

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

The No that Makes Possible Each Yes

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church
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FIRST READING *from Rebecca Solnit, journalist (adapted)*

American history is dialectical. What is best about it is called forth by what is worst. The abolitionists and the underground railroad, the feminist movement and the civil rights movement, the environmental and human rights movements were all called into being by threats and atrocities.

I was born during the summer the Berlin Wall went up, into a country in which there weren't even words, let alone redress, for many of the practices that kept women and people of color from free and equal citizenship; in which homosexuality was diagnosed as a disease and treated as a crime; in which the ecosystem was hardly even a concept; in which "better living through chemistry" didn't yet sound sinister; in which the US and USSR were on hair-trigger alert for a nuclear Armageddon. It was a world with more rainforest, more wild habitat, more ozone layer, and more species; but few were defending those things then.

The world gets worse. It also gets better.

This is earth. It will never be heaven. There will always be cruelty, always be violence, always be destruction. In the time it takes you to read this, acres of rainforest will vanish, a species will go extinct, women will be raped, men shot, and children will die of preventable causes. We cannot eliminate devastation but we can reduce it, outlaw it, undermine its sources and foundation. These are victories.

After September 11, 2001, people felt, along with grief and fear, a huge upwelling of idealism, of openness, of a readiness to question and to learn, a sense of being connected and a desire to live our lives for something more, even if it wasn't familiar, safe, or easy. Nothing could have been more threatening to the administration, and they did much to repress it.

But that desire is still out there. It's the force behind a huge new movement we don't even have a name for yet, a movement that's not a left opposed to a right, but perhaps "below against above," "little against big." If we could throw out the old definitions, we could recognize where the new alliances lie; and those alliances -- of small farmers, of factory workers, of environmentalists, of the poor, the indigenous, the just, the farseeing -- could be extraordinarily powerful against the forces of corporate profit and institutional violence. Left and right are terms for where the radicals and conservatives sat in the French National Assembly after the French Revolution. We're not in that world anymore, let alone that seating arrangement. We're in a world that for all its ruins and poisons and legacies is utterly new. I'm hopeful, because the future is dark- meaning inscrutable, unknown. As long as we're here, we might as well live by our principles.

SECOND READING *from Inazo Nitobe*

A professor in Tokyo in the early 20th century, he was Assistant Director General of the League of Nations. He was a Japanese samurai warrior who became a Quaker pacifist.

I ask for daily bread, but not for wealth, lest I forget the poor.
 I ask for strength, but not for power, lest I despise the meek.
 I ask for wisdom, but not for learning, lest I scorn the simple.
 I ask for a clean name, but not for fame, lest I condemn the lowly.
 I ask for peace of mind, but not for idle hours, lest I fail to hearken to the call of service.

The No That Makes Possible Each Yes

In Ramallah, on the West Bank, Palestine, a little revolution recently took place – completely nonviolent, completely joyful, irrevocably radical, though in some ways hardly noticeable, the kind of pinpoint event in the great sweep of history that could be seen either as the threshold of the future or the culmination of the past, or both.

In a cramped office filled with desks and metal chairs, file cabinets, computers, a woman in a headscarf barked to her daughter, “Speak up! Raise your voice!” The daughter, a young woman, stood with her fiancé, with other family members gathered round, and for the first time ever in the Palestine, the officiant presiding over the civil marriage was a woman. Tahrir Hammad who is 39, first applied for this official post in 2009, after working many years as a law clerk. She was denied; she persisted, encouraged by colleagues, male and female, slandered by others, including a former professor of hers, who posted on Facebook that her appointment would “open the door of a metastasizing evil.” She persisted, even though the Islamic legal system there is archaic: the marriage contract is signed by the groom and the father of the bride, and by two male witnesses. But finally she prevailed, and the people of Ramallah have welcomed her. When Ms. Hammad officiates, she always asks questions of the couple, and asks each to answer separately. “Do you freely consent to this marriage?” That’s when the mother of the bride yelled out, “Speak up!” to her shy daughter – something that mother might not have done with a male officiant. Ms. Hammad also asks each time if there are conditions to be stipulated in the marriage contract. The young woman standing before her whispered, “I would like to finish my education,” and said afterwards that she’d had no idea that this was even possible. Mother, daughter, grandmothers in the room, little children there, nephews and nieces, and Ms. Hammad herself are all part of this great turning, brought about because someone, somewhere, many someones in succession, looked at a tradition thousands of years old and simply said, “No. This cannot stand. This no longer works for us, this make no sense, this is not right, we will no longer exclude women from this work,” and the spoken *no* of imagination becomes the *yes* of possibility – for everyone, not just for women. A *no* like that, a *yes* like that, challenges every presumption, opens all kinds of doors. I’ve told you before, I think, that a little flower girl once said to me, at a wedding, “Wow. This is so cool. I always thought that at weddings I’d have to be the bride.” Meaning: *This is so cool. I can be anything I want.*

