



Friends, we come together after a weary week of burying the dead, standing in solidarity with the living.

As we bless these children today, I'm reminded of what a hopeful act it is to pledge ourselves to these young lives. These are children who enter a world of unspeakable violence, violence we will one day try to explain to them with words that will somehow seem inadequate. Attending the [memorial service at Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center](#) last Sunday, a Muslim leader mentioned that he and his wife made the complicated decision to leave his children at home. He did not yet have the words to tell them about what had happened, how hate had hardened one person's heart beyond repair. He did not yet have the words.

A Jewish woman in my community writes about a similar struggle with her 8 year old son:

Tonight as I kiss my boy to bed. I still shield him from the violence that surrounds us. I know that it is the right decision for now. We talk about injustice in other ways. I know it doesn't shield us. I know there is hate diseasing the hearts of too many. But I can shield his world... a little longer. So tonight, with a heavy heart and tear filled eyes, I carry the darkness for both of us.

I think about the ways we might as caring adults first find words to help our children and youth understand the reality of hatred and the deep harm that people inflict on each other. We might first talk about bullying and name calling, how people use words to hurt other people. I'm sure you can remember hearing this phrase at some point in your childhood. I certainly do, when I was in elementary school and first experiencing the stinging words of bullies about my weight or my last name.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

The nursery rhyme is meant to assure the child that words cannot inflict harm, and to be strong and confident in the midst of such hateful speech. As children, we internalize these messages about the potential words have to do harm to us and others. We also learn the short distance between name calling and real violence. Judith Butler is an American philosopher most well known for her work on gender and language. In her book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* she writes:

To be called a name is one of the first forms of linguistic injury that one learns. The problem of injurious speech raises the question of which words wound, which representations offend. In being called an injurious name, one is derogated and demeaned. Could language injure us, if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings? Beings which require language in order to be?

Butler points out that as "linguistic beings," language is fundamental to how we understand ourselves and our identities. We use language to understand who we are and to communicate ourselves to the world. African American playwright [Ntozake Shange](#), who passed away this weekend, once said: "I'm a firm believer that language and how we use language determines how we act, and how we act then determines our lives and other people's lives."

In Pittsburgh, we have seen hate speech weaponized into devastating actions of hate. But we know that [anti-Semitic incidents](#) have surged nearly 60% in 2017. As the dead were being buried, news of vandalism and other threats to Jewish communities continued, from Irvine to Brooklyn. Shockingly, our President has [embraced the term “nationalist”](#) and refused to denounce white nationalists. After the KKK rally in Charlottesville, Virginia which killed white anti-racist protester Heather Heyer, Trump was quoted as implying a moral equivalence of anti-racist protesters and Nazis, saying there were “[good people on both sides](#).” He has likewise fanned the flames of inflammatory speech in his rallies and public statements— demonizing immigrants and asylum seekers in the caravan traveling from Central America to our border, Muslims as conspiring to “[infest](#)” our country. Is it any surprise that the racist graffiti and threats scrawled on synagogues this past week have all used the term “[rats](#)”?

Journalist Eyal Press has a recent piece in the New York Times entitled [This Week’s Mail Bombs Are No Surprise](#) which brings a new term into play for us to think about:

“stochastic terrorism” - in which mass communications, including social media (and rallies), inspire random acts of violence that according to one description “are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable.” In other words, every act and actor is different, and no one knows by whom or where an act will happen — but it’s a good bet that something will. These are just words, some would say. But words have consequences, especially when they are stated repeatedly by influential figures and sound distinctly like dog whistles to extremists who might well feel emboldened to act on them. Now more than ever, no one should feign surprise or innocence about this.

I think that Press is really speaking to us when he urges his readers to stop feigning surprise or innocence about this kind of hate and terrorism-- to set aside our disbelief that hate is real and present. We Unitarian Universalists are the love people. We are often reluctant students of hate. But we have to understand that hate’s constant presence is not going away, and has been emboldened, even incited by the political speech of our highest offices. The reality is that our Jewish, Muslim and African American Christian siblings in faith have been subjected to ongoing persecution, hate, bullying and demonization on a regular basis for centuries.

Within our Unitarian Universalist communities, we have queer people, transgender people, disabled people, who too understand how hate is real because they have been targets. Alongside the history of persecution, however, is a history of hopeful resistance, and we can, and must be a part of that resistance. Our Jewish neighbors need our compassionate solidarity, but part of being in solidarity is learning from, and lifting up, their long history of hopeful resistance. The Talmud states, “If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you do not protest it– you are held accountable. And so it is in relation to the members of your city. And so it is in relation to the world.”

It is critical for all of us, using whatever platforms we have, to counter hate speech with a kind of free speech that truly liberates—the kind of speech that proclaims that none of us are free until all of us are free. This liberating speech uses the soul force of our deepest values to decry white supremacy, racism and anti-Semitism and claim a hopeful vision of interfaith unity and solidarity. On Tuesday, we also need to amplify the platforms of those political candidates whose voices can bring critical counter speech perspectives to the halls of our Congress and public office.

I close with a story told by Minneapolis [Rabbi Michael Adam Latz](#) about Rabbi Akiva and his students:

They were traveling by boat from one port to another when the sky suddenly grew dark and threatening. As the winds howled, the waters began to rage and they encountered the storm of a lifetime. One gigantic wave hit the boat and shattered it to pieces far from the shore.

Two days later, people were shocked when they saw the students and their beloved Rabbi Akiva coming in from the sea.

“Rabbi,” they cried at the waterlogged teacher. “How are you alive? How are your students alive?” Rabbi Akiva smiled tenderly. “You see, when the storm tossed our boat and the waves shattered the wood, we grabbed onto one another, tightly. When one of us got weary or exhausted, the others held them above the water and carried them until we reached the shore.”

We must carry each other through these trying times. Our survival depends on our solidarity—we are the safest, most powerful and most free when we are together.

May it be so, and amen.