

Are You a Square Peg Trying to Fit in a Round Hole?

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That poor Yeti in our Time For All Ages story. He felt so alone. He felt he did not fit in.

I have felt like that Yeti at points during my life, especially when I was a child. We moved many different places and each time I would have to start at a new school. I tried so hard to fit in. I would laugh really loud at someone's joke or try to share some of my lunch. Most of the time, it turned into trying to please others. And for some reason no matter what I did, I never felt like I belonged.

By a show of hands, who here has had a point in their life when they felt they did not belong?

We humans are hard wired for connection and likewise, we are hard wired to build walls of separation.

We love to put ourselves and others into categories. Seahawk Fans and Raiders Fans. Democrats and Republicans. West-coasters and East-coasters. Oh, and that area in the middle, Mid-westerners. Christians and Muslims.

We love to generalize and categorize. Why? Because it is what has kept us safe. We knew who or what was a threat and we banded together to face it. It's also simpler to group people together. It is too complicated to try to assess every single person to understand if they are friend or foe.

When we do this, we lose the ability to reduce our fear. The more generalized we see people the bigger the threat they can be. We lose sight of their humanity. We lose contact with our own connection to humanity by walling ourselves off from each other.

Recently, a story circulated through Facebook, a wife messaged her husband on the way home and she shares:

I had the most unreal experience. I boarded the train and took a seat on the inside next to the window. This woman sits down in the seat in front of me and slowly the train begins to fill up. Then a man with a turban sits down next to her. She starts shifting in her seat looking around to see if there are any free seats but the train is full. The train departs and she's fidgeting and then it turns to mumbling about how she's uncomfortable. Then the man takes a call and speaks in a foreign language. At that point, she declares "that's it" and gets up and asks if anyone will switch seats with her. I volunteer and she thanks me. I say "I'm not

It's easy to put the walls up. It's easy to assume someone is a threat. Not only is it easy to put walls up to keep us safe from other people. It is even easier to put a wall up around ourselves.

According to Brene Brown, "Belonging starts with self-acceptance. Your level of belonging, in fact, can never be greater than your level of self-acceptance, because believing that you're enough is what gives you the courage to be authentic, vulnerable and imperfect. When we don't have that, we shape-shift and turn into chameleons; we hustle for the worthiness we already possess."

When we feel unworthy and unloved, then we build a wall around ourselves preventing us from connecting to others. For us to find a place of belonging, we need to first start with love and acceptance of ourselves.

As Mary Oliver reminded us in our wisdom today:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

This thinking of categorizing people and ourselves has deep theological roots. The believers and non-believers. The saved and the damned. Heaven-bound and hell-bound. Deep roots.

In our tradition, there are deep roots of acceptance and love, specifically in our Universalist roots. According to Universalist Minister Hosea Ballou in his Treatise of Atonement, each and everyone of us have the ability to access love. This love can come from God or this love can come from a force bigger than ourselves. No matter what, each of us have the ability, if we let ourselves, to access love. Ballou also reminds us we can only find true salvation or access to that love by recognizing our connections to each other. Finally, Ballou affirms we are all worthy of God's love, no matter if we believe in a God or not. We are all loved and worthy of love.

Ballou wrote the Treatise of Atonement in 1807. It was radical then, and it is radical now. To truly embrace Universalism, we have to drop all judgment of ourselves and others. In fact, Ballou insists it's not our job to judge. If God loves us unconditionally, then there is no room for judgment. If there is a sin in Universalism, it is judging whether we or anyone is worthy of love.

The wife on the train had more to say in her story to her husband. If you remember, she had volunteered to take the lady's seat and the lady thanked her. She continues:

I volunteer and she thanks me. I say "I'm not doing it for your comfort, I'm doing it for this poor man who has done nothing to offend you" and I move and sit next to him. He didn't say anything at first, but he squeezed my hand as he got off the train and said "thank you, God be with you".

It is easy to put up walls. To deny love. However, it is powerful to knock those walls down and let love shine. The little red bird knocked the wall down for the

Yeti, which allowed him to receive and give love to the other animals in the forest. When I embraced who I was and knocked down my own wall, I have the distinct memory of when it was...I was in Jr High, at lunch, and I had done something and someone called me weird. At that moment something clicked in place, and I turned to the person and said, "You're right, I am. Thank you for the compliment." Of course, the person did not mean it as a compliment, but it no longer mattered to me what the person thought. I was able to realize I did need to fit in to belong.

