Since before we were married sixteen years ago last month, my wife Julie and I have read aloud to each other.

We favor young adult fiction. It tends to be more lively and plot-driven than books for adults, which at the end of a long day put us right to sleep. And young adult novels generally have a less cynical view of the world. We can usually anticipate an ending if not happy then at least redemptive.

We started with C. S. Lewis’s magnificent *Chronicles of Narnia*, then undertook Philip Pullman’s brilliant *His Dark Materials* trilogy and of course the enchanting *Harry Potter* series. But when Julie and I began to hear enthusiastic reports about *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, we passed. A novel about children forced to kill each other for mass entertainment did not sound redemptive, or even enjoyable. The real world is horrific enough.

Then, this past March, the *Hunger Games* movie exploded on the scene. Featuring little known actors in lead roles, it premiered at number one in the United States and topped the box office for four weeks. In revenues this year it trails only the Marvel special-effects blockbuster *The Avengers*, which cost nearly three times as much to make.

Unlike the muscular but formulaic *Avengers*, *The Hunger Games* became a cultural phenomenon, especially for young people. I saw it, liked it, and read the book and its sequels, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, which the publisher, knowing a cash cow when it sees one, still has not released in paperback [except in large print].

The trilogy is set in a future North America devastated not by nuclear apocalypse but by inexorable environmental and social collapse: “the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the encroaching seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance remained.”

The American nation is now Panem, from the Latin *panem et circenses*, bread and circuses to keep the people docile and compliant. Its 16-year-old protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, lives in District 12, a depressed coal-mining region where the starving stagger through the streets and corpses litter the roadside.

Katniss reflects bitterly on the selfishness of her ancestors: “I mean, look at the state they left us in, with the wars and the broken planet. Clearly, they didn’t care about what would happen to the people who came after them.”

The twelve Districts of Panem are ruled by the opulent, decadent Capitol, which vanquished them some 75 years ago. Ever since, the Districts have been compelled to pay annual tribute to the Capitol in the form of two children between the ages of 12 and 18 selected by lottery. The children, called Tributes, are compelled to fight to the death in a semi-artificial environment manipulated by a team of Gamemakers. These Hunger Games are broadcast live on television with Super Bowl-style commentary and video close-ups of each violent death. The sole survivor is rewarded with lifelong riches, and their district receives extra food rations for a year.

When Katniss’s beloved 12-year-old sister Prim is chosen as District 12’s Tribute, Katniss steps forward to take her place.

The rest of the story is a thriller blending moral ambiguity, nuanced character development, and of course violent action.
Katniss’s journey takes her from caring almost exclusively about herself and her family to caring about others to leading a revolution. By the third installment, Mockingjay, she realizes “it isn’t enough to keep myself, or my family, or my friends alive by running away. Even if I could, it wouldn’t fix anything. It wouldn’t stop people from being hurt . . . . At some point, you have to stop running and turn around and face whoever wants you dead. The hard thing is finding the courage to do it.”

In this decisive moment, Katniss echoes another American hero, Will Kane, the just retired marshal played by Gary Cooper in the classic film High Noon, when he turns the buggy around and heads back into town with his Quaker bride to face the men who have sworn to kill him.

But unlike Will Kane, who finds almost no help among his fellow citizens, Katniss discovers help everywhere, even in the despised Capitol. She comes to understand that her “ongoing struggle against the Capitol, which has so often felt like a solitary journey, has not been undertaken alone.”

Katniss has always understood the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism, honoring the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Now she understands as well our Seventh and last Principle, that we are all a part of “the interdependent web of all existence.”

Libertad es convivir, elegir, decidir.
Libertad es amar, comprender, y luchar
para que todos tengan libertad.

Freedom is living together, deciding, choosing.
Freedom is loving, understanding, and struggling
for everyone to be free.

[“Libertad,” Hymn #34 in Las Voces del Camino]

From war, Katniss learns war’s folly. “They can design dream weapons that come to life in my hands,” she vows, “but they will never again brainwash me into using them.”

At the end, Katniss, the Girl on Fire, realizes she doesn’t need “rage and hatred. I have plenty of fire myself. What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life goes on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again.”

For me the Hunger Games trilogy, beyond page-turning excitement, is a disturbing thought experiment: How much of the intolerable can people tolerate, and why, and how?

The chilling premise of children compelled to kill children for popular entertainment seems quintessentially intolerable. And yet in this fictional future, people tolerate it. Until they don’t.

I was brought up short by the scene in Catching Fire in which revelers at a typically extravagant Capitol party drink an emetic to induce vomiting so they can continue binging into the night. “Everyone does it,” someone explains to Katniss, “or else how would you have any fun at a feast?” Katniss thinks of the emaciated in her home district, starving while the Capitol wastes food for fun.

And then I thought of how we eat to excess in the United States, many of us, while according to the United Nations some 20,000 children die every day from hunger and nearly a billion people go to bed hungry.

Terrible. Disgusting. Immoral.

And yet we tolerate it.

You know, I actually like exercise. I like how my body feels when I’m running, or swimming, or bicycling. But one of the reasons—one of the reasons I exercise is to burn calories so I won’t put on weight.

