Trust

Trust is the oil that lubricates the wheels of social interaction. Without it, we are immobilized, stuck in place, fearful of moving, afraid of getting hurt. Without trust, the world is a lonely and frightening place.

Consider the trust it takes to enter a traffic intersection, where major thoroughfares cross. We enter only because we trust that others will follow the established rules of the road. Intersections are by nature, risky, even dangerous places. Yet, enter we must, if we are to get to where we are going.

Unitarian Universalism exists at the intersection of many great religious traditions. It takes trust to enter. Author Annie Dillard may have gotten it right when she wrote, “It is madness to wear ladies hats and straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets.”

The religious endeavor is not without risk. Here we open ourselves to other people, other points of view, other beliefs, and other spiritual expressions. We expand our horizons, push beyond our comfort zones, and reach for high ideals. We tread into uncharted territory, daring to believe in the possibility that our lives can be transformed. We make ourselves vulnerable in the process; hence the need for crash helmets.

When trust is broken, the instinct is to protect our self from further pain by withholding trust. This type of mistrust is the mistaken idea that we can somehow control the circumstances and outcomes of our lives. Like the woman hurt in a painful divorce, vowing never to trust men again, generalized mistrust is at the heart of bigotry and prejudice. Think of how much mistrust of Muslims occurred after the attacks of September 11.

Closely related to faith, trust is not given blindly. Buddhist teacher and writer, Sharon Salzberg defines faith as “trusting your own deepest experience.” Through experience, we learn who and what is most worthy of our trust.

Henry David Thoreau once said, “I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do.” Here at the intersection, where many great religions meet, trust keeps us moving -- moving toward a vision of a world transformed by our care.

Yours in faith,

Diane
Ministering to Children with Special Needs
by, Kathleen Hogue- Religious Education Coordinator

In our religious education program for grades preschool - 8, we have been learning the Unitarian Universalist principles. The first three are:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations

These three principles really speak to me and lead me to ask this question: If we believe that every person born on this earth is born with a mission and a purpose, should be treated fairly and with compassion, and should be accepted and encouraged to grow spiritually - what does this say about our ministry to children and youth with special needs?

Children and youth who come to our church with special needs can create challenges for religious educators and congregations as a whole. Often children with special needs remind us of our own human frailty. Their living presence challenges us to face our own fears. Consequently, our response can be to turn away such children and their families or ignore their presence altogether.

For our religious educators there is the challenge of teaching the child. Our goal as UU religious educators is to provide a place where children who struggle can realize their purpose, their mission - to be allowed to teach us what they know as well as learn from us.

For congregants there is a general lack of information about how to respond to these children. Sometimes disruptive, highly difficult children are too much for congregants to handle during our Sunday morning services. One caring, concerned adult in the life of a struggling child can make all the difference.

In February of 2008 I attended a weekend-long training led by Sally Patton. Sally is the author of Welcoming Children with Special Needs: A Guidebook for Faith Communities. In late January to early February of 2009 we will begin phase one of our plan to become a welcoming and inclusive congregation to children with special needs. I hope you will become involved with this very important work. Being who we are -- Unitarian Universalists -- does not end with the morning worship; it is a lifelong endeavor in which we live our beliefs. We must embrace our UU principles to honor the sacredness of all life, then our ministry to all children and all people is as it should be.

For more information on how you can become involved please contact Kathleen Hogue @Kathleen-hogue@qwestoffice.net.

He drew a circle to shut me out,
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win.
We drew a circle that took him in.

Poet Edwin Markham
in "Outwitted"
Awakening Compassion on the Border
(An article on the home page of the UUA.org web site)

"Are You Angels?"
Gonzalo lay on the side of a remote ranch road in the Arizona desert, hovering in and out of consciousness. Since drinking contaminated water from a cattle tank three days before, vomiting and diarrhea had left him severely dehydrated. Alone and immobile, without medical care or water, Gonzalo resigned himself to death only a dozen miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border.

