

When The Spirit of Acceptance is Rejected
Presented by Rev. Margie King Saphier on May 7, 2006 at
United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA.

It's good to be back. For two weeks my husband Jon and I were in The Netherlands, bicycling among the tulips, over dykes with paved tops for bicyclists and pedestrians. Most of the roads have designated bike paths, whether you are in country or whether you are in a city, like Amsterdam. Bicycles are a major form of transportation, and the Dutch are very skilled in bicycling. Jon and I saw 70 and 80 year-old folks cycling with greater ease than we had.

While I was in the Netherlands, I often thought of El Salvador. As most of you know this past February. I went with Jane Pentheny and Pat Artis to El Salvador to assist the Sight and Bite Team provide free eye and dental care to the poor of that country. During quiet times in The Netherlands, I finished reading the book *When the Dogs Ate Candles*, a book about the people – Americans but mostly Salvadorans – who stood up to barbaric regime in El Salvador. El Salvador and The Netherlands are as different as different can be. In contrast to El Salvador (or the U.S., for that matter), there is no poverty in The Netherlands. El Salvador is a conservative and poor country, compared to the social policies and wealth of the Netherlands with its excellent schools, housing and health care for its citizens, as well as its liberal attitudes towards birth control, gay marriage and euthanasia. Although the Netherlands has a monarchy, their tax and salary system reflect a certain drive for equality so the difference between the highest paid and the lowest paid is not as great as it is in El Salvador, or as in the U.S. El Salvador's civil war, which was largely driven by the injustice created by the huge gap between the rich and the poor, ended 14 years ago. The huge gap persists. The peace is still fragile.

Although The Netherlands is a peaceful country, it knows the dissonance its spirit of liberalism and equality is creating within its relatively new multicultural society. The Netherlands is not monolithic in its liberalism: the cities are far more liberal than the countryside. Much of Dutch liberalism is based on practicality. Their reasoning goes something like this: "Since the phenomena exist anyway, whether we approve of it or not, let's bring it out into the open and legislate it to create a generally acceptable and applicable framework in which we get a degree of control (Vossestein, p. 150)."

Therefore Amsterdam has a red light district, in which prostitution is legal and unionized. Also in Amsterdam there are cafes that sell marijuana to be smoked at the café - although sometimes you may get a whiff of marijuana as you pass a smoker on the street.

Dutch liberalism reminded me somewhat of Unitarian Universalism. It is based on a strong belief that everyone should have the same opportunities no matter what people's position is in society; high or low, they should be treated equally (Jacob Vossestein, *Dealing with Dutch*, p. 33). It may be hard for UU's to believe but this core belief came out of Calvinism, as well as the Judaic-Christian teaching, "Do unto others as they would do unto you." Because the Dutch believe so strongly that everyone should have equal opportunities, same sex marriage is legal in the Netherlands.

There is also freedom of religion. When Jon and I visited the Museum of History of Amsterdam, the first exhibit was of Muslim women living in The Netherlands wearing headscarves, some which were very simple, whereas others were quite ornate. There were video recorded interviews with Muslim women, who explained why they chose to wear headscarves. But the Dutch are no different than the rest us: multi-culturalism has brought challenges to their society. This culture of carefully managed permissiveness is not welcomed by many of the immigrants, who are mostly Muslim. There have been conservative imams who have preached against homosexuals and women's rights, warning their followers not to mix with non-believers. The experience of the feminist Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali shows that embracing Dutch liberalism is a risky one. In 2004, Ali, who is a Somali immigrant, made a film, titled *Submission*, attacking treatment of women by Islamic fundamentalists; as a result, the director of *Submission*, Theo Van Gogh, was savagely murdered by a disgruntled Muslim. Ali continues to be a forceful voice urging the Dutch to insist on the superiority of liberal Western values, but there are many voices, not just Muslim, which challenge Dutch liberalism. Some come from Roman Catholics and fundamentalist Calvinist in the southern part of The Netherlands. Other voices come from other corners of the world. Angela Shanahan, an Australian columnist, went to hear the Dutch prime minister speak at the Australian National University. She reported in her column dated April 17, 2006, that she challenged the prime minister by asking, "But do liberal Western values include child euthanasia and

gay marriage?” I don’t want to get into the issue of child euthanasia; I know very little other than it was recently passed and there are very strict protocols.