The fictional partygoers of the Capitol overeat and then induce vomiting. I overeat and then exercise.

I concede an aesthetic difference, and maybe a health difference, but not a moral difference. I’m eating more than I need because I like the taste of food, while others starve.

Collins’s dystopian future looks an awful lot like our present reality.

No, we don’t draw kids’ names out of a bowl and make them kill each other.

Instead, we tell kids as young as 17 the only way they can escape poverty is to join the so-called volunteer army. Then we send them to kill and be killed in Iraq and Afghanistan, sometimes by kids their own age or younger.

No, we don’t watch killing for entertainment.

We watch its proxy, the National Football League. We tell poor kids lucky enough to possess gridiron talent they can escape poverty by making it to the NFL. We cheer when they put a bone-crunching hit on another player. And we look the other way when their lives are shortened by disabling injury and brain damage.

No, we don’t blow up our workers in coal mines.

Well . . . yeah we do.

Ask the families of the 29 miners killed two years ago at the Upper Big Branch mine in West Virginia in an explosion caused by the greed and negligence of the Massey Energy Company. The day before the blast, one of the miners who was killed had told a friend, “Man, they got us up there mining, and we ain’t got no air. I’m just scared to death to go to work because I’m just scared to death something bad is going to happen.”

Those who complained were fired. Those who stayed died. The company was fined, but no one has been charged with the crime.

The Hunger Games challenged me to think of all the intolerable things we tolerate.

Here are just ten items, in no particular order, on my list of intolerables:

Incarceration of African Americans at rates so hugely disproportionate it’s called the New Jim Crow.

Harassment, humiliation, detention, and deportation of people who cross arbitrary national borders in order to feed their families or give their kids a shot at a decent life.

Burning fossil fuels we know cause global warming, which will deprive our descendants of food, water, and a temperate climate.

Producing nuclear energy without any method of safeguarding its deadly waste.

Refusing to raise taxes on the wealthy while we cut drug treatment, mass transit, libraries, and public education.

Using the oceans as dumping grounds.

Desecrating the land and destroying the culture of indigenous people in order to exploit their natural resources.

Capital punishment.
The Defense of Marriage Act.
Allowing corporations and the wealthy to invest millions of dollars in political influence, making a mockery of democracy.

There are so many intolerables. Somehow, like the good citizens of The Hunger Games, we tolerate them.

Until we don’t.
But how do we stop tolerating the intolerable? Revolution?
The revolutionary leader Coin in Mockingjay turns out to be as brutal and amoral as President Snow, while the revolution hardens Gale, the stalwart huntsman, into a ruthless killer.

Revolution without transformation exacts a terrible cost.
“Once to every soul and nation,” we sang this morning, “comes the moment to decide.” But that’s not right, is it?
The moment to decide doesn’t come just once. It comes again, and again, and again.
Again and again and again our times demand of us:
Which side are we on?
Who is our neighbor?
Where is our treasure?
Where is our heart?
The day before yesterday I was talking with Chris McElroy, our Standing Committee chair. She reminded me how impatient we Americans can be when it comes to activism.

We burn out. We get compassion fatigue.
But change takes lifetimes and more. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 27 years. Aung San Suu Kyi was under house arrest for 15 years.

They didn’t burn out. They didn’t give up. They didn’t lose hope or heart. There was too much at stake.
Neither can we.
We don’t have to save the world. We have to do what we can, when we can, where we can to stop the intolerable.

Over fifteen years ago, at Harvard Divinity School, I met a fellow student named Karen Tse. Karen was wondering if she should pursue Unitarian Universalist ministry. Impressed by her intelligence, seriousness, and spirit, I encouraged her. A couple of years later, I was honored to sing at her ordination.

In the year 2000, Karen founded International Bridges to Justice http://www.ibj.org, an organization that works to end torture around the world. She refuses to tolerate the intolerable.

Karen has received numerous human rights awards, has given a TED talk, and last weekend preached at the Service of the Living Tradition at our Justice General Assembly in Phoenix.

As she inspires others, Karen is inspired by a small boy named Vishna.

Vishna, Karen says, “reminds me that there is always something that we can give even when we think we have nothing to give. Vishna was only four when I met him . . . . He was born in the prisons of Cambodia; [but] the guards absolutely loved him because he was a small baby when he was born. He was allowed to slip in and out [between] the bars. He wanted to visit all 156 prisoners in Kandal. Even though he rarely made it to all the prisoners, I'd lift him up and he'd see them . . . and put his fingers through. For many . . . prisoners he was their greatest joy and happiness, and they looked forward to his visits. . . . He was born in prison without material comfort and without much power, but he had a sense of his own heroic journey. He did what he could, and in doing so embodied the words of [Unitarian minister] Edward Hale”: 
I am only one; but still I am one.
I cannot do everything; but still I can do something;
and because I cannot do everything
I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

“Please,” says Karen. “Please do the one thing you can do.”
Amen and Blessed Be.

Benediction:

On the home page of International Bridges to Justice, the organization founded by Karen Tse to end torture, are displayed these words by our colleague the Rev. Wayne Arnason:

Take courage friends.
The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
and the stakes are very high.
Take courage.
For deep down, there is another truth:
you are not alone.