

A sermon from Rev. David Miller, Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Fairfax, VA

When I woke up on Monday morning and turned on the news, my heart not only sank, it broke again. Again, such useless and devastating pain, again, the cycle of endless discussions on mental health vs. terrorism, gun control vs. public safety and again, the needed exploration of motive, the human need that helps us all try to understand the un-understandable. I knew we would have to do something on Monday night to offer anyone needing to come to this sanctuary and connect in community and yet I bristled when the time came to decide whether or not to call it a vigil, I just couldn't, even if it was semantics, I couldn't have one more vigil for one more shooting for that feels like it has become part of the cycle too. I totally understand the need for us to gather together and connect and pray and cry and reflect and try to understand the un-understandable, but as I said after Orlando, I am sick vigils, not really the vigils but the need for them and what never seems to change after they are done.

I am also struggling a bit with protests. This isn't new. When the second Iraq war began, I remember watching a small group on a street corner screaming at cars and carrying signs. I wondered if they thought that they were changing anything by doing this. They weren't changing any minds and I thought, if they thought they were really making any difference by standing on that street corner and yelling at cars, it was a waste of time.

Then I began to think about whether it was something they just had to do, more like a spiritual exercises. More like filling a deep internal need to do something in the face of an overwhelming force, something that they couldn't control, something that was going to happen no matter what. I tried to see it through that light, a light that kept that small ember glowing in their hearts during times of anger and despair and I hoped that I found a deeper place of compassion. It was certainly possible that this small ongoing act brought them the courage to still hope and who was I to fault them for that.

I went through this same process when I came to UUCF and found the small Gun Violence Prevention group. There they were, with others from the community, on the 14th of every month, standing out with the signs on the sidewalk in front of the National Rifle Association headquarters commemorating the date of the terror of Newtown, the murders at Sandy Hook Elementary, December 14th 2012. Most months, there aren't a lot of people there. Most months there isn't any news media covering the m. Most months, there is a core group, the NRA security guards and maybe some police. But on some months, the numbers of people swell, the politicians come forth, the news media arrives and my gratitude for this ongoing presence of witness in front of the NRA is unending. Here is just a partial list as cited from Salon Magazine, of the horrors that have resulted since this increased presence just since I have been serving as your minister:

10/1/2015 - Christopher Sean Harper-Mercer 26, killed 9 people and injured 9 others in Roseburg, Ore. Christopher Sean Harper-Mercer was described by law enforcement as someone with white supremacist and anti-religion opinions and speculated that these views motivated him to shoot up Umpqua Community College. The resulting action. No new federal gun laws were passed.

11/29/2015 - Robert Lewis Dear, 57, killed 3 people and injured 9 others in Colorado Springs, Colo. Dear opened fire in a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado, with his wife speculating that the religious Dear did so because of his opposition to abortion rights. The resulting action - No new federal gun laws were passed.

12/2/2015 - Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, 28 and 29, killed 14 people and wounded 22 others in San Bernardino, Calif. Farook and Malik committed the shooting at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino - No new federal gun laws were passed.

6/12/2016 - Omar Mateen, 29, killed 49 people and injured 58 others in Orlando, Fla. Mateen engaged in a mass shooting at a popular gay night club called Pulse. The resulting action - No new federal gun laws were passed, despite President Barack Obama urging Congress to either enact or renew laws that would ban the possession of assault-style weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines.

And of course now we add Las Vegas to this list.

On the 14th of most months, there is that small group, armed only with the sadness of loss and the courage of hope, out in front of the National Rifle Association, an organization complicit in the tragic and shameful inaction of our elected leaders in addressing these issues of moral clarity and public safety. On the dates following each one of these mass acts of terror, the small number of committed souls grows. The space that they hold for the rest of us becomes a larger community of grief, anger, frustration and hope. I am so grateful that they are there holding the space for the rest of us. I am so grateful that they will be there on this coming Saturday, October 14th, beginning at 10am in front of the National Rifle Association to register voters who care about gun safety and gun sense.

