

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Powerless and Powerful

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WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING: First Lesson *Philip Booth*

Lie back daughter, let your head
 be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
 Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
 your arms wide, lie out on the stream
 and look high at the gulls. A dead-
 man's float is face down. You will dive
 and swim soon enough where this tidewater
 ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
 me, when you tire on the long thrash
 to your island, lie up, and survive.
 As you float now, where I held you
 and let go, remember when fear
 cramps your heart what I told you:
 lie gently and wide to the light-year
 stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

SECOND READING: The Avowal *Denise Levertov*

As swimmers dare
 to lie face to the sky
 and water bears them,
 as hawks rest upon air
 and air sustains them,
 so would I learn to attain
 freefall, and float
 into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
 knowing no effort earns
 that all-surrounding grace.

THIRD READING: A Sikh Prayer for America on November 9, 2016 *Valerie Kuar*

In our tears and agony, we hold our children close and confront the truth: The future is dark.
 But my faith dares me to ask:

What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?

What if our America is not dead but a country still waiting to be born? What if the story of
 America is one long labor?

What if all the mothers who came before us, who survived genocide and occupation, slavery and
 Jim Crow, racism and xenophobia and Islamophobia, political oppression and sexual assault, are

standing behind us now, whispering in our ear: *You are brave?* What if this is our Great Contraction before we birth a new future?

Remember the wisdom of the midwife: “Breathe,” she says. Then: “Push.”

Now it is time to breathe. But soon it will be time to push; soon it will be time to fight for those we love: Muslim father, Sikh son, trans daughter, indigenous brother, immigrant sister, white worker, the poor and forgotten, and all the ones who cast their vote out of resentment and fear.

Let us make an oath to fight for the soul of America with Revolutionary Love.

We must fight and live and love with revolutionary love.

Powerless and Powerful

From Joy Harjo, artist, poet, musician, teacher:

*To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear;
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.*

On the day following the election, a young mother wrote a prayer that remains useful and instructive and healing even on day 108:

*In our tears and agony, we hold our children close, she wrote. She was saying: we must hold our children and our grandchildren, and other people's children; we must hold the child within ourselves. In this darkening time we hold each other, and we hold what we cherish: values and core convictions, principles and dreams and victories hard-won; we hold it all and wonder, if we dare, in the words of this young writer - *what if this darkness, this terrifying time, is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?* She writes, *What if our country is not dead but still waiting to be truly born? What if all the mothers who came before us, who survived genocide and occupation, slavery and Jim Crow, racism and xenophobia and Islamophobia and sexual assault, are standing right behind us now, whispering in our ears, "You are brave." You are strong. You are a good and grateful people. You are warriors, who will fight for your**

country, for the soul of your country, embodied in the Muslim father, Sikh son, trans daughter, indigenous brother, immigrant sister, white worker, poor and forgotten – you will fight for them all with a revolutionary love.”

“Breathe and push,” says the midwife, just before the birth. We are breathing now, and starting to push on.

Some of you are activists and agitators, advocates for justice in out-loud, visible ways. Others, I know, are day-to-day warriors, mustering the strength and wherewithal to talk with neighbors, co-workers, family and friends, trying not to be annoying, yet trying to stay brave, and saying at the picnic, in the lunchroom, or on Facebook, “This healthcare bill – this just is not right. This is not what I believe in. This immigration order – this just can’t be right. This is not who we are.” Loud and quiet, public and private – in these times there are many ways to be a warrior for love.

This question about birthing comes from Valerie Kuar, a young filmmaker and writer who holds degrees in theology and law, and who became a mother recently and became an activist 16 years ago when her uncle was murdered, the first American person killed in a hate crime after 9-11. You may remember: he was a Sikh, whose turban was a symbol of his faith, his devotion to a religion of nonviolence and peace, but which confused his killer into believing he was Muslim, as if that would make killing a person okay. Valerie Kuar became an activist for love as a college student. Among her radical activities has been work within her own family, finding a way after more than a decade to bring her cousins face-to-face with their father’s murderer in prison, to hear him tell his own tragic story, and to offer him forgiveness. In these times, there are many ways to be a warrior for love.

