

Now What?
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
November 13, 2016

Meditation and Prayer

May we settle, with grateful hearts, into our places in this ancient Meeting House, this house which has stood on this hill through the Revolution, through the Civil War, through all too many wars, and through innumerable times of discord and deep division in this nation we share.

May we settle here and now, in this place made sacred by the love of generations, by the dedication of generations to the highest of ideals, to freedom, to justice, to peace among all people, peace with the creatures and all life on this living earth home.

And may we pray, naming the yearnings of our hearts:

In *this* time of division and discord, we pray...

...for the strength and wisdom to continue to stand on the side of love, to live and work on the side of love;

...for the courage to stand by the side of all our brothers and sisters who may feel threatened and afraid because of the color of their skin or their national origin or their religion or their gender or who they choose to love;

...for wisdom in our leaders across the political spectrum, that they might bring us together rather than push us apart, that together we might move ever closer to a blessed community of love and kindness and justice.

Pray in particular for the man who will be our new president, that the privilege of occupying this high office will move him towards more kindness and compassion and understanding, towards genuine inclusion of all who live in this land, towards finding more peace among the nations, towards care for this earth threatened by climate change.

Readings

from the early Buddhist scripture *The Dhammapada*:

Conquer anger through gentleness, unkindness through kindness, greed through generosity, and falsehood by truth. Be truthful; do not yield to anger. Give freely, even if you have but little. The gods will bless you.

Use your body for doing good, not for harm. Use your tongue for doing good, not for harm. Train it to speak kindly. Use your mind for doing good, not for harm. Train your mind in love.

For hatred can never put an end to hatred; love alone can.

by Rev. Theodore Parker (1810-1860), from a speech delivered at the Massachusetts State House, January 1858, on the evening before that year's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Convention (it is likely that the words of these few lines gave inspiration to an oft-repeated sentence from Martin Luther King, Jr.):

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight, I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

“Stand By This Faith” by Universalist preacher Rev. Olympia Brown (1835-1926):

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals. Which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful.

Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message. That you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost.

Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.

Sermon

As many of you know, this past Wednesday we opened the Meeting House for a day of reflection, open to anyone who wished to enter for some moments of peace sheltered by these old posts and beams and rafters.

A few wrote a thought or two on notepaper provided for that purpose:

“...it’s reassuring to know that this building has seen worse!”

“Oh – for our planet – our country – our children – May we find strength to persevere!”

“Together we can... do what? Raise children who care, help our neighbor, stand up for justice, engage and do the right thing. CARE. LOVE. VOTE.”

And this one, beginning with an oft-quoted line from poet Mary Oliver:

“‘What will you do with your one wild and precious life?’ Stand on the side of love.”

There were other notes, but all expressing feelings from the heart as together we face a quite dramatically new political reality and landscape. And implicitly or explicitly the notes expressed determination to keep on, to contribute, to help, to live and work for justice, for peace, for the planet.

Now, as a preacher I can never, nor have I ever, tell you how to vote; but I am free to express my own opinions on one or another matter, opinions which may or may not be shared by all or any of you. We inherit, you see, a religious tradition that honors what is called the free pulpit... and also the free pew. These two things together enable real, substantive, heartfelt conversation: in the phrase I so often use, “conversation about things that matter.”

So – speaking for myself only, I did not vote for the man who is now president-elect. Indeed, I have been appalled over the course of this campaign by things he has said about immigrants and refugees, about our Muslim neighbors, about veterans, about constitutional protections; by his mocking a man with disabilities; appalled not only about his language in relation to women, but by the things he bragged he has done to women; as well as deeply concerned about his having called climate change a hoax and declaring he would not adhere to the Paris climate change treaty and would roll back environmental regulations put in place by the Obama administration.

All in all, then, I was a little depressed on Wednesday morning, depressed and fearful for our future.

And though *my* white male privileged daily life won’t change much, at least not any time soon... I am deeply concerned about the well-being of those who do not share this privilege, this relative safety... whose health care may be impacted, whose safety on the streets, in the workplace, and even in their own homes may be at risk... many of whom by their own accounts are very afraid right now.

Well... once you get the depression or anger out of your system in what amounts to a sort of grieving, you have to get up and get back to living. As Emerson wrote, reflecting in part on very personal grief in his essay “Experience”: “Up again old heart.”

So... in the wake of a campaign that I think it’s fair to say took the wind out of our collective sails regardless of who we voted for up and down the ballot... preaching to myself, though I expect maybe for many of us, however we voted: “Up again old heart.”

Wherever we find ourselves on the political spectrum and whomever we voted for: Gary Johnson, Jill Stein, Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, none of the above... “up again old heart.”

In short: Here we are: We will have a new president, and his name is Donald J. Trump. The congress remains controlled by Republicans. And for at least two years, likely four, none of this will change.

But *we* can continue to work for whatever change about which we are passionate, perhaps asking this useful question at every step of the way:

How will we stand on the side of love in this new political environment?

