

## Peace Is Not Comfort: The Rough Challenge of Nonviolent Action

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento  
Presentation on Ending Modern Slavery by UUSS  
Kids Freedom Club

Reflection by Jed Shapiro (printed after sermon)  
Hymns: #348 Guide My Feet; #134 Our World Is  
One World; #121 We'll Build a Land (note use of  
revision for the gender-inclusive refrain: "Come  
build a land, where all of our kindred, anointed by  
God, may then create peace....")



Photo: Friendship Park 12/10/18 (American Friends Service Committee)

### Sermon

Last week in Sacramento I attended a session for faith leaders on responding to community emergencies. Among other topics, we learned about civil disobedience. The philosophy of civil disobedience declares that it's morally wrong to obey or accept a law or a policy that is unjust. The practice of civil disobedience is a person's active, professed refusal to obey a law or an order by a government, its police, or its military. Such actions call for training, discipline and steadiness. It can be scary to get arrested in a protest—it *is* scary. Even if you are praying or chanting with confident voice, as you near the zone where you could be arrested, you don't feel comfortable. An experienced minister said this to us: even if you've put yourself in a situation like it many times before: "As you get closer to the front [line], the reality is kicking in and your heart is racing."

Many of us in the room hadn't been close to such a situation, let alone participated. A young organizer assured us: "We didn't bring you here to

make you sign up for civil disobedience or expect you to." Indeed, in most actions, it is just a small percentage of the protesters who are prepared to commit civil disobedience and get arrested. She said: "We wanted you to learn about it, see an example of it, and know it as one option of involvement."

A leading African American pastor told us that civil disobedience is only one activity of a range of choices if we wish to work for justice and fairness. Indeed, he said: "There are multiple ways we are asked to show up." Yet the need is there. The minister made only this request: when it comes to working for justice: "Be willing to participate at the farthest edge of your comfort zone."

The edge of your comfort zone could be writing a letter to a public official. Or making a telephone call. It was so long ago that I don't remember the first time I called the office of a legislator or governor. But even now, I have to push myself a little to pick up the phone.

I don't remember the first time I made a visit to a legislator's office to make my views known, but every time I did go, it was because somebody asked me to go, and because someone would be there with me. Whatever it means for you, the pastor said, "go the farthest edge of your comfort zone and land there."

In early December I was able to respond to the request to show up at the U.S./Mexico border. About 400 clergy and lay leaders from around the country gathered in San Diego at to mark International Human Rights Day with protest. The American Friends Service Committee organized a series of demonstrations around the country.

We went to the border to oppose the U.S. government's separation of migrant families, the holding of children in cage-like pens, and the firing of tear gas and rubber bullets on unarmed Central Americans who have been attempting to claim asylum at official U.S. Border stations. Moreover, we wanted to show our solidarity with residents of the border areas in both Mexico and the U.S. who oppose the militarization of their border communities, the militarization of their neighborhoods. The title of this campaign is [Love Knows No Borders](#).

I arrived in San Diego on Saturday. On Sunday morning I had breakfast in a hip, sunny café—very comfortable. Then I went to the Sunday

service at a local UU church, familiar and comfortable. In the afternoon I joined hundreds of others at another church for an orientation led by the American Friends Committee. Lots of UUs came from around the country, but many other denominations were represented—Catholic and Protestant Christians, Muslims, Jews, Quakers, Sikhs, Hindus, and more.

We were invited to participate in one of the various volunteer teams that would go to the border area. The American Friends organizers told us the options, after which groups of us went off to different parts of the church campus for team-specific training.

One team learned to be medics, who would carry the those who became exhausted or injured on stretchers, wash eyes burning with tear gas, and bind up wounds.

Some were in charge of making protest signs, distributing them at the march and collecting them.

Only 50 learned what would be required of them if they were willing to be arrested and taken into custody. They attended a session to learn what it would mean to be one of the “arrestables,” as they were called. They could choose later to opt out.

