

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Love and Rage

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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FIRST READING

from Cornell West: African American Christian theologian, Democratic Socialist, philosopher and teacher

If I were the last person alive in a world that was thoroughly dominated by tribal forces, and fueled by parochial hatreds and market forces that are preoccupied with efficiency and productivity, but that play down inequality and isolation, I would still hold on to a dialectic of particularism and universalism. That would allow me, at my best, not to lose sight of the humanity of each and every one of us. That is what has, in part, sustained my own sanity as I have tried to come to terms with the problem of evil. It takes tremendous audacity and a deep sense of folly to be a Christian in this dreadful and ghastly century. Think about it. Two hundred million fellow human beings murdered in the name of some pernicious ideology...

My message is that we hold on, to the deep, tragic, comic sense of history that implicates each and every one of us – but that also empowers each and every one of us to expand the scope of our empathy and compassion –what Christians call love...

Maybe we can organize. Maybe we can mobilize. Maybe we can sustain a living vision so that the tradition of struggle for decency and dignity remains viable and vibrant, and the struggle for democracy remains alive and not simply part of a rhetorical deployment to conceal the oligarchic character of our economy.

We must be honest enough with ourselves to say that even without... rational certainty, we have spiritual confidence: to stay sane and to sustain ourselves, owing to non-market values like love and care, concern and kindness and sweetness.

SECOND READING *from poet John Haines***The Last Election**

Suppose there are no returns,
and the candidates, one
by one, drop off in the polls,
as the voters turn away,
each to his [or her] inner persuasion.

The frontrunners, the dark horses,
begin to look elsewhere,
and even the President admits
he has nothing new to say;
it is best to be silent now.

No more conventions, no donors,

no more hats in the ring;
 no ghost-written speeches,
 no promises we always knew
 were never meant to be kept.

And something like the truth,
 or what we knew by that name-
 that for which no corporate
 sponsor was ever offered-
 takes hold in the public mind.

Each subdued and thoughtful
 citizen closes his door [and her door], turns
 off the news. [Each] opens a book,
 speaks quietly to [their] children,
 begins to live once more.

Love and Rage

Marilyn Nelson is an African American poet, a scholar and winner of many awards. She's been Poet Laureate of Connecticut, where she lives, and received her PhD from the University of Minnesota. She has poem called "Minor Miracle," which Luke will read to us. (I've changed some of the harshest language, but not all.)

*... I was cycling with a male friend,
 through a small midwestern town. We came to a 4-way
 stop and stopped, chatting. As we started again,
 a rusty old pick-up truck, ignoring the stop sign,
 hurricaned past scant inches from our front wheels.
 My partner called, "Hey, that was a 4-way stop!"
 The truck driver, stringy blond hair a long fringe
 under his brand-name beer cap, looked back and yelled,
 "You f-ing niggers!"
 And sped off.
 My friend and I looked at each other and shook our heads.
 We remounted our bikes and headed out of town.
 We were pedaling through a clear blue afternoon
 between two fields of almost-ripened wheat
 bordered by cornflowers and Queen Anne's lace
 when we heard an unmuffled motor, a honk-honking.
 We stopped, closed ranks, made fists.
 It was the same truck. It pulled over.*

*A tall, very much in shape young white guy slid out:
greasy jeans, homemade finger tattoos, probably
a Marine Corps boot-camp footlockerful
of martial arts techniques.*

*"What did you say back there!" he shouted.
My friend said, "I said it was a 4-way stop.
You went through it."
"And what did I say?" the white guy asked.
"You said: 'You f-g niggers.'"
The afternoon froze.*

*"Well," said the white guy,
shoving his hands into his pockets
and pushing dirt around with the pointed toe of his boot,
"I just want to say I'm sorry."
He climbed back into his truck
and drove away.*

This is a story of terror and rage, sin and redemption, and hope for a shared future. What we make of it will differ depending on our circumstance, whether we are white or not white, on the bike or in the truck, in a small Midwestern town. Most of us, I think, cannot fully imagine the terror of that scene, the violence that occurred there on a clear blue afternoon. You could say "Well, at least no one was hurt," but that would depend on your circumstances also. He assaulted them, wounded them, mostly because he could, then drove off, then drove back, then apologized, then drove off again. And amazingly, the poem is not entitled, "Yeah, thanks, but no thanks, for your so-called apology;" the poem is not called "Too Little, Too Late." It's called "Minor Miracle," and in way, that's a miracle itself.

This is a story completely unresolved, just like our real lives, a snapshot of snap judgements, stubborn stereotypes on both sides, fear and fury. It's about the white guy's cowardly malice, and admittedly, his courage in the end. It's a poem about the always open question of what exactly apologies accomplish. It's also a poem about their fists: Marilyn Nelson says they heard the truck come back. "We stopped, closed ranks, made fists..." In fear? For self-defense? Fists clenched in furtive prayers? (*Please don't let this happen...*) The fist, everywhere and always, is also a symbol of resistance, of rage and dignity and ferocious love.

