

The Most We Can Give
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This will be something of a split-personality sermon. On the one hand, I want to weigh in on the gun violence issue, but I also don't want to short-change you on the spiritual sustenance that can be so needed this time of year.

Our worship theme of the month is presence, provided by the Soul Matters program to which we are subscribed. This may not seem that exciting or interesting, but in my reflections I've concluded that the quality of our presence can define the quality of our lives, and the quality of our spiritual health and religious convictions. Our presence, when you get down to it, is the most we can give – not just in the giving season, but in all the seasons of our lives. When we die, we won't be remembered for the material items we gave; we'll be remembered for the love we gave, and we can't give love without our presence. When we die, we won't be remembered for our beliefs or convictions; we'll be remembered for the *presence* that our beliefs and convictions moved us to give.

First, I want to take advantage of some of the materials we're provided by the Soul Matters connection, by sharing with you a list of questions they provide each month in relation to the topic. The instructions say, pick *one* of these questions to mull over throughout the month that speaks to you most. Here they are:

- 1. Has the experience of “presence” increased or decreased for you as you’ve gotten older?**
- 2. How might tomorrow be an opportunity to “discover presence”?**
- 3. What absence walks with you more days than not? Or put another way, whose absence feels most present to you and what can you do tomorrow to feel and honor them more deeply?**
- 4. Who has gone missing right before your very eyes?**
- 5. Have you lost sight of yourself?** Cecelia Ahern says, “Sometimes, we lose sight of ourselves when we're not paying enough attention.”
- 6. Would you be more present to your life if you weren't trying to perfect it or win at it?** Richard Gilbert says, “Allow your life to be a work in progress. Do not hurry to mold the masterpiece; Always there is more to be done. Life is always unfinished business.”
- 7. When was the last time you created a world in itself?** Henry Miller said, “The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.”

8. **Where is your chance today to love someone with your presence?** Mastin Kipp says, “At the end of the day: do others feel loved in your presence? This is the spiritual bottom line.” And Simone Veil said, “Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”

So which question speaks to you?

Being a parent, watching my young kids grow fast, and seeing I won't have another chance at the quality of my parenting once it's over, the last question speaks to me. *Where is your chance today to love someone with your presence?* I confess, it's sometimes hard for me to be present to my children because I'm often distracted. I'm driven by my vocation and my work – maybe some of you can relate to this. As Americans we're cultured to strive in our professions, to achieve. In my case, I strive to make gains in my social justice and community organizing work – to connect people, pass ordinances, win campaigns, affect public policy and turn the tide of public opinion. I see that UUs have done it in the past, and I can do it too.

But of course it takes a lot of presence – going to meetings, sending lots of emails, making calls, going to City Hall, going to witness rallies like the one we have today, which is family-friendly and one I *can* do with my kids. Social justice takes a lot of energy, a lot of presence - a lot of speaking, writing, singing, pleading, and praying.

It's important work – it's the kind of work of a life well lived. When we give this kind of presence we are loving. Presence *is* another word for love. But – as a parent of young children, I have to order my priorities, as must we all. This is how presence gets to the spiritual bottom of things. With our presence, we are making our choices, we are saying something about ourselves, about to *what* or to *whom* we believe is most important to give our energy.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. comes to mind, for the choices he made with his presence. Now, MLK shouldn't be brought up just once a year around his birthday, just like Jesus shouldn't be corralled to his birthday or so-imagined resurrection. Prophets like these should be recalled regularly, maybe even daily. The lives of Jesus and MLK follow a parallel arc, ending similarly. MLK embodied the teachings of Jesus and for me, MLK is the Jesus I put on my wall. I have two pictures of him front and center in my home – one is a photograph, the other an illustration. I know for sure MLK was real, he was no composite, no ethereal divine notion. They were both sons of God, as much as all human beings are children of God – all of us faced with the same moral quandries and decisions in life, all of given the same mixed bag of traits with which to work.

