

Capacity to Destroy
A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation
By The Rev. CJ McGregor
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We must all have current events on our mind this morning. As the stories unfold we are left asking ourselves and others, “how could they do that?” and “what’s wrong with them?” We are left thinking about the human’s capacity to destroy, to live in desolation. You might remember that last week I compared consolation and desolation, which is our theme for our messages this month. We as Unitarian Universalists look to that which holds us, spiritually, for comfort, joy, satisfaction, hope, and peace. This is consolation. We are challenged and moved away from our pursuit of truth and meaning by the wicked, the immoral, and the malicious. This is desolation.

And so, I’ve been thinking a lot about desolation and our capacity to destroy. I’ve wondered if desolation is innate. That is, I wonder if we are born with the capacity to destroy. Where does our ability, capability, our fitness to destroy and bring about desolation come from? If we’re not born with it, then are we taught it, is there a cultural or societal osmosis of sorts where a gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas passes through us?

If human civilization ever wipes itself out, aliens or one of our successors will cast an eye on our ruined planet and ask themselves what ever happened to humans. The root cause won’t be a specific catastrophe, conflict or devastation that eradicates us; the problem will begin with the architecture of the human brain. However, our alien friends will also note that the human mind contained another component, very influential but far less impressive, known as the reptilian brain, an aggressive lustful impulsive section of machinery, with a great deal more in common with what might be found in a wild canine or a small rodent.

Because of this reptilian brain, humans ended up with some serious problems. Firstly, tribalism. Humans are always on the verge of developing violent hatreds of foreigners and manifested strong ongoing tendencies to crush strangers in vast numbers. They can never reliably see the humanity in all members of their own kind. Secondly, humans are fatefully prone to short-term thinking. Even when confronted by data, humans can only imagine the near-term future, a few years at best, viewing the long-term as an unreal state. Human impulses are left uncontained and work to destroy its individual and collective future. Lastly, humans have an especially intense fondness for wishful thinking. Though capable of immense intellectual achievement, its mind hated to reflect on itself. Humans prefer to act rather than think and daydream rather than plan. Having invented the scientific method, it preferred – in most cases – not to use it.

For many generations, these flaws were more or less endured. Certain institutions were invented to temper them: the law, sound government, education, science. It worked, sort of. Humans keep wiping out swathes of their fellows, but they didn’t wreck the species as a whole. These aliens will discover that what caused the ultimate destruction was the increasing power of the reptilian brain. This mighty tool eventually managed to capture fire, contain the elements, and give humans a godlike power over the planet. The cost of its mistakes grew ever larger, its powers became uncontained while human wisdom remained intermittent and fragile. Eventually, human might outpaced its capacity for self-control

Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk, a leading expert in trauma once said, "Our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another." In our alien story, there is one thing that might have saved humanity: love. The love of the stranger; the capacity to see the other as like oneself and worthy of the same mercy and charity. The love of and concern for those who do not yet exist and whom one will never know but whose lives one is shaping in the selfish present. The love of the truth: the strength to resist illusion and lies and square up to uncomfortable facts of all kinds. We don't need to be aliens of the future to understand all this. We can see the disaster scenario only too well right now. The fate of civilization lies ultimately not in the law courts, at the ballot box or in the corridors of governments. It lies in our ability to master the most short-term, selfish and violent of our impulses active in the dense folds of organic matter between our ears; it lies in learning how fiercely to compensate for the flawed architecture of our minds.

There is a book I recommend titled *Handbook for the Heart* edited by Benjamin Shield and Richard Carlson. It is a compilation of original essays written by 34 of today's best-known teachers of love. Just as the spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi once said, "My life is my message," Shield and Carlson view these authors as living out their lives consistently with their commitment to a loving existence. Each, they say, tells us "in a unique and personal way . . . with certainty how the heart is the fundamental source of our connection with all of life. Let me offer you a few of my favorites from this book.

Deepak Chopra urges us to consciously bring love into our lives. "My best advice is this," he says. "With every encounter, with every single human being you meet, ask yourself one simple question: 'What can I give this person?' He says, "There is always something you can offer, and the giving is always very powerful. You can say something nice, or even silently wish the person happiness or some other type of goodwill. Even the thought of blessing someone, sending loving thoughts, or giving a simple silent prayer has the power to affect others."