So we have an interesting dichotomy: on the one hand we have the exhibition at the Historical Museum showing Dutch acceptance of Muslim women wearing headscarves, which is shown to demonstrate Dutch tolerance; on the other hand, we also have the Dutch requiring immigrants to learn their liberal values, which includes tolerance. I personally think this is reasonable, but the Dutch are criticized for this because their liberal values are seen as an abomination to fundamentalists of all religious traditions. This is the crux of the problem, not only for the Dutch, but also for Unitarian Universalists: how do we live together when the values we hold contradict the essence of the other’s faith or beliefs? This question is being debated in Lexington MA. A fundamentalist family is taking the public school system to court for teaching about homosexuality.

As this congregation is acutely aware, one expression of Unitarian Universalist core religious beliefs – gay marriage - is being challenged, and may be declared illegal. On May 10, only 3 days away, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts will hold a Constitutional Convention to advance an amendment that could outlaw same-sex marriage. As this controversy continues over the next few years, it will be very easy for any one of us to slip into verbally bashing those who oppose our position. BUT WE MUST NOT ALLOW OURSELVES TO ACT IN THIS WAY. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said in this morning reading, “Hatred only breeds more hatred.”

Let our Principles, which are values that affirm life, guide us in our action. Let the religious sources, which can open our hearts and minds to the Creative Source of Love and Compassion, be our nourishment and sustenance for the challenging road ahead, so that our prophetic voice will be heard. I chose the readings this morning by Stephen Bilko, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Archbishop Oscar Romeo because each of these men chose to speak and act from a place of radical love against a place of radical hate. Each of these men were murdered for speaking their truth in the spirit of love. All three bore witness to the total brutality that arises from de-basing and hating another through negative stereotypes. And yet they chose love – and their words are still remembered to this day.

As I mentioned earlier, I finished reading the book, *When the Dogs Ate Candles* while in the Netherlands. The title refers to the practice of lighting candles near the dead, mutilated and abandoned bodies of the campesinos during El Salvador's civil war. When the candles burned out, the dogs often ate the candles. But the book tells a bigger story about a handful of ordinary people made extraordinary by the circumstances they faced. They worked for justice out of a deep well of love, not out bitterness, anger or hatred. You may wonder why I am juxta-positioning the life-death issues of El Salvador to gay marriage in the Netherlands and here in Massachusetts. When human rights are denied, there can be a slow death of the human spirit. To build a world where we bind up the broken, requires that we do it in the spirit of love. Last month at the reception after the dedication of the hanging of the church banner stating, "People of Faith for Marriage Equality," I was speaking to gay man who was here with his partner. He began to tell me that this was the first church in his entire life, where he as an individual, as well as part of couple, had experienced unconditional acceptance. He had to pause as he became overwhelmed with emotion. Think of what it means to go through life without the affirmation of your individual sacredness. We are doing holy work.

The book *When The Dogs Ate Candles* speaks about finding the spirit of love when living with death at your shoulder. Bill Hutchinson, the author and UCC minister, served as the Director of the Marin Interfaith Task Force for Central America. As director Bill recruited 28 American volunteers, who served in the Accompaniment Project for the Human Rights Commission of El Salvador. Because the men and women of the Human Rights Commission were documenting the torture and deaths of El Salvadorans, they were receiving deaths threats. Some had already been killed. To help protect the members of the Commission, American volunteers went to be with the Commission (sometimes eating and sleeping with them) in the belief that El Salvadoran government and military would not assassinate a Commission member attended by an American. None of the volunteers were killed although one was imprisoned for a short period. Over time many members of the Commission were eventually killed.

Hutchinson marvels that although the Commission members had experienced imprisonment and torture themselves and although they spent their time documenting the torture and killing of El Salvadorans, they were a cheerful group. They were not filled

with hatred or bitterness. They were united in the justice of their cause, even though the members truly lived “with death at their shoulder.” When Hutchinson inquired about this, they individually spoke about the reality of knowing that death might be imminent. Miguel Angel explained to Hutchinson, “You start to see things clearly. If they kill me, they kill me. You get used to it.” Death was no longer the worse could happen.

Living one’s faith in the spirit of love is not easy. It requires courage. But life, this precious gift, is to be lived in joy, from a spirit of abundance, which comes from love. Even in death, the spirit of love, lives on.

Herbert Anaya, president of the El Salvador Human Rights Commission, was assassinated. His daughter, Gloria Maria Anaya Perla, wrote this poem, titled “The Lost Love.”

She smiles, she was just a happy child.

She quit being a kid when she saw her dad being killed

She prayed, but nobody answered, she felt alone.

She cried, she knows that she has to be strong,

But then she saw her people without anything but with strong love.

She knew there was her father she had lost.

She understands that love was being responded with love.

She cried once again. She knows her father is gone,

But he has left his love, and she knew that she will never be alone.

May the spirit of love Live among us and through us. may it be so.