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 Arlington Street Church  
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### **A Sermon from the Don't Bully Pulpit<sup>1</sup>**

I hopped into my car to drive across the city and turned the key in the ignition. NPR came on with the engine; a woman's voice I didn't recognize was speaking to a live audience, saying this:

“At the age of 22, I fell in love with my boss, and at the age of 24, I learned the devastating consequences. Can I see a show of hands,” she asks, “of anyone here who didn't make a mistake or do something they regretted at 22? ... So, like me, at 22, a few of you [also] may have ... fallen in love with the wrong person, maybe even your boss. Unlike me, though, your boss probably wasn't the president of the United States of America.”

I turned off the car and sat, riveted to the radio. After more than a decade of silence, Monica Lewinsky was on the TED stage, giving a talk she titled *The Price of Shame*.<sup>2</sup>

For those of you who were lucky enough to miss this particularly sordid moment in American history, Monica Lewinsky was a White House intern in 1995 and '96. She confided in someone she thought was a friend that she was in a relationship with President Bill Clinton. That friend secretly taped their conversations, and released them. In January, 1998, it broke online – the very first time the traditional news was usurped by the Internet for a major news story. Monica Lewinsky calls it “a click that reverberated around the world.” The affair and its repercussions, which included President Clinton's impeachment, became known as the Lewinsky Scandal.

“What it meant for me personally,” her speech continues, “was that overnight I went from being a completely private figure to a publicly

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<sup>1</sup> The benediction included Edwin Markham's poem “Outwitted,” from *The Shoes of Happiness and Other Poems* (1913): He drew a circle that shut me out – / Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. / But love and I had the wit to win: / We drew a circle and took him in.

<sup>2</sup> March, 2015

humiliated one worldwide. I was patient zero of losing a personal reputation on a global scale almost instantaneously.”

Nine months later, Monica Lewinsky sat in a windowless office listening to the surreptitiously taped phone calls; she was legally required to authenticate all 20 hours of them. “Scared and mortified,” she says, “I listen, listen as I prattle on about the flotsam and jetsam of the day; listen as I confess my love for the president, and, of course, my heartbreak; listen to my sometimes catty, sometimes churlish, sometimes silly self being cruel, unforgiving, uncouth; listen, deeply, deeply ashamed, to the worst version of myself....”

Soon, the whole world listened to those tapes. And, says Monica Lewinsky, the “rush to judgment, enabled by technology, led to mobs of virtual stone-throwers.... I was branded as a tramp, tart, slut, whore, bimbo, and, of course, ‘that woman.’ I was seen by many but actually known by few. And I get it: it was easy to forget that ‘that woman’ was dimensional, had a soul, and was once unbroken.”

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At the time, despite my admiration for President Clinton, I knew where the responsibility for his transgression lay. And unlike the cyberbullies and Internet trolls, I never gave much thought to his victim. Hearing her speak, I was moved to a deep sense of remorse. For the first time in 18 years, I have been reflecting on the unprecedented bullying she suffered.

Monica Lewinsky was compelled to come forward by the 2010 death of Tyler Clementi, the 18-year-old Rutgers University freshman whose roommate secretly webcammed him in an intimate moment with another young man. When a conflagration of online shaming and humiliation was ignited, Tyler Clementi jumped from the George Washington Bridge to his death.

Monica Lewinsky writes, “Tyler’s tragic, senseless death was a turning point for me.... What we need is a cultural revolution.... Online, we [have] a compassion deficit, an empathy crisis.... Public shaming as a blood sport has to stop, and it’s time for an intervention on the Internet and in our culture.

“The shift begins with something simple....” she continues. “We need to return to a long-held value of compassion – compassion and empathy.” As it turns out, empathy and compassion from even just *one person* can make the difference between life and death.

As people of a faith community that covenants to speak our truths in love and to help one another, we know that freedom of expression comes with responsibility. Words can tear or words can heal. It is a spiritual practice to consume news with empathy and compassion, to click with empathy and compassion, to communicate with empathy and compassion.

There's a fairly new word that means the opposite of bystander: it's *upstander*. To be an upstander is to trade-in apathy for action. To be an upstander is to stick our heads above the parapet to offer a kind word, or, online, to post a positive comment or report bullying. Monica Lewinsky suggests "walking a mile in someone else's headline."<sup>3</sup> If you knew that, by speaking up, you could save a life, would you risk it?

