

WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

We Rise

Rev. Luke Stevens-Royer

Sunday, January 22nd, 2016

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"

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The first reading is from Rev. Karen Hering

The upcoming presidential inauguration has raised more than a few questions for me: *How do I “show up” for the inauguration of a president who refuses to see me except through lenses of diminishment and mockery? And How do I bear witness to the peaceful transfer of power that our democracy requires when I am gravely concerned about where the new leaders will take us?*

As I often do when riddled with questions, I turn to the dictionary, which tells me the word inauguration derives from *augur*, which means to “portend a good or bad outcome.” Fair enough. Surely this inauguration offers many signs about what will come. That’s precisely my dilemma and dis-ease. I wonder how to read those signs. And how to respond to them...

What if we, who are concerned about the poor, the marginalized, the people of color, the women, the immigrants, stepped into the title and power that democracy bestows on us as “we, the people”? Am I ready to accept this mantle, to exercise my powers as a member of this democracy? Are you? Are we as a people willing to serve as augurs – reading the signs of the times, naming what we see and speaking truth to power? Will we let ourselves be claimed *not* by fear but by a larger loyalty to justice, equality and peace and a belief in the real power we wield when we pay attention and work together?

I am already witnessing and paying homage to the transfer of power it portends — most importantly, the transfer of power to all of us who will in time, together, determine its outcome. In this reading of the times, I can find my place. In this reading of the times, I can find hope.

The second reading is *Praise Song for the Day* by Elizabeth Alexander, read for the 2009 Inauguration.

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other, catching each other's
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, *Take out your pencils. Begin.*

We encounter each other in words, words
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark
the will of some one and then others, who said
I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.
We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by first do no harm or take no more
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
praise song for walking forward in that light.

The final reading is from Maya Angelou, *Still I Rise*

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your
hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame –
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain-
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights
of terror and fear
I rise

Into a daybreak
that's wondrously clear
I rise

Bringing the gifts
that my ancestors gave,

I am the dream
and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

SERMON

A woman wakes to greet the day – up earlier than the sun;
she can't sleep all that well, but it doesn't bother her anymore.
She feeds the cat, let's out the dog, starts the coffee
and turns to the small, almost hand-made daily quote calendar
placed on a small shelf in the kitchen.

Today's quote is simple: *bloom where you're planted.*

It's a familiar quote to her, but she can't quite remember from where.
Some echo of it came down through her childhood –
a childhood in a humble house and family –
on 3rd street in Des Moines.

A childhood where they scraped the beans out of every can
and grew whatever they could in their backyard
not out of an artistic love of the aesthetic of gardening, necessarily –
but out of the common rhythm of sun to seed to soil to hand to table.

Bloom where you're planted seemed to resonate with her.
Seemed familiar.

To bloom in the soil of that creaky house, worn with age.
To bloom in the neighborhood that was filled
with less extravagant things and more simple pleasures;
like sprinklers and brick church walls for wall-ball in the alley

To bloom now in a new life, a new light, seemed familiar to her –
a different garden now - of the spouse lost, but children close.
Of a vision of retirement now changed by grief
but stilled filled with blessings and joy and laughter
of good food, good drink, and good friends.

Bloom where you are planted – even if it doesn't look like it used to –
because what else can you do, but set roots where you are
in whatever your garden looks like these days -
and find and create beauty in any way you know how.

An old theologian used to say, *“to be a Christian cobbler is not to put a
cross on every shoe you make – but to make the best shoe you know how.”*

To make the best shoe you know how.
To be the best cobbler you know how.
To be the best teacher, parent, child,
to make the best painting, music, poetry,
to fix what you know how to fix
to create what you know how to create
to bake the best bread,
sweep the cleanest floor,
cook the most delicious meal,
give the best smile, hug, handshake
that you know how.

To be who you are –
in all your many roles –
to be you – the best you know how.

