

Opening statement written and read by John Eby at Children of Abraham conversation: Purpose of Life.
Thursday, November 19, 2015.

Identity Violence

Friends,

It is a joy to see you all here tonight. We come together as a powerful statement of resistance to the violent forces of identity-politics that are distorting religious traditions, disfiguring the political climate, and devastating human lives. Our presence here declares that we do not accept distortion, disfigurement, and devastation. We grieve with our brothers and sisters in Paris, Baghdad, Beirut, and Yola as they mourn unexplained losses at the hands of religious extremism. We grieve with our sisters and brothers in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan who mourn inexplicable losses due to disproportionate retaliation by powerful nations they've never visited. We grieve with the young men and women who are ensnared into destructive and objectifying ideologies promoted by non-State organizations and State machines.

We renounce the dehumanization of Russians, Jews, Coptic Christians, French people, Americans, Sunnis, and Shi'ites that justifies this rapid intensification of arbitrary violence, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and civil chaos. We renounce also the dehumanization that draws media, politicians, and the public into demonizing whole groups for the actions of a few.

Many of us are left, in the wake of such senseless violence, with the question: "what are we to do?" Among the best answers to this question is before us here tonight. We are to stand in solidarity and friendship across differences and disagreements, to show respect and affection for people who look or think or worship differently from us. We are to build friendships that go beyond the convenience of social class and partisan identities to create a richly textured rainbow society, a beloved community. We learn about and from each other, practicing the art of listening, learning, and growing. And we stand especially right now with the Muslim community here and elsewhere that becomes an easy target for ignorant resentment and slander. I hope that each one of us will challenge that prejudice every time we hear it, showing to its spokesmen compassion but without tolerance for racist and anti-religious prejudice.

Tonight, as we talk in friendly conversation together about “The Purpose of Life” we explore each other’s’ perspectives and stand together in solidarity against the nihilistic cynicism of ISIS terrorism, disproportionate retaliation, and political fear-mongering. These vicious points of view rely upon a finalistic philosophy that says that there is no solution to problems other than incredible destruction and violence.¹ That finalistic philosophy claims there is no solution other than eradication of difference.

We stand together in solidarity and friendship to declare another way – a way of respect, universal dignity, and transformative relationships. We stand together to declare that it is in our diversity that we discover the true beauty of society and a common Purpose of Life. This is who we are, the Children of Abraham, the Children of all humanity.

¹ Thomas Merton, “Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant,” *Gandhi on Non-Violence*.