

Now What?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Meditation and Prayer

We are invited to a time of meditation, prayer, and silence...

Beginning with our breath...

Just noticing our breath... not controlling... just noticing... breathing in... breathing out... rising... falling... just noticing, experiencing our breath... as we allow ourselves to settle... any tensions released... at least a bit... with each breath...

From this quieter, more settled place, prayers grow... today...

prayers from our hearts to the God of many names and beyond all names...

holy presence within each of us and among us all...

Prayers that we might have the courage

for these times in which we live...

courage in the midst of challenges personal and national

in this fractured, divided time...

courage to reach out and connect... courage to love...

to build bridges to those with whom we differ...

even as we do not and must not relent, with courage,

in speaking out against hate in all its forms

and seeking greater justice and equality.

And finally, but not least, whatever our political affiliations, we offer prayers for our president-elect and vice-president elect. May they, too, have the courage and grace for which this moment in our history calls.

Readings

Chapter 16 of the “Tao Te Ching” (translated by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English)

Empty yourself of everything.

Let the mind rest at peace.

The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return.

They grow and flourish and then return to the source.

Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.

The way of nature is unchanging.

Knowing constancy is insight.

Not knowing constancy leads to disaster.

Knowing constancy, the mind is open.

With an open mind, you will be openhearted.

Being openhearted, you will act royally.

Being royal, you will attain the divine.

Being divine, you will be at one with the Tao.

Being at one with the Tao is eternal.

And though the body dies, the Tao will never pass away.

The second reading is from the writing of the Quaker writer and activist Parker Palmer:

For those of us who want to see democracy survive and thrive—and we are legion—the heart is where *everything* begins: that grounded place in each of us where we can overcome fear, rediscover that we are members of one another, and embrace the conflicts that threaten democracy as openings to new life for us and for our nation. . . .

If we are to stand and act with hope... and do it for the long haul, we cannot settle for mere “effectiveness” as the ultimate measure of our failure or success. Yes, we want to be effective in pursuit of important goals. . . . [But] we must judge ourselves by a higher standard than effectiveness, the standard called faithfulness.

Are we faithful to the community on which we depend, to doing what we can in response to its pressing needs? Are we faithful to the better angels of our nature and to what they call forth from us? Are we faithful to the eternal conversation of the human race, to speaking and listening in a way that takes us closer to truth? Are we faithful to the call of courage that summons us to witness to the common good, even against great odds?

When faithfulness is our standard, we are more likely to sustain our engagement with tasks that will never end: doing justice, loving mercy, and calling the beloved community into being.

Sermon

I don't know about you, but I've been experiencing a little anxiety and worry this past week... and still do, though its quality has shifted a bit...

And, actually I do know about you, some of you anyway, since at various meetings this week you've expressed the anxiety and worry that so many of us have been sharing as our democracy journeys through this time.

So, to begin with: In the midst of this time, what are we doing to take care of ourselves? I'm hearing things like: Resisting the impulse to check the news every ten minutes; going for a walk; reading a book; listening to music; watching something on TV (not the news); keeping to regular routines.

I do some of all of the above myself.

And now and then I pick up my banjo, sometimes just to pick a tune, and sometimes to sing a song, like this from Pete Seeger that you've heard from me more than once and that I've been playing often for myself:

Don't you know it's darkest before the dawn
And it's this thought keeps me moving on
If we could heed these early warnings
The time is now quite early morning

Okay then: Did we think all struggle would be over with a mere election? All divisions bridged, all wounds healed, all issues resolved?

How could it be – no matter what the election results?

Among other things, democracy, as I said last week, is about more than elections, more even than an election as critical as this one. And after all, many of the wounds of injustice that must be addressed have been festering for centuries.

With this in mind, as we heard from Parker Palmer, we need to be in it for the long haul... continuing with faithfulness to one another and to the tasks before us... tasks which in any case mirror all the ways we want to live: kindly, with mutual respect, keeping our eyes on the prize of more justice, more peace, more harmony with the natural world upon which we depend. As at the same time, and just as essentially, we bring kindness each day within our circles of family, friends, neighbors, community.

