#NeverAgain: Balancing Safety and Freedom
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
March 25, 2018

Heeding the pulse of life, they knew what to do. The students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas created the #neveragain movement and the school walk-outs a month after the shooting and the March for our Lives which took place yesterday. Another school walkout is scheduled for April 20th, the anniversary of the Columbine shooting. More than 800,000 in DC, 200,00 in New York, 12,000 in Portland yesterday, hundreds in Vancouver they are heeding the pulse of life and know what to do. These are anxious times, and yet there is something we know for certain:

Not one more. We cannot allow one more child to be shot at school. We cannot allow one more teacher to make a choice to jump in front of a firing assault rifle to save the lives of students. We cannot allow one more family to wait for a call or text that never comes. We must make it our top priority to save these lives, says the march for our lives website.

March For Our Lives is created by, inspired by, and led by students across the country who will no longer risk their lives waiting for someone else to take action to stop the epidemic of mass school shootings that has become all too familiar. In the tragic wake of the seventeen lives brutally cut short in Florida, politicians are telling us that now is not the time to talk about guns. March For Our Lives believes the time is now.

School safety is not a political issue. There cannot be two sides to doing everything in our power to ensure the lives and futures of children who are at risk of dying when they should be learning, playing, and growing. The mission and focus of March For Our Lives is to demand that a comprehensive and effective bill be immediately brought before Congress to address these gun issues. No special interest group, no political agenda is more critical than timely passage of legislation to effectively address the gun violence issues that are rampant in our country.

Change is coming. And it starts now, inspired by and led by the kids who are our hope for the future. Their young voices will be heard.

Now, I was reading the language of the students off their website just now, and though they call for legislation, they recognize that the NRA has made it near impossible for current legislators to pass such laws, so they are looking toward the next election – as Stoneman Douglas senior, David Hogg, said to the politicians supported by the NRA – “get your resumes ready.”

If it reminds you of the protests against the war in Vietnam, it should. If you think they were inspired by the black lives matter movement and me too, time’s up, you’re probably right. If you think there’s nothing we can do to help, you’re wrong.

Though we are barely a month out from the particular school shooting which spawned these particular protests, we have revving up for this for years.

The General Assembly of the UUA passed a resolution in 1972 advocating mandatory licensing for the purchase and possession of all usable guns, and in 1976 a resolution urging the passage of legislation urging the restriction the ownership or possession of handguns. In 1991 we passed a general resolution on gun control asking legislators to enact and support laws such as
1. the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1991 (HR7) in the United States, which is intended to place nationally uniform, effective limitations on individual possession of

2. handguns, including waiting periods, licensing, and registration;

and specific restrictions intended to make the purchase of firearms more difficult;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Unitarian Universalist Association, its member congregations, and individual Unitarian Universalists be urged to petition legislators to include safety training programs as a mandatory condition that must be met before firearms can be owned and used; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Unitarian Universalist Association, its member congregations, and individual Unitarian Universalists in the United States be urged to petition legislators to enact and support laws banning private ownership or use of machine guns and semi-automatic and automatic assault weapons.

We’ve had enough. Since Columbine 1999, since Knoxville in 2008 since the Sandy Hook 2012.. and too many others to name.

Enough is enough. Because children should be safe at school, that we should be safe in our houses of worship – here.

Safety, of course, as we know, cannot be guaranteed. Even the safety of our children. The safety of our most precious loved ones. In the fall we started talking about creating brave space instead of safe space, because of course we can't guarantee safety, but we can create conditions which are safer and conditions which help with bravery. And of course, that’s what the students at Stoneman Douglas have shown us – and students all over the country and world. The Florida students have from the outset acknowledged the advantages they had enjoyed, until the fatal shooting. For the most part, these students had not been raised in neighborhoods where they feared for their lives. Many of them come from families with means which had, to some extent, protected their young lives from the poverty, disease, and violence of our world. And they recognized immediately that the advantages they had enjoyed had provided them with the voice to speak out and organize after this confrontation with the brutal fact of violence.

Their activism falls on the heels of the black lives matter movement and #metoo, times up. Whether conscious of it or not, they were schooled in those movements prior to their own activism.