Which brings me to my point and the matter of presence. MLK wasn't perfect, which makes me love him more, and makes him more relatable to my life. He gave the lion's share of his attention and presence to the causes of justice and non-violence, peace, and an end to poverty. His family suffered for it. He could not be described as a model dad or husband, especially by today's standards.

And so it gives me pause when I have to choose between my advocacy work and my children, as I often do. It raises the perennial, practical spiritual question, that E.B. White expressed so well: *“I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”*

As a good UU, I want my cake and I intend to eat it, too. Regularly, I tell myself, I can do both, I can do both. I *try* to do both. Sometimes it works – sometimes one or the other suffers with neglect. And so it’s good for me to keep asking the question, *Where is my chance today to love someone with my presence?*

Where is your chance, and whom will you love with your presence today, this holiday season, and every day? Who is missing? Who is missing from this church community, and might it be time to invite their presence back? Or introduce someone for the first time?

At heart, this church strives for nothing more than to be a loving presence – for each other, to inspire its membership to be a loving presence for our loved ones in our everyday lives, and of course, to inspire us to go out beyond our walls and be a loving presence, in witness of senseless violence and tragedy, as we will do shortly.

And so it’s time for me to turn to the topic of preventing gun violence, as this is the anniversary of the Sandy Hook tragedy that took the lives of 20 first-graders. My son is in first grade, so you can imagine why this portion of the sermon was hard for me to write. It’s not my child whose life was so dreadfully taken four years ago, but I have witnessed, and been a presence to another set of parents who lost their son to gun violence a few short years ago, and when I review the story of what happened, it still makes me cry, as it did on Friday when I reread the articles in the LA Times about it.

I’ve mentioned it before – if you Google Ursula Walker LA Times, you’ll find a timeline of 5 articles, with one that Ursula wrote herself. Ursula and Richard Walker lost their son to gang murder on October 30th 2014. It occurred in broad daylight as Christopher was waiting for a burger outside a burger stand where I know the owner in my neighborhood in Altadena. He was shot four times in the back. He had left behind the gang lifestyle seven years prior. He was an employed father of 3.

Imbedded in these articles you’ll find a link to a seven-minute video that tells the whole story, and has footage of the march and vigil I organized six months after the murder took place. We walked from a church up the street back to the burger stand. I spoke and said, “Gangs are not just a black problem. They are a community problem, they are an American problem.” Other gang interventionists and pastors spoke, but it was the Walkers who spoke most movingly. I hope you’ll watch it and read the articles.

I bring up the Walkers’ story because I want to impress upon us today that the epidemic of gun violence and tragedy affects every demographic in our society. It was the god-awful slaughtering of mostly white first-graders that inspired today’s annual event and

many such events across the country. The Brady campaign let us know that we are one of three events happening in LA county today, and we should feel proud of that.

But where's the annual event for all those people of color who lose their lives to gang murder each year? You wouldn't believe how many of those murders go unsolved. The Walkers know who killed their son, they even see him in the community occasionally – but he walks free because no witness will come forward. They are too afraid of retribution.

Wait – isn't our crusade mainly about the laws – that, nationally, the AR-15, the assault weapon, the so-called “modern sporting rifle”, the mass-shooting weapon of choice, has no place in civil society, and should be out-lawed outright? That what we'd really like to see is this military gun - designed to kill a lot of people in a short period of time, first used in Vietnam - all be collected from civilian ownership and destroyed – melted, and perhaps converted into play-ground equipment?

Isn't our crusade mainly that common-sense back-ground checks should be made law, that logically, if you're on the FBI's no-fly list, you should not be permitted to purchase a gun? Well yes, these are laws worth fighting for – someone needs to tackle the impossible, and join forces with the Brady campaign and other organizations whose goals are to legislate for a safer country and prevent mass-shootings by befouled individuals. And so I congratulate this church for taking this on, so that innocent victims of shootings are not forgotten. Someone has to do this work, and results are possible. California recently outlawed the sale of ammunition of assault weapons. And back where I grew up, a suburb of Chicago, Highland Park, managed to ban assault weapons outright. It was challenged but the Supreme Court declined to hear it. Of course, all that's endangered now with the incoming administration.