Bloom where you are planted.
Even when the garden changes – even when you feel wilted –
even when how you bloom changes
because of your own choosing
or something beyond your control.

The ability to bloom, even in the harshest conditions,
is something the earth itself reminds us of.

If we want to know how to bloom
in a freshly inaugurated garden
that seems devoid of oxygen and filled with creeping, creepy, charlie
devoid of good soil and water and experienced, careful hands to tend it –
even in the harshest of conditions,
plants remind us –
they can still bloom.

A farmer will know, a horticulturist will know, a botanist will know –
there is some pretty fierce and unrelentingly plant life out there.

Some plants seem to be capable of enduring in the face of all adversity,
carving a niche for themselves where nothing else is able to flourish.

Whether it's a tough little dandelion growing through a crack in the
concrete, a lone cactus in vast desert plains
or a thorn bush thriving in scorched soil,
it's not something you see – or even notice – very often.

Scientists, who love plants, like a lot – lift up a few examples:
They bloom in dry deserts –
like the 'Resurrection Plant' or Rose of Jericho.
It looks like a tumbleweed – and essentially it is.
A tight brown ball of dry plant material that seems dead.
But place it in water, and what seems like a miracle will occur:
the plant will slowly begin to unfurl,
a green tinge coming back into its leaves.
It developed this ability in its native Chihuahuan Desert on the U.S.-
Mexico border, going dormant during drought, and reviving when it
rains.

Or like succulents – like the yucca or the Dactyloopsis, growing in the desert – with a hard outer shell; it quickly absorbs all the water they can with the tiny amount of annual rain, and conserve it to last for months.

They bloom in the high mountains,
like Alpine flowers – like the buttercup plant which can survive 6,000 meters up on mountains like Everest.

They bloom in the darkest depths of the ocean,
like the Halphila Stipulacea, living 145 meters deep in the ocean off the coast of Cyprus.

In 2012, scientists germinated silen stenophylla seeds found frozen in permafrost – they were buried 32,000 years ago by squirrels storing food for winter. And they bloomed.

Some Aspen trees have been dated 80,000 years old –
And the article lifting up these and many more examples ends with this:
Flowering plants have evolved to fill almost every niche imaginable and endure harsh conditions that would kill off most animals. As long as there is access to light, water and air, then a plant can grow.

Or like the peace lily, suffocating from neglect in some Associate Minister's office, until Carol Caouette says, "Luke – I'm watering your plant" and it comes back to life.

It reminds me of the post office motto –
neither rain, nor sleet nor snow can stop them.

Like dust, they rise.

In any garden, any hard, dry soil, if you have a dream and determination you can gather enough hope to create a human plow – say of 90-100,000 people marching to a capitol or millions throughout the world – and you can crack up any soil and say, no – actually, we don't die – we join together, and rise, and flourish.

Alice Walker spoke of gardens, and spoke of collective liberation – which is Universal Salvation. And she spoke of knowing where we have come from and how we only rise when we do so together.

She wrote, "Who were these Saints? Some of them, without a doubt, were our mothers and grandmothers. Exquisite butterflies trapped in evil honey in the post-reconstruction south, toiling away their lives in an era, a century, that did not acknowledge them.

They dreamed dreams that no one knew - saw visions no one could understand...

Listen to the voices of Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Roberta Flack, and Aretha Franklin, among others, and imagine those voices muzzled for life.

The agony of the lives of women who might have been Poets, Novelists, Essayists, and Short-Story writers who died with their real gifts stifled within them.

We must fearlessly pull out of ourselves the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know – they have handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see.

My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. She planted ambitious gardens with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely. Because of her creativity of flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms – sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, and on and on.

Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength – in search of my mother's garden, I found my own.

There are people rising all over the place.

They are rising each morning,
adorning whatever shabby circumstance
that is thrown at us – with flower and beauty
and courage and strength...
there are people rising
courageous enough to face a new day
when they fear for their life
because of their skin, their religion, their gender,
because of the sexual orientation or the sound of their voice.