But fate brought angels to Gonzalo in the form of humanitarian aid workers who found him as they patrolled the Sonoran desert.

Volunteers from No More Deaths (NMD), a ministry of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson, carefully laid Gonzalo in the back of their pick-up. He asked if he was dreaming, then if his rescuers were angels. Noting Gonzalo’s extensive bruises and difficulty breathing the volunteers started making calls to arrange for an ambulance back into town -- an hour-long drive on rugged and washed out back roads.

One of the aid workers administering water to Gonzalo and treating his blisters on the ride to meet the ambulance was Marta Caminero-Santangelo, a Unitarian Universalist (UU) who had traveled from Lawrence, Kansas, to spend a week working with No More Deaths.

Aware that two NMD volunteers had been arrested and charged with human smuggling while transporting immigrants to receive medical aid in 2005, Marta, who had two young children at home, had planned to avoid situations which might put her at legal risk. But seeing Gonzalo, who so obviously needed serious medical attention, changed that. “There is just no way I wouldn’t have helped him get to a hospital,” Marta said later.

When the truck reached the No More Deaths base camp, Gonzalo was put in the care of another Unitarian Universalist, Walt Staton. Along with Maryada Vallet, a volunteer Emergency Medical Technician, Walt accompanied Gonzalo to the waiting ambulance. After being taken to a hospital in Nogales, Arizona, Gonzalo was treated, then deported -- but he was alive. Without the help he received from NMD, he almost certainly would have joined the hundreds of persons who die crossing the border each year.

A Religious Response to Suffering
Staton, who grew up in Prescott, AZ, first heard about No More Deaths in 2004, when the organization arose out of a coalition of faith-based humanitarian and immigrant rights groups in response to the skyrocketing number of deaths. In the mid-1990s, new border walls and increased enforcement in El Paso and San Diego created a “funnel effect,” steering would-be border crossers towards more remote and difficult crossing points. Hundreds of people fell victim to the harsh conditions of the Sonoran Desert. Annual deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border went from 87 in 1996 to over 500 in 2005.

The summer after No More Deaths was founded, a record was set for deaths along the Arizona-Mexico border. According to data from medical examiners, 279 people perished in Arizona alone while attempting to enter the United States during the 2004 to 2005 fiscal year.

No More Deaths/No Más Muertes was a religious response to the suffering: volunteers would provide food, water, and medical care to save the lives of border crossers. As the movement expanded, it outgrew its ad-hoc relationship with a local Presbyterian church and went searching for a new sponsor in 2007.

By that time, Walt Staton was active as a full-time NMD volunteer. He coordinated desert aid camps, conducted media outreach and fundraising, performed vehicle maintenance, and did “just about anything to be useful.” To help cope with the emotional strain from his experiences, Staton began attending services at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson.

During the winter of 2007, Staton gave a presentation on No More Deaths to the congregation’s immigrant rights group. During the presentation, he mentioned that NMD was searching for a new sponsoring organization. A church member suggested that the congregation might be able to fill the role. Over the next few months, a congregational policy team investigated the legal and financial implications of such a commitment. In May, 2008, the congregation voted unanimously to adopt No More Deaths as a ministry of the church.

As an official ministry, No More Deaths is part of the fabric of the congregation, receiving financial and direct support. Religious education classes gather supplies for “migrant packs,” basic desert survival kits containing nonperishable food, first aid and sanitary supplies, and extra pairs of socks. This summer, the congregation’s YRUU group spent four days volunteering at a NMD camp, patrolling the desert and maintaining water stations.

