

Charity and Solidarity

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At the New Orleans Rebirth Volunteer Center, the good people of the Greater New Orleans Unitarian Universalists welcome people from all over the country to their city. Many of the volunteers are UU, but a good number are not. They come from all sorts of different places—the week we were there, people working through the center with us were from urban Washington DC as well as rural central Wisconsin.

No matter who you are or where you're from, though, our colleagues and friends in New Orleans want the experience there to be more than just a one-time, feel-good trip. They want what happened in and to their city to open your eyes to injustices that happen in our very communities.

And so we started our week at the Center with the standard program: a self-guided tour of the city and then a discussion of race and class in pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans. It was a brief discussion, but it helped us develop a lens through which we saw the entire rest of the week. That lens—like the lenses on prescription glasses that allow you to see what's actually there—allowed us to see both the uniqueness of New Orleans and the common threads that could allow what happened there to happen anywhere else in our nation.

In that discussion, we learned how the neighborhoods of New Orleans were constructed—and how the political divisions of New Orleans disenfranchised people who were poor and black. We heard stories of peoples' experiences during and after the floods that followed Hurricane Katrina—experiences of being turned back at gunpoint from escaping the rising waters, of going days without food and water, and of a woefully inadequate response to the ongoing needs of the people of the Crescent City.

One of the questions we were asked in this training was this: “What is the difference between charity and solidarity?”

I'm proud to say that the facilitators let me know that our youth came up with the best answers to that question that they had ever heard. I trust that if you think about that for a minute, you'll come up with some good answers too—it's not a trick question, after all.

Charity. Solidarity.

What we talked about was the difference between doing something *for* another person because *you* think it's the right thing to do and doing something *with* another person because *they* have asked for your help. It's the difference between acting out of pity and acting out of compassion.

What didn't occur to me then was that the difference between charity and solidarity essentially defines, for Unitarian Universalists at least, the *religious* response to human suffering.

I'll say that again: the *religious* response to human suffering.

The word religion, after all comes from Latin words that mean "to bind together again." Thus, a religious response to human suffering would seek first and foremost to create a connection—to join together communities and people, to work together to heal brokenness and combat injustice.

Solidarity—the act of standing with someone—is the ultimate religious response.

Thus, the religious response to the ongoing pain and suffering of the people in New Orleans is to stand with the people of New Orleans, to develop relationships with them, to see ourselves in their place, to understand the injustices that are at the heart of American society, to pitch in and help rebuild, and to demand that our government do their part. Because, after all, in the words of one member of our youth group, standing in the Lower Ninth Ward looking out over empty fields where houses once stood, "This is the same country we live in. This is America. That's hard to believe."

We were asked by our hosts in New Orleans to see ourselves as New Orleanians. To feast on the marvelous food and dance to the wonderful music. To feel the unique energy of the city called NOLA, an energy born of the intermingling of cultures from Africa, Spain, France, Acadian Canada, Native nations and more. We were asked to see that city as ours because the people we were there to serve see it as theirs—and their desire for the rebirth of New Orleans comes from New Orleans being part of their blood.

But the religious response to human suffering on the Gulf Coast doesn't end there. It doesn't end with a work trip and a party, it doesn't end with a vote at our annual congregational meeting to be a partner congregation (as wonderful as that is). It doesn't end with a gift of money or of time. It doesn't even end when we can say that we, too, are New Orleanians.

The religious response to what happened there is to call ourselves to change. To ask ourselves to see the world in a different way. To understand that where pain happens, where violence happens, where injustice happens, we are called to solidarity, to accountability, to a response that seeks to create relationships where they have been broken.

The religious response to human suffering is to stand on the side of love.

In the past few weeks, our newspapers have been riddled with calls for solidarity in the face of injustice and violence—from the ongoing imprisonment and sham trial of Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma to the murder of Dr. George Tiller in Wichita to the shooting of security guard Stephen Johns by a racist, anti-Semitic terrorist at the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, earlier this week.

Those of us who were in New Orleans now understand that the religious response to events like this one is to stand with the victims of injustice—to understand ourselves as connected to those who suffer.

This week, we are all New Orleanians, but we are also all Burmese people oppressed by a military tyranny. We are all women of the plains with no doctor for miles willing to help us exercise our right to choose. We are all Jews, living in 21st-century America in fear of the next anti-Semite to find a gun or buy a bomb.

Next week, we might have to be undocumented immigrants in Mount Kisco desperate for a better life for their families and exploited by an unjust system that forces them to be invisible. We might have to be Steffani and Virginia, whose wedding license had to be issued by the State of Connecticut because the New York State Senate can't govern its way out of a paper bag. We might have to be the poor residents of Williamsburg and Greenpoint in Brooklyn, banding together to stop more polluting industry from moving into their neighborhood and ruining the air our children breathe.

Because the religious response to human suffering is not indifference, it's not charity from a distance, it's not pity. The religious response to injustice and pain is solidarity and compassion. And it is what we are called to do together. Blessed be.