But it's no reason to back down. It's reason to step it up! While it may feel hopeless at times where laws are concerned, there are multiple ways to advocate and promote a more just and peaceful world. These other ways have to do with looking at the ages-old matter of violence. The family system of our country is drenched in violence – we were created in its image and founded on it. And we look the other way at the violence and killing epidemic in our cities and communities where gangs are a plague. We mustn't only care and pay attention when white children get killed, but also black and brown children and teens and young adults.

The Walkers are certain in their conviction that reducing the availability of guns would not stop gang violence. “They would find another way, even if it meant using a sling-shot,” they say. They believe that it's not guns that are the problem, it's *violence* that is the problem. My father, who worked in social services in the inner city of Chicago, says violence is how these young people communicate with one another. They know no other way. Until people care, and take the time and *presence* to intervene and teach an alternative way to communicate and relate to one another, the killing won't stop.

I was quoted in the LA Times saying, “We each have a role to play.” Community-wide interventions, ceasefires and people called “Violence Interrupters” have made a difference when focus and presence is paid to one neighborhood – churches, the police, grandmothers, social workers, and gang interventionists all work together with results. Maybe that’s not your calling, but there are countless other ways to be a “violence interrupter.” By volunteering at a domestic violence shelter, being a mentor to a woman or teen. Helping to provide or find living space so a woman and her kids can escape violence. Giving a foster child some attention – not just a Christmas present, but some *time*. All these things ask something huge of us: they ask for our presence. To interrupt violence, we must be a presence.

Violence plagues everyone. We’ve become desensitized to it – you wouldn’t believe how hard it is to find entertainment for children on TV or movies that’s not violent. A lot of parents give up on it - I know I haven’t been careful enough in this regard and I regret it. My girl wants to watch the Box Car Children film for every Friday Movie Night because it’s one of the only films where almost nothing violent occurs.

Unfortunately, violence plagues most family systems when it comes to emotional violence. I’m a minister, and I struggle to not yell at my kids. I grew up with it – it’s in the fiber of my being and goes back countless generations. Violence isn’t just an American problem, it’s a human problem – it’s at the core of our struggle to evolve as human beings. And yes, in some ways it seems to be getting worse, but in other ways there is evidence of hope. Recently a study came out that said parents use corporal punishment far less than they once did. That’s progress.

So today we march not only for the victims of Sandy Hook and victims of shootings everywhere – we bear witness to the existential struggle against violence in all its forms. We use our voices to assert that life is indeed sacred, and we will not accept the constant devaluation of life we see all around us. Black lives matter, no matter how they end. As Ursula Walker would come to say to me over and over, “All lives matter.” She gets the last line in the video about their story, “*all lives matter.*”

Every life taken unjustly is one life too many.

To bring this all home, our spiritual fitness hinges on this, the question of presence. What/who are we present to? Are we present only to acquisition and status, or are we present to the holy and the sacred. Are we present to “the least of these” as Jesus asked? Are we present to the arduous step-by-step process of justice?

Imminently, for our march, we enact a ministry of presence – we communicate this to the community: that no matter how hopeless our cause looks, no matter how reckless and asinine the gun industry and NRA has become, no matter what policy and law-makers do, we “ain’t gonna let nobody turn us around.”

And now, that's exactly what we're going to practice singing, because it's what we'll sing to end our vigil today. This is the Joan Baez version that I've listened to since I was a child, so if you know it, join in, or listen to a verse, then join in.

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around, turn me around, turn me around, ain't gonna let nobody turn me around, keep on a walkin, keep on a talkin , gonna build a brand new world,

Ain't gonna let the administration turn me around . . .

Ain't gonna let that stinkin NRA turn me around . . .

Ain't gonna let that gun industry turn me around . . .

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around. . .