

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield  
May 2, 2010  
Reverend Maddie Sifantus

**READING “The Swimming Pool” by Thomas Lux**

All around the apartment swimming pool  
the boys stare at the girls  
and the girls look everywhere but the opposite  
or down or up. It is  
as it was a thousand years ago: the fat  
boy has it hardest, he  
takes the sneers,  
prefers the winter so he can wear  
his heavy pants and sweater.  
Today, he’s here with the others.  
Better they are cruel to him in his presence  
than out. Of the five here now (three boys,  
two girls) one is fat, three cruel,  
and one, a girl, wavers to the side,  
all the world tearing at her.  
As yet she has no breasts  
(her friend does) and were it not  
for the forlorn fat boy whom she joins  
in taunting, she could not bear the terror,  
which is the terror

of being him. Does it make her happy  
that she has no need, right now, of ingratiating,  
of acting fool to salve  
her loneliness? She doesn't seem  
so happy. She is like  
the lower middle class, that fatal group  
handed crumbs so they can drop a few  
down lower to the poor, so they won't kill  
the rich. All around  
the apartment swimming pool  
there is what's everywhere: forsakenness  
and fear, a disdain for those beneath us  
rather than a rage  
against the ones above: the exploiters,  
the oblivious and unabashedly cruel.<sup>1</sup>

**SERMON: "Safety Net"**

We are gathering this morning at the beginning of a very special month for Wakefield and in the life of this church. You may have heard me mention our collaboration over the last months in something called "Stories for a Safer Wakefield" or you may have seen references to it in the *Wakefield Item* or the *Observer*. Some of us have attended meetings with WAAV—or the Wakefield Alliance Against Violence—and the Beebe Library and others as this month of events has come together. You may have seen the brochure which reads: "Violence—Seen it—Felt it—Done it?"... "What is It? What do you consider violence?" It goes on to say "In one way or another, violence touches your life. We are all sometimes victims, sometimes witnesses, and,

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<sup>1</sup> *New & Selected Poems* (Houghton Mifflin).

depending on how we define it, maybe sometimes perpetrators. It affects us individually and as a community. Let's talk about it."

I have taken that last statement seriously—so let's talk about it this morning. Now as I say that, I know that this is or can be a very difficult topic for many. Maybe for you. Some of us have survived violence and abuse or know someone close to us who has. We know that statistically. There may be someone here this morning who has been or still is in an abusive relationship. Some of us may have been that girl at the swimming pool making fun of that fat boy when we were younger—or we may have been that fat boy or fat girl. There is a lot of pain that can come to the surface in all of this. We need our practice of breathing out and breathing in and our reflection on the inherent worth of every individual from the first principle of Unitarian Universalism. And we have our hope, as the choir has sung, of the gift of peace for all, of the perfect song to sing. May we be held in that peace, in that safety net, this morning as I consider what might be an uncomfortable subject for some of you.

We know that violence does touch all our lives—at least we know it intellectually. We see it on the television news; we hear about it on the radio. It pops up on our email screens. We know there are wars going on—somewhere “over there.” Some of us may have fought in a war. We know on some level that, as Geoffrey Canada wrote in the preface to his now classic book, *Fist Stick Knife Gun*: “America has long had a love affair with violence and guns. It's our history, we teach it to all of our young. The Revolution, the ‘taming of the West,’ the Civil War, the world wars, and on and on. Guns, justice, righteousness, freedom, liberty—all tied to violence. Even when we try to teach about non-violence, we have to use the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., killed by the violent.”

Canada goes on to say that it “is because most people in this country don't have to think about their personal safety every day that our society is still complacent about the violence that is engulfing our cities and towns.” He is talking about what he calls a new generation, “the hand gun generation.” He reflects that this violence is new, but says that it is not. He says that “violence has always been around...violence, I remember.”<sup>2</sup> He is mostly talking here about the violence outside on the streets in some neighborhoods—as we know, some neighborhoods not so very far from here.

