

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

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Imagining the Best: a Spiritual Response to the Trump Mob

We are in an imagination battle. Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous. And that imagination is so respected that those who kill, based on an imagined, radicalized fear of Black people, are rarely held accountable.

Imagination has people thinking they can go from being poor to a millionaire as part of a shared American dream. Imagination turns Brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of ability.... I often feel I am trapped inside someone's else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.

Adrienne Maree Brown, Emergent Strategy

Introduction

As I begin my morning message today, I want to invite us all to pause and to remember. I'm not trying to re-traumatize you, but I invite you to remember how you felt four days ago when we witnessed the Trump mob attacking congress--to protest the fact that congress was meeting to affirm that Trump lost the election. I don't know about you, but for me it's still sinking in. I'm still struggling to understand it in my head, and I'm still feeling it in my body. I'm going to come back to that later in my message: what did it feel like in your body?

I want to reflect this morning on what this moment means politically and culturally—but that's not my main task. As your minister, my main task is to reflect on this spiritually, and to help us frame our response to it spiritually. And the task takes Imagination. There is a spiritual task before us, and it takes imagination. As Adrienne Maree Brown says in the reading I just shared, imagination is used negatively to create racism; we need to use imagination positively to find the way forward into the Beloved Community we seek.

Political Observations

It's not my main job to be a political analyst here, but I will make three points about the politics of the situation. First, I am very struck by how different this would have been if the mob with the Trump flags had been in Lansing: in Lansing they all would have had guns (or most of them). In Washington D.C. you're not supposed to carry guns and therefore most of those in that mob did not have guns. I'm struck by this, and I see this in the national news: the comparison between our state capital, Lansing, what we've seen there; and what we saw in Washington this week.

My second point is that this is not over: the armed protests are going to continue. I was surprised in November that there weren't violent takeovers of polling places and places where they were counting the votes – and if we think there won't be next time there's voting, we're naïve.

Finally, I'm outraged at the difference in policing that we saw. The way the Trump Mob was treated as they walked in and walked out in broad daylight—most of them--filming themselves....in comparison to what we've seen as a police response to the Black Lives Matter protests. No rubber bullets. No fire hoses, no police dogs.

Cultural Observation: the Trump Movement

Those are my political observations. And before I get to the spiritual response I will make a cultural observation. I've been thinking about this for four days and it dawned on me that this is a cultural milestone in this nation. I'm asserting that this thing we call the Trump Movement is mostly a political movement, but it's also a cultural movement. There's a cultural identity there. We know who we mean when we say "the Trump people." It is a political force that bears his name because he came to political power, but it is a broader cultural movement. When we say Trump people we have a common understanding in our society what that means: what they look like, what they do and say. This was their defining moment.

My cultural comparison is hippies and Woodstock. Two totally different purposes and moods but with this similarity: when you say "hippy," in our society we have pretty much a common understanding of what that means. It's a cultural label. If one event defined the popular understanding of what a hippy is, it would be Woodstock. I don't know if the Trump Movement is going to be a recognized cultural label 50 years from now, but if they are, January 6, 2021 will be their Woodstock. The day they stormed the capitol. The event that defines them.

Spiritual Task: Understand – and Love – the Trumpers

This brings me to our first spiritual task. Our spiritual task is to understand and to love the Trump people. Understanding them is an intellectual task; loving them is the spiritual task. Who are they? What do they want? What do they stand for? What are their values?

I read on Facebook this morning a comment that says it's important for liberal people to understand their family and friends who identify as Trump supporters. This is where it gets really hard because for many of you, I know with certainty that this is personal and it's a question of your family members. I've heard you talk about difficult conversations, about communication broken off between family members.

As a spiritual matter there's a question of how do we love those people. How do we love them as Unitarian Universalists who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people? How do we honor their humanity and not descend to answering hate with hate? That's a spiritual question. As Ruby Sales would say, to understand the Trump Movement we must ask the question, "What hurts?" and be willing to listen to the answer.¹ We are called by our values to oppose violence and racism; we are called by our values to defend democracy; are we are called to honor the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

This is spiritual work, and this is a challenging moment for that work.

Spiritual Task: Take Care of Yourself, Body and Soul

So one of our spiritual tasks is to understand in our heads and in our hearts what the Trump Movement represents, and how to respond. And actually our first spiritual task is to take care of ourselves.

