know there are other secret clubs that we find ourselves invited into, against our will, clubs we'd rather not be part of – the cancer club, the mental illness club, the grief club, the addiction and recovery club, the widow and widowers club, the infertility club, the chronic illness club, the family estrangement club, and so many more. All of us have a few membership cards tucked away in a dark recess of our wallet or our heart that we would rather not have – and that allow us an entry point to empathy, not just for our other club members, as Patchett describes so beautifully, but empathy for everyone with a club membership they'd rather not have, that is empathy for everyone.

This impulse toward empathy is a beautiful one. As Quaker educator Parker Palmer reminds us "'The more you know about another person's story, the less possible it is to see that person as your enemy.'"³ Novelist Gina Apostol's efforts to empathize with people who committed an atrocity inspires me to not close off my heart to the people I might consider my enemy. They are worthy of my empathy too.

³ Palmer, Parker J. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014. Page 5

But only empathy is not our final answer. As Unitarian Universalists, our faith also calls us to challenge how things are.

While we respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we do not respect every choice or every behavior, every structure, every practice. We are committed to 'the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all' and 'respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.' We know we don't live in a world of peace and justice, a world where our connections to and impact on all existence, especially the natural world guide humanity's decisions. I don't think I even need to name examples of this reality. If you glanced at headlines or listened to the news as you drove or heard about pain and brokenness in someone's life – or experienced it in your own, you surely know that these principles are not yet lived reality... and there is much work to do to make it so – and sometimes, that means a voicing a clear, emphatic 'you are wrong' alongside the empathetic 'I love you.'

For some of us the 'You are wrong' comes easy. We see the gap between the world as it is and the world as we want it to be and can name it clearly. I see it in the way you live your lives – the bags and bags of styrofoam gathered, the commitment to use your money well, the ways you work for political change. You know what is wrong in this world and a devoting yourselves to principles of anti-racism, or care for the earth, a world where everyone's basic needs are met, or the idea that there is no such thing as other people's children, every child is ours. You march, you lobby, you volunteer, and you invite others along to be co-creators of the beloved community... and sometimes this mission means you have to say a clear 'you are wrong' to those who would say that your efforts are not worth it, that the problem isn't important, or who actively oppose your vision. While we might first look for shared values and common self-interests, we do sometimes reach an impasse where 'you are wrong' needs to be said.

And when we get to the place of voicing. Our emphatic 'you are wrong,' we must remember to keep the 'I love you' in the same breath. We know that we cannot lean only into our ethics without that balancing force of empathy. Because we know, as Gordon read earlier:

Hatred, even of meanness

Contorts the features.

Anger, even against injustice

Makes the voice hoarse.

We also know this because there are the times when someone told us we were wrong – and if they said it in the same breath as 'I love you' we were a lot more likely to hear it. I can think of the moments when people, including some of you in this room, told me 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' or its variations. It can be a sacred moment of trust and hope, a turning point, a time to commit and recommit to our values and draw more people into our circle of love and care.

What does it look like to say 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' in the same breath? I have an example from my life. Not long ago, I was talking with a person I adore – no one from this church – though there are many people that I adore here. She used a racial slur in our conversation.

'Please don't use that word,' I said. 'It's hurtful.'

She responded, 'I've been using it my whole life. It's just something I say.'

'That may be so,' I said. 'But I know it hurts people. And you are a kind person who I know doesn't want to hurt people. I don't want you to say it.'

Then the conversation turned to something else. Honestly, I don't know if that word has completely left her vocabulary, but she hasn't said it in my presence again. In that moment, I tried to remind her that she is kind and the word she used isn't kind. I tried to say 'I love you' and 'you are wrong.' In the same breath.

This kind of truth-telling is hard for me. I was taught by our culture and my family that it is my job to nurture relationships, to be loyal to relationships. To strengthen connections and do the hard work of showing up to other people.

Years ago, I stumbled upon a passage in a theological book that has helped me think about what loyalty truly means, how it means loving truth-telling, especially when that truth might be hard for the listener to hear. That is another idea that has stayed with me, emerging and submerging in the back of my mind over the years. I will share that passage with you now. It's by Miroslav Volf, a theologian from the former Yugoslavia who teaches at Yale Divinity School:

'Telling what one believes to be true is a way of being loyal to a relationship; telling what one believes not to be true is a way of defecting from a relationship. As a consequence, "the virtues of integrity and fidelity are understood to be at stake in all those situations in which the virtue of truthfulness is at stake" (359). We speak truth because community matters to us and we sustain community that matters to us by speaking truth.⁴

Speaking the truth, especially when it might be hard for another person to hear, is how we sustain community; it is how we are loyal to one another. We need to occasionally say, 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' in the same breath. This passage reminds me of times that I didn't have conversations I probably should have – and relationships withered as a result.

Most of this sermon has been about our personal relationships. Of course, this practice of 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' is not just for our personal relationships. Novelist Gina Apostol spoke about the confusion of empathy with ethics with regards to making sense of the atrocities of war. We can bring this practice into our political sphere. We can challenge discriminatory politics or programs that increase the risk of catastrophic climate change while holding, 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' alongside each other in our hearts – though you might not want to say them both out loud the next time you call your representative or go lobby in Lansing. Holding that in your heart, in your breath matters.

All of our work for justice in the public sphere is informed by our Unitarian Universalist principles, including respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all' and 'respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.' As we seek a world of peace, liberty and justice, as we seek practices and policies that respect the web of all existence, we must also respect the inherent worth and dignity of the people we might think of as our opponents, because, the means are the ends and we need to live all of our values, all of the time, especially when there is tension between them.

And when you figure out how to do this, please let me know. I surely haven't figured out how to do this always, but I know that this is the work I am called to do – and I invite you to join me in learning how to say 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' in the same breath.

I now invite you to breathe with me, I invite you to visualize whoever it is you most need to say these words to and think 'I love you' and 'you are wrong' in the same breath.

⁴ Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. Page 262

May we be courageous.

May we be guided by both empathy and ethics.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.