Before we broke into groups, we all heard the instructions for those who might be arrested. Leave your wallet, phone, keys, jewelry and backpack with a buddy. With a permanent marker, write a contact person’s number on the skin of your arm, in case officials took everything else away from you. Don’t wear contact lenses, in case you are exposed to tear gas. Consider wearing a Depends adult diaper in case you are detained for hours with no access to a toilet.

Every team wore an arm band of a different color. Green was my team’s color—the logistics team. On Monday we would carry granola bars, water, and fruit. We’d hand out the adult diapers to the arrestables at the start of the day. With garbage bags and recycling bags we’d try to leave the beach cleaner than we found it.

On Sunday night there was an interfaith service at the church. Musicians led us in song, including songs we would be chanting in the march. A dozen faith leaders talked. It was a long service. The main preacher was the Reverend Traci Blackmon, an African American pastor from St. Louis and a leader in the United Church of Christ.

She told us that working for justice is not peaceful. It’s not peaceful... if by peace you mean *the surface calm of the status quo*. There is no such thing as a peaceful protest, she said. Nonviolence, yes; peace, no. In other words, she was asking us to move toward the edges of our comfort zones.

Early the next morning we arrived at the San Diego office of the American Friends Service Committee. My team assembled supplies as other teams got ready. People and groups took pictures with one another. The Unitarian Universalists gathered for a large group photo, most of us wearing stoles and collared clergy shirts and big smiles.

Many of us filled up chartered buses—five of them. The rest of us carpooled. Everybody ended up at a park near the border. From the parking lot, we marched a mile down a sometimes-muddy path toward the ocean beach. Government helicopters flew overhead constantly. It was overcast and windy and would stay that way all day.

We approached the beach, where we would make a left turn and walk toward the border fence. The arrestables unloaded the belongings they didn’t want to have in case they got arrested. Four people gave me their backpacks, which I carried, in addition to my own—ugh! A woman in her 70s asked me to take her cane. Her cane had a base with four legs, which helped me manage all that weight walking on the sand.

The 50 clergy who had been trained to be arrestables moved in a group in front of the rest of us. We followed, moving toward the beach. We all paused at the shore. The group in front made a circle, said prayers, and called out the names of people who had perished in this border area. After we heard each name, all of us responded in Spanish: “Presente.”

A few clergy blessed the arrestables in groups, four by four. Then they walked the last mile down the beach. They approached the tall brown-metal fence that separates what used to be one local community into two separate countries.

Through the high fence we could see folks on the Tijuana side of the border gathering to watch and support this protest. Watching us from our side of the metal fence were Border Patrol agents in bulky green uniforms, black helmets with plastic visors, and semi-automatic rifles in their arms.

Together in a line these religious leaders approached the "No Trespassing" area near the fence. They had razor-sharp concertina wire to the left and ocean waves lapping the sand on the right. They went to the edge of the restricted area, the so-called "enforcement zone."

I looked around and realized how vulnerable everybody was. Yes, our group was 400 strong, but we were out on the beach, now two miles from a parking lot, with overwhelming government force around us.

The faith leaders knelt in a row on the sand, several of them in the water, getting their stoles, robes and prayer shawls wet. As they knelt in a line, they spoke words of blessing and compassion for all concerned. Federal agents called out orders:

*get out of the water—*

*move back—*

*disperse—*

*this is your final warning.*

One by one, disobedient leaders were cuffed and led away. Agents led them up a hill and made them sit on the pavement. In total, 32 folks were arrested. Each time one was led away in cuffs, those of us behind the protest area would applaud them and sing loudly. But we didn't know how long they'd be gone or how they'd be treated. Neither did they.

They were given federal citations and released in a couple of hours. Later I met a woman from Iowa who showed me her printed citation. The charge was: *refusing to follow orders of a federal agent*. The location was: *Friendship Park*.

Clergy and lay persons who got arrested included UUs, Methodists, Muslims, Quakers, Jews and folks from other faith traditions. Everybody was released within two hours--except for one person.

