

“Purple Power”
Rev. Maj-Britt Johnson
February 27, 2005

READING #1

There is a danger, in issue-oriented groups not based on community, that the enemy is seen as being the one outside of the group. The world gets divided between ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’. We are among the good; the others are the bad. In issue-oriented groups, the enemy is always outside. We must struggle against all those who are outside of our group, all those who are of the other party.

True community is different because of the realization that the evil is inside—not just inside the community, but inside me. I cannot think of taking the speck of dust out of my neighbor’s eye unless I am working on the log in my own. Evil is here in me. Warfare is inside my own community, and I am called to be an agent of peace there. But warfare is also inside me and I am called to seek wholeness inside of myself. Healing begins here, in my self. Wholeness and unity begin inside my self. If I am growing toward wholeness, then I’ll be an agent of wholeness. If our community is an agent of wholeness, then it will be a source of life for the world around it.

-Jean Vanier

READING # 2

“There was a time when my aggravation with the system focused on Caspar Weinberger, secretary of defense. I’m sure he was no worse than many others, but there was something about his cold arrogance and apparent lack of wisdom that infuriated me.

So I got a picture of Caspar and placed it on my puja (prayer) table with all my spiritual heroes. Then, each morning when I lit my incense and honored the beings represented on the puja table, I'd feel waves of love and appreciation toward my guru, Buddha, Christ, Anandamayi Ma, Ramana Maharshi and Hanuman. I'd wish them each good morning with such tenderness. Then I'd come to Caspar's picture, and I'd feel my heart constrict, and I'd hear the coldness in my voice as I said "good morning, Caspar." Each morning I'd see what a long way I still had to go.

*But wasn't Caspar just another face of God? Couldn't I oppose his actions and still keep my heart open to him? Wouldn't it be harder for him to become free from the **role he was obviously trapped in** if I, with my mind, just kept reinforcing the traps by identifying him with his acts?...*

The Indian poet Kabir said: 'Do what you do to another person, but never put them out of your heart.' It's a tall order. But what else is there to do?" (Ram Dass)

SERMON

When I read this little piece by Ram Dass I asked myself: Who is *my* Caspar Weinberger? Who is banned from my altar, today? And so I began to free-associate a list. I told you some of this last week when I was talking about some of my barriers to unconditional love. Banned from altar are: George Bush, Dick Cheney, the Religious Right (a whole conglomeration of faces that have all melted into one) Fox News, Rupert Murdoch, people who drive pickups with gun racks in the back...The list goes on.

On a window sill in my home study is a makeshift altar, and there sit: a dancing Shiva, a couple of Buddhas, a cross, a Pueblo storytelling doll, a couple of goddess

figures, several carved Kenyan figures, pictures of family, and now, since Wednesday, clipped off the cover of Newsweek, a picture of a worried looking George Bush.

In the center of the window sill is a candle with a ribbon around it and from the ribbon hangs a little gift card that says “Honesty”. As I begin to write a sermon I light the candle and I pray for honesty. By that I mean: God, may I move beyond my limited ego as I write. Guide my heart, my thoughts, and my will, because you’re the only one with the “Big Picture.”

My real altar is in here, in my heart. That is the place where the prayer originates. **Many** times a day I find myself spontaneously naming who and what I am grateful for: family, friends, having food and a roof over my head, having love in my life, and, of late, being here in this congregation and all the opportunities to grow spiritually that this work represents. When gratitude doesn’t spontaneously well up, I do it anyway. I have learned that it is true what they say: it is very difficult to be truly depressed, or resentful, when one is filled with gratitude. My days are better and I am a kinder person when I remember my gratitude list. And doing it in the easy times seems to build up a bank account for the hard times.

That inner altar is where I am at my tenderest and most loving. George had not yet found his way in there by January 23rd when I was first scheduled to deliver this sermon (services were cancelled due to snow). But on Thursday the 20th of January, (coincidentally the day of the Presidential inauguration), I followed Ram Dass’ example and began saying: “good morning George”. And then I would stare at his picture for a little while, trying to see beyond what I first saw there. Admittedly they were not kind, and compassionate thoughts.

