

Someday it will be otherwise

[Note: The readings to accompany this sermon were from Maria Papova <https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/11/01/figuring/> and Aurora Levins Morales <http://www.auroralevinsmorales.com/blog/vahavta>. Carol Caouette and Craig Hansen offered their version of “A Change is Gonna Come” just before the sermon.]

A change is gonna come, said Sam Cooke. I wonder, do we really want it? I wonder, can we really see it, each of us, whoever we are on this journey of life, can we really envision a changed world, see our own place within it? Can we imagine

*...the exact smell of the summer streets, in the words of Aurora Levins Morales,
the smell of summer streets in which no one has been shot...
the sparkling taste of food when we know
that no one on earth is hungry, that the beggars are fed,
Imagine with all your being towards that day
when the poor of the world shake down a rain of good fortune
out of the heavy clouds, and justice rolls down like waters.*

Can you see it? Can you imagine? What would that cost? What would that cost *us*? And I ask that knowing that there's a whole wide range of diversity among us, wealthy people and not wealthy people and everybody in between. What would it cost you, that redistribution, that reparation, restoration of a right and ethically elegant balance that has never yet existed on this earth?

Defend that world, says the poet, *as if it were your child.*
It is your child.
Defend it as if it were your lover.
It is your lover.

Imagine
*That the crimes of our age, the grotesque inhumanities of greed,
the sheer and astounding shamelessness of it, the vast fortunes
made by stealing lives, imagine that the horrible normalcy it came to have,
is unimaginable*

I wonder sometimes if we can. I wonder what it takes to want to. Change is not, it never is, an easy thing. I think all the time, so often, of the words of Frederick Douglass, an excerpt from a longer speech, words gathered into our hymnal, because he was not speaking only politically. (Where's the line?) The words are in our hymn book, placed there as a prayer, to help people grow souls, to consider what it means to have a soul worth saving, to be and breathe, for just a while, embodied spirit. Hear Frederick Douglass, from the back of our own hymn book: *Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are [those] who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a*

physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did. It never will. You have to really want it, transformation of things as they are, starting with your own heart, your own perspective, power, circumstance, security, and I wonder sometimes if we really do want it, if we really understand, especially if we're white, especially if we're straight, cis-gender, of a certain age – I wonder if we really understand what's on the table here. I know that I don't understand. I know that I can't quite imagine. I need companions.

There's a poem I love by Jane Kenyon; many of you know it, a poem about paying attention:

*I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.
At noon I lay down
with my mate. It might
have been otherwise.
We ate dinner together
at a table with silver
candlesticks. It might
have been otherwise.
I slept in a bed
in a room with paintings
on the walls, and
planned another day
just like this day.
But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.*

I've kept this poem close, as a prayer of gratitude for the loveliness of simple things, all the quiet joys that so often go unnoticed and unspoken. It's a gentle admonition to love the life you have, and actually it's not so gentle, ending as it does with that barb at the end, that reminder of mortality. It's poignant, urgent, tinged with more than a drop of sadness. Don't wait to pay attention; don't wait to speak your thanks; don't wait to savor joy. Lately, though, I've held this poem another way, as a kind of prophecy, as a reminder of how unevenly the cards are dealt us in this life, how for some it's peaches in the morning and sweetness at night, candlelight dinners, long walks with the dog – how for some it's safe and relatively lovely almost all the time, and for others, it's ... otherwise, almost all the time. Suddenly the line, "One day I know it will be

otherwise” blares like a trumpet, shattering complacency. It’s a street chant, it’s the thunder and lightning of power conceding, the great and mighty prayer, “a change is gonna come,” *when the poor of the world shake down a rain of good fortune out of the heavy clouds, and justice rolls down like waters*. I’m not saying that we don’t each, all, everyone, deserve the sweet peaches and long afternoons of love and good work and deep rest at the end of the day; I’m saying that we each, all, everyone, absolutely do, everyone - and one day, God willing, things are going be otherwise. God willing, **and us willing**. A change is gonna come, and that change may require some of us to relinquish some of our peaches, our privilege, our place (otherwise, it can’t be ever be otherwise), and that change won’t come easy, so therefore it is so important to be careful what you wish for, what you march for, what you say you’re fighting for, what you post and repost on Facebook, because I wonder: do we really mean it?

For four weeks now, you have all been asking, we have all been asking, what to do, confessing to each other, *I don’t know what to do*. When I hold that question before my own face in the mirror, I ask myself, not gently, “Well, what you were you doing before May 25, before the murder of George Floyd, before the people came pouring into the streets like rushing, righteous water, washing over everything, cleansing all the deadly silent spaces, in so many cities, all over the world? What made that day different for you? What were you doing to make things otherwise (I ask myself as gently as possible, as if gentle *were* possible right now, or appropriate), what were you doing on May 24, or May 23, with all your righteous outrage, all your grief and power? In what ways were you being (in the words of our chalice lighter) an **upstander** then, really practicing your Unitarian Universalist faith, in a way that would make a child proud? What were you doing before, to crack open your heart and plow up the ground? Whatever it was, do more of that now. Or, depending on what it was, do less. Listen for the wisdom, for the call, of other voices now, other stories. Imagine your own changed place in a transformed world.