Valerie’s question in November came out of that same non-violent, visionary faith: What if this is a moment that beckons us not toward despair but toward an unprecedented conjuring of resilient imagination and radiant clarity? What if this is a moment now, in our country and our lives, not for resignation and regression, but for rebooting, recalculating our own capacity, as a people, for courage, commitment, collaboration? That isn’t really a political question, though of course it plays out in political ways. It’s a religious question, a moral question, a prophetic question, asked in the way that prophets of old would come into a town *bifocally*, saying, “Yes, I see the conditions here, and at the same time I see something else. I see the circumstances under which you live, the poverty, the resources spilled for war, the refugees, the racism, the hateful walls you build. (*This is how the prophets spoke.*) I see your apparent and appalling disinterest in affordable healthcare, affordable housing, affordable education, your strange systems of taxation which belie a preferential option for the rich. I see the despoiling of your water and your land.” The prophet would come to town and say, “Oh, I see the world as it is, but I also see *that*, the world as it could be, the world as it should be, as it will be, if you will only desire it and commit to it, if you will only submit to your own spoken desire for justice, freedom, equity, compassion.” This question about our present darkness and whether we are in a dying time or birthing time, is a prophetic question.

I am not a person who tends to see the glass half-full. I almost always prefer evidence over idealism, facts over dreams, and that may be partly why, many years ago, I chose a vocation that requires punctual and articulate hopefulness. I chose, or I was chosen by, a vocation that requires

hope – not sunshine-y optimism, but a gritty, serviceable hope. In the words of a spiritual we sometimes sing, “I’m gonna keep on till I find it; there is more love - more joy, more hope - somewhere.” I am paid to sing that song. Mine is not a line of work in which you can let the numbers, the facts, the morning news, the evidence, speak for itself. I can never leave it there. As a minister, I’m charged on Sunday mornings and on all the other mornings with two tasks, which in my logical mind sometimes seem diametrically opposed to one another: I’m called to speak truthfully, as best I can, and to speak hopefully, as best I can, to speak and live and love and work and go about my days as truthfully and hopefully as I can, with eyes and ears and heart and soul, and mind, wide open all the time. It is perilous, exhausting work, and it saves me every day, and you know this, because you are implicated, too, Unitarian Universalists. You have signed on, too, as members here, as friends, people of a certain kind of faithful orientation, no matter what your paid work is - good people, trying to live with gratitude and grace, striving to be generous, striving to be kind in an unkind historic moment. You may not be wearing turbans to signal your devotion, but your choices and commitments testify, or should, to a certain set of convictions and principles around which you have oriented your heart, and you shall not be moved. Those choices play out in your private life, they play out politically, but they are primarily religious. No differently from me, you also are called to seek and speak the truth, and find and proclaim hope all at once, in equal measure, in all circumstances and conditions. Ours is no caravan of despair. And in some moments, that’s an easy, joyful thing, because life on this earth is beautiful and blessed, and everything is holy, everything a miracle. In some moments it’s easy to speak truthfully and hopefully at once, and in other moments, such as the moment we’ve lived in as a country and an international, interfaith, inter-species global community for the past 108 days, it is a harder thing, to hold the truths we must bear witness to and the hope we must preserve. The challenges we’re facing are not new, but since the election certain ways of being have been newly amplified and sanctified, and thus empowered. This is not about Republicans and Democrats; it’s about ways of being human in the 21st century, and certain ways are loud now and ascendant, ways of being which are in fact choices, and they are beneath us as a people: ways such as greed and the celebration of greed, lying and the celebration of lying, sexual predation and its celebration, military bravado, disdain for the poor, for working people and the land, white nationalism (whether spoken in code or explicitly), and more – all amplified and sanctified, and increasingly normalized, and thus infused with power. It’s hard right now to hold both truth and hope.

Yet there rises now this question: *what if the crisis of this moment is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness the womb*, with something new and mighty, wholly terrifying but beautiful and strong and loving, waiting to be born? This is about what story we’re going to choose to live in going forward – not alternative facts, but an alternative intention, an alternative allegiance or fidelity. It’s about looking at the only facts, and choosing an alternative loyalty. To what story have you given your life? Is it a story, a set of stories, learned from the time that you were small, of scarcity, fear and domination, or a story of abundance, compassion and equity? Which story are you choosing to inhabit? Around what narrative, what interpretation of the facts, what theology, have you shaped your life, have you taught your children, and in turn been taught yourself, by elders, parents, teachers who have gone before? What vision were they holding? What gospel were they teaching? At what point or points on your journey so far have you laid down one narrative, one old telling, for a new one, laid aside some story that for you just could

no longer ring true, no longer be wholesome and whole, and life- giving and healing? When did you lay down an old narrative in order to sing a new song?

We are called in this moment to a revolutionary and prophetic love: love for all that is holy, and love for one another - “one another” meaning everybody, even those you don’t agree with, even those with whom you disagree profoundly; this is a love that will call us into brave and humble conversations in the coming years that are painful and awkward and sacred and urgent. Love for “one another” means everyone, those we disagree with and also those who live at the margins of power and frankly, the margins of our own experience here: peoples of color and indigenous people, poor people, trans people. This is a love that will call us into brave and humble conversations that are painful and awkward and sacred and urgent. We will have to re-assess our sense of our own primacy as mostly white religious liberals, re-assess our well-meaning but misguided sense of our own centrality, and make room for all kinds of other voices. We are called as Universalist Unitarians to a revolutionary, saving love for all that is holy, for one another, and for our own selves, as we strive to keep on keeping on, in spite of the facts and because of them.