¹ Ruby Sales as quoted by Krista Tippett. Ware Lecture by Krista Tippett, General Assembly 2016.
<https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2016/workshops/ware>

I asked you a moment ago what did it feel like. I remember on Wednesday when I was in front of the TV, I could feel the tension in my body. I felt it in my shoulders. On Thursday night, the day after the mob violence, we had an evening worship service already planned and we turned it into a time for people to respond to what was happening and to honor our feelings. I asked everyone then and I'll ask you now: where did you feel it in your body when you were watching those images on TV? And how can you take care of yourself? If that tension is still there, what can you do to take care of yourself—your first spiritual task? We use the term “gut wrenching” sometimes and now we know what that means. We feel it in our bodies when something terrible happens.

Self-care is priority number one, and what does that look like for you? Massage, meditation, exercise, calling loved ones; you might pray, or journal, or rest; you might chose to call your therapist for an appointment or call your minister for a prayer. Maybe it's time to go to your twelve-step group or other support group, or to call your sponsor for support.

Group Spiritual Work: Anger Leads to Action

Self-care is more of an individual task, and as a group we also have a spiritual task. As a Unitarian Universalist movement (if you define yourself as part of this movement, as I do). I mentioned feelings a moment ago, and one of the primary feelings I've been experiencing is anger. It's still there for me. Anger is a legitimate response when boundaries are broken, and anger can motivate us.

Here are the words of Rev. William Sinkford, a UU minister in Portland Oregon and recently the president of the national UU Association—the first Black president of that body:

We are a gentle and generous people, but let us not forget our anger.

May it fuel not only our commitment to compassion but also our commitment to make fundamental changes.

Our vision of the Beloved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the privilege of the few to be accepted as just and even holy.

*Our religious vision must again and again ask, Who is my neighbor?
and strive always to include more and more of us.*

*As we intone the words that gave birth to this nation, “We the people...” we are, and we should be,
both a gentle and an angry people.²*

This is our collective spiritual task as a Unitarian Universalist movement. We have 7 principles that define our movement (not totally, but largely) and the 5th principle is this: *the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregation and in society at large*. Democracy is one of our religious values. So we are called to defend democracy wherever we find that it's threatened. We are an inward-looking religious movement sometimes—that's appropriate to take care of ourselves and make our congregations strong; but we're an outward-looking, politically engaged movement as well. That's why UU the Vote was one of the most prominent social justice movements and one of the most prominent things in all of Unitarian Universalism throughout this past year.

Group Spiritual Task: Imagination

I have one more point about our spiritual task, and this comes back to imagination. Each month we embrace a different theme, but it's really a question. What does it mean to be a people of Deep Listening? That was our question a few months ago. What does it mean to be a people of of Healing? That was two months ago. Last

² Rev. William Sinkford. Reading #159 in *Lifting Our Voices*. Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston. 2015.

month is was, What does it mean to be a people of a people of Stillness? And this month, January: What does it mean to be a people of a people of Imagination?

As Adrienne Maree Brown said, *I often feel I am trapped inside someone' else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.* I say that we all need imagination to envision the world we want. We've seen the ugly reality: rampaging the capitol, Trump flags like an army, angry white people who have been lied to and feel aggrieved and lash out at journalists...

What is our vision? What is the antithesis of that? What would it look like on the steps of the nation's capitol? in Lansing? on the streets of Mount Pleasant? in this congregation? We must imagine it clearly. Instead of a violent mob, a loving community. Instead of lies, hard truths, honest truths, diverse truths. Instead of feeling aggrieved, realizing that there is enough for all if we choose to share and make it so.

Speaking of imagination and having a dream, that's what Dr. King is known for. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said:

God grant that ministers, and lay leaders, and civic leaders, and professional people all over the nation will rise up and use the talents and the finances that God has given them, and lead the people on toward the promised land of freedom with rational, calm, nonviolent means.³

I'm asking us not only to embrace that dream but to revitalize it and modernize it. What do we imagine as the world of love and justice? This is personal work: how can you imagine yourself in this movement, what part do you play? How can you make love and justice more real in your circle of loved ones? And it's group spiritual work: How can we imagine it and make it more real in this place, and how can we take the vision of love and justice to the wider world?

I will leave you with this. The primary image in my mind from Wednesday is the shot from the outside of the steps and all the Trump flags: the mob as they are in the process of breaking in. Who is your "army" marching in Washington? What flags are they flying? See their faces. Hear their words and songs. What songs are they singing? They are not the songs of yesterday, they are the songs of tomorrow: and we are writing them today. Our imagination and our intention and our will makes it so.

Forward together, not one step back.

³ Martin Luther King. Reading #59 in Lifting Our Voices. Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston. 2015.