

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

## No Caravan of Despair

*Reverend Victoria Safford*

Sunday, September 8, 2019

## READINGS

### Waiter

*Ibtisam Barakat*

In a dream I took  
a giant pair of scissors  
and cut a snippet of  
the Mississippi river.

I wrapped it like a thread  
around my finger  
and took it to the  
peoples of the world  
whose lands are  
short on water.

Like a waiter before dinner  
I poured the water freely  
and woke up filled  
with the wonder of  
one human hearing  
the thirst of another and  
not ignoring that any more.

### the Mississippi river empties into the gulf

*Lucille Clifton*

the Mississippi river empties into the gulf

and the gulf enters the sea and so forth,  
none of them emptying anything,  
all of them carrying yesterday  
forever on their white tipped backs,  
all of them dragging forward tomorrow.  
it is the great circulation  
of the earth's body, like the blood  
of the gods, this river in which the past  
is always flowing. every water  
is the same water coming round.  
everyday someone is standing on the edge  
of this river, staring into time,  
whispering mistakenly:  
only here. only now.

## No Caravan of Despair

There was one day in August –

- just a couple of weeks ago, but already in the busy fall, August feels like a misty summer memory. August already feels, in September, like part of my past.

I'm remembering a day way back in late August, when north of here, some of the leaves on some of the trees were already infused with the faintest gold. Even on a foggy day, damp and grey, which this day was, the grey light was also golden, that lovely, poignant, late-summer light. At that time of year if you're walking in the woods and you look down, you'll almost surely find a single, blood-red leaf, maybe maple, and pick it up to press later in a book and thinking, "Wow. How strange! I'm going to show this to Ross! How unusual to find a leaf like this so early. Fall is such a long way off." Except it actually isn't. Fall is always right around the corner. When I was little I used to dread the Fourth of July, counting the vacation days remaining, watching them slip by, wishing I could hoard them.

I'm thinking of a certain day in August, and realizing now that this was one of those summer days that you hold in your hands and wrap carefully in leaves, tie it round and round with summer grass and put it in your pocket for safe keeping, so that sometime in the future, sometime not too long from now, when there's nothing green and nothing gold anywhere in sight (grey, white, black, ice, snow, frost, winter), on a day like that in February, maybe, you can take it out, untie the shriveled grass, the crumbling leaf around it, and hold in the hands of your memory a soft summer day again, a day that seems to hold within its golden hours all of summer, all the summers you have ever known:

the way the sun rose pink and orange on the water;  
the way the loons and little birds responded to the sun, offered up their ancient hymns;  
the way the invisible wind whispered and rustled all around you, the way it only can when there are leaves and bushes and branches;  
the way rain smells, or even mist, when mixed with soil;  
the way the sun feels on your shoulders, on the back of your neck, when finally the fog gives way in late afternoon and you shrug off your sweatshirt and think about swimming one last time.

Long ago, back in August, I remember there was a day like that, and it had a pressing agenda:

wake up,  
greet dog,  
watch sun rise,  
drink coffee,  
slip a kayak into the water.

This was on a lake I love, wild around its edges, big enough that even after many years I can still get a little lost, especially in fog. There's something about paddling like that, following the shoreline with no map, no watch, no phone, moving gently out of time, with no way to measure whether you've been out for one hour, or two, or four, or more, no way to measure the distance you've gone. The shoreline stays the same, except it doesn't, and you wonder *how can I remember every single one of these trees, imprint it on my heart, and each rock with its lichen and moss?* One inlet opens to next and then the next, and you know then that you're propelled not so much by the paddle, as by curiosity. What's beyond that

outcrop of rocks? What's around that bend? Why are those ravens making such a racket way over there? What was that noise in the brush ahead of me, that splash in the water beside me? On this day that I'm remembering it felt almost impossible not to keep going, even when my shoulders ached and my hands were blistered, and I knew my people might be starting to worry just a bit. The water, the fog, the shoreline, the sky just beckoned on and on. A person could get lost that way.

A person could get found.

I wonder what's ahead of us.

I wonder what comes next.

I wonder what would happen if we went just a little further, you and I, and all of us, if we took one more stroke, one more step, one more breath?

When exactly, and how, is our past – our individual past and our shared past, our history – going to become our future? Where will this story that we're all in here take us? Where will we take the story?

To hold a day like that, or a life, or just a moment, just a few minutes, that is a spiritual practice. That openness is a kind of prayer. That kind of wide-open, wide-eyed curiosity ought to feel exhilarating, thrilling, brave – but in these dark and troubled times, days of chaos, days of rage, this time we're in not just of unsettling uncertainty but of absolutely certain loss and devastation, in times like this (and I don't know if in my lifetime there have ever before been "times like this" – in fact, I know there haven't.

There's been xenophobia against immigrants before, and cruelty even against refugees, but not like this. Not with children in one jail and their parents in another, and people paid – by us – to think about how to keep them there indefinitely.

Marginalized communities have been targeted before, gay people, queer people, trans people, but never quite like this.

Women's rights and children's rights and the rights of the sick and the old and those with mental illness, civil rights and human rights have been threatened before, but never quite so comprehensively.

There've been moments when greed and guile were more highly prized than decency and honesty, and truth and facts, when science was scorned and justice denied, but never so effortlessly.

The planet has cried out before, the waters and the land, the animals and birds, forest and oceans, Amazon burning and Arctic ice vanished to water, but never has the planet cried so desperately;

white supremacy has shown its teeth, certainly, but never in my lifetime so blatantly or insidiously;

guns have wreaked havoc but never so relentlessly, shamelessly;

and war in one place or another has always been an option, but not usually so blithely, recklessly, stupidly, selfishly;

democracy is always under assault, but not usually like this;

fascism has found footing before, and well... maybe it *was* like this...)