You may be following the crisis within our denomination, a structural crisis that erupted last month over a hiring decision, that has really forced us, invited us, to look deeply into all the institutional practices (some of them so seemingly innocent) that quietly conspire over time to maintain a demography in the Unitarian Universalist Association that looks pretty much as it did in the 18th century. Leaders of color in the UUA, ministers and also lay people, have called for congregations to hold teach-ins on white supremacy this month, to name all the quiet and explicit ways that presumptions about race continue to limit who we are and who we’re called to be. More than 600 congregations signed on, including us. Two weeks from now the Reverend Ashley Horan will speak in our services and later that week Amy Peterson Derrick and I will hold an evening conversation with as many of you as we can encourage to come. “White Supremacy” is a shocking term, as jarring to progressives as to outright racists. But I’ve come to think of it like this: when you’re sitting in a dimly-lit room, sometimes a beam of sunlight shines in and makes visible thousands, millions, of sparkling particles of dust. It’s disturbing, because you realize in that moment that the dust is always there, usually invisible, and it is everywhere, not just in the sunbeam. It is the air you breathe, thick, omnipresent, imperceptible, inescapable. That to me is white supremacy, in our country, in the DNA of every institution, and deep in our psyche and our self-perception. To what story, what narrative, are we going to give our lives? It’s not easy holding truth and hope at once.

Our theme this month is *submission: the practice of claiming power*. This is not the kind of submission that means giving up or giving in or giving any inch of ground (moral, loving ground). This is not the kind of submission that signals acquiescence. I should say here that we choose all these themes, the Worship Advisory Council, together with Amy and Luke, and Thaxter and Carol, in the summer for the year ahead. We had no idea last June what this year would hold. *Submission* could feel like a strange theme for religious progressives in the fifth month of this new administration. But it does not mean giving up or giving in, folding up our tents and laying low till 2020, or 2024. It’s about choosing what story, what history, what prophetic vision you want to live in, and live for and fight for, and giving yourself to it

wholeheartedly. It's about the air you want to breathe. It's about trusting that the love and hope we carry within us and among us can sustain us, and it will transform the world.

Denise Levertov has a poem that is a prayer:

*As swimmers dare
to lie face up to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.*

That's about knowing that your vision of a transformed world is not just political for you, it's not a matter of opinion for you; it's a spiritual discipline, it's your faith, whether you believe in God or not. You've given yourself over, like a swimmer, like a hawk, to a way of being and seeing that you don't have to hold alone; in fact, it will hold you.

*Lie back, child, let your head
Be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you.*

Philip Booth wrote this poem for his daughter when he taught her how to swim, urging her to trust that something larger than herself would hold her, if she let go of her fear. Lie back, breathe deep, and history itself, this story we're all writing, will hold us.

*Lie back, child.
Spread your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls A dead-
man's float is face down... Child, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.*

Imagine that this ocean he describes is actually a web of whispering voices, ancestors behind us, children just ahead, holding us to our own vision, holding us accountable to a larger love.

This is submission as Muslims understand it, as *islam*, or what Jesus meant when he said you have to lose your life in order to find it, give yourself utterly to a way of being in the world. It is

a religious, ethical orientation, to see the world as it is and as it could be, all at once, to perceive the world bi-focally, as beautiful and broken, and to say, "I choose to dwell in possibility." As anyone in recovery will testify, there are so many things over which we are powerless in this life. Our survival depends on acknowledging that, admitting to that, submitting to the hard, harsh truth of the facts as they are- and then choosing, in love, how to live nonetheless.

To pray, says Joy Harjo, you open your whole self

Offer your whole self, submit your whole self,

*To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
 To one whole voice that is you.
 And know there is more
 That you can't see, can't hear;
 Can't know except in moments
 Steadily growing...
 Like the eagle that Sunday morning
 ... Circled in blue sky
 In wind, swept our hearts clean
 With sacred wings.
 We see you, see ourselves and know
 That we must take the utmost care
 And kindness in all things.
 Breathe in, knowing we are made of
 All this, and breathe, knowing
 We are truly blessed because we
 Were born, and die soon within a
 True circle of motion,
 Like eagle rounding out the morning
 Inside us.
 We pray that it will be done
 In beauty.
 In beauty.*

We are called in this springtime, budding moment, to a revolutionary love and we will submit to nothing less than beauty, truth and hope.