

November 20, 2016

First Unitarian Church

Some stories I've heard this week. Things that have happened.

Swastikas were spray painted on a couple of schools in Albuquerque, and other racist graffiti on another.

A young person stood up in the cafeteria in one of our high schools and shouted, "Latinos go home!"

At UNM, a male student in a Trump -tshirt tried to remove the hijab from a female student's head.

At another university, Baylor in Texas, a black student, a young woman named Natasha, was on her way to her 10am class when a white man shoved her into the street and said, "No [n-words] on the sidewalk." He said the word. She told the story in a video on twitter. A hashtag was started: #IWalkWithNatasha." Two days later, she had a very different walk to her 10am class: 300 students had gathered to walk with her.

Another day, a member of our congregation, a person of color, was buying something at a local business when an employee said, "You're not one of them Muslims, are you?"

Another day, just before the election, a white lesbian member of our congregation had her Hillary sign stolen from her front yard, and replaced with a death threat. It said, "Death to Hillary and her fan."

This week someone left her another note, this time taped to her front gate. She was a little apprehensive after the last one, but instead of threatening her life, this note said:

"Hello, I saw your flag a few evenings ago when I was walking one of my dogs and wanted to thank you for displaying it. I'm curious to know where you got it. I'd like one too, probably to display in my office at UNM, where I teach. Many of my students are suffering distress and deep fear for their future. Frankly, I am too."

This member had the American flag hanging from the day before the election to the day after Veterans Day. She herself is a veteran. Then she replaced it with this a Coexist Flag. She has the same thing as a same bumper sticker on her truck but with rainbow colors.

The Southern Poverty Law Center says over 700 hate crimes have been reported since Election Day.

Also this week, a known white supremacist – what the media accommodatingly refers to as a white nationalist or a member of the alt-right- was marked for one of the highest positions of leadership in our country, white house chief strategist and senior counselor.

How are you doing?

I've heard from many of you that you've been feeling up and down. You're going along okay, staying busy, and then anxiety, sadness, grief, or anger hit you.

Even our sermon signboard changed. If you passed by it this week, you might have noticed that on Wednesday the sermon title changed from "Gratitude" to "Resistance." It also switched from Christine to Angela.

We traded Sundays, so now Christine will give her Gratitude sermon next week instead. But the two topics are not unrelated. I'll say more about that.

It's a volatile time.

The results of the election were shocking to many of us, but for others, for many indigenous people, people of color, LGBTQ people, immigrants, and disabled people—all of whom have been targets of our president elect's bigotry, as have women of all kinds, for many of those folks the results were not so shocking, especially if they live outside of big cities. For some, the outcome just confirmed what they had already been experiencing. This is especially true for people who bear the brunt of multiple prejudices at the intersections of identities: queer women of color, disabled immigrants. It's just finally all out in the open.

Social and political liberals have been called out for living in a bubble, for ignoring the rage building in rural America, where young unemployed men were as ripe for radicalization here as they are in Arab countries or anywhere else.

There have been many calls to understand conservative rural voters. And this is partly right, to borrow a phrase from Thich Naht Han. It's a mantra in his book *How to Love*. "You are partly right." It is partly right, that listening will be required in order to repair and protect the soul of this nation. But this is no time for a quick political reconciliation that is actually an accommodation. This is no time—and there is never a time— to accommodate bigotry.

Racial tension has been laid out in the open not only between people of color and people who openly support racism, but also among progressives. Some people of color have called out white progressives for not doing enough to put an end to racism. A black, interfaith colleague of mine forwarded a Facebook post expressing tremendous anger at white progressives, blaming them for the election, saying if they are so anti-racist they should have confronted their white racist relatives and taught them better.

When I read this, my first thought was, “My god! How often have I banged my head against the wall trying to do just that? I have at various times gotten into fights, engaged in thoughtful dialogue, and in one case been cut off from an entire branch of my extended family since I was sixteen years old due to confronting their racism and misogyny. Yet I cannot think of a single time I converted anyone!”

That was my first thought. Defense. Defense.

But my second thought was: no, she’s partly right. The truth in her message is that white people often do remain quiet when they observe racism, at the holiday dinner table or on social media or at work. Usually out of fear or a feeling of futility, hopelessness. And maybe if those whites never ever put up with it, it would be almost gone already.

For the same reason, some anti-racism activists are asking hard questions about the safety pin symbol. People—and not just white people-- are wearing safety pins as a symbol that they will stand with anyone who is being bullied, whether it is for race, gender, religion, or anything else. Remember: the bigotry and entitlement reflected in Donald Trump’s campaign and now his cabinet appointments go way beyond race.

But it is anti-racism activists who are asking: Is the safety pin a trend, or a movement? Will white people put them on and leave it at that? Just a symbol? Or will the pin remind them of the promise they are making, to stand up and speak up? To walk the walk?

One Huffington Post article that has been making the rounds this week framed this question in a deeply shaming, cynical, and—I’m afraid—paralyzing way. We don’t have time for that.

