

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

We All Go High

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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FIRST READING

Anyone Who Is Still Trying

David Hernandez

Any person, any human, any someone who breaks
up the fight, who spackles holes or FedExes
ice shelves to the Arctic to keep the polar bears
afloat, who talks the wind-rippled woman
down from the bridge. Any individual, any citizen
who skims muck from the coughing ocean,
who pickets across the street from antigay picketers
with a sign that reads, GOD HATES MAGGOTS,
or, GOD HATES RESTAURANTS WITH ZAGAT RATINGS
LESS THAN 27. Any civilian who kisses
a forehead heated by fever or despair, who reads
the X ray, pins the severed bone. Any biped
who volunteers at soup kitchens, who chokes
a Washington lobbyist with his own silk necktie—
I take that back, who gives him mouth-to-mouth
until his startled heart resumes its kabooms.
Sorry, I get cynical sometimes, there is so much
broken in the system, the districts, the crooked
thinking, I'm working on whittling away at this
pessimism, harvesting light where I can find it.
Any countryman or countrywoman who is still
trying, who still pushes against entropy,
who stanches or donates blood, who douses fires
real or metaphorical, who rakes the earth
where tires once zeroed the ground, plants something
green, say spinach or kale, say a modest forest
for restless breezes to play with. Any anyone
from anywhere who considers and repairs,
who builds a prosthetic beak for an eagle—
I saw the video, the majestic bird disfigured
by a bullet, the visionary with a 3-D printer,
with polymer and fidelity, with hours
and hours and hours, I keep thinking about it,
thinking we need more of that commitment,
those thoughtful gestures, the flight afterward.

SECOND READING

from Mahmoud Darwish

As you prepare your breakfast, think of others
(do not forget the pigeon's food).

As you conduct your wars, think of others
(do not forget those who seek peace).

As you pay your water bill, think of others
(those who are nursed by clouds).

As you return home, to your home, think of others
(do not forget the people of the camps).

As you sleep and count the stars, think of others
(those who have nowhere to sleep).

As you liberate yourself in metaphor, think of others
(those who have lost the right to speak).

As you think of others far away, think of yourself
(say: "If only I were a candle in the dark").

We All Go High

For anyone still trying –

any person,
any human,
any countryman or country woman

- says the poet –

any anyone from anywhere who kisses a forehead heated by fever or despair, or FedExes
ice shelves to the Arctic to keep the polar bears afloat,

any biped who volunteers at soup kitchens, who stanches blood or donates blood or
plants something green, whether spinach or a forest –

for anyone still trying to be kind, trying to be good, trying to do good or at least to do less harm, anyone still trying to learn -and maybe even go outside and practice- what compassion is;

anyone still trying, which I think is all of us, because none of us is there yet, no one's got this down. *We're still young on our journey*, as a Native friend sometimes says to me: we're still young on our journey toward loving one another – young and strong, and sometimes weak, stumbling and bumbling, but we are still and always trying, I believe, to be good, to be kind, to be brave, to be whole;

for anyone still trying –

a word of thanks.

A blessing.

A nod of encouragement, acknowledgement.

Sometimes it's good to let each other see we see each other, trying to be better, trying to be generous and open, trying to muster hope and to risk it. Sometimes, in a profoundly unkind time, it's good to send a signal.

Hope is not always practical or logical, and compassion is not simple, or convenient, nor without its own risks. It is not soft. It is not easy. It is not sweet, though it is tender. It is not always pretty, nor polite, necessarily, though it's always respectful. Compassion and respect are prerequisite for each other. When you respect someone, it's harder to be blatantly unkind. And though it takes everything we've got, to the point of draining us completely, compassion, like hope, is also restorative. It heals us and replenishes us. It cycles back around, in ways we can't predict and should not expect, but it does cycle back. There's something about opening your heart, your whole heart, that strengthens your heart. It enlarges your capacity, and it extends the cramped horizon of the discouraged self. Compassion, like hope, extends the horizon of the self.