Congregation members are encouraged to accompany NMD volunteers in attending immigration court proceedings once a week in order to promote accountability in the justice system. Congregation member Voncille Henry, a retired social worker, described her experience witnessing the court proceedings:

“[The migrants] were led in and sat on one side of the room. The judge had an interpreter and she told them... that they’d be called up to answer whether or not they were guilty. As I
understand it, they are informed prior to the court hearing that they can plead guilty or not guilty, but if they plead ‘not guilty,’ they will be held indefinitely in jail and that there's no way to know how long it would take to get legal representation for them. So many of them, most all of them, opted to plead guilty. It made me physically ill to see the looks on their faces as they walked out of the room. Because it was the end of their valiant effort to provide for their families and to give [them] a different way of life.”

For the holidays, the UU Church of Tucson and NMD created an activity called “Holiday Hospitality,” in which participants recorded their answers to a different question each day for twenty-one days, questions such as: “If detained by the Border Patrol, a migrant will have all of his/her personal belongings taken and sometimes not returned. How many accessories are you wearing?” “Migrants often leave their entire families behind in order to start a new life in the U.S. How many family members will you be in touch with this holiday weekend?” By multiplying their answers by a designated amount -- ten cents, twenty-five cents, a dollar -- participants determined a suggested holiday donation to No More Deaths.

Two Ways to Help
The UU Church of Tucson is working on creating even more avenues for congregation members to become involved. But there are also ways that Unitarian Universalists across the country can help. Many, like Marta Caminero-Santangelo, already have.

Rev. Diane Dowgiert, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson, says that two ways for UUs to support NMD, no matter where they live, come immediately to mind. The first is to make a direct monetary contribution. No More Deaths is staffed entirely by volunteers, and there is a constant need for financial support so that humanitarian aid can reach at-risk migrants. Donations can be made by sending a check to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Tucson at 4831 E. 22 St., Tucson, AZ, 85711, and designating on the check that the donation is intended for No More Deaths.

Dowgiert's second suggestion is for Unitarian Universalists to travel to Tucson to volunteer. “I think that there's really no way you can understand the human dimension of immigration enforcement and fully understand what the experience of crossing the border is like until you've been here and you've seen it. So I would encourage people to go to the No More Deaths website and see if they can become volunteers and get that human face, and take that back to their community so they can spread that awareness and be better advocates,” she said.

Bringing the Border to the Capital
Recently, NMD brought that awareness to the nation's capital. In September, No More Deaths released a 104 page report titled “Crossing the Line: Human Rights Abuses of Migrants in Short-Term Custody on the Arizona/Sonora Border.” A delegation traveled to Washington, DC, delivering it to lawmakers and networking with other human and immigrant rights groups, including the Unitarian Universalist Association Washington Office for Advocacy.

“Crossing the Line” contains 345 stories of abuse of migrants by the Border Patrol, documented by No More Deaths volunteers from 2006 to 2008. When immigrants are caught by Border Patrol, they are temporarily detained while their immigration status and criminal record are checked. Processing can take anywhere from a few hours to three days. The stories describe improper medical care, denial of water, physical and verbal abuse, and failures to inform migrants of their rights while in Border Patrol custody.

This December, copies of the report are being delivered to President-Elect Barack Obama's transition team and to the Mexican Embassy. No MoreDeaths is working with Congressional leaders to call for an investigation into the treatment of people in Border Patrol custody and the organization is partnering with human rights groups to propose enforceable standards that will apply to the Department of Homeland Security.

In a sermon Rev. Dowgiert preached in November 2008, she reflected on her experience volunteering with NMD this summer. She said, “The world’s religions teach that we are to welcome the stranger, that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. I know there are those who say that humanitarian aid only encourages more migrants to risk crossing the border illegally. I believe it is much more complex than that. For many of those who cross, the journey is begun not in hope, but desperation, driven not by greed, but survival. Many who cross make not for a chance at a better life, but for a chance at life itself. My day in the desert borderlands convinced me more than ever that policy reform must be grounded in moral ethical consideration, not just an expedient outcome .... Policy reform must come from a place of awakened compassion and must consider the values of human life. The place to awaken compassion is on the border.”