The president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Rev. Peter Morales, writing this week, encouraged us, Unitarian Universalists, to “take a deep breath and a long view...” to maintain our commitment “to democracy, compassion and human dignity” as we “help bend our culture toward justice.”

He further wrote:

Our voice is going to matter in the coming years. Our role, as always, will be to be a powerful voice for compassion and civil rights...

For now, let us reflect and draw strength from one another... Together we can shape the future.

(I would add, “*help*” shape the future, since we UUs are not alone.)

Gloria Steinem, by the way, when asked about the election in an interview on Wednesday, said it was a “vote against the future... but the future will happen anyway.”

By this, she went on to say, she meant that our nation is becoming ever more diverse, racially and culturally, and that progress towards a future of more inclusive rights will continue – the moral arc of the universe again.

Here’s the thing, though. The famous “moral arc” doesn’t bend all by itself. So...

Every day in our personal lives, it seems to me we must continue to awaken to the reality that we are part of an interdependent web of life and love, and so we must *choose* to act accordingly: kindly, with compassion and love and understanding.

To put it slightly differently, our Unitarian Universalist faith, while it doesn’t call us to unanimity on this or that political or social issue, *does* call us to this deepening of our experience of interdependence, *does* call us to discern how to live ethically as we seek a world of more peace and justice.

Further, here in our particular Unitarian Universalist congregation, we are called by our stated covenant to continue to take care of each other, to support each other, to listen to each other as together we strive to give life to our UU Principles, to (I’ll say it again!) stand on the side of love – whether in regard to homelessness and hunger, immigration rights, war and peace, ecological sanity, as well as the continuing effort to listen to one another, among ourselves and across the great and sad current divides in our nation. Because actually there is so much more that we share as Americans and as human beings than not.

As for where exactly to put our efforts?

Whether personally or as a congregation, we do well to choose what moves us most deeply, choose the issue, the reality, the form of suffering or injustice that touches or breaks our heart. No one of us, and no single congregation, can do everything in relation to every form of suffering on the planet. But moving from what touches or breaks our hearts, we will know where to send the check, where to write the letter or email, where and when to stand up, speak out, who to help.

And at the same time, we indeed also must be among those who strive to bridge the chasms in our nation that divide us politically and socially. We need to talk to each other, to try to understand each other, even or especially when we don’t agree with each other. Even or especially right here, we must not assume that everyone in these pews thinks alike when it comes to social issues or political affiliation or how we have voted.

Now... often it is our young people who teach us in such times – or any time for that matter. There is plenty of fear and anxiety and anger among young people of politically liberal persuasion. There is also plenty of wisdom.

Our daughter teaches high school English in the Bronx; her students are mostly of color, and all of them in this unique school had dropped out and then returned. One of her students – I expect with plenty about which to be worried and even fearful in her life, perhaps now more than ever, said on the day after the election (and I’m paraphrasing) that there is no use in continuing to rail against an election result we can’t change; instead of things we can’t control, she said, we need to worry about how we are going to care for each other, how we are going to love each other.

Wow.

And a few days before the election, the PBS News Hour played brief videos from students who had composed letters to the new president, whoever that ended up to be.

One of them said something to the effect that whoever is elected, every day we should try to enact what we wanted our candidate to enact.

Amen to that for all of us, whatever our politics.

And one more: Paige, a former member of the Unity UU Church youth group in North Easton, now in her twenties, wrote this the other day (reported by our own Beverly Tricco, who was the Director of Religious Education at that time):

Something that's been rolling through my brain all day... As a Unitarian Universalist, I was raised to believe that every living being has inherent worth and dignity and thus deserves respect. That includes those who I disagree with. That includes those who do not see the same inherent worth and dignity in others. I endeavor to keep an open mind, and an open heart, while fighting for the rights of all living beings.

Yes! Beautifully said.

Finally, it seems to me that we can add to these young voices, perspective from those of us who are older, some of us considerably older, than these students and young people. Our perspective is relevant too, indeed maybe completes the picture of how we move forward. This is of course the perspective that comes with having lived through many ebbs and flows politically as well as in the various larger movements to bring government of the people, by the people, and for the people to life *truly* for all the people.

It is a perspective that sees we have come a long way in the work for civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, human rights, animal rights, the right to a healthy planet. We have also seen that there have been setbacks before, and we know that there will be again. We know, then, that we must continue to be passionate, committed partners in this bending of the arc.

We know that every time the sky darkens and storm clouds loom... up again old heart... keep standing on the side of love, keep caring for one another, caring for the most vulnerable... with passionate and enduring concern and effort... stand up and speak out too for the values of our American democracy – values of free press, free speech, equal rights for all... even as we do keep listening to those with different views and opinions and affiliations from our own... whatever our own views happen to be.

For we are all in this together.

Indeed our faith teach us this quite clearly, teaches us that we are part of one world, one Earth, one life, in all of its glorious and beautiful diversity.

May we remember this always. May we live knowing that it is so.

So may it long be.