The story is completely unresolved. What should happen next to all these people, within each one? What happens inside us? I am amazed and grateful always for minor miracles, the moments, and there are many, millions, when people catch themselves and say, "I could hate you now and be completely justified. I could kill you, metaphorically or truly. I could sink into the solitary confinement of small imagination. But by grace, and by my will, I won't. (That decision is the miracle.) I will choose a harder way, the harder, holy work of imagining a future in which we coexist, although right now we'd both rather not. I will rage against the hatred in you, and in me; I will not let the anger go, just yet, but I will not perpetuate the hate." That choice of love and life is a major "minor miracle."

We are knee-deep now, waist-deep, in a brutal political season, with all kinds of hatred in the air, and I'm thinking about love and rage, and how we choose our words, and what deep spiritual work good politics requires. How to rage against that which deserves our rage, hate that which deserves our hate, and not hate *people*, still love them, or at least not despise, not denigrate, not dehumanize people, which in the end can only dehumanize ourselves?

How, for example, if you are me, can you hate almost everything that Donald Trump says, everything he says he stands for and believes, everything he shouts and insidiously implies, and yet not hate the man, not let yourself sink down? I hate all the ways he demeans democracy, dignity, diplomacy, common decency, pluralism, multiculturalism, feminism, fairness, justice, equity, compassion, anti-oppression, environmental advocacy, science, kindness, humility, integrity, truth, hate all the ways he disrespects these things. He completely disregards any vision that sees beyond one's own stake in the ground, to common ground and common destiny, even to the seventh generation? How can you hate the way a person hates and endangers everything you cherish, and not be defined by hate yourself? How in an election year, or any year, with so much at stake, can you stay up on the higher ground, yet think what you think, believe in what you believe in, say what you need to say and say it loudly, boldly, fiercely, rage against what which is worthy of your hottest, wildest rage, yet hold to love, hold to principles you cherish, the ones you hope define you?

This is not about Donald Trump, nor any candidate, or party or election. It's about living in a broken world, rife with racism, injustice, violence, greed, misogyny. Call it history or human nature, call it sin. Whatever it is, how can we muster a sufficient and appropriately furious response to desecration, a righteous but not self-righteous rage, and ever hold to love? If sin is "missing the mark," how do we stay true to the mark, and true to ourselves?

In his poem, "The Last Election," John Haines describes a fantasy that maybe feels enticing to us now:

*Suppose there are no candidates and no returns,
no more conventions, no donors,
no more hats in the ring;
no ghost-written speeches,
no promises we always knew
were never meant to be kept;*

That's a lovely prospect as the caucuses heat up.

He says, "suppose there are no candidates,"

*And something like the truth,
or what we knew by that name,
takes hold in the public mind.*

Each subdued and thoughtful

*citizen closes their door, turns
off the news. Each opens a book,
speaks quietly to their children,
begins to live once more.*

It sounds like escapism, and it feels appealing – but I don't think that's at work here. He means, "Turn down the volume – the screaming tirades, the outrageous pandering platitudes (on all sides), the vicious show. Remember what you care about, what breaks your heart, what makes it sing, what saves your life, and remember where that caring came from. Why do you believe the way you do, vote the way you vote, care the way you care? Remember who you are and who you're called to be, and what you would speak quietly to children, who will inherit every single thing we leave behind, including rancor, including bad behavior. We are called to larger love, deeper rage and larger love. We're in this for the long, long haul, and this is soul work that we do.

Cornel West, philosopher, socialist, Christian theologian, says "My message is that we hold on to the deep, tragic, comic sense of history that implicates each and every one of us – but that also empowers each and every one of us, to expand the scope of empathy," our effective, active empathy. That's a mighty work, holding all that love, and centuries of devastation.

We are called to a large love, complicated and courageous, and maddening though it is sometimes, we hold to the old organizing adage, *there is no way to peace, peace is the way*, ever mindful that "beloved community" is not a far-off, shining destination just beyond our reach. "Beloved Community" is not code language for some impossible, post-revolutionary place we're trying get to and never will, like the land of Canaan or the Emerald City. It's not a place "out there"; it's a way of being here together, a way of walking together through the mess we're in right now, with vision clear, eyes open, hearts brave, hope shining and sharp as a knife, ready to cut through despair, denial and delusion, and the seduction of easy dismissal, cheap shots, disrespectful and dehumanizing scorn.

