

Thanksgiving is this Thursday and we'll be with our families. I was talking with a woman this week and she said she was dreading it, because she has a crazy uncle who drives her nuts and she's thinking she'll have to kill him. I had a crazy uncle, so I totally get that. Maybe you did too. Maybe you still do, in which case I am sorry. Or worse, maybe you are that crazy uncle. God forbid. When I was a teenager, we'd be driving to the relatives for the holidays and my mother would say, "Don't argue with your uncle. I don't want a dispute at our family Thanksgiving." So whenever he said something outrageous, I would grit my teeth and smile, then sneak out later when it was dark and let the air out of his car tires.

Crazy uncles come in all flavors—conservative, liberal, fascist, socialist, capitalist, communist, true believer, atheist. It isn't so much what they believe, as it is their dogged insistence that they alone possess the truth. The thing is, logic doesn't work with crazy uncles. Appeals to fairness and justice don't work. I once pointed out to my uncle that his remarks about women were sexist, thinking he would say, "Oh, so they were. Please forgive me. I'll have to work on that." Except he didn't. Nor did he change his mind about black people and Asians and Hispanics and everyone who wasn't just like him. So I did the only thing I could do, which was to let the air out of his tires, so he couldn't go anywhere and spread his nonsense.

The crazy uncles, and even some crazy aunts, have been coming out of the woodwork this past year—in all flavors. Because of Facebook, we see videos about them and have begun to think they're somehow representative of America, and indicative of our future. Depending on who you talk to, we're either headed for 1940's Germany, 1950's Soviet Union, or 1930's America, with all of the dangers of those particular places and eras. Those were horrible periods, so we're alarmed by those politicians we worry will take us there again. We're at one another's throats, even estranged from people we once loved and admired.

I know a man who isn't speaking to his brother, with whom he has always been close, because of who his brother voted for. He didn't know for sure who his brother voted for, but he had his suspicions because of a Facebook post he had seen, which his brother had "liked." This mystifies me. There isn't a politician in the world that could turn me against my brothers and sister. This doesn't mean I've abandoned my ethical standards. Not at all. I simply refuse to let the rhetoric of political machines dictate whom I will love and not love. I believe it is entirely possible to be fully opposed to a politician, to refute that politician, to utterly and thoroughly reject that politician's vision for our nation, without hating that politician and those who might have voted for them. Just as I will not let a politician dictate whom I shall love, neither will I let them dictate whom I shall hate, fear, or blame. I cede that power to no one but myself.

So I will not hate, because I am a Quaker. But because I am a Quaker, I will keep my eyes peeled for injustice. Because I am a Quaker, I will always side with the tormented, not the tormentor. But I will not hate.

The pain of these days is magnified because we believed after electing our first black president, and the nomination of two women to the presidency, Hillary Clinton and Jill Stein, that America had finally exorcised the twin demons of racism and sexism. Let me be clear, it is not the fact of those two women losing that saddens so many. In a constitutional republic like America the possibility of loss is ever present. Republicans and Democrats alike have had to make their peace with political loss. We do not grieve because a woman lost. We grieve because racism and sexism were such prominent features of this election, reminding us of their power to clutch and distort the human heart. We grieve because this election has emboldened persons who vociferously and violently insist on their superiority, their supremacy. And we grieve because for too long we believed in the inevitability of justice, and now can only conclude it is more elusive than we imagined.

In a sermon in 1965, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Like King, I believed in the inevitability of justice. I believed the only thing keeping us from a more perfect union was time. I believed racism and sexism would gradually recede, and that one morning the sun would rise on a more enlightened, inclusive America.

Now I know there is nothing magical about time, nothing inevitable about justice. The arc of the universe can just as naturally, just as surely, bend toward oppression and ignorance if we are not careful. Friends, we have our work cut out for us. Progress is not inevitable. It is not some great ideal toward which the universe magically bends. Fair play and progress are the result of dedicated people rolling up their sleeves and putting their hands to the plow. The arc of the universe will only bend toward justice if we make it so. It is not inevitable. It is the consequence of our unswerving dedication to a world restored. Justice is never a sure thing. The moment we believe justice is inevitable, with no effort on our part, is the moment it begins to recede.

As Quakers, ours is a double call. Our first responsibility is be vigilant for justice. When people are diminished, when their rights and dignity are threatened, we cannot and must not be silent and still. Our second responsibility is to love those with whom we disagree, remembering that a nation's moral stature is only secure when its citizens refuse to hate. As Quakers, we must model the reconciliation we promote, even when, especially when, reconciliation has become a minor key in our nature's song.

Many of us have not been targeted in this campaign, though that should not diminish our determination to seek justice for others. Last week a man said to me, "Why do care who won? Why are you upset? You're a white male, you'll be fine."

I care because I have a wife, and a daughter-in-law, and a granddaughter. I care because my brother is gay and my brother-in-law is black and my niece is Hispanic. I care because I love the Syrian family our meeting has sponsored, our little Syrian toddler, Sidra, with her impossibly large eyes that look to us with trust and hope. She is the same age as our Madeline, no less valued, no less loved. So even though I have not been targeted, and maybe neither have you, we are not released from our Christian responsibility to care. When the lash of tyranny strikes one, it strikes all.

It's a bit like when a pig and chicken were talking about a bacon and egg breakfast.

The chicken noticed the pig was upset and said to the pig, "I don't understand why you're so upset."

The pig said, "Because for you breakfast is an abstraction. But for me it's a matter of life and death."

While this election might feel like an abstraction for some people, who don't understand why others are upset, let me just say that for African-Americans, for Hispanics, for Muslims, for women, for gays and lesbians, for our beautiful Syrian family, it feels like life and death.

So we must resist.

Resist injustice, resist hatred, resist racism and all the other ism's that poison our nation.

But we must also resist our tendency to demonize, our habit of cutting off those with whom we disagree. Some of them, a thoughtless minority, have acted shamefully. There have always been people whose visions of community and country are stunted and deformed. Don't be like them. Then there are others with whom we disagree, but like you and me long for a better America, a better world. They are our allies. In some instances, our own family and friends. Reach out to them. Care for them. Hold ever before them the highest ideals of our Quaker faith and our treasured Constitution.

And if someone should ask you whose side you are on, say what Edward Burrough, that wonderful early Quaker, said, when asked on the heels of the English Civil War, which side Quakers were on. He said, "We are not for names, nor men, nor titles of government, nor are we for this party, nor against the other...we are for justice and mercy and truth and peace, and true freedom, that these may be exalted in our nation."

And that, my friends, should you care to know, is what I am for.