Love is powerful and to truly practice Universalist Love, we are challenged by the evil in the world. We are hesitant to offer love unconditionally for fear we will get hurt or those we love will get hurt. I know some of you have asked how do we even try to love certain political candidates.

I offer a story from the Preemptive Love Coalition, a global movement of peacemakers changing the way we engage the world's most polarizing conflicts by confronting fear with acts of love. The story starts with:

"You've killed my friend. But I've come here to feed you."

Sadiq (Sa deek) crouched low, holding a bottle of cold water to the man's lips. We were astonished by what he said, there in a crowded detainee compound in the middle of the desert outside Fallujah (Fa Lu Jah), where hundreds of suspected ISIS militants are held.

On this mission, we set out to feed our enemies and clothe captives with dignity.

"Love Anyway."

This two-word provocation (pro vo cation)—how far does it go? It's taken us to Libya, to save the lives of dying children. It's prompted us to feed starving families in the Fallujah desert. It's helped Iraqi widows rebuild lives torn apart by American bombs.

It's also led to fatwas and death threats against us. We've seen friends murdered, martyred, and kidnapped. We've wept beside mass graves and watched ISIS chemical rockets slam into communities. Members of our team

have been bombed and held at gunpoint—because love means going to the hard places.

But what does it look like to "love anyway" when you're standing face to face with your enemy?

But go beyond the surface-level reasoning, and it gets more complicated. **What does it actually mean to be part of ISIS?**

If a man joined at gunpoint or because ISIS threatened his family, is he guilty? What if he never fired a bullet or lifted a knife? What if he only fought because his family was starving and there was no other way to put food on the table? What about the 7-year-old boy who was brainwashed into fighting or the teenager whose father volunteered him for a suicide mission? Are they guilty?

What about those convicted of fighting for ISIS, like the prisoner sitting with his back against the wall, facing Sadiq? What then? Is this man no longer worthy of love? Do we no longer say, "Love anyway"?

For most of us, ISIS is a faceless horde, spreading across the Middle East and beyond.

For our friend Sadiq, ISIS is a bound, blindfolded prisoner with water dribbling down the front of his yellow jumpsuit. Sadiq recognized the man sitting in front of him. He had seen him before, in an ISIS propaganda video.

In that video, this man stood in a line of tribal sheikhs who were loyal to ISIS and read a speech condemning a captured Iraqi security official. The officer was then executed and the grisly recording posted online. That slain officer was Sadiq's friend.

As the crisis in Fallujah unfolded—as we brought food and water to thousands of displaced families—we knew that preemptive love meant going to the detainment compounds, too.

When we proposed this distribution to Iraqi leaders, some were astonished. "How did you even think to do this?" one asked. "We haven't heard this idea from anyone else."

Others said, "You can't do that."

"They're getting what they had coming to them."

"Security first."

But we believe only light can drive out darkness. Love is the only real answer to hate. So we went anyway—and gave food, water, and clothing to hundreds of high-risk detainees in the compounds outside Fallujah.

ISIS beheads and burns its enemies. That's why we must feed and clothe ours.

ISIS distorts faith to justify killing. That's why we must seek the best of faith to preserve life and overcome corrupted religion.

ISIS treats its enemies as monsters or animals—which is precisely why we must not, why we must say no to torture and starvation. No to enhanced interrogation. No to collective punishment and the presumption of guilt.

Arrest, investigate, try, convict, and, if guilty, imprison—yes. But never sink to your enemy's level. Always treat them with respect. We are only as good as how we treat our worst enemy.

Yes, we all have our own politics. Yes, we have our own religion. Love anyway. Step out across enemy lines and embrace conflict rather than run. Your love has

the ability to transcend guilt, shame, and indifference. Wrap your arms around those you fear, and invite others to do the same.

If we are to truly embrace Universalist Love, this is what it means. Let me be clear...people can be worthy of love and still held accountable for their actions, their words, and their impacts. We can be worthy of love and still be held accountable for our actions, our words, and our impacts.

We start by embracing that love for ourselves and knowing we are worthy of love. We accept ourselves as imperfect, flawed, and beautiful beings. Once we realize this, we will understand we belong wherever we are.

Then, we open up our understanding that to truly be connected we have to create places for others to know they are loved. Because, as Ballou reminds us, the only true salvation or full access to love is through our connections to each other.

Any walls we create around ourselves or others, limit the power of that love.

Let us forgive easily; expect imperfection; show our vulnerabilities; and drop our superiority. Or as Mary Oliver suggests:

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-
over and over announcing your place
In the family of things.

We all have a place in the family of things, no matter what our shape or category. Amen.