Matthew was an American Friends Service Committee organizer in jeans and a red tee shirt. The shirt said, of course, *Love Knows No Borders*. He'd been one of our trainers the day before. On this day, he had guided us toward the beach and shepherded the arrestable group toward the border fence.

He watched as the clergy knelt in the water. Border agents came around a line of clergy and went after Matthew. He had a backpack on; they pulled it off him and threw it to other agents. Some of his American Friends coworkers pulled him

away from the agents, but agents charged and pushed down one of the colleagues, then grabbed Matthew.

He later said: "As I felt my arm twisted behind my back and hands squeezing the back of my neck, I heard ... officers yell, 'We got the instigator... we got him.'" They isolated him from the others who were being led away. Whereas others were charged with refusing federal orders, Matthew was charged with "Assault on a Federal Officer." A conviction for this could lead to prison for 10 years. Many of the protestors had phones and cameras. It's clear in one video that Matthew did not assault an officer.

Matthew said: "I was handcuffed with my hands behind my back and placed into the back of a gated patrol car and driven down hidden roads for 20 minutes.... As we pulled into the Imperial Beach Detention Center, armed agent yelled 'Alright! More bodies!'"

He was put in an empty isolation cell, 8 feet by 12 feet, "with bright fluorescent lights, one metal bench, a metal toilet, and a one-inch thick mattress pad."

He said: "For the first four hours I was invigorated from the power of our action, and began to exercise, stretch, sing, and meditate. I would rise occasionally and peek out to watch armed agents finger print 8, 10 and 12-year old children and mothers as they breastfed their babies or held their toddlers' hands. It was surreal... This was really happening. I was really watching children being separated from families and put into cold locked rooms."

Matt was in the cell all night long, except for five minutes when he was brought out to be informed of his charges. Sleeping wasn't easy, he said: "The lights were bright, the room was cold and I didn't have any blanket or layers and my shoes and pants were still wet.... The ... the regular open and slamming of [cell] doors, the sounds of children crying, and the occasional swearing of the officers at children ... were jarring." At 10 p.m. he "motioned a request for a blanket" to an officer, [who] ... turned away. Three hours later he asked another officer, who brought him an aluminum-foil "astronaut blanket."

At 6:30 a.m. he was handcuffed again, searched again, and transferred to another federal facility. On the ride there he met three Central

American men—one whose parents had taken him to New Jersey when he was two years old. As an adult he was deported to a Mexican city he didn't remember. At this facility they were all told to strip, searched again, and put in oversized jumpsuit uniforms. Then he was taken to one more facility, where several men were crowded into one cell with one steel toilet.

After some time, federal agents released Matthew out on the street in San Diego. Soon his coworkers greeted him with hugs. For the previous 24 hours, they hadn't known where he was held, what he was held for, or what kind of shape he was in.

Writing later about his ordeal, Matthew said: "I realized that what [the authorities] were willing to do to me, a white man with U.S. Citizenship in the midst of dozens of media outlets and cameras in broad daylight, I could only imagine how little it would take for them to abuse a migrant struggling to survive as they cross the border in the night." This is what drives him to go to the farthest edge of his comfort zone, and then go beyond it.

Matthew has written about notable younger adults who organize for justice in the U.S. but are not yet citizens of this country. For them, going to the far edge of comfort means risking deportation.

In an email to those of us who went to San Diego, Matthew highlighted several news accounts of the interfaith protest on the beach—magazines, newspapers, TV networks and online. (Links listed after sermon.) That border witness event brought many of us to the far edge of our comfort zones, but it brought significant media attention across the country.

My lessons from this journey include this:

Each one of us is responsible for discerning where the far edge of our comfort zone is and for deciding whether to land there. For some of us, we won't know until we're there and feeling the discomfort. For many of us, our comfort zones are defined not only by our tolerance for tension and uncertainty, but by our commitments to work or family. Every one of us has to figure out where that is for us in whatever situation we find ourselves.