These mirror conversations with myself, with my heart, are not gentle. They’re also not always honest, I’m sure, or accountable, or fully informed, or humble enough or brave enough, fierce enough or kind enough. I need companions. Long ago, thirty years ago, I knew that for me it’s important, imperative, to grow my own soul and discern the call to service in community, not alone in my bathroom confessional with the relentless, and frankly, clueless, mirror. We can’t do this work alone: strengthen the spirit for the long, long haul, sing songs of resistance, and hope and despair, repent, lament, strategize a living revolution and inspire one another to be brave up-standers, not callow, shallow bystanders. You can’t do that by yourself. I knew a long time ago, and I know more than ever now, that only in accountable community, a community of faith and hope that speaks the truth in love, only (for me) in a congregation can I ask even the most intimate questions:

Who am I? Who am I called to be? That’s not only mine, or yours, top answer. We need companions.

For 15 weeks, we have been apart from one another. If someone had told us in March that this were possible, we wouldn’t have believed it, no more than we would ever have believed that 118,365 people in our country would have died, that 1,376 Minnesotans would have died, just plucked from our midst, gone from our sight. Let’s hold that for a moment, what’s happened.

The reality that we must hold this, and so much more now, separately, may be the hardest thing. I don't quite know how to do it. I don't know how to be a human, a person, let alone a minister, without you, and without others whom I love and respect and rely on, not only for hugs of comfort but for the occasional slap-down of accountability: the way a person who believes you're worth it looks you in the eyes, takes your two hands in theirs, or your two shoulders, and says, "Come on. Let's do this together."

It feels like in March we fled a burning building, with only enough time to stuff a few things in our pockets, grab a few treasures, and run. It feels like in March we were banished without warning to a thousand desert islands, and now we're playing that party game: if you were all alone on a desert island, what's one book, one movie, one dinner companion, one cherished thing you'd bring?

Empty your pockets. Lay your stuff out on the sand. And look: there are all the songs Carol's been teaching us for the past decade, safe and sound in your musical muscle memory (and if they fall out, they're up on a slide every Sunday). We're singing together apart. And here is the canon of stories Amy's been sharing all along with our children and all of us; we hear them each week as if they were new because now we need them differently than before – they resonate within us and among us, and we're sharing them together, apart. And here are your comrades, companions, strangers and friends, on Wednesdays, on Sundays, at other times, if you just take the time to log on, just make the time to do Zoom, – they're so thirsty for your face, for your voice, to catch just a glimpse of your story as it unfolds in this strange time, this strange and holy time. They need to weave the strands of your story among the strands of their own. We're holding each other together, apart. Empty your pockets, the few things you grabbed before we scattered, the stuff you've carried with you all along- and there are your convictions, your questions, your hopes, the prayers that sustain you in the night, and always have, the wonderings you wake to in the morning; the god, the Love that holds you in strong hands and will not let you go, the higher power, force of light and love that's always held you, even now. All still there. Maria Popova writes of how easily, how carelessly sometimes, we wall ourselves off from each other and from our own true selves, intoxicated by individualism and ego and fear. *How can we still succumb, she asks, to the illusion of separateness, of otherness? This wall, this veneer, must have been what the confluence of accidents and atoms known as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., saw through when he spoke of our "inescapable network of mutuality," what Walt Whitman punctured when he wrote that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."*

We're still together, apart. The building is closed but the church is open, as ever, wide open; open - as we say in baby dedications - to every possibility. Together, even now, we're starting to imagine, to risk imagining, to risk really wanting, transformation in this world, radical change. The only way to take such risk, to dream such dreams, is together, not alone. Across the ether, here, we're strong. Unified – not always in agreement, not at all; we need the liveliness of argument, the creative tension that shoots sparks when one person's story or experience collides with someone else's story, and the plot thickens, the truth deepens, as we learn to hear and hold each other. We know how to do that; that's our stock in trade: pluralism. Respect. Courage, reverence, compassion. We know how to dream in harmony. One writer said this week, *This month will go down in the history. We know the end goal of all these mass protests is to create a safer, healthier, and more joyful, just and peaceful world. Our liberation is tied together, and the*

time for change has come. [Kenza Hadj-Mousssa & Patrick Burke, TakeActionMN] I'm holding that bright ribbon because I know you're holding it, too.

From Aurora Levins Morales, her variation on the *va'havta* in the Hebrew prayer, *shema yisrael*:

*When you inhale and when you exhale
breathe the possibility of another world
into the 37.2 trillion cells of your body
until it shines with hope.
Then imagine more.*

*Don't waver. Don't let despair sink its sharp teeth
Into the throat with which you sing. Escalate your dreams.
Make them burn so fiercely that you can follow them down
any dark alleyway of history and not lose your way.
Make them burn clear as a starry drinking gourd
Over the grim fog of exhaustion, and keep walking.*

*Hold hands. Share water. Keep imagining.
So that we, and the children of our children's children
may live.*

For a few moments, we'll be silent together.

Spirit of life, hold us now, all of us together,
apart but never separate,
Remind us of shared breath,
that we are all one body, together with all people, all the animals, the living world, everything
alive upon this fragile earth.
From one source, a pinpoint, have we come, all of us,
to be here breathing all together just a little while.
Separation is illusion.
In our every action, every prayer,
with courage and humility,
may we willingly and joyfully
aid and abet the mighty changes that we know are going to come,
the holy transformations that will make this world
and our own souls more holy and more whole.

Amen and amen.