

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website  
Small Group Ministry Session  
**Bring Moral Imagination Back in Style**  
By Diane Haines, UU Fellowship of La Crosse, Wisconsin, September 15, 2016

**Opening Words:**

**Imagination**  
*I wish I were a Unicorn  
So smooth and white with shiny horn  
To prance and dance on clouds up there  
And spend my days with wings in air  
I wish I were a Unicorn  
So smooth and white with shiny horn  
I'd monitor the earth below  
And sprinkle it with stardust glow  
Sandra M. Haight*

**Check-in:**

Share a bit about yourself, a thought, an event in your life, or something intended to be meaningful to these friends with whom we gather today.

**Topic:**

What is moral imagination?

It is responsibility to imagine the humanity of people other than yourself. And yet the root cause of so much grief is our failure to do just that. Edmund Burke called this the “moral imagination,” the idea that our ethics should transcend our own personal experience and embrace the dignity of the human race. It is not simply a responsibility, it is the core of true spirituality, the radical awareness of the *other* as an existence that is as real and valid as our own.

**Questions and Discussion:**

Please read the following stories and quotes. Which of them resonates with you? Have you, or someone you know, experienced *otherness*? Do you have a story about moral imagination you wish to share with us?

**Stories:**

**Jennifer Finney Boylan** has seen people open their hearts when some *otherized* soul is revealed to be a member of their own family, or a friend. Our culture is making progress as a result. But too many people are still met with hatred because whoever and whatever they are is something others have never been compelled to imagine.

**Story 1:**

When I was 16, I had my first job as an aide in a nursing home. There, I saw that elderly people who lost their hearing often withdrew from the company of others because it was so difficult for them to fully participate in conversations and other social interactions. This isolation caused them to deteriorate in other ways, and several of them died the year that I worked at the home.

This experience helped me to recognize the harmful effects of isolation caused by *otherness*. In reality, none of us is *other*. We are all born into this world, we live a while, and we die. In between, we do our best to avoid suffering and to find happiness. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could all support each other in this endeavor--if we could all see that we are in this boat together?

**Story 2:**

I came back from the beach one day to find my grandmother and her nearly deaf friend Hilda playing gin and drinking vodka. “She’s Not There,” by the Zombies, was playing on the radio. This was a little strange.

“Why is Hilda listening to WFIL?” I asked.

“Shh,” my grandmother replied. “She thinks it’s classical.”

I’ve told this story lots of times since it happened, back in 1968. It always gets a laugh. But lately it doesn’t seem so funny.

Story 3:

Not long ago I was searing a steak in my apartment when the place filled with smoke and the fire alarm went off. I stood on a chair to try to turn it off. I had to do this about a half-dozen times before the thing stayed off, and each time I climbed up, my ears — already damaged from a lifetime of playing in rock ’n’ roll bands — were less than two feet from the piercing alarm.

When the noise finally stopped, my hearing was “traumatized,” as the otolaryngologist later described it. A high-pitched ringing began that night that has not ceased, a sound somewhere between the howling of wind and a chorus of crickets. I’ve also lost about 60 percent of the upper register of the sound spectrum, and what I do hear resembles the buzzing from a blown-out speaker. I have been fitted with hearing aids. I am learning to read lips. Why yes, it does suck, thanks for asking.

Now I keep thinking about Hilda, whose handicap struck me more as the stuff of comedy than of compassion. It wasn’t that I didn’t understand that she suffered, back when she was old and deaf and I was young and not. It’s that whatever she suffered from was something I didn’t need to be concerned with. It didn’t occur to me that imagining the humanity of people other than myself was my responsibility. And yet the root cause of so much grief is our failure to do just that.

#### Quotes:

- War, except in self-defense, is a failure of moral imagination. *Bill Moyers*
- It's through the small things that we develop our moral imagination, so that we can understand the sufferings of others. *Alexander McCall Smith*
- If the history of the western moral imagination is the story of an enduring and unending revolt against human cruelty, there are few more consequential figures than Raphael Lemkin - and few whose achievements have been more ignored by the general public. It was he who coined the word 'genocide.' He was also its victim. *Michael Ignatieff*
- There is not much new under the sun. As *Rudyard Kipling* observed: “All good people agree, / And all good people say, / All nice people, like Us, are We / And everyone else is They.”
- Imagination will often carry us to world’s that never were. But without it we go nowhere. *Carl Sagan*

Any group who has been discriminated against and/or abused, has had to fight for empathy, understanding, and acceptance. What is sad is that we are built to identify with one another's suffering. It's called empathy -- the ability to "feel" what another feels. We are so made to empathize that we can engage our powers for those that don't even exist -- we do this when we identify with a character in a book or a movie. But when it comes to using our powers for those that do exist, the ego makes choices -- it suppresses the powers of empathy because it fails to identify. About two thousand years ago, there was a carpenter who tried to teach people about this. But the message was too simple.

If you wish, we can end on a lighter note. The definition of *imagination* from the New Oxford American Dictionary is: The faculty or action of forming new ideas or images. The ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful.

What are the first three ideas and/or images you think about when you visualize this definition?

#### **Closing Words:**

Music is a moral law. It gives soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination, and charm

and gaiety to life and to everything. Plato