Even as we do and must continue to speak out against hate and intolerance in all its many forms. No election in and of itself silences voices of hate, and our voices must not be silent either.

Faithful for the long haul.

Writer, poet, and activist Wendell Berry spoke at First Parish in Cambridge some time ago. Here's the one thing I recall about his talk: At the time he had, he said, been taking part in demonstrations against mountain top removal mining for decades, might have been as much as twenty or thirty years, including sit-ins at the office of the governor of Kentucky, arrests, and so on.

Then he said that if his ability to continue to show up to the next demonstration or protest, or to write the next essay, rested on the possibility of immediate success in ending mountain top removal, he could never have kept on. Rather, (and I'm no doubt paraphrasing what I heard) it was simply about being faithful to what he felt had to do, felt called to do, felt was right. So it didn't matter how long it might take. Faithful for the long haul. Of course.

Now, coming of age in the sixties, many of us were under the impression that we could change the world and usher in an era of justice and equality, love and peace, "age of Aquarius" in a few years' time.

Well, welcome to the human race, and welcome to the messy, sometimes chaotic, often divisive world of flawed democracy, with some wounds that do indeed take generations to heal, and that do not heal on their own, each generation with its – with our – own unique work to do. With fresh challenges along the way: for our generation including the challenge of the climate crisis, a challenge interwoven with just about every other issue of justice and equality.

Challenge which almost always brings opportunity.

And as Joe Biden and Kamala Harris take office on January 20, 2021?

Well, they can't do much of anything all by themselves to heal our nation and the climate, to right all wrongs, to create a more caring society. We each have our parts to play – daily. And not only with those of like mind and opinion but perhaps just as importantly with those of quite different mind and quite different opinions on one or another or even most issues of the day. All of us brothers and sisters in this one nation called the United States of America,

deeply flawed from the very beginning... but teachable, healable... in the long haul. We must believe that! If we don't, then we are truly lost.

And along the way it is important, no, it is essential that we take care of ourselves. In some of the ways I noted earlier, and also more deeply: to ground ourselves in some sense of being part of something much larger than our individual self, call it community, call it the larger Self, call it God, Buddha nature, Christ consciousness... or, as in the first reading, the Tao: the Way of nature and of life.

Paraphrasing that ancient text: If we can, from time to time, empty ourselves of our usual concerns (including for sure our political worries!), and instead just rest in the moment, we just might experience if only for a moment connection with some reality we could call source, spirit, nature... and from this, more open-minded, open-hearted living flows. It does.

We might invite this experience sitting on a meditation cushion; but just as well could be on a woodland path or in our own backyard, open to the wide world. Reminded as we become absorbed in sky and clouds, changing leaves, sun and shadow, that nature knows nothing of politics or of our personal worries... nature just goes on. Yes, quite dramatically affected by human life, human activity, human excess... but nature adjusts, the earth adjusts, with little or no concern for any particular species or its troubles, including ours. And you know what? I find this strangely comforting. In the spirit of something Iris Murdoch once wrote, we can "give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care."

Call all this mysticism if you like, and then bring to mind these words of Charles Péguy: "Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics."

In any case, whatever we do to tend to our spirits... I encourage you to do more of that during these days. Just as Gandhi is said to have meditated for a longer – not shorter – period at the outset of a day he knew was to be exceptionally busy and full of challenges.

Well, to conclude as I began, with a little more Pete. In the same song he sang:

Some say that humankind won't long endure
But what makes them so doggone sure?

And he sang, in the spirit of passing the work along from generation to generation:

And so we keep on while we live
Until we have no, no more to give
And when these fingers can strum no longer
Hand the old banjo to young ones stronger

Because:

Through all this world of joy and sorrow
We still can have singing tomorrows

Yes! May it always be so... because we help to make it so.
Amen. Blessed be.