The edge of your comfort zone could be signing a petition. For a parent, it could be having your child along with you at a rally—or in the voting booth. It could be talking about the news

together with your child, which is not easy to do in these times.

For some of us, the edge of our comfort zone might be making at least one telephone call every month to a public official's office. For others, getting to the farthest edge of our comfort zone might be learning how to talk about an issue with others, such as people who are undecided on an issue or those on the other side of it.

Perhaps we're not able to do any physical work to get to the far edge of our comfort zone, and instead we choose to support causes or campaigns with our monetary donations. Giving money may not seem like a stretch. It may not seem like the far edge of your comfort zone. If not, then consider giving lots more, until it does. There are so many ways we can stretch ourselves in the direction of our values and our hopes for a better world.

Working for justice and equity—working for peace—is not peaceful, if by peace you mean the surface calm of the status quo. That's why it helps to have companions, people who help us learn, help us discern our path, and help to guide us as we move on that path.

No matter who we are, it is up to us to choose whether to move toward the edge of our comfort zone, and how, and what that looks like. Let us be willing to discern and to learn. Let us have the courage. Let us encourage one another. In the days ahead of us, may we feel the blessedness of discomfort as we stretch ourselves toward our hopes for a better world. So may it be. Amen.

### **Websites:**

[UU Service Committee](#)

[American Friends Service Committee](#)

### **Media Coverage:**

[Associated Press Dec. 10, 2018](#)

[Newsweek Dec. 11, 2018](#)

[Yes! Magazine Dec. 11, 2018](#)

[UU World magazine Dec. 14, 2018](#)

## Reflection on Intolerance by Jed Shapiro

I attend weekly club meetings to improve my public speaking skills. Many members who attend are émigrés from diverse countries representing unique ethnicities and religious convictions.

For some time I've been troubled by one of our long time members and a reference he makes. When in front of the group, he refers to the United States as, "this great Christian nation," stated with pride. I'm uncomfortable with what sounds like disregard for the many non-Christians in the room including Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Agnostics, and Atheists. I also feel excluded because I identify as Jewish. Most of all, I don't understand why he would make such an insensitive and divisive proclamation – and be smug about it.

There's something else about his assertion I don't understand. My fellow club member is himself an immigrant. He fled a repressive regime and came to this country seeking freedom and acceptance. Back when he arrived, a more aspirational American immigration system welcomed his resettlement, without judgement as to on his country of origin, ethnicity, or religious beliefs.

My friend found a place – as have so many others – in this Nation built on a foundation of diversity. And yet, his words feel like they deny inclusiveness and respect for his fellow club members whose religious identities differ from his own.

How many have come to this country seeking freedom from danger and persecution – only to advocate closing our borders behind them to prevent others from doing the same.

I for one would not be with you today – literally, I would not be – if Albert Rothstein had not been welcomed to these shores in 1912. Albert's parents scrimped and saved for

steamship passage, then took a leap of faith, sending their 16 year old son – alone – to carry their hopes and dreams to the U.S. where he joined relatives living in New Jersey. Here, they envisioned, he could find a life free of authoritarianism and the right to worship who and how he wished.

Albert eventually met and married Anna Hanzer, another Russian émigré. He started and grew a business that not only supported his family, but provided jobs for dozens of workers and their families. Together Albert and Anna had three children; my Aunt, Uncle, and my Mother. They sent all to college and these three young people earned professional degrees, married, raised families, and thrived.

Mine is the third chapter – the third generation – of an American success story. Along the way I was taught to understand that diversity enriches us all – and makes us stronger as a nation. Back at the public speaking club I embrace the group's diversity. I feel particularly proud and protective of our English-as-a-second-language speakers, who are working hard to improve their ability to communicate in the language of this new land. But I've let them down. I feel the weight of responsibility to do something about this "Great Christian nation" thing... and I haven't. My conscience keeps taking me to task: "What's the point of having integrity if you can't find a way to act on your convictions?" I know, that's a good question.

What would you do?