There are people rising
with little acts of resistance
by supporting organizations holding your values,
by refusing to be triggered and trapped into fear,
by constantly and continually
looking for beauty in the midst of all
without neglecting the real hard work
of rebuilding our trust of one another
of rising from the dust of despair
into the clean air of our own breath and strength,
when we rise together.

One reformer said, “the life of the spirit is a daily dying,
and a daily resurrection to new life.”

A daily dying and rising.
A daily pruning of what is fallow
so that the good flowers can bloom.

Of letting go of those things which are toxic to the soil of our soul –
the hatred, the fear, the despondency, the despair –
to prune what we are ready to prune
so that we can bloom in new hope
for the transfer of power from someone out there –
to us – to we the people – to our own agency,
and our collective power.

People are rising – in classrooms and board rooms,
in kitchens and churches and on street corners –
rising by telling their story,
listening to new stories,
supporting places they love and people they love -
and taking to the streets, as they are doing right now.

An artist who did the iconic Obama “Hope” poster
but together these posters for the women’s march;
they say:

We the people are greater than fear
We the people protect each other
We the resilient have been here before
We the people defend dignity
We in indivisible.

It is, as one colleagues calls it –
Universal Salvation, which is just a churchy way of saying
collective liberation.

Broken, fearful, uncertain, afraid –
trampled like dust,
we rise
like love
into a widening pool of light.

Billy Joel, who I, as an uncharacteristic millennial, loved growing up – copying my older brother – his music has been echoing for me recently.

One song was *Miami 2017, or I've Seen the Lights Go out on Broadway* – do you remember some of those lyrics, now that we're in 2017:

*I've seen the lights go out on Broadway,
we saw the ruins at our feet
you know we also didn't notice
you see it all the time on 42nd street*

*they burned the churches up in harlem
the flames were everywhere, but no one really cared,
they always burned up there before...*

*they turned our power down
and drove us underground –
but we went right on with the show.*

So from Miami 2017, to Mahtomedi 2017,
Re. Kim Novotny offers this invitation –
Ecclesiastes for 2017:

"For everything there is a season,
and a time for every single thing this side of heaven:
a time to be a baby, and a time for last breaths;
a time to rage incoherently at the state of the world,
and a time to tuck yourself into soft blankets and drink ginger tea;
a time to smash the imperialist white supremacist capitalist
heteropatriarchy,

and a time to build up the egalitarian, multiracial, anti-racist,
environmental, liberationist love movement;

a time to make wishes on dandelions, scattering seeds to the wind,
and a time to pluck up new weeds, declare them flowers,
and make new wishes;

a time to ugly cry and let the snot drip down,
and a time to belly laugh till your sides ache;
a time to grieve dear ones gone to glory,
and a time for dance parties even among graves;

a time to deep clean
and throw away all the crap that doesn't spark joy,
and a time to collect thrift shop treasures and impractical shoes;

a time to cuddle so close you get tangled up in embraces
and can't tell whose arms are whose,
and a time to give each other space to become your whole selves;

a time to be on the search for what's next, what's on its way,
and a time to let go of what you always thought you'd have;
a time to recycle what's ready to go,
and a time to upcycle what wants keeping;

a time to shred old files, and a time to stitch up fresh wounds;
a time to get real still and quiet, and a time to yell true things out loud;

a time to love what needs loving, and a time to hate what needs hating;
a time for necessary conflict, holy resistance,
and a time for peace, which steadily persists,
and passes all our understanding."

We keep going,
we keep rising and growing –
in dry deserts longing for freedom
on mountaintops looking at a dream
in deepest oceans where water is life -
even when they *turn our power down*,
we go right on with the show –

we begin again,
we rise to each new day
in a garden we don't always control
a garden where at times it seems growth is impossible –
and still, in the harshest of conditions, we rise;
when you rise to greet the day,
we stumble out of bed and start the coffee
and see the simple invitation:
bloom where you are planted.