

Lisa Lee Herrick writes in a recent issue of “Emergence” magazine that it was odd for her last January to stay home during the celebration of the Chinese New Year. It meant missing out on the usual big meal at her family’s favorite restaurant in San Francisco’s Chinatown.

But just a week before, it was reported that a 35-year-old man arriving in Washington State from Wuhan, China, had been diagnosed with a dangerous new virus. With thousands of travelers from around the world expected to descend on San Francisco, her family decided not to take the chance of getting infected.

Her parents, refugees from Laos, remembered how diseases would ravage the camps they were living in. So, they urged Herrick to stockpile supplies and be prepared to hunker down for a while. But her thoughts went to her siblings: her brother, an anesthesiologist at a city hospital, and her sister, a hospice nurse, both of them likely not only to land in the middle of what was coming but also to be reviled and resented for being Asian.

“I cannot stand the idea,” she wrote, “that someone might point their finger and say ““You did this to us.””

Since, she has seen comments on Facebook with photos of unfamiliar foods from Chinese markets. One Facebook friend, Herrick wrote, commented on one photo he found: “I don’t know. What this is, Worms?”

“I was appalled and betrayed,” Herrick wrote, “It was clearly a plate of cooked tripe: julienned into ribbons.”

But it was too easy to look at something unfamiliar and imagine something comically awful, while ignoring the prejudice it reveals. Food, she noted, is a common access point to understand the lived experiences that both unite and divide us. How we eat is a matter of taste, she said, but “racism fouls the mouth, makes waters bitter, and poisons our connections to each other.”

These kinds of racist slurs were not new for her, Herrick said, adding, “I’ll never forget the time that someone asked me if I had a dog and if I planned to eat it.”

But the reported Chinese origin of the coronavirus has revived a pattern of Asian racism that goes back more than a century, with hundreds of random street attacks reported in the last couple of months against Asian Americans. “Here in our city,” she writes, “people stare at us as if we were dangerous wild animals rife with disease.”

And it is weighing on Asians, she said, not just to endure racist acts, but left to be the ones “who must inform and educate, but never accuse, to remain sensible and calm while a finger, a weapon, is pointed in my face.”

“I’m tired of wearing the yellow mantle,” Herrick said. “It looks terrible on everyone. I am nobody’s peril. I am just as vulnerable, powerful, worried, protective, optimistic, and concerned as we all are in this global pandemic.”

Friends, it is a fraught moment in time for our 6th UU principle: the call to affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

Of all our principles it is the one that is least disturbed from the language adopted in 1961 when the Unitarian Universalist Association came into being. Those early bylaws named as one of the tasks of this new religious body to “implement the vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace.”

Twenty-three years later, in 1984, when we rewrote most of the principles, for this one we booted out the exclusive language of “brotherhood” and added the notion of “liberty,” but otherwise the spirit of that principle remains. And it does retain the kind of brave optimism that was telling in the early 60s.

Only a year before, newly-elected President John F. Kennedy in his inaugural address foresaw for this country what he called “a New Frontier” that would take on, in Kennedy’s words, “unchartered areas of science and space, unsolved problems of peace and war, unconquered problems of ignorance and prejudice.”

Brave, inspiring words, yes, but hardly the kinds of words that we hear on the lips of world leaders today. And for good reason: we’re a little suspicious of such high-flown rhetoric, and testimony like Lisa Herrick’s shows us why. Post-World War II politicians, Kennedy included, for all their successes, were singularly ineffective in taking on the deep and gnarly problems that divided humankind and still keep us separated today.

The goal of world community – not to speak of peace, liberty and justice – is hobbled by a heritage of inequality, oppression and white supremacy that has troubled this nation: A heritage that we, too, have been forced to grapple with in our own denomination, and that in recent years has only deepened across this country. It is being exacerbated now by the COVID pandemic, which is striking non-white communities harder than any others and so is dividing us further along racial and economic lines.

Yet, it’s worth remembering that nearly 60 years ago the “striving for world community” that we charged ourselves with was not some abstract notion that we thought sounded nice. Those words arose from connections and commitments that had been in place for decades and that at one point fueled brave and risky initiatives to protect the lives of imperiled people only decades before in the early days of World War II.

The story, ironically, is one that was not widely told among us until only about seven years ago. That was when Israel’s Holocaust Museum singled out the two people at the center of the story as “righteous among nations” for their work and they became the subject of a PBS documentary.

Those two were the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, a Unitarian minister, and his wife, Martha. The Sharps responded in 1939 to an appeal from the UUA to help Unitarians in Czechoslovakia who were being persecuted by Nazi occupiers. They helped arrange exit visas for some of those people, but then they got drawn into the larger work of aiding all refugees. They helped many Jews flee and delivered food. At one point, Martha orchestrated passage for 29 children on a boat to the United States.

Their efforts set into motion what is now the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which today remains a powerful voice for human rights. You remember that last fall we hosted their president, the Rev. Mary

Katherine Morn, as our Sunday speaker last September and we supported their Guest at Your Table campaign. So, we come by our continued commitment to world community honestly.

But even today we struggle to make the words of our 6th principle more than progressive boilerplate. Peace, justice, liberty: sure . . . and? It's nice to contribute money to people who are doing this work, but our principles call us not just to speak those words but to live them.

Last week on a Zoom call I invited reflections from members of our Peacemakers group at UUCA about the 6th principle. I appreciated a comment by Bruce Larson that the telling word in the 6th principle may be the smallest one: all We seek to promote peace, liberty and justice not just for our own purposes, but for all people. Lately in our country some people have gotten stuck on the notion of liberty, but they seem to want to apply it only to themselves. They complain that government restrictions on travel and gathering intended to reduce the spread of the virus impinge, unfairly they think, on their desire to live as they choose. But in the end that reading of liberty amounts merely to anarchic chaos and in today's circumstances endangers everyone's health.

Liberty for all is made possible by the agreements, the commitments, the respect and consideration that we give to each other. When we live in community, it's something that we are always negotiating. We value our liberty, but for example, we also value our health and safety. So, we negotiate limits to our liberty to improve the chances that we all may be well.

All is a powerful and challenging word. Peace just for some is not true peace. Justice only for some is not true justice. Liberty demanded at the expense of others won't cut it.

Lisa Lee Herrick writes that once her anger with one woman's racist remark led her to see if she could track the person down. She hunted through Facebook and actually found her. But once she had she also discovered that, as with many of us, her postings were a funny assortment of quirky and oddly endearing things: as Herrick put it, "not the ogre I was expecting to find."

Insecure, and maybe a bit flawed: a person in progress. So, she dropped her search. "It wasn't right to define myself by the worst things that ever happened to me," she wrote, "and it didn't feel right to condemn someone else by their weakest moment."

Perhaps, she said, "that vengeance I had ached for all those years – the age-old desire to tip the scales in the name of justice – was just unexpurgated anger. Revenge is a bottomless cup that leaves you thirsty."

That, of course, leaves us with the difficult task of letting go, of disarming, and, ultimately of forgiving. In truth, Herrick reflected, those years of deflecting racism had left her, in her words, "battle-worn, not browbeaten." Age had given her a vaster sense of spirit, an understanding of the need not to respond to abuse but to intervene before it happens.

So, is it our work as well: commitment to putting peace and justice in our every step so that we all build the community that sets us all free.