If I had delivered this sermon four weeks ago I would have told you what those thoughts were. But something has changed in me after being with my meditation for four weeks. I can't do it. I realized we would probably laugh together, feel a little bonding. But that is a kind of cheap togetherness. And I don't want to build community on that.

We live in a country that is polarized. Everybody says so. Red states/Blue states. Liberals/Conservatives. Bush lovers/Bush haters. Fox News watchers versus CNN watchers, Terri Gross listeners versus Rush Limbaugh listeners. And, everyone says, with a note of alarm, it's *getting worse*.

There was that map, after the election, with its big blocks of red and smaller, but thankfully denser, blocks of blue. Staring at that big Red Bloc the day after the election, one could feel concern rising, maybe even fear. To hear some analyses it was like a civil war was about to be forecast. Any year now we're going to turn into the Balkans.

But I wonder if anyone else here began to feel something contradictory stirring within, like I did as I looked at the map. Actually a lot of contradictory stirrings, and they are what I'm going to *try* to sort out today. First of all, those numbers were awfully close. 49 to 51 percent or vice versa, or something close to that in most of the states. That means there are a lot of blue people out there in those red states, holding down the fort. Thank God. And that means too that here in the blue states...oh well. A lot of red. Well, I knew that. I live in the hills of northern Appalachia, surrounded by pick up trucks with gun racks and God bless America stickers. And we all know what THAT means.

In any case, staring at that map, I realized I was being jerked around by these media images and I don't like being jerked around. It was feeding my fears, and for a few years now I've been trying to get off of the fear based diet.

When I looked inside I realized, as Jean Vanier writes “warfare is also inside me”. One side of me loves the fervor and conviction of a strongly held belief. I had been disenchanted with politicians and partisan politics for years until this election. I voted, but that was about the extent of my involvement. This one got me, and many other people I know, fired up. I found my energy again, for a little while.

The other side of me, looking at that map, once the fervor was over, and the deflation had set in, was saying: I know life is never this simple. Life is never this either/or, Black and White, or Red and Blue as the case may be. And, looking back I can see that as my interest in electoral politics picked up over the election, my biases had been activated, like troops being called up for the draft.

Two things bother me about this. One, that I could allow my self to be forced into a role in this media drama. In other words I became a media defined character, in this great drama called life in America.

Second, that I could come to think of other humans in an opposing role, also defined by others.

But wait a minute. The media certainly didn’t just invent me out of thin air. What role did I have in that? What was my buy in? I’ll get back to that in a minute.

First I want to back up my claims about the media. Actually I want to cast the net a little wider. The media gets blamed for everything; surely they are not acting alone.

I got on the internet and read some of the articles being written before and after the election and found that many had the same questions. In an article entitled: “The Myth of the Great American Divide,” Matt Miller recommends a book by *Morris Fiorina* called “Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America,” *He says that Fiorina makes a*

persuasive argument that the whole culture-war narrative is trumped up by political and media elites, who find it in their self-interest to shape the terms of debate this way in order to win elections, raise money for activist groups or drive ratings.”

Now, when I hear the word “elites”, I bristle because of course that is what we liberals are called by those right wing talk show hosts. It’s one of those code words, trigger words, and so immediately I might wonder, well then what is that writer’s bias? Whose *side* is he really on in this culture war? If he’s using *their* code word. My political mind wants to find a place to fit him. But at the same time I’m thinking, forget the labels, what he says is making sense.

War, of any kind, definitely makes for news. I guess the media would find it more difficult to report the following findings, which might in fact have cast their entire map as varying shades of purple:

(In another article in the Washington Post the author writes) *“If the country were more polarized, you'd expect to find it in the polls. You don't. After scouring surveys, sociologist Paul DiMaggio of Princeton University concluded that "the public actually has become more unified in attitudes toward race, gender and crime since the 1970s." One standard poll item asks respondents to react to this statement: "I don't have much in common with people of other races." In 1987, 23 percent agreed; by 2002, only 15 percent did.”*

That’s good news huh? I think we should celebrate that.