Rebecca Solnit is an American essayist and journalist. She writes about the future and the past, and she places her hope in the fact that we never really know for sure, in the present, how far resistance or imagination travel. She was born in 1961, she says,

...the summer the Berlin Wall went up, into a country in which there weren't even words, let alone redress, for many of the practices that kept women and people of color from free and equal citizenship [some of which practices continue, although now at least we do have words]; a country in which homosexuality was diagnosed as a disease and treated as a crime; in which the ecosystem was hardly even a concept; and we were on hair-trigger alert for a nuclear Armageddon. It was a world with more rainforest, more ozone layer, and more species; but few were defending those things then. The world gets worse. It also gets better.

She writes about “hope in the dark,” not the bleak and scary dark, but the dark that is inscrutable, unknowable, the future that’s not here yet, but could be shaped in certain ways if we would speak and live by principle, say *no* out loud when *no* is called for; say *yes* to everything we can imagine; begin to paint the picture.

Can you imagine, for example, having seen the news we saw on Thursday, living in a country that has the will, the moral imagination, the backbone, the spine, the prophetic courage, the common sense, the common decency and intelligence to say *no* once and for all to the National Rifle Association? In Oregon, 10 beautiful young students are dead, plus a disturbed person who had no business owning 14 guns or 13 guns or any guns at all - all dead. Another moving Presidential speech, another wave of hateful on-line comments in response, but imagine our country, imagine the lives of the parents of first-graders in Connecticut and every other state, and the parents of high school students everywhere, and community college students and other college students, people on military bases and people praying in their churches, people on the street and police officers working in the cross hairs of danger and everybody else if we could muster the wherewithal to say *yes*, to life, to possibility, to a civilized society, by saying *no* to the ridiculous so-called right to have a gun in every American hand? The President says, rightly, this simply doesn’t happen anywhere else. Not like this – it doesn’t. Sometimes the only way to *yes* is *no*. The only way to freedom is *no*. [And I will quickly say I don’t mean hunting. I don’t mean farmers shooting snakes and predators. I mean saying *yes*, out loud, to the fragile beauty of everything.]

We do it all the time, this “no and yes,” so valiantly, in small and humble, miraculous ways, little revolutions. We look at the world as it is, and suddenly glimpse the world as it could be and then we can’t go back. We move through the patterns, traditions, the habits of things as they are, as if they were immutable, intractable, and then by grace or will or luck we wonder, “But what if...?” You’ve known this. You’ve seen it. You have lived this maybe more than once: unanticipated but deliberate transformation. Unexpected power. How many people have come into my office, how many people do you yourself know, who have told a story something like this-

“I love my parents and my family of origin, but the life I’ve made as an adult, and am still making, is very different from the one I came from. I don’t know exactly how or when but at some point, I said *no* to violence – emotional or physical violence. I just wasn’t going to live like that. I made a different kind of home.”

“I said *no* to the casual, habitual racism of family dinner table jokes (or the sexism, or homophobia, or whatever it was). It was not huge in our lives, but quietly ever-present and I grew up one day and said *no more*. At my table, that will not go unchecked. Some loved ones can’t forgive me, but I am holding fast.”

“I said *no* to corporal punishment for children.”

“I said *no* to the shaming of anyone.”