But what about the violence in *our* very neighborhoods? What about the violence or abuse that might happen behind closed doors? What if we notice a neighbor or a co-worker with

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*, pp. x-xi.

an unexplained black eye or behaving in a way in which they seem to be threatened? What if it is you yourself who has not felt safe at school or at home but you are too scared or too embarrassed to talk about it or tell anyone? What if you have witnessed bullying? What if you have experienced baiting just because of your sexual identity? What if you are that fat boy at the swimming pool? Or girl?

These are the kinds of realities that Stories for a Safer Wakefield seeks to address this month through many activities that you can find out about in the green and white brochure. Starting this week you can see Downtown Story Walks in merchant windows. There will be guest reader days in the elementary schools featuring thematic selections for the children. I will be a guest reader at the Woodville School this Tuesday and at the Walton School later this month. There will be Rape and Assault Defense Training conducted by the Wakefield Police Department and Bully Busters martial arts demonstration at the Beebe Library. Also at the library are special books available on the theme, including a compelling book on domestic violence by Anita Shreve, *Strange Fits of Passion*. A panel discussion on the book and the issues presents took place in March and was filmed for cable TV. Four of the events will take place right here at our church. You can read all about them in the brochure and in the May Gleam. It has been exciting to work with a number of other people on these events for a number of reasons, not the least of which is just the fact of collaborating for a small church like ours. But of course the biggest reason is that for us domestic violence, bullying and other forms of violence are justice issues. If we truly believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each individual, then we must respond and put our faith in action. We must “stand on the side of love,” as our hymn says. We must provide a safety net for all of our members and our community. We have no choice but to stand on the side of love, as persons who confess our faith.

I have been thinking a lot this week about how I first knew about the kinds of violence we are talking about this morning. I have asked myself the questions on the front of the brochure: “What is it? What do you consider violence?” I went back to a time when I was at the end of high school when I was dating a fellow student and started spending some considerable time at his house. Now, I have to say that I was a pretty sheltered and naïve young girl at that point. My parents were so much older than all my friends’ parents that I used to say that it was like being raised by Victorians. And they were both very religious people, didn’t drink or smoke and definitely never spanked us, which seemed like was normal in childrearing those days. So it was that it was totally confusing to me to find myself in the midst of this family where abuse and

threats were just under the surface...and which would bubble over in ways that I didn't know what to do with. The father of the family treated his wife with not even thinly disguised disdain, with verbal abuse that I regularly overheard and the threat of physical violence present in his demeanor and behavior. He once threatened his son, my boyfriend, with his rifle when he came home later than he expected. I had NO idea how to behave. So I did nothing. I don't think I even talked to anyone about it. It seemed that talking about these things was something that just was not done. Then. Hopefully that has changed some since then. Or has it?

Around the same time I started playing music with another young man and spent hours and hours at his house singing in a little room up some back stairs. There I witnessed more verbal violence between his parents, this time definitely fueled by alcohol. And this time I witnessed the destruction it wielded on this family but especially on my friend. I don't think we talked about it at the time, but we have since, as we became adults and are still friends.

A few years later I was in college, living in an apartment in Providence. Next door to us was a young couple I didn't know—I would see them coming and going. Barely a nod in the hallway. But many evenings huge screaming matches would occur, absolutely terrifying in their intensity. I would hear glass crashing on the wall between our apartments and huge thumping sounds. Eventually the young woman's father came and took her away. Again, I had no idea what to do. There wasn't a Providence Alliance Against Violence to call. It seemed to me that I should not get involved—in fact I was too scared to get involved. If I had truly been standing on the side of love back then, what should I have done?