He goes on: “Of course, strong disagreements (on abortion, for instance) remain. But these disguise large areas of consensus; 80 percent or more of Americans regularly support environmental regulation.

*...What's actually happened is that politics, and not the country, has become more polarized. By politics, I mean elected officials, party activists, advocates, **highly engaged voters**, and commentators (TV talking heads, pundits”).*

These hypotheses bear witness to the doubts and questions my better side was raising, perhaps yours too? The one that is suspicious of its own fervor. Complexity is so much more difficult to live with than raw passion. It requires so much more patience.

I am afraid that when my fervent, old school political activist, highly engaged voter side, was reactivated I became just what the extremist talking heads on right wing radio shows say I am: an elitist, latte-sipping liberal.

Make that an elitist, decaf, gingerbread latte with skim milk sipping liberal, to be precise.

There's enough truth in the accusation of "elitist" that it can be used by the loud, manipulative voices on TV and radio, to drum up fear and loathing amongst the many in the middle. Just as we liberals, however coolly, also maintain a certain image of a large portion of America through the use of our code words and code images; like my use of the words: red neck, gun toting, God Bless America bumper sticker truck driving, neighbors.

“In his search for polarization, sociologist DiMaggio examined many subgroups by age, race, sex and education. None exhibited more polarization, with one exception: people who identified as "strong" Republicans or Democrats. That's about 30 percent of adults.

...Polarization and nastiness are not side effects. They are the game. You feel good about yourself because the other side is so fanatical, misguided, corrupt and dishonest.” (ibid)

Oooh the sting of truth. I am so grateful that an elitist, latte-sipping liberal is not *all* that I am. But I am very disconcerted that in a sense, if I've been part of this polarizing 30% then I have more in common with the extreme right and those talking heads than I ever really understood.

We are minorities in this country, my judgmental elitist half, and the extremists on the right. Together, it would appear, we are part of creating the culture war. We were not just cast into role. We created them for ourselves, and others are simply reflecting them back to us.

The so called culture wars stir up a dust storm which obscures the fact that we, my better half and a red stater's better half, might have much more in common with each other, better things, than our shared propensity to categorize each other.

If the data is correct, and we do actually agree on quite a number of things, then I have to begin asking: who and what is being served by promoting this view of a polarized America? On a deeper level than only the commercialization of news or our ego needs.

When I asked myself this I remembered analyses I'd read years ago about the complexities of class and race in the south, I'm sure you've read them too. They described how the white power block in the south deliberately, systematically, worked to pit black people against poor whites in order to keep them divided.

Blacks were encouraged to see them as poor white trash so they'd have someone to see as lower than themselves and struggle only to stay that notch above. Meanwhile

poor whites are being told blacks are lower because they were former slaves, and so they too can focus their energies on making sure they stay a notch above.

Now who did this little system serve? What if those two groups, poor whites and poor blacks, had banded together to notice that they were both on the bottom? Both poor and mistreated and used against each other? Who would the focus be on then? The powers that were manipulating them of course. That had to be prevented. So deep resentments and attitudes were encouraged, carefully fed and watered until they no longer had to be encouraged they'd taken deep root. This was every bit as careful and systematic a process as any other form of institutionalized racism.

Who or what is being served by the nurturing of our extreme attitudes toward other political groups? And by the nurturing of our shorthand and code language for each other. I realize this sounds like I'm about to launch into a conspiracy theory but I'm not. The fact remains, conveniently for some, that if we're busy fighting each other, we can't really do much of anything effective where our mutual interests are involved, can we? And the status quo can continue.

But this is where the going gets rough. Take only one case in point. It is in all of our mutual interests to look at the war in Iraq and notice how expensive it is spiritually, morally, ethically and financially. Now I think my side is right of course. The anti-war side. I can't believe anyone could read the evidence, and not want to ask some questions of Bush. How could anyone wholeheartedly have supported him taking our troops in there in the manner he did. How could they not have noticed there were other solutions?