“I said *no* to religion I didn’t believe in.”

“I said *no* to silence when speaking was important, and I said *no* to idle talk when it was better to be quiet.”

“I said *no* to alcoholism...”

-this could be someone in recovery himself or someone who loves someone, and still he had to say *no*, she had to say *no*, loudly, clearly, repeatedly, to her own self in the mirror and to others, at great risk:

“...*no* to the swirling chaos that addiction conjures in a household,
no to enabling it,
no to tolerating its catastrophic consequences, forgiving its sins,
no to saving other people’s lives,
no to looking the other way,
no to trying endlessly to placate and to please,
no to smoothing over ruffled feathers, trampled feelings,
no to the numbness of having no feelings at all,
no to self-denial, self-incrimination, self-loathing, self-blame.”

The person says, or maybe you have said, “This sounds so negative, all this nay-saying, but *no* has made possible every *yes* in my life, every lovely cherished thing. I once was lost and now I’m not.”

It is not easy. Frederick Buechner, Presbyterian novelist and minister, says sometimes it feels selfish, and in certain ways it is, the reclamation of the self. In a memoir, in which he recalls family members living with addiction, dysfunction and depression, Buechner writes,

Love your neighbor as yourself is part of the great commandment. The other way to say it is, 'Love yourself as your neighbor.' Love yourself not in some egocentric, self-serving sense but love yourself the way you would love your friend in the sense of taking care of yourself, nourishing yourself, trying to understand, comfort, strengthen yourself. ... People in the caring professions are famous for neglecting their selves with the result that they are apt to become in their own way as helpless ... as the people they are trying to care for and thus no longer selves who can be of much use to anybody. If [someone you love] is struggling for life in a raging

torrent, you do not save her by jumping into the torrent with her, which leads only to your both drowning together. Instead you keep your feet on the dry bank - you maintain as best you can your own inner peace, the best and strongest of who you are - and from that solid ground reach out a rescuing hand. "Mind your own business" means butt out of other people's lives because in the long run they must live their lives for themselves, but it also means pay mind to your own life, your own health and wholeness, both for your own sake and ultimately for the sake of those you love too. Take care of yourself so you can take care of them. A bleeding heart is of no help to anybody if it bleeds to death.

Buechner, a Christian, believes that this is how God loves humanity: gently, with bounded restraint.

The power that created the universe and spun the dragon fly's wing and is beyond all other powers, holds back, in love, from overpowering us. ...[I have felt] that presence surrounding me like air- God in his very stillness, holding his breath, ... loving us, the only way he can without destroying us. I [have] felt ...the passionate restraint and hush of God.

Sometimes the only honest way to say "I love you" is to say as tenderly and relentlessly as you've ever said anything, *No. No*, this can't continue; *no*, I cannot help you. I will say *yes* to your life and to mine by saying *no*, because I love us both.

Imagination is powerful. It surveys the given world - dysfunctional, dystopian, archaic, constrained - and glimpses possibility. And from resistance to -ill health, to bad practice, oppression- from that sacred *no*, *yes* starts taking shape. You gather your principles, rules for living, convictions; you decide what kind of person you intend to be, you're called to be – and from that solid ground comes compassion, generosity, the strength to love. You decide what you do and do not want, what you need in this life, and what you really don't. I think of Inazo Nitobe, the samurai turned Quaker, in Tokyo, who gave his life for peace in the end and who could name with such clarity those things to which he would say *yes*, and those to which he could, with grace, say *no*:

*I ask for daily bread, but not for wealth, lest I forget the poor.
I ask for strength, but not for power, lest I despise the meek.
I ask for wisdom, but not for learning, lest I scorn the simple.
I ask for a clean name, but not for fame, lest I condemn the lowly.
I ask for peace of mind, but not for idle hours, lest I fail to hearken to the call of service.*

No and yes, both, clarify our ethics and our faith. The spark of it is in us all along. On a Wednesday night two weeks ago a toddler friend of mine was playing on the floor, in the middle of the hallway. (She'll remain nameless, but her father is Luke Stevens-Royer.) She had toys strewn around her and a bevy of admirers and playmates, I not least among them. People began arriving for the Wednesday dinner, and so her innocent but misguided Papa started to pick up the toys and say something inappropriate, like "time to clean up." He came closer and closer to where she was sitting and she saw him coming, toys in his hands. The storm clouds on her face grew threatening. Silence descended as she gathered her strength. (I'm not sure Luke noticed.) And then this tiny girl stood up on her tiny legs and put out her hand. "Papa!" she said sternly.