How can we sustain it?

A woman writes:

All year long, I have been on a seesaw of outrage and numbness. The deaths of children in government custody. The Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. The family separation policy. The rollbacks to protections of queer and trans communities. The crackdown on accessing food stamps – all these threats to the bodies, the psyches, the livelihoods and rights of people... All these threats to the water and the land.

Deepa Iyer is a teacher at the University of Maryland and at the Center for Social Inclusion in New York. She goes on:

I see a lot of you on similar seesaws out there, either directly affected or simply worn down, disoriented, and numb. It's not surprising. During the first two years of the current presidency, people of conscience have been caught in a push and pull cycle that has demanded struggle at every turn. There have been no ebbs or flows, and no collective sighs of relief—because once we evaded a disaster at one blockade, we had to confront a siege somewhere else. Sustaining high levels of outrage, constant vigilance, and rapid response is unrealistic and unhealthy. At the same time, becoming numb, accepting what is happening as the new normal and relying on spurts of self-care are not long-term options either. How can 2019 be different?

The strategy she offers is to begin from the premise of compassion and resistance - compassion for the world, for the earth and its people, compassion for yourself as one of these people, and resistance to whatever threatens these. From that ground, discern your own place in the struggle:

Are you a disrupter?

A healer?

A bridge-builder?

A story-teller (which maybe is what parents are, helping little children, helping youth, make sense of what they see and hear, painstakingly stitching bright threads of history and hope into the daily fabric of the story-cloth enfolding them, so they know who they are and what manner of people they come from)?

Are you an artist, naming what you see, framing what you know, so we can see it too?

Or are you a front-line responder (maybe a teacher or a service provider), bandaging the wounded, sometimes literally?

Maybe you're a visionary, calling out a future that we all can't quite yet imagine, offering a kind of map?

She describes all these roles, offers little job descriptions, and says once we know and claim our own role or roles, and trust that everyone else is claiming their roles too, that then we don't feel we have to save everything at once, hold everyone at once, rail against or defend all the things all the time, but just hold up our own small corner of the sky. If we do that, the well of compassion (the well inside us) will run deep and clear, not bitter, not clogged with the sludge of exhaustion and resentment. The well of compassion will run deep and clear, and the weight of resistance, our muscles of resilience, grow strong.

Shine on, she says in another post, this time speaking mainly to women of color like herself. *It's natural to feel sad, anxious, worried, scared, and helpless. And that's why it is imperative to nurture the fullness of who we are as human beings. Being a social justice warrior 24/7 can prevent us from leading with a clear head and can contribute to burn-out quickly. Let's give each other permission and inspiration to glitter, shine and sparkle.*

And there Deepa Iyer steps into a long and venerable tradition of dancing revolutions, singing and laughing and loving through the struggle, which is another kind of deep compassion.

The state of the union is fractured for sure, but this is not unprecedented. A healthy democracy is always rife with disagreement and debate, always passionate and roiling, just a bit. What's shifted in the two years we've just weathered is the cruelty, the depth and breadth of swaggering

disdain and strutting disregard. I'm not talking about "civility," or civil discourse or manners. I'm talking about a strain of lethal, and newly legitimized cruelty, an almost feral mean-spiritedness, leeching up out of the subterranean pools of our nation's past, seeping down from the highest level of government into every aspect of our common life, amplified in the murky shadows of social media and gaining ground now in legislation, in public speech and public policy, and affecting, sometimes even defining, how we treat each other, how we hold, or fail to hold each other, and especially those whom Jesus called "the least of these," meaning not the least worthy, the least valuable, the least numerous, the least beautiful, the least human, but just the opposite: the gorgeous, vast majority of our family who have for now the least voice, the least privilege, the least power, and the least chance of survival. I'm talking about America, the state of our fragile union. In such a time as this it seems the work of religious communities, self-styled progressive spiritual communities, is pretty clear: to call it out, to call us back, to wade into the water, as Carol sang to us, and *trouble* the water, *stir up* those stagnant pools of swagger and bravado and hate speech and arrogance and greed. That's what compassion is for us: it's not soft or pretty or sweet and it is not ever optional. I'm talking about a militant compassion that is fierce, and brave, and relentless; public sometimes, intimate often, and hard. This is not political for us, but theological.

