

**“Banned Books Week”**  
**Sermons by Karen A. Wolf and Edward Oberholtzer**  
**UUCSV**  
**October 1, 2023**

**Karen:**

The celebration of Banned Books Week is hardly a joyous celebration, rather it is recognizes the growing problem of banned books in the US. The American Library Association reports that there were a record-breaking number of attempts to ban books in 2022—up 38 percent from the previous year. Of those challenges, the organization notes, "the vast majority were written by or about members of the LGBTQIA+ community and people of color." These increasing efforts to limit access to books, limit what can be taught. Just in the past few weeks there have been numerous examples of efforts to limit what books teachers can teach or what books can be in Libraries.

As reported in the Washington Post, one teacher in South Carolina was taken to task for teaching the book “Between the World and Me,” a National Book Award-winning book authored by Ta-Nehisi Coates. This book was reported to go against the South Carolina proviso that forbids teachers from making students “feel guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress.” Restricting access to is yet another attempt to ignore the messy nature of our country’s past and our heritage. As the author Ta-Nehisi Coates points to in our UU Soul Matter Guide for this month, “Here is what I want you to know: in America it is traditional to destroy the black body- it is heritage.” Banning books that discuss our messy heritage of our race relations or the diversity of our people, whether it be our family structure, sexual identity or preference is a defacto destruction, through making these invisible. Thus denying the inherent worth of every person, our first principle and further denying Justice, equity and compassion in human relations, our second principle.

The extent of book banning is ever increasing. It extends from children’s literature including Dr. Seuss books, Hop on Pop, The Lorax, The Giver, The Lion, the Witch and Wardrobe, Where the Wild Things Are, and the Harry Potter series.

You may remember last year we watched during our story for all ages, And Tango Makes Three, about two male penguins that adopted an orphaned penguin. This lovely tale was also banned.

The current backlash against some books and ideas isn't the first time this has happened in American history. Some of the earliest attempts to censor and block books goes back to early America, when Thomas Morton’s book critical of the Puritans was banned by the Puritans. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, published by Unitarian Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1858 was probably one of the most famous works to be banned as it offered an unabashed depiction of slavery as an evil, brutal institution, which was not well received by Southern slave owners.

When the Comstock Act was passed in 1873, it was titled "An Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use." This broad act did not define Obscene but was applied to a wide range of material about such topics as birth control, abortion and sexuality. Works of artistic merit were banned along with the writings of Chaucer's Canterbury tales and the works of authors William Faulkner, Hemingway, Steinbeck and Margaret Sanger. The ripples from this law continued long after it was ended in 1965. (On a personal note, I remember my mother taking my new copy of Lady Chatterley's Lover in 1968.... And the shock when I produced a fresh Copy of Our Bodies Ourselves in 1974.)

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the term "Banned in Boston" gained notoriety as book sellers colluded to avoid selling books that they perceived might lead to vice or deviance. The result was the banning of books such Voltaire's Candide and Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass.

After WWII, there was a large effort to ban comic books. As a psychiatrist, Fredric Wertham promoted the theory that comic books led to juvenile delinquency. Almost overnight, comics were brought down to a level appropriate only for the youngest or dimmest of readers," the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund says in its history.

More recently we see an ever-enlarging list of books banned by schools, libraries, and bookstores. Wonderful and important books such as Maus, The Bluest Eye, The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, and Gender Queer, A Biography

We have a long history of book banning and censorship but we pay a price. This year's Banned Book Week has the theme ""**Let Freedom Read**". As we consider the importance of freedom read, reflect on these important democratic tenets:

1. freedom of conscience, including the right to express individual views in any format, and
2. unrestricted public access to library materials of all kinds.

But, it is just as important for us to consider "How can we as UUs, given the tenets of our faith and our covenant address the growing trends on censorship and book banning?"

**Ed:**

Karen has laid out a history of book banning as well as an argument that we, as members of a progressive religious organization might all comfortably get behind. Who, what sort of person, could find offense in the image of two male penguins adopting a penguin chick? What monster finds Maurice Sendak to be offensive? Who would deny the Lorax?

But, let me offend you, and remind you of a phrase that came from a nineteenth century muckracking journalist, a classic saying, comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfort-

able. It falls to me, former librarian that I am, to raise the issue of what we do with those books, that music, those art forms that seem beyond the pale. Louis Brandeis famously noted that the first amendment of our Bill of Rights does not give you license to cry "Fire!" in a crowded theater. Beyond crying Fire, are there limits? And are we simply talking governmental censorship? What responsibility do we have, as seekers of Truth, whatever, as Pontius Pilate wondered, whatever Truth is.