Chris Crass, a young Unitarian Universalist community activist who has written and spoken widely on progressive movements for social change, calls this "prefigurative politics:" to live and breathe and practice now, in every gesture, the values, virtue and radical inclusion that we imagine for the future. Gwendolyn Brooks, African American poet, writes,

*Say to them,
Say to the down-keepers,
The sun-slappers,
The self-soilers,
The harmony-hushers*

*...Even if you are not ready for day
It cannot always be night...
Live not for Battles Won.
Live not for The-End-of-Song.
Live in the along.*

This month we've heard many of you in the Sharing Circles and elsewhere muttering a bit about the monthly theme. "We don't like sin. We're not into that," meaning, of course that the word is a little retro for our taste, a little dusty- churchy, full of pious judgement. So find another word, if you can, to speak of human-manufactured ecological catastrophe, and pernicious, murderous racism, and the cruelty of economic justice, and violence and oppression. Find another word for corporate greed. Find language that can name these things - not as if they were natural disasters, sad but unpreventable- but what they truly are: failures of imagination, failures of human will, soul-sickness on the grandest scale. Find a word that suits you, that speaks to the scale of the damage we do to one another one by one and to fabric of sacred community – and find words to speak out in response.

I don't hate any of the candidates or either of the parties. What I hate is the chasm between obscene wealth and obscene poverty, with no kind of hope in it. To me it is a social sin. I hate and fear the fear that lives in us, in all of us, and the way that sometimes politicians play it; they play fear like a violin, so masterfully and subtly, and when they speak of walls and closing borders, between countries or people, banishing entire religions from our shores (which is ridiculous, I know, but still it plants a seed of poison, it fuels a lethal fire), I rage against that fear, because I know its potency, what it does to us inside and as a people. We know where that can lead. That kind of fear, that kind of alienation from our truest, highest selves, is sin to me. When I give in to it, or fail to answer it courageously, I don't need any god or church to judge me: I'm apart from my own soul.

We are taught when we are young – women especially, and people of color even more – to be courteous, polite and careful, especially in criticism; we're taught that this is civilized behavior, and even morally, religiously preferred. Don't make a fuss- but there are times when anything less than full-blown fury would be a sin itself. You don't object politely to white supremacy or xenophobia or the ruin of a planet. This is the dilemma of all movements for social change; it's not just Black Lives Matter. The old coffee mugs and T-shirts say "Well-behaved women rarely make history," and that's true of every revolution, and every transformation, every disruption of things as they are. Jesus didn't get to be Jesus by leaving the money-changers' tables neatly in the temple, or quietly wringing his hands when the rabble tried to stone someone to death. As young activists and others have taught us all along, sometimes it's okay to be loud, to be angry, to act up. Sometimes it's required. And we have seen, in old movements, in new movements, how even the loudest, messiest rage can be infused with love. Imperfection abounds, clumsiness, mistakes, but there is also love and joy and dignity. We live in the along. Minor miracles abound.

This month we paired the theme of sin with the practice of turning – turning toward light, turning toward truth and renewal, turning back, again and again, to what you know and what you love, what you dream, what you stand for and believe in. We'll need to keep that practice honed as the election roars around us, rage at what deserves our rage, and try not to be distracted.

Chris Crass speaks of organizing from a place of love. He quotes a young Jewish woman, politically progressive, who struggled with her family, who support the state of Israel and Zionism. Finally, she listened to their stories, went back through all the family albums and the

diaries and memories. “I understood,” she said, “how fragile their identity really was, the trauma and the pain and fear of annihilation that Zionism taps into, which compels Jews to believe the world cannot be safe for us.”

It helped me have compassion for my family, for others like them, and to want to fight for a world in which no one feels the need to occupy another’s land in order to feel safe. For me, organizing as an anti-racist and anti-Zionist Jew is about more than opposing the occupation of Palestine. It’s also about transforming what it means to be a Jew, about connecting to the history of persecution and resistance in a way that makes me say I never want my family, or my people or any people to be part of that again. Her political work is her spiritual work.

I think of something Thaxter(*) said last month when we were planning Sundays around this month’s theme. Thaxter said, “You know, sometimes sin is not so bad. Sometimes maybe you need more. Wrath is one of the deadly sins, but sometimes anger is the right response, the best response, and exactly what’s required. Sometimes lust – for life, passion, the sensual, tangible love for this world and each other - is exactly what we need. Sometimes lust is good. And sloth [Thaxter loves them all]: Sometimes if you’re working too hard, caring too much, doing damage to yourself and maybe others, sometimes it’s good to let the struggle rest, and a little sloth becomes a virtue, and a spiritual practice.” It softens your heart and steadies your hand, so you can rage again tomorrow.

I think of Thaxter also because there is no question that if we are to hold to our vision of beloved community- pluralistic, antiracist, just, equitable, compassionate, brave, hopeful and shining with love- if we are to hold to a bright vision in cynical, fear-filled times, and do our soul-work for the long, long haul, there’s no question that we need a seriously excellent soundtrack for our souls to dance to. Part of why we come to church is to be washed with music that heals the soul and steels the will so we can remember who we are at our core and who we’re called to be, so we can begin again in love. We come to hear this music from the choir and from others, to fuel our rage and sanctify it, purify it, to remind us minor miracles abound, and help us walk in beauty. We are a gentle, angry people, a gentle, fiercely hopeful, loving people, and we are singing for our lives.

(*) On this Sunday, the congregation celebrated Thaxter Cunio’s 20th anniversary as Director of Music and choral director.