We need to show each other that we are here for each other. We’ve got to steer our anger, sadness, worry, and everything else in a productive direction.

Now don’t misunderstand me. I’m not calling for quick reconciliation among social progressives either. This is an important moment of tension and conflict. This is a conversation that needs to happen. It is necessary in order for us to move our society forward on the right path. This swirl of deep feelings, identities, betrayals, and commitments is a necessary and creative chaos.

It reminds me of creation narratives. Remember how in humankind’s ancient stories, the condition for new realities to be born is always chaos?

In the Babylonian creation myth, the Enuma Elish, Tiamat the mother of creation is raging, swirling sea full of monsters. The Greek poet, Hesiod, sang of chaos as one of the main conditions required for the creation of the cosmos. Chaos accompanied Mother Earth, the Underworld, and Love. From Chaos came the night, and from the night came Air... and Day. The bible begins with God hovering over a formless deep. Who knows what was in there? Even science presents to us the primordial swamp,

milieus of matter that swirled and mixed until the ensuing chemical reactions led to life.

Chaos. We know something about this.

But how do we not lose our bearings in it? How do we practice resistance when we are waiting for and helping a new reality to be born?

People of faith have deep wells of wisdom for times such as this.

Now I know that faith, and in this country especially protestant faith, has been co-opted, hijacked, and misappropriated to justify accruing more power for the powerful. The very kind of prosperity gospels that Jesus of Nazareth staged such a brilliant resistance against, that he spoke against time and again, have become almost the face of our country.

Contorted versions of the “good news,” in which those who are unlucky are deemed to have deserved it. But that is a perversion of the ancient tradition of love and justice from which this church emerged. It is as the Rev. Dr. William Barber says: Those who claim to live by the scriptures, but find no priority for political or economic justice in them, are morally corrupt. ¹

The bible has more than 2000 verses regarding poverty, but only about five regarding homosexuality and none about abortion. Every major world religion includes some version of the Golden Rule, teachings on mercy and compassion.

You who love justice and mercy, you who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person and who long in your wild, human hearts for it to be realized have not been rejected. Something higher has been rejected.

Do not accept what is being offered to you in its place.

Resist resignation.

Resist hopelessness.

Resist terror.

Resist accepting the lie that you are powerless.

Listen to the words of the great Gwendolyn Brooks, in her poem, Speech to the Young : Speech to the Progress-Toward. Gwendolyn Brooks, who wrote for her children and all good people looking forward during times of struggle. Listen:

Say to them,
say to the down-keepers,
the sun-slappers,

¹He says it often, and he said it again in a sermon he preached on Nov. 13, 2016.
<https://livestream.com/accounts/5188266/events/6620333/videos/141843863>

the self-soilers,
the harmony-hushers,
"even if you are not ready for day
it cannot always be night."
You will be right.
For that is the hard home-run.

Live not for battles won.
Live not for the-end-of-the-song.
Live in the along.

Live in the along. We are in for a long haul, which means we cannot prepare ourselves as though it were a quick campaign. Sadness, anger, and fear will only carry us so far. The strength that sustains this kind of resistance comes from the heart and spirit.

So make your home for now in this chaos. Allow yourself to be in harmony with uncertainty, so that when you are called to action, you will not already be exhausted. Breathe, feed your body and spirit, get centered, and give thanks for what is good and beautiful. Remember that we are made for play and joy as well as striving. Surround yourself with friends.

There's a story in the gospels.² It takes place when Jesus' close friend John has been decapitated by the king. John is Jesus' cousin. Their friendship, the gospels say, began even before they were born.

When Jesus was beginning his activism and ministry, John went before him, "preparing the way." And now he has been brutally killed by the king, who did so because John called him out for being unethical, and the king felt... harassed.

The first thing Jesus does is retreat to an island. Here I picture him like Natasha in her room, recording her thoughts which will be cast out into the great chaos of the world wide web. Jesus goes into seclusion and casts his thoughts as prayers to the great chaos of God, whom the scriptures by this point have gone out of their way to tell us is not a man-like being in the sky, but something much more unnamable and wild than that. By this point the God of the scriptures, whose name means "I am," has shown up as storm, wind, fire, silence, and more than once, as a stranger. An other. An outsider. That's what Jesus prays to.

When he returns to shore, there are hundreds waiting for *him*.

He receives them, telling his disciples who have been waiting, go on ahead to that island where I was, without me, and I'll catch up later.

But by the time he is ready to do so, it's storming. (Remember now, he prayed to a God who had been known to show up as a storm). The boat he was going to take has

² Matthew 14.

blown away from shore. And so, this is the story in which Jesus walks on water. Across the storm tossed sea. He sees his disciples paddling furiously, trying to reach him. They had given up on waiting.

When they see their teacher, they don't recognize him. This happens so often in the bible. People see their wisdom teacher, or even God, and instead of recognizing it they get scared and freak out.