Jaron Lanier, a tech programmer and musician, a pioneer in virtual reality who writes frequently about the effect of technology on the human spirit, talks about "a circle of empathy." Imagine drawing a circle with yourself at the center. You can do this on a piece of paper sometime, or do it now, as a kind of meditation.

He says, if someone falls within your circle of empathy, you wouldn't want to see him or her killed. Something that is clearly outside the circle is fair game. For instance, most people would place all other people within the circle, but most of us are willing to see bacteria killed when we brush our teeth [not all bacteria, but those]. The tricky part is that some entities reside close to the edge of the circle. The deepest controversies often involve whether something or someone should lie just inside or just outside the edge. For instance, the idea of slavery depends on the placement of the slave outside the circle, to make some people nonhuman. Widening the circle to include all people and end slavery has been one of the epic strands of the human story – and it isn't quite over yet. The fight over abortion asks whether a fetus or embryo would be in the circle or not. What about animals? What about trees? And what happens when knowingly, even willfully, to eat a meal, to build a home, you destroy what's in your circle?

When you change the contents of your circle, you change your conception of yourself. The center of the circle shifts - your own standing shifts - as you expand or shrink the perimeter to make it either more or less inclusive.

When you change your circle of empathy, you yourself are changed.

Another writer puts it somewhat differently.

A human being, he says is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task

must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving is in itself a part of the liberation. This was Albert Einstein, writing to a friend, a rabbi, whose young daughter had died. Einstein was trying to explain compassion, and the eternity, the infinity, of our belonging to each other.

In such a time as this, with everything at risk and everyone on edge, our work is clear, as a congregation and as people: to try to speak compassion, to try to expand the circles of empathy, to try to dwell within the eternity, the infinity, of our belonging to each other.

I will tell you a story.

A couple of weeks ago, someone whom I know, someone I admire, someone I love, sent me an email, a forwarded joke, with a little note, *I thought this would brighten your day.* It was a sexist joke, a weak joke, a bad joke, and it did not brighten my day. Usually I do what all of us do when this stuff comes through: I delete it and forget it. But this time, , for some reason, it got to me. Maybe I was tired. Maybe it was because it happened to arrive somewhere between the Kavanaugh hearings last fall and the Governor Northam debacle last week, with so many assaults on human dignity in between, we've just about lost count. Maybe it was the same day I learned about Juliet, the 18 month-old detainee from Honduras whose father was deported after she was taken from his arms and lost somewhere in the system, lost somewhere in Arizona, or Texas, or Michigan, or the authorities don't really know for sure where, and all he says in the YouTube video (from Honduras) over and over is *Please let her go. She's too small to be alone.* She's too small to be in jail. *Ella es pequena, es pequena.* Or maybe it came in the midst of the Federal shutdown, or as I was reading the latest international climate report, or hearing the rollback of rights and protections for our transgender siblings in the military ... I don't know. But suddenly, right here at my desk, I felt this lump in my throat and constriction in my chest, and I just put my head down and cried. Which I don't do here at work, on the clock, on your pledge dime, very often, and certainly not in response to stupid, tired jokes forwarded a thousand times.

I spoke to the person who sent it, a person I love, a member here, and told them I might talk about it, here - because I wanted them to know it's not about them at all. It's about how each of us, all of us, are holding the lines of the net that holds us all safe, all of us, and all we love, and we cannot let the lines go slack. Not anymore. We have to call it out. We owe this to each other. If you see something, say it. If you hear me say something hurtful or amiss, tell me. If out of the blue something catches in your heart and leaves you inexplicably and uncharacteristically crying at your desk, chase that down. Wade into that water and trouble it up. To anyone who is still trying – to be kind, to be good, to practice and to learn - **shine on**, and find a way to speak the truth in love.