I have trouble getting beyond thinking that those who won't listen to the facts need to be educated. Then I remember, we live in 1984. Remember in George Orwell's

book entitled 1984, it was the truth that fell victim to tyranny. Language was used to manipulate. The power structure came up with banners that had sentences on them like: War is peace, twisting language around so horribly that it was impossible to say anything meaningful anymore to rouse people's consciences.

It feels like that today. The facts are out there. It doesn't matter. Most people know them. Information is not enough. It's not about that anymore. Somehow we make decisions primarily based on loyalty to one's own group, one's own side of the cultural divide, however one might describe any given point on the divide.

It seems that so-called "cultural" loyalty trumps truth. And it certainly trumps open dialogue. Why? We all feel safe in a group? Us against them. Why do we need to feel safe? Because we live in a culture based on fear.

Why is there no room in this country for instance for a pro-choice person to express their doubts about abortion? Why is there no room for an anti-abortionist who is not on the extreme end to think through the issues within their own camp or in dialogue with others?

The truth is invisible because we are all much more loyal to our side, to our "camp" than to it.

How do we get past that?

Well, since I have no power to change anyone else, and I believe my motives are usually suspect when I do try, I have to say: "let it begin with me". And I am asking you to do the same. That is the spiritual message in today's sermon. Let it begin right here, in this person's heart.

Do any of you remember the story about Gandhi and sugar? I may remember it imperfectly so forgive me. A woman came to Gandhi, one of the great social activists of all time, with her sick daughter, wanting him to help her get better. Gandhi determined that the little girl needed to discontinue any use of sugar, somehow that was the problem. But he didn't tell the mother that. Instead he said, come back in two weeks. In two weeks she came back and he told her: your daughter needs to stop eating sugar. Why did he wait two weeks? He spent the two weeks seeing if he could stop using sugar and what effect it might have on him. He had to see if he could do what he was asking her to do.

When I looked at George the day of his inauguration my heart was hard. My voice was cold. I could try to justify that by pointing to any number of cold acts he has committed. But my own coldness was what really struck me. It is made up of something other than truth. It is some kind of defense. So are all my categorical attitudes about Republicans and Fundamentalists and so-called rednecks.

My objections to our President's actions remain. But I want to separate, the acts from the person. Why? Because as a spiritual and a religious person I do not want to banish anyone from my heart. It seems to me that is always the beginning of some form of warfare.

And I know that hardness of heart, that coldness affects many other relationships. The president's face is of course just a symbol for a whole pantheon of people on "the other side". And not just there. What has been revealed to me by doing this practice for four weeks, is how often that same cold knife is there to subdivide my world. You or me, up or down, either/or, winning or losing.

So I continue to face George, nearly every morning, sometimes I forget, and I say:
May you be well, may you be happy, May you know peace, may you be free from suffering.

You've no doubt heard the following: Prayer doesn't change the world, but it changes people and people change the world.

How can I as a minister ask you to do something which I am not practicing myself? And what I am asking you to do is consider this practice of noticing who is banished from your heart, and opening it back up to them.

I'm asking you to consider establishing a spiritual practice, if you do not already have one. By that I mean some practice, on a regular basis, which takes you outside of your usual world view. Something, like the loving kindness meditation we did last week, or like Ram Dass' practice of loving his enemy, which expands your personal universe to include a larger hope and has faith in a power greater than your own self. Call it love, call it God, call it hope, call it your higher self. The name doesn't matter.

A spiritual *practice*, emphasis on the word *practice*, is the grounding of faith. And faith is what will begin to replace fear. And the practice of faith is the seed of real change. It is what precedes any decision, any action which is grounded in spirituality. And as spiritual practice in community I want to ask you as a group to think with me, on a few questions which I am pondering.

What code words, what short hand might we be using, even if un-stated, which does not serve the largest good? What or whom *does* this serve? Is there anything about our togetherness that is not inclusive but exclusive?

I'll end by restating Jean Vanier's words: "Evil is here in me. Warfare is in side my own community, and I am called to be an agent of peace there. If I am growing toward wholeness then I'll be an agent of wholeness. If our community is an agent of wholeness, then it will be a source of life for the world around it."