“STOP!!” It was archetypically beautiful. (I don’t think Luke caught that aspect of it.) It was the triumph of the will. It was agency, integrity, all those things we talk about in baby dedications. It was *I want to live in this world, the world of toys and friends and endless time, not dinner time, not high chair time, or clean-up time.* “STOP!!” She was like Diana Ross. “In the name of... all that is good and right and true: You. Shall. Not. Pass.” The toddler lost that particular round, but the fire’s inside her. We’ll see that flare again. And together with all of you, all of us, her wise parents will remind her of words she heard when she was really small; we all remind each other, all the time:

May you never unlearn your sweet gentleness.

May you keep tame that which rages dangerous within us all.

And yes:

May you respect yourself and envy none.

And yes:

Remember who you uniquely are.

May you win no victory that harms either yourself or another.

May you give sympathy to all living things [including yourself], and by your actions lessen the tides of human sorrow.

And yes, and yes:

May you go singing your heart's own song.

Louise Erdrich, the novelist, says,

I hold the word no in my mouth like a gold coin, something valued, something possible. To teach the no to our daughters. To value their no more than their compliant yes. To celebrate no. To grasp the word no in your fist and refuse to give it up. To support the boy who says no to violence, the girl who will not be violated, the woman who says no, no, no, I will not. To love the no, to cherish the no, which is so often our first word. No – the means to transformation.

One final story:

Last week I read about a camp for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Unlike Europe and the West, the Jordanians opened their border four years ago. Hundreds of thousands people have come in. 80,000 of them live in this camp 50 miles from Amman, the nation’s capital (imagine that), and although they only have intermittent electricity, and must carry water (both drinking water and waste water) by hand, and live in tents or concrete buildings, a kind of community has been established. There are makeshift markets, 2500 of them, a whole economy now (generating \$14 million a month, by one United Nations estimate). People plant gardens and trees, olives and lemons, the fruits from which they hope they won’t be there to see because a camp should be a temporary place – but still. One man says “We call this The White City – the sand is white, the tents are white, the sky.” But he has small children, and so he’s planted corn, tomatoes, fruit trees, sunflowers, because he says children should see colors, living green; he needs them to see beauty in the garden, and care and pride and patience. He moved all the soil from a construction site miles away on the other side of the camp, in buckets on a bicycle. He teaches his children poetry, and music. Essentially, he’s saying, he and countless others are saying, “No. We will not die and we will not live like animals. No. We will not succumb to sub-humanity.” No and yes. This man also says that if the chance came to leave tomorrow for Germany, for Sweden, or to go

home to Damascus, they'd go in a heartbeat, because he also says *no*, absolutely, unequivocally, to the identity of "refugee." *No, we will not relinquish our personhood, nor the hope that holds us to our home, and also to our future.*

This is the no that makes possible each yes – for the children of our children of our children's children. It is the means to every transformation.

silence

Words in closing: *Prayer of St. Francis*

Lord, make us channels of thy peace—
That where there is hatred we may bring love,
Where there is wrong we may bring the spirit of forgiveness,
Where there is discord we may discover and reveal harmony,
Where there is error we may embody truth,
Where there is doubt we may bring the spirit of inquiry,
Where there is despair we may bring hope,
Where there are shadows we may bring light,
Where there is sadness we may bring solace.
For it is in giving that we shall receive,
By self-forgetting that we shall find,
By forgiving that we shall be forgiven.
May we seek rather to comfort than to be comforted,
To understand than to be understood,
May we strive to love more than to be loved.

The stories from Ramallah and from Jordan are retold from articles in [The New York Times](#), September 2015.