

Last Saturday afternoon, my partner, Melissa, daughter Annie and I attended the PRIDE Charlotte Festival. We parked a few blocks away and were walking up the street when we met two men in red t-shirts who inquired, in a friendly voice, whether we knew any of God's promises. I smiled and indicated "yes." They stopped, we stopped, and a conversation ensued.

This would make for a much more interesting article if I could report that soon we were engaged in a furious shouting match, that they were insensitive and condemnatory, that we drew a crowd with our heated theological debate, that they announced that we were doomed to hell. Alas, you'll have to settle for this considerably more benign account.

The two men identified themselves as Christians and asked about our religious perspective. I informed them that I am the minister of this congregation. They first asked about Unitarianism—Were we a Christian church? Did we have a sacred text? What informs our religious beliefs? What were our views on the afterlife? They seemed genuinely curious.

They invited us to consider their views. That's actually the language they used—"We would invite you to think about this . . ."

Now, they had very strong convictions. They spoke with confidence about their faith. They clearly disagreed with us on quite a few issues. It became clear that we hold fundamentally different, even opposing worldviews.

But, they also listened, asked questions, even asked for more information on some things. And, they were respectful the whole time.

I told them that we did not agree with them and that I was unwilling to accept that they had a unique hold on the truth. But, I also told them that I admired them for their commitment and for their willingness to speak out of the strength of their convictions. And, I commended them for being respectful. I doubt I had any more success in changing their minds than they did in altering my views. But, we parted on friendly terms.

I was pleased that our five-year-old daughter overheard this conversation. She listened to four adults disagree. She heard us challenge one another's claims. She heard each of us speak passionately about that to which we've given our hearts. And, if only in one simply exchange, she learned that it is possible for people both to differ strongly and to communicate respectfully.

Some of us heard Karen Armstrong at this year's Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. Armstrong, one of the world's foremost scholars of religion, is now devoting her time and energy to fostering conversations around the world on the concept of compassion. (See <http://charterforcompassion.org/site/> for more information.)

Armstrong is calling all of us to what she claims is a shared virtue in all religious traditions. She describes it as the call to use "empathy—moral imagination—to put ourselves in others' shoes. We should act toward them as we would want them to act toward us. We should refuse, under any circumstance, to carry out actions which would cause them harm."

During General Assembly, Melissa and I had the opportunity to share a lunch with a small group that included Karen Armstrong. She said then that one of the biggest challenges the world faces is how people can find common, even compassionate ground across strong religious differences. I'd like to think that she would have approved of our sidewalk conversation. In spite of radical, fundamental differences, we maintained respect.

Armstrong sets a very high bar. Did you notice? “We should refuse, under any circumstance, to carry out actions which would cause . . . harm.” Of course that would mean refusing to engage in violence and acts of destructive personal slander. But, might it also include foregoing derision and stereotyping? not insulting others’ intelligence? not belittling others’ deeply held convictions?

What might it mean if we were to decide as individuals to be “beacons of progressive thought and action?” To speak with strength and conviction about our most deeply held values? To act with integrity with what we say matters most? But, to do so with the determination to embody compassion? How might it change our lives? How might it change the world?

Peace,

Jay