"It's a ghost!" the disciples yell. Jesus says, "It's not a ghost. It's me." Except the phrase used for "it's me," could also be translated "I am," just like the name of God. "I am." And so what they are hearing is, God is here, in the storm.

Now from the boat, a disciple named Peter says, "Okay then, call me to walk on water toward you." And Jesus says, you're on. Peter steps out of the boat... he takes a few steps... he's doing it! And then he turns his gaze, remembers the enormity of the storm, and immediately begins to sink. Pulling him out of the water by the arm, Jesus says, "You are a man of half faith."

You know, usually when this story is told the focus is on Jesus walking on water, right? But I don't think this story is really about Jesus at all. It's about Peter, the regular guy. The everyday person, a disciple of Love and Wisdom who—like Jesus' all of disciples in the gospels—doesn't always get it. Who sometimes takes their eye off the face of love and truth that empowers and sustains them, and starts to sink.

You can stay clinging to that boat—to beliefs that are no longer useful—in the storm and go under. You can start walking, and become distracted and sink. Or you can keep focused on what is guiding you, and stay steady.

Our mission, this congregation's mission, is the same as it was before the election. Just bigger, stronger, louder, and more urgent.

We are called now to walk into, speak into, lean into, live into who we know we are. We've got to keep our eye on the prize, and our hearts and souls tended to during this time.

We don't know what's coming next. Exactly what we need to do. But there are some ways of practicing both resistance and being constructive, starting now.

#1: When you leave this place, almost the first thing that is going to happen is Thanksgiving. A complicated holiday. Spiritually, it's on point. Giving thanks is good for the soul, especially when times are tough. Absolutely do it.

But the holiday is also tied to a national myth that shapes our sense of where we are.

It is a myth that caught on during the civil war, when Abraham Lincoln told a partly right story of pilgrims and Indians eating together. He told the story as a way to encourage unity in the divided country. It became part of how white America remembers its origin story: that whites came to this land to create a democratic society in which people could be free. In reality, after the first Thanksgiving, whites

conducted a brutal campaign of genocide against native people, and violently enslaved millions of Africans for generations. Alice Walker says, “The problem with this country is amnesia.”

So I dare you to begin your Thanksgiving meal with a prayer or spoken meditation, in which you lift up what you are thankful for, but also lament that our country was founded through genocide, that suffers to this day from those original sins of greed and violence, and that the powerful continue to allow extreme poverty while they accumulate unmerited wealth.

Close it with your most ambitious prayer for peace, for reconciliation, and for wholeness for our country and the world.

When your uncle says, “I’ll bet you voted for Crooked Hillary,” then no matter who you voted for or didn’t vote for, I invite you to respond with a soft front and a strong back. Say, racism and sexism are as wrong now as they were 400 years ago. I can’t support it, and because I love you, I’d like to think you won’t support it either.

#2: If you feel safe enough to do so, wear your pin. It isn’t just a sign of racial solidarity, though it is that, too. It’s also for people like the Syrian refugee family who were embraced in this sanctuary on the day after the election. They were so scared. It is for the children who are being told to go back to Mexico, when they are *our* children, this city’s children. It’s for transgender people. It’s for everyone who might be bullied. Not everyone feels safe enough—some people, those who are already targets—may worry that the pin makes them even more of a target. If you can, put on your pin and fly your flag and use whatever other signs and symbols you have to show that you are not on board with bigotry.

#3: Call congress or send a letter. Let’s make sure they are inundated.

#4: Attend a resistance workshop. We’ll be scheduling some anti-racism workshops here soon. We’re hosting a training in community organizing, on the afternoon of Sunday Dec 11. Lots of organizations are holding workshops. Keep an eye out.

#5: Give. Give to the organizations that empower marginalized people, end oppression, or honor civil or reproductive rights. Black Lives Matter. Strong Families New Mexico. Planned Parenthood. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Equality New Mexico. El Centro. Give a little or a lot. Give what you can.

Give to your church! We are about \$60,000 away from reaching our pledge target for next year. Take a pledge card from one of the seat back pockets and make a dent in that gap! Help us be here and be strong for you and for whatever 2017 brings by letting us know how much support we can expect from you next year.

I’ve just increased my pledge by 10%. When we give, we magnify our impact. We aren’t just one little person anymore. We are spreading our power around.

#6: Consider attending a march, and invite other UUs to join you. If you let us know you're going, we'll help you publicize it so others can meet you there. I already know two mothers in this congregation who are attending the Million Women March in Washington DC on inauguration day. There will be another women's march here in New Mexico the day after. Men are welcome, too.

Finally, keep each other close. This is a great time to reach out to each other and deepen relationships. There is comfort and strength in community.

We are going to be called to show up. To march and speak. And sing! I attended a workshop with the Rev. Dr. William Barber a few months ago. He had a whole day with us, and his team spent fully half of it preaching to us about how important music is to movements and they led us in song. So, let's sing.

Susan is going to help us get ready this morning by teaching us a couple of parts for our closing hymn. A song I've found myself singing all week.

#153- Woke up this morning with my mind...