I'm not going to tell you the joke, obviously. What I'll say about it is that it's set in the Garden of Eden and tells why Eve and all the women who came after her

all the women
all the girls
my daughter

my mother
your mother
your daughter
all of us

are second rate compared to the beautiful, subservient, dimwitted, promiscuous, naked girl that Adam could have had, but he messed up.

The email said, *I thought this would brighten your day. And: I hope you don't take it personally, or in a "me too" kind of way.* At the end it said, *Forward this to all the men you know and all the women you think can handle it.*

So I'm trying to figure out how not to be shrill, judgy, obnoxious, oversensitive, politically correct (all my default behaviors). how to rise above with some maturity and dignity and pastoral professionalism, and look the other way and pretend that this stuff doesn't matter (even though it's been piling up around us for so long, and doing so much harm to women and to men and to children and to everyone). I'm trying not to take the bait or sink toward the lowest common denominator, to be the kind of minister you all want. No one wants a preachy preacher here, scolding all the time.

But the fact is, there's no way to take it except personally and in a "me too" kind of way, because "me too," is the **very definition** of compassion. And if "handling it" means shutting up and sitting down and being nice, well, I won't handle it, I can't handle it, because that would be against my religion, that winking complicity in this tired game. I believe that we are all trying – *right?* – all still trying to be good, to be kind, to raise the bar, to raise the alarm.

I learned some time ago in a passage Karen Hering wrote that the phrase "raise your standards" comes from the medieval battlefield. A standard is a flag, the colors of a regiment, or a city, raised upon a staff to indicate the rallying place, the place for standing firm and steadfast. It's time to raise our standards. We're here to fly the flag of truth, compassion and brave wisdom, the flags of broken-heartedness and healing. It's time to raise our standards. And then we all go high. It's no longer any use to speak of "us" and "them" – *when they go low, we go high.* We all stumble, we all fail, we all mess up, and we will lift each other up and brush each other off, and we will all go high together, because that's the only way that anything will change.

And just for the record, I am a daughter of Eve. I know it was meant to be a sexist joke, but I'm taking it as a religious joke as well. I'm comprehensively offended by this joke because I am a daughter of Eve and in this house we're all her children. Unitarian Universalists are direct descendants of Eve, who did not make a "mistake" in the garden and thus bring down all humanity by mistake. She was not tricked by a snake or anybody else. We are the children of Eve, the woman who said plainly, "I don't want to live in this garden, this gated community, if I don't have full access to the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I'm starving," she said, "ravenous for wisdom, and moral agency, and I'm ready for the messy work of ethical discernment. This neighborhood's too small, too homogenous, *Adam*, and I want to draw wide circles of empathy, so wide they insect and overlap into one great universal circle, and this paradise is too precious and exclusive. I don't like that there's a wall around it. I don't want

dominion over the animals or anybody else. It's time for us to go, and if you won't go, don't hinder me."

That's our biblical lineage right there, and what I can't handle, what we won't tolerate, is blasphemy. Somebody's hurting our family, here, and here, and here, and here, and here... and it's gone on far too long. We are called to the deepest, most radical compassion, militant compassion, we can muster, for ourselves, for one another, for everyone and everything within the widest circles we can draw, the widest ring of love we can imagine.

From Mahmoud Darwish, poet of Palestine:

As you prepare your breakfast, think of others
(do not forget the pigeon's food).

As you conduct your wars, think of others
(do not forget those who seek peace).

As you pay your water bill, think of others
(those who are nursed by clouds).

As you return home, to your home, think of others
(do not forget the people of the camps).

As you sleep and count the stars, think of others
(those who have nowhere to sleep).

As you liberate yourself in metaphor, think of others
(those who have lost the right to speak).

As you think of others far away, think of yourself
(say: "If only I were a candle in the dark").

Shine on.