

A NOT-SO-QUIET WEEK IN LAKE WOBEGON

a sermon by
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It has been a not-so-quiet week in Lake Wobegon!

On Monday, I found that, apparently over a long period of time, a large sum of money was taken from me. What I thought I had safely saved toward some of my future dreams was gone!

Have any of you ever been robbed? Do you remember how it felt to be violated in that way, to have someone take your valuables? Then you know how I felt.

But, wait, my week did not get better!

On Tuesday, my partner told me the pension plan into which we had paid for years had been raided by other parts of the organization, and we are looking at much lower retirement benefits. And worst of all, it was legal!

Have any of you had your retirement savings diminished by corporate shenanigans?

But, wait, it got worse.

On the same day, we received an email from our child in college. Because of cutbacks in federal funding, tuition will be rising substantially, while Federal Pell Grants will be severely reduced. We will need to borrow more money!

I'll just bet that many of you have experienced something similar: rising costs for things you need because federal support has been cut.

On that same day we got a letter from our local police department, announcing a town-wide emergency drill in about a month – needed, the letter said, “because of increased tensions in the world and the likelihood of terrorist acts against citizens of our community.”

Needing emergency drills to be prepared against terrorist attacks does not make me feel any safer. How about you?

I thought Wednesday would be a better day. Our class action suit against the abandoned munitions plant, to make it a superfund cleanup site, was scheduled for evidentiary hearings. But, at the last minute, the US Attorney for our district petitioned for dismissal, and was granted it, on the grounds of national security issues.

I wonder if our ground water will ever get cleaned up . . . and of what mysterious substances? Why is everything the government wants to avoid now a matter of national security?

On Thursday I had no time for my own trials and tribulations. I was over at the Santosos'. They received word that their daughter, Lucy, had been seriously wounded in the recent flare-up in Fallujah. I remember Lucy as the bright-eyed Coming-of-Ager who argued so forcefully with everyone about patriotism. All of those arguments seem distant as her family worries for her safe return. I know you join me in sending your healing energy their way, and I know many others, wounded or killed, are in our thoughts today.

On Friday, my office day, I was kept distracted from my own problems again. Two people, one from our congregation and one from the community, one old and one young, came in to discuss their need for assistance with dire medical expenses. I did what I could using your generously donated Minister's Discretionary Fund. But, as many of you know, needs keep growing while declines in domestic investments and the dollar internationally mean we don't have as much to contribute.

We all do what we can, but don't you wish the economic realities were different, and we could do more?

On Saturday, I drove downtown for an interfaith meeting – a drive which took way too long. I had planned to take the train, but with the most recent cut-backs in public transit funding, trains are now weekday rush-hour only.

Did you get caught in that monster traffic jam along with me?

But, somewhere along the way I saw a sign.

No, I mean it really was a sign, a billboard.

And it was also a sign, a piercing intrusion of the universe into my life.

Did you see it too?

If you had, you might have been stopped in your tracks like I was.

Suddenly, my week fell into focus.

It all came together for me and I realized that:

the robber who stealthily stole from me,
the thief who took the security out of our Social Security,
the force behind the cuts in federal education and grant funding,
the increase our fear levels,
the escalating acts of terrorism,
the government's denial of responsibility for its actions,
the injury and death of so many here and abroad,
the lack of medical and financial resources,
the decline of our economic position worldwide,
the erosion of the foundation of our developed nation,

the agent of all this personal, social, and national corrosion,
is war.

We are well aware of the usual consequences of war: lists of casualties, photos of destruction, debates of causes.

But, what about less obvious consequences.

What about the effects of living in a culture which is driven by war?

I have mourned the tremendous losses of life and promise in the conflicts which our country has either created or engaged, but when I saw that sign, it awakened a deeper mourning for all the collateral losses of a culture of conflict.

I grieve that war creates a climate of scarcity.

When more than \$100 billion per year are siphoned from our collective resources to support war, those resources are not available for enhancing, visionary programs. In the name of patriotism and security, we are forced to sacrifice in other aspects of our lives.

But, when we have already reached a bottom line in terms of health care, education, and public services, to sacrifice means to have our own pockets picked to fill the coffers of war.

It is as if, while you are in the kitchen preparing a snack for your guest, someone you trust quietly rifles through your drawers in search of valuables to pay for an expensive addiction. In a society which has not yet fulfilled its promise to all of its citizens of an equitable share of the American dream, war is like that thief who silently robs everyone but then labels our losses patriotic virtues.