This is the way things get done. It often starts with a small group of people, committed, focused, in it for the long term, grounded in their faith and hope. Motivated by anger or frustration, or sadness and loss, or a variety of factors that move the human spirit to take a risk, to step out of the crowd, to take a chance against the odds, in order to have some sort of positive, meaningful and lasting impact. We have no way of knowing if the effort to provide moral witness at the NRA is closer to the beginning the middle or the end of its effectiveness. There could be something that happens that changes things overnight, or there could be something that won't ever happen more than having a place for us to be in times like these.

That is part of the point of having courage and making a courageous act, there is no surety of the payoff. Courage offers no guarantees that what we try will work. That is true with regard to large public movements and that is true in each one of our individual lives. There is no guarantee that our individual acts of courage will pay off, whether beginning a new relationship or moving to a new city for a new job. There is no way of knowing what the result will be if we stand up to a bully or pick up the phone to ask another for help during one of our own personal moments of pain or despair.

It takes courage to ask for help and it takes courage to admit when you wrong. I am going to try and be courageous and say that I was wrong in judging these small groups of protesters and for that I am deeply sorry. Yes, it does often take a lot of courage to have hope and it often takes courage to admit when you are wrong so today, I am going to combine those things and I am going to have hope that one day, standing on that sidewalk in front of the big building on Waples Mill Rd, I am going to have the courage to hope that one day, someone will walk out of the big blue building, walk up to a one of those weary protestors with a sign and say, you know what, I have been wrong. I have been wrong about the meaning of the 2nd amendment, I have been wrong about the need to stonewall legislation and I have been wrong about trying to do what is best for the health and safety of my fellow citizens.

What an amazing and courageous act that would be. What a beautiful moment in human relations. What a way to shift the world on its axis. I think it would be incredibly meaningful even if just

one person who works in the building walked out on any given 14th of any month of any year and said, I have been wrong and what can I do to help. What an act of courage that would be. And imagine, what would it be like if not just one person came out but a spokesperson walked out of the building at one of the times when the reporters were there and asked for a moment. What if that spokesperson said, you know what, we are appalled at the loss of life caused by the lack of safe and sane guns laws and although we still want to protect each American's right to bear arms, we would like to help negotiate laws that help protect our citizens from random acts of violence, especially from assault rifles and other firearms that are just designed to kill in mass quantities. Wouldn't that be amazing? Wouldn't that help bring this country together? Wouldn't that help change the course of our journey together? And most of all, wouldn't it be wonderful to do all we can so that the list I read earlier has the least amount of additions to it as possible?

I know this seems like a dream and I don't want to make the courage of hope into the foolishness of hope, but when we are courageous, we never know what will happen until we try.

Frustrated with the low wages, lack of health care, and the poor conditions their fellow farmers were forced to work in, two activists went door-to-door to unite local farmers. These farmers were discriminated against and sometimes even pitted against one another whenever they demanded better wages, so these activists worked to create a community of workers seeking the basic rights they deserved.

Through a series of organized boycotts starting on Sept. 8, 1965, and lasting more than five years, the Delano Grape Strike aimed to bring national attention to the injustices facing migrant workers. And it did just that. More than 14 million Americans joined the boycott aimed at two of the largest corporations involved in the grape industry in Delano, California.

The corporations were eventually pressured to renegotiate their farmers' contracts, raising their wages, giving them access to health care, and bringing an end to "labor contracting," a system wherein jobs could be assigned by favoritism and bribery. These activists were led by two frustrated people, Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez and the result was the National Farm Workers Association.

This is not the first time in the history of this country and in most of our lives that we have needed courageous hope. The women's rights movement, the struggle for LGBTQ rights and civil rights, all the equal rights movements of the 20th century started small and took a long time to see substantial results. They have all had moments of pain and despair. This is not the first time we have faced heartless times that seem to be moving us far away from the values we support and the world for which we dream.

This isn't the first and it probably isn't the last but it is one of the most unique, troubling and unimaginable. And I don't know if we will be able to think our way out of this for courage in my opinion is an act of faith. Courage comes from a dare to hope. Courage comes from deep somewhere in our hearts and is an undeniable act of the human spirit. As Maya Angelou says, "Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time."