And I didn’t know who Marjory Stoneman Douglas was until these students put the school with her name in the spotlight. She was an American journalist, author, women's suffrage advocate, and conservationist. She defended the Everglades against efforts to drain it and reclaim land for development. And learning that made me think of Dan Ogden, whom we memorialized yesterday at the same time March for our Lives in Vancouver was taking place. Young and old converged from Hough Elementary and Congresswoman Jaime Herrera Beutler’s office in Esther Short park. Young and old gathered in this church at the same time to remember conservationist and professor and civil servant, Dan Ogden. Marjory Stoneman Douglas and Dan and Val Ogden knew that democracy requires the participation of its citizens and that the people have more power than they tend to exercise.
Most of the people in the world
go out to work, day after day,
with their voices chained in their throats.

It takes teenagers to remind us that voices have power and collectively we are powerful. SNCC – the student nonviolent coordinating committee emerged from the student sit-ins against segregation of the sixties. SNCC played a seminal role in the freedom rides, the 1963 March on Washington, Mississippi Freedom Summer, the Selma campaigns, and other historic events. And students are leading the way now.

I know that it’s frightening and scary and frustrating that our generations, the parents and grandparents of these students didn’t manage to protect their classmates. I suspect the feelings are strong – that there is shame that we didn’t do more, that we left it to them to take action, that all our efforts didn’t provide that safety we all deserve – but there it is. I’m sure our parents before us, many of them who taught us we could change the world, also felt that profound disappointment.

My personal experience with violence, my lesson in the challenges of freedom and safety came when I was a young adult, just a few years older than the Florida activists. I was living in the country of Honduras, serving as a Peace Corps volunteer. I had been sexually assaulted in the village where I first lived, and had been moved “for safety” to the capitol city – which I can tell you for a fact did not feel safe. You might compare it to being moved from Washougal to downtown Portland. I had an apartment on a hill in Tegucigalpa, the capitol of Honduras. I rode a bus to go up and down the hill. At night, when the bus dropped us off, the women would get off in a group and stay in a group. Without foresight or planning, we just walked one another home. Sometimes we’d talk, other times we didn’t. But the group would stick together until we reached someone’s destination, and she would peel off, and then we’d keep going until the next house or dwelling, where other women would leave, until, at the end each woman had arrived home safely, without harassment or danger. It was instinctual. I noticed it the very first time I took a bus home at night, and I counted on it from then on. I was willing to give up a little freedom – to not walk at my own pace or take my preferred route home – so that I could stay with the group in order to feel relatively safe.

The truth is, women in this room, likely understand this phenomenon without my speaking it. Some others do too, for sure. And Dan’s story about the unsafe conditions of his childhood created by too much freedom, without boundaries and limits, will sound familiar to others of you. There is always this polar tension, between our values of freedom and safety – the desire to live and let live, and the desire to protect and put limits on our actions so that we don’t hurt ourselves or others. This is the narrative writ large right now – as if we’re having two completely different conversations going on in our nation, those who wish to protect the freedoms of gun-ownership and those who are willing to limit those freedoms to maximize safety.

Truth is, I don’t have any great insight to share with you this morning. I don’t know our way out of this, except through the hard work of activism and political participation and conversation across difference. The veterans who have joined this student movement inspire because they understand the absurdity of powered rifles in the hands of civilians. There are a large number of veterans who joined the march because they can speak out with authority on both gun control and the second amendment. These are the alliances that must get made in order to effect real change. These are the gaps we need to bridge.
One of my favorite signs reported to me from yesterday’s Vancouver march was “when the second amendment was written, people were still property.” And that’s the truth.

What I do know is that we can’t be cynical, and we cannot despair. Those are the easy choices. Instead, we need to make a braver choice, to stand with the grieving youth and let the lives lost not be in vain. I know this is hard, it is not a little thing I ask of you. We need to remain – as Martin Luther King told us – remain maladjusted to physical violence.

“But I say to you, my friends, as I move to my conclusion,” said Martin Luther King in 1963, “there are certain things in our nation and in the world which I am proud to be maladjusted and which I hope all [those] of good-will will be maladjusted until the good societies realize. I say very honestly that I never intend to become adjusted to segregation and discrimination. I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism, to self-defeating effects of physical violence...”

“In other words, I’m convinced now that there is need for a new organization in our world. The International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment--men and women who will be as maladjusted as the prophet Amos. Who in the midst of the injustices of his day could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

May we remember his words and follow the lead of the youth today.

Benediction

May this week be one of creative maladjustment for us all, where we practice bravery and actively reject despair. We know the work to be done. So, with Love guiding us, may we go forth and do it.

* Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.