In this moment, curiosity about what happens next feels perilous. It's never felt more prudent to close the gates of imagination, to clutch hard at what we know for sure as if clutching somehow could protect it, protect us; to think small, not big, because big feels apocalyptic; to think small and feel small, make only

short-term plans, stay the course, ship the paddles, hunker down and find a cozy cove to shelter in and to let this storm blow by, even though we know that isn't how storms work. We know, too well, that storms can leave a mighty devastation.

I wonder what's ahead of us.

I wonder what comes next.

I wonder what would happen if we went just a little further, you and I, and all of us, if we took one more one more step, one more breath, together?

When did these become such terrifying questions?

Unitarian Universalism is all about imagination. It's adventuresome: *who are we, and who are we called to be?* Unitarian Universalism is all about curious questions - intellectual, but more importantly, and more bravely, spiritual:

How can I grow my soul (deepen, broaden, tenderize and toughen my humanity)?

How shall I serve this world?

How is it with thy spirit? (an outwardly curious question)

How can I help you?

How have I hurt you?

What would forgiveness look like, of each other, of ourselves?

This curiosity takes enormous courage. We have to practice every day.

I wonder what it's like to dwell within your body?

I wonder what it would be like to be more at home with mine, more at peace in mine.

This is all the catechism of curiosity.

What happens, what changes, what's possible, when I practice gratitude instead of anxiety?

Gratitude instead of fear?

Gratitude alongside grief?

Gratitude in spite of everything... what happens if I practice?

I wonder, how, with my limited time, limited talent, limited treasure, limited power, how can I be a force for good, and with whom I can join my forces?

Unitarian Universalism is all about imagination, wonder, paddling out a little further toward one more mystery, into the open water of open inquiries: *where did we come from? What are we? And why? Where are we going? And how shall we go?* What promises, what principles, what covenants will hold us steady, hold us true? What wondrous love will we insist upon relentlessly? In the hands of what god are we tenderly held, or are we only here to hold each other? What story are we in? What story are we shaping? This kind of curiosity, this openness, defines us - wondering what's possible.

*In a dream, says the poet, I took  
a giant pair of scissors  
and cut a snippet of  
the Mississippi river.*

*I wrapped it like a thread  
around my finger  
and took it to the*

*peoples of the world  
whose lands are  
short on water.*

*Like a waiter before dinner  
I poured the water freely  
and woke up filled  
with the wonder of  
one human hearing  
the thirst of another and*

*not ignoring that any more.*

I wonder what's ahead of us. I wonder what comes next. I wonder what would happen if we went just a little further, you and I, and all of us, if we took one more stroke, one more step, one more breath, together? These should not be fearful paralyzing questions, but just in fact the opposite.

In this troubled time, it feels a little like the end of time, like everything we've known and loved and learned and built and dreamed, worked for, marched for, prayed for, hoped, is trampled or at risk. But time is not an arrow, shot from the bow at the beginning and propelling history inevitably in one doomed direction. There are no straight lines in this round world, no guarantees, and seasons change, and movements grow. Hearts beat on, and all things, like water, ebb and flow. Despair *can* give way to resistance, if you voice it in community. Grief *can* become resilience if you honor the weight of it, and let others help you bear it. Cynicism can be melted; grim certainty un-rusted; apathy can wake up, if the music's loud enough and strong enough.

Lucille Clifton writes about the great river, which like all rivers, moves not in a line, not in a rut, as it appears to do, but as part of a great, unending circulation:

*the Mississippi river empties into the gulf  
and the gulf enters the sea and so forth,  
none of them emptying anything,  
all of them carrying yesterday  
forever on their white tipped backs,  
all of them dragging forward tomorrow.  
it is the great circulation  
of the earth's body, like the blood  
of the gods, this river in which the past  
is always flowing. every water  
is the same water coming round.  
everyday someone is standing on the edge  
of this river, staring into time,  
whispering mistakenly:  
only here. only now.*

This time we're in is part of all time. We are not alone here, but joined with communities of hope up and down the river which connects to every flowing stream, and all around this world. One person's imagination waters the desperation of another; one person's tears irrigate the hard, despondent, cramped and crabby heart of someone else. Ancestors, through us, sing songs of love to children they will never meet; young people call with strong voices toward those not yet even here.

Two weeks ago on a Tuesday a baby was dedicated here by Reverend Sara: a squirmy, squeaky, damp, tiny, lovely, brand new human. Just minutes before we came into the sanctuary, I'd learned that a dear friend had died, a hundred years old, a spirit guide and mentor. Eight decades of her hundred years she offered to the world as fierce and loving activism for justice, peace and freedom. She went out, the baby came in, and I was reminded that everything in this life goes round and round, world without end.

I wonder what's ahead of us.

I wonder what comes next.

I wonder what would happen if we went just a little further, you and I, and all of us, if we took one more stroke, one more step, one more breath, together?

That Tuesday with the baby in my arms, I remembered once again that I owe way too much both to the ancestors and to the descendants to indulge for very long the luxury of despair. There's just no room for that. There's just no time.

This is no caravan of despair here. We are wide awake, which is not always easy. In his house, it's the way we do religion. We are wonderers, wanderers, lovers of life and of each other. We know, with adrienne marie brown:

*we can only be a force together,  
we can only be together with trust,  
we can only trust if we are authentic with each other –  
and we can only be authentic if we can admit we don't know our way out of this.  
let this be a verbal toast to more questions,  
more doubt,  
more experimentation,  
more listening to unlikely voices of leadership,  
more caring and connecting with each other in ways that will prepare us for whatever is coming*

For whatever is coming.

With joy in the struggle, as my friend Frances said her whole life long, with joy in the struggle, amen and amen.