Every dollar given to war is a dollar taken from somewhere else. Worse yet, it is more likely two or three dollars taken from somewhere else because the expenses of war are financed by the largest budget deficit in the history of our nation. By the time our war debt is repaid, we will have easily paid double or triple, robbing the pockets of our retirement dreams and the ability of our children to fulfill the promise of the future.

No matter where you fall on the political spectrum, unless you are among those few who benefit from the spoils of war, you are pushed toward scarcity living and thinking by the excessive economic demands of war. Scarcity thinking erodes our attitude towards everything else – sense of self, sense of family, meaning of community – until it threatens the vibrant heart of our liberal religious faith: the abundance of goodness, of potential in a world of promise.

Do you really want someone – anyone – to rob you of your future and then tell you the imposed scarcity is a virtue? I know I don't!

I grieve that war creates a climate of fear.

War cannot happen, nor can it be justified, without some threat. The psychology of conflict requires a perception of danger. It might be a threat to our homes, or a threat to our resources, or a threat to our self-image, or a threat to our principles. Threat is then made personal and real through fear. But fear is a double-edged sword.

Without fear, all of our fight-or-flight reflexes are relaxed, and our higher thought processes can function. But introduce fear, and the most primal responses rise to the surface – enlisting specialized hormones, enzymes, perceptual changes. A person in fear becomes attuned to threats. Filled with caution and terror, one perceives the whole world as a potential threat. Fear, once bred, reproduces itself rapidly, engendering a continuity of fears.

You know how long it takes to get your heartbeat down, to get your head clear, to get your eyes sharp after you have been frightened by something. You know how hard it is to return to your normal, trusting, hopeful self. Until you regain that sense of control, you waste your energies irrationally on what you want to avoid, not what you want to achieve. Those who promote a sense of fear are also like thieves: robbing you of your best self, stealing your deepest dreams, leaving only the empty whispers of anxiety.

Do you really want someone – anyone – to rob you of your capacity for higher thought and visionary action, and then tell you that fear is the norm? I know I don't!

I grieve that war creates a climate of division.

Conflict is about taking sides. In a time of war, the demand for taking sides against a perceived enemy becomes exaggerated. However, in a world of diverse thought, values, and opinions, we often take sides against friends as well.

Our Unitarian Universalist community should understand this, as we remember how the Viet Nam conflict spread its divisiveness until we Unitarian Universalists were at war with one another over the Draft, sanctuary, peace marches, and more.

In our current time of war, sharper lines of dualism are once again being drawn – often to the detriment of not only our community, but of the essential diversity which we cherish. Rather than weave a rich pattern of complexity and diversity, we are asked to see things one-dimensionally. In the process, we lose the potential for wisdom and insight offered by the radical openness which is our heritage.

For example, if we consider all military personnel to be our antagonists, we will miss the wise counsel of people like General Anthony Zinni, whose first-hand knowledge of war led him to advocate peace. If we

consider all who oppose war to be our allies, we may abet some who advocate violence against the system.

Whenever our world view becomes one of division, not unity, we sacrifice one of our greatest assets: our ability to perceive connections more than differences.

Do you really want someone – anyone – to rob you of your capacity to reach across divisions and make meaning, and then tell you those divisions are meaningful? I know I don't!

But, if you don't want to be robbed, if you don't want to have your values and vision eroded, if you don't want to see your future clouded, what can you do?

You can find your voice.

You can say "Yes!"

You can say "Yes" to abundance, hope, and inclusion, rejecting visions of scarcity, fear, and division

You can say "Yes" to the ways of peace, rejecting summons to war.

Your profound "Yes" can challenge scarcity thinking which claims that the wealthiest nation in the world cannot care for its people and their future because of the demands of war. Your "Yes" can express a domestic agenda of abundance – our nation appreciating its abundance would be our greatest peace-making agenda, not only for us but also for the world.

Your “Yes” can stop the spread of fear which tries to make us think that terrorism defines our lives more than our hopes and dreams. Your “Yes” refuses to let the words, symbols, and institutions of fear become yours. You will speak of hope when others speak of fear.

And your “Yes” can deny all the divisions which try to separate people into “us” versus “them.” Your voice can help us all resist the seduction of “either you are with us or you are against us” thinking. You can work to create dialogue, including true, non-defensive listening, with anyone and everyone, no matter how divergent they may seem . . . on any issue, be it war, abortion, economics, politics, or religion.

Find your voice!

And what did that billboard say, that sign which opened my eyes?

Modeled on that well-known MasterCard ad, it read:

“Afghanistan: \$40 billion, 5,000 lives

Terrorism:: \$45 billion, 25,000 lives

Iraq: \$200 billion, 25,000 lives

Peace: priceless”