You may have heard that the Unitarian Universalist Association launched a campaign last year which is called Standing on the Side of Love. This initiative confronts exclusion and violence based on identity, be it sexual orientation, gender presentation, immigration status, race, class, religions, nationality, physical ability or any other excuse for harassment. You can see more about it on line if you Google “standing on the side of love.” This campaign comes right out of our first principle, affirming the full humanity of all people. It brings it even further than affirmation, in fact, and stands for love. I think of the Apostle Paul and his well known words often used at weddings, “Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.” Whether in a marriage relationship or in relationship to other human beings, it is about that basic respect. It is about being reconciled rather than being right, as my colleague Fred

Small said in a sermon last September, probably after the congregation sang the hymn we sang earlier, *Everything Possible*.<sup>3</sup>

This month we are standing on the side of love here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield. We are looking around us and our community and providing safe space to talk about these issues. We know that over the long life of this congregation, there have been those that have suffered from abuse and those like me who witnessed it and didn't know what to do about it. I maintain that we can stand on the side of love and be a safety net for those who are vulnerable to bullying and all the forms of abuse. You might be interested that the Georgia Commission on Family Violence released a 2009 Fatality Review Report. In it, they discuss the particulars of the faith involvement of both victims and abusers. Of the nine homicides they reviewed, seven victims identified as (church goers) as did three abusers. But only one victim had shared any information about her abuse with her minister. The rest remained active but invisible in their churches.<sup>4</sup>

You should know that I am here to talk with any of you confidentially if you are affected by these issues or have been in the past and are dealing with lingering pain or confusion. There is also the Wakefield Alliance Against Violence—WAAV—who you can be in touch with. We have their wallet cards available in our rest rooms. Abuse is not something we believe or support here. We stand on the side of love.

The news has been compelling these last months since the suicide of Phoebe Prince, the South Hadley teenager who had been mercilessly bullied in the weeks and days leading up to her decision that she just couldn't take it anymore. I suspect that many of us just can't understand how Phoebe reached that place of just not being able to go on...and equally why the people around here didn't seem to respond to the situation. Just this last week the South Hadley schools drafted new policies to address bullying. You may also have heard of the suicide of eleven year old Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover of Springfield last year, also after having been bullied. This week the state legislature approved a bill targeting bullying. It remains to be seen how it can be implemented and whether it can have any real effect. One might think that schools should be safe space. We know they are often not. Whether we can legislate them into *becoming* safe space is a noble thought but we also know that the world is a complex place these days, especially with the ubiquitous use of cell phones and social media but teens.

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<sup>3</sup> First Parish in Cambridge, 9-13-10.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org/blog/marie-fortune/71>

This is one of the answers for why life was unbearable for Phoebe. And a reason that is hard for some of us of a certain age find hard to understand. After all, there has always been bullying and vicious teasing. I know I remember it from my growing up. But it is different now. Most of our teenagers don't remember a time when there weren't cell phones; they couldn't imagine not answering them or viewing the texts that come through. And their life is full of social media like Facebook and My Space. That is how they communicate. It might seem easy for you or I to say "just don't answer" or just don't go online. This is how they relate. This is how they know if people like them—or friend them—or unfriend them. We are not going to make social media go away...or texting. But we can let these young people—and all people know we care about them.

What if we stand on the side of love? What if we are intentional about the safe space we create here, as we do one Wednesday evening a month for our LGBT friends and members? What if we reach out to the teenagers and all others in our wider community and say loud and clear that we stand on the side of love? That we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of each one of you—we may not agree with your behaviors but at the core we believe each one is worthy, each of us. What if we look around us and stand with those who have been abused?

One more story. One of the students I work with at Andover Newton Theological School lives in South Hadley, as does my sister Bonnie. Both of them know some of the families of the accused teenagers. My student tells me that one of the girls who stands accused in this very sad situation was actually moved to South Hadley with her mother and siblings, with all of their names changed, due to a violently abusive father. An age old story—a child who was abused, turning around to abuse another. Just like our girl in *The Swimming Pool*.

How can we stand on the side of love, so all can feel that love? How can we be a safety net here, to catch those who may be falling? How can we help vulnerable teenagers and others become "who they were born to be", as in our song that Kelli sang this morning, which was performed by the singer Susan Boyle who likely endured her own private hell of teasing in her younger years. How can we stand on the side of love and really believe that everything *is* possible? Let us join together this month of May and stand on the side of love.

Blessed be.