The year before I was born, the French philosopher, Simone de Beauvoir published an essay entitled, "Must We Burn de Sade?" I won't ask how many of us might have any of de Sade's works on their bookshelves. I will allow that I have had in years gone by, a number of his books. I will also allow that they were offensive in the extreme, difficult to read not only for their content, but also, frankly, because they were so poorly written. Should they be burned? de Beauvoir thought not, despite her critique of their style. I will say that I did not buy them for the shelves of the Danville public library when I was director. There are guidelines a collection manager follows as well as budget constraints, though de Sade did not meet those not because of his offensiveness, but simply because his fiction was, as we librarians would say, out of scope. Perhaps a writer of Menonite sadomasochism would have been included, though, so far, none to my knowledge have come forth.

And this points to the hard questions around banned books. What do we as progressives do with material outside the pale? My favorite Italian quantum physicist, Carlo Rovelli, includes in his latest collection of essays, a firm commitment to an Italian publisher who had put out a new translation of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Rovelli praised its publication as an act of courage and then proceeded to write about what he had learned from reading Hitler's screed. Rovelli said that he was overwhelmed by the sense of fear that dripped from each line of Hitler's memoir. He had not, to that moment, thought of fascists as driven by fear, but, reading Hitler's words, he came to realize that fascism gained what power it has from the fear that underlines it. An important lesson for all of us.

Should we burn Hitler? As a librarian, I had no control over whose hands such a book might fall. A young person, seeking justification for his or her rage? Another young person wondering why his or her fellow travelers were so consumed by their own rage and seeking a way to understand it? Sun Tzu, in his *Art of War*, tells us of the importance of understanding our enemies. He might have gone on to encourage us to understand our friends, our neighbors, our fellow countrymen.

And let's be clear. No one can censor short of a governmental body. Karen has named a number. School boards, the government, city, state and federal. It has only been within my lifetime that what is, arguably, the greatest novel in the English language, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, has passed the restrictions placed upon it by the notion of obscenity. Saying a work was Banned in Boston was all too well known and had been applied in Boston, that bastion of Irish culture to that masterpiece of Irish literature. And, lest we think back on this smugly, consider that the Watch and Ward Society which was responsible for banning was largely made up of a sterner, more intolerant breed of Uni-

tarians. But of Unitarians, nonetheless. But what of other restrictions? Restrictions we place upon works of literature. My own daughter will not read any of the works of Vladimir Nabokov, a man I consider to be not simply one of the masters of English prose, ironically considering that English was his second, or third, or fourth language, but a writer whose mastery of the novels form is second to none. Jenny points to *Lolita* as having pedophilia at its core, and further notes that Nabokov had returned to that theme a number of times and in a number of other works.

Must we burn Nabokov?  
Must we refuse to buy Nabokov?

And not simply novels. Wagner was a notorious anti-Semite. Does that inflect his music? Does Richard Strauss's being named Reich minister of culture for the Nazi regime come forth, unbidden in his music?

Martin Heidegger's writings, a crucial line of thought in twentieth century philosophy, arguably has a strong streak of fascism within it and Heidegger was notoriously allied with Nazism. My own Zen heritage goes back to Hu'un Yatsutani-roshi, a man who stood by the autocratic and genocidal regime in wartime Japan and who, despite the lack of a Jewish presence in wartime Japan, continued to espouse anti-Semitic views. And yet, his teachings are revered by me and my fellow practitioners.

Must we burn Wagner, Heidegger, and Yatsutani?

The *Art of War* urges us to know our enemy. There's much to be said for this, but it doesn't cover it. Consider how much we gain from the *Four Last Songs* of that arguably Nazi sympathizer, Richard Strauss. Of the examination of existence by that Nazi-sympathizer, Martin Heidegger. How much do we learn of the nature of desire and of its expression by Nabokov. How much do we learn of humor, and and of pathos from the films of the discredited Woody Allen?

How much do we throw out, what can we save from Thomas Jefferson? David Hume? Aristotle? All men who espoused, in words and deeds, unvarnished racism, all thinkers we cherish. Our own heritage as Unitarian Universalists contains within it, in its New England manifestation, ministers who owned slaves, right there, right across from Harvard Yard.

Must we burn the seven principles?

All things to ponder during this Banned Book Week. All things to consider as the current election cycle looms. All things to consider as we reach into that bookshelf, as we frequent our local book store, as we place an order for our next book on Kindle.