Stephen and Ondrea Levine emphasize that, to be truly loving, we must live in the present. But most of us are short on love because we have a closed heart. And, they add, many people "die" before their time - die a spiritual death, long before their physical death, from want of pursuing moments of the heart; and they die from denying so many parts of their true nature. Nothing opens the heart like watching what closes it, distracts it, dilutes it or confuses it, say these authors. We also expand our hearts when we hone ourselves to recognize our own spiritual thrusts toward love - "a moment of mercy here, a millisecond of forgiveness there."

Nathaniel Branden stresses that at no time in history has the word love been used so promiscuously as it is at present. As we toss the word around freely, we compromise it: "Just as a currency, in the process of becoming more and more inflated, has less and less purchasing power, so words, through an analogous process of inflation, through being used less and less discriminately, are progressively emptied of meaning. "It is possible," Branden writes, "to feel benevolence and goodwill toward human beings one does not know or does not know very well. It is not possible to feel love . . . Love by its very nature entails a process of selection, of discrimination. Love is our response to what represents our highest values. Love is a response to distinctive characteristics possessed by some beings but not by all. Otherwise, what would be the tribute of love?"

Rabbi Harold Kushner advises us to incorporate the element of forgiveness into our relationships and allow others their quirks. He, for example, hopes - when he is in a bad mood - that his wife "is prepared to write it off as just a bad mood, not the essential me." Kushner offers a story to illustrate: "Some years ago, I read a wonderful newspaper column. A woman sees two children in a playground get into a fight. One of them says, 'I hate you. I never want to play with you again.' For two or three minutes they play separately, and then they come back and start playing with each other again. The observer says to a woman sitting next to her, 'How do children do that? Be so angry one moment and together the next?' And the neighbor says, 'Oh, it's easy. They choose happiness over righteousness.' "

Jack Kornfield recommends that - if you want to love - take time to listen to your heart. In today's busyness we forget what matters most - "we have been distracted and drawn into the marketplace. Our lives are complex, and our times are materialistic, ambitious, outer-directed." And, therefore, our hearts are not available to us.

Carl Jung once wrote, "The individual who wishes to have an answer to the problem of evil has need, first and foremost, of self-knowledge, that is, in the utmost possible knowledge of his own wholeness. He must know relentlessly how much good he can do, and what crimes he is capable of, and must beware of regarding the one as real and the other as illusion. Both are elements within his nature, and both are bound to come to light in him, should he wish — as he ought — to live without self-deception or self-delusion."

Let us consider all this and answer the questions I posed this morning. I've wondered if desolation is innate. That is, I wonder if we are born with the capacity to destroy. Where does our ability, capability, our fitness to destroy and bring about desolation come from? If we're not born with it, then are we taught it, is there a cultural or societal osmosis of sorts where a gradual or unconscious assimilation of ideas passes through us? Yes, the capacity to destroy is within us. This capacity sits on a wide spectrum from destroying a relationship to destroying a democracy. Even greater is our capacity to heal and love.

One of the most remarkable qualities of Nature is its capacity to heal itself. We must wonder at the remarkable intelligence that allows all living systems to be able to regenerate themselves in the face of trauma, and to consider healing and trauma as a wider pattern of evolution. This pattern is at work at the cellular level, all the way to the level of the whole organism, and the wider ecosystem.

Despite the ravages of even the most extreme forms of destruction, given the right opportunities, forests regenerate after fire. Space is given for new growth and enhanced bio-diversity. Similarly, ocean floors process natural oil seepage. Microbes capture the carbon and enrich the nutrient profile by weaving it back into the food chain. These are just two examples of Nature's capacity to heal itself. As beings of Nature ourselves, this capacity for self-healing is alive within us, too. From individual to the societal levels, we can learn to create the right conditions for these processes to occur.

And so, that is our calling. To fiercely compensate for our minds and build our capacity to heal. One of the functions of our faith is to return ourselves, return others, and return our planet to wholeness.

May it be so.