As Jesus and Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. King taught, to be an upstander is to meet the force of hatred with soul force. These are Dr. King's words, exhorting his people to take heart: "I've seen too much hate to want to hate, myself, ... and every time I see it, I say to myself, Hate is too great a burden to bear. Somehow, we must be able to stand up against our most bitter opponents and say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering [with] our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we will still love you.... But be assured that we'll wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day, we will win our freedom. We will not only win freedom for ourselves; we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."<sup>4</sup>

To be an upstander is not easy, nor it is not always simple. I'm positive that it goes better when we band together to call out bullying, and work together to sanction bullying behavior and draw boundaries on its toxic effects. In her book *The Bully, The Bullied, and the Bystander*, Barbara Colorosco defines bullying as *contempt* packaged with a sense of entitlement, a liberty to exclude, and an intolerance of difference. It will always include an imbalance of power, the intent to harm, and the threat of further aggression. And when it escalates unabated, it will also include terror. "Once terror is created," writes Barbara Colorosco, "the bully can act without fear of recrimination or retaliation.... The bully counts on peers becoming

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<sup>3</sup> Monica Lewinsky, *The Price of Shame*, [ted.com/talks/monica\\_lewinsky\\_the](http://ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the)

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Christmas Sermon for Peace*, Christmas Eve, 1967

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involved ... or at least doing nothing to stop [them. And] ... the bullied [person] is rendered powerless....”<sup>5</sup>

The first principle of Unitarian Universalism – a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all beings – means that “Nothing – nothing – justifies treating another person with contempt.”<sup>6</sup> We are called to moral outrage; to become active witnesses to the cycle of intimidation, fear, and violence; to stand up, speak out, and encourage others to do the same. We are called to be upstanders.

Our intern minister of blessed memory, Rev. Dan Kane, introduced me to his favorite response to bullying. In 2007, a middle school girl named Olivia Gardner suffered a seizure in front of her peers. The bullying that followed over the next two years drove her to a new school, then another, and yet another, and ultimately to be homeschooled. She was isolated and emotionally distraught. Her plight finally hit the news, where two teenage sisters – Emily and Sarah Buder – picked it up and stood up.

In a wildly creative act, they launched a letter-writing campaign called “Olivia’s Letters,” inviting people to write and offer Olivia Gardner “positive, encouraging, and reassuring words that would help boost her spirits, improve her self-worth, and restore faith in her peers.”<sup>7</sup> More than 1,000 letters came from strangers from all over the nation and all over the world – from former targets, as well as remorseful bullies and once-silent bystanders – an “overwhelming chain reaction of support, [solidarity,] encouragement, and love” that more than filled a book called *Letters to a Bullied Girl*.

Each story is uniquely shattering, but each letter ends with virtually the same exhortation to conscience, courage, and community. The Buder sisters’ letters sum it up: Emily Buder, age 17, writes to Olivia Gardner, “However much this experience has diminished your faith in the good of humankind, please try to remember that there are people who are on your side, who care about you immensely, and who admire you for the strength you have shown by pushing through this. You are a beautiful, wonderful, and strong person, and all of us who care about you will be here to help you get through this. Things will *get better* ... and I’m sure you will find an amazing group of friends who will genuinely care about you and never let

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<sup>5</sup> Olivia Gardner with Emily and Sarah Buder, *Letters to a Bullied Girl*, pp. xv-xvi

<sup>6</sup> *op cit*, p. xix

<sup>7</sup> from the email that launched “Olivia’s Letters,” Buder, *op cit*, p. 199

anything like this happen to you ever again. Please keep your head up and never doubt yourself. You have a bright future ahead of you!”

Sarah Buder, 14 years old, concludes her letter to Olivia Gardner, “The best thing you can do is not let it affect you. Think of it this way: people like that aren’t even worth your thoughts. These bullies want power, and the best thing to do in this situation is not give it to them. Stay strong. The best way to fight back hate is with love. My heart is with you.”<sup>8</sup>

And just two lines from a woman who was both formerly bullied ... and formerly a bully. “Keep your heart open and know that you are never alone in this life...,” she says “Please always remember that people do change and love does heal.”<sup>9</sup>

Beloved spiritual companions,

May we enlist empathy and compassion  
and seek to interrupt the cycle of bullying.

We are called to moral outrage;  
to become active witnesses  
to the cycle of intimidation, fear, and violence;  
to stand up,  
speak out,  
and encourage others to do the same.

May we trade-in apathy for action,  
and be upstanders.

Even *just one person* can make the difference between life and death.  
May we be the ones.

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> *op cit*, pp. 201-202

<sup>9</sup> *op cit*, p. 157