

What Now? A Post-Election Sermon

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First Unitarian Church

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Reading: <http://www.auroralevinsmorales.com/blog/vahavta>

“Another world is possible.” Another world *is* possible.

There is a law that says churches cannot explicitly endorse (or oppose) a particular political candidate or political party. On this day, when I know many of us personally feel a sense of relief and celebration—and probably if we are honest also a good measure of *schadenfreude*—I’m remembering how, early in the Trump administration, there was talk of the federal government doing away with that law. Some conservative churches did in fact endorse Donald Trump when he was a candidate, and he liked that, I think, and wanted to reward them with a green light for future campaigns. Meanwhile, I know a lot of liberal ministers who had choice words of their own to say about candidate Trump. Words that flowed freely in clergy groups, if not from the pulpit. But I said at that time that even if they did that, even if the government changed the rules, I would not change the way we do things here. I still feel that way, even after these four years.

Before I explain why and talk about what I do think the church should do, let me affirm that there is a lot to celebrate and be grateful for today. There was an outpouring of joy in our city’s streets yesterday. Up and down central, young people especially, out with signs and honking and cheering throughout the afternoon. Across our country, spontaneous dance parties broke out. The relief is palpable.

There is so much to celebrate today, especially after this year. This year! The year 2020 has been such a hard year, that last week a sidewalk randomly collapsed under a guy waiting for a bus in New York City. He fell through the hole into an underground vault teeming with so many rats that he couldn’t even open his mouth to call for help without a rat going in it. And people on social media were like, “That is so 2020.”ⁱ

There is a lot to celebrate, not the least of which is that our country will finally, at last, have its first female vice president and first vice president who is a person of color. As a religiously liberal congregation, with progressive social values, we can also celebrate the ways in which many—if not all— of those values will be explicitly supported by our country’s next administration. Churches can, should, and do weigh in on social issues. This church is part of a denomination that has taken stands in support of the environment, abortion, indigenous rights, and eliminating poverty. Our denomination has dedicated itself to climate action, dismantling racism, and has called for an end to mass incarceration and the war on drugs.

But while it’s true that a majority of UUs identify also as *political* liberals, and we tend to think of these concerns as aligning with progressive *political* platforms, they’re not the same. As politically conservative UUs have noted, two people can disagree about the role of government, while sharing some of the same social concerns. Unfortunately, that kind of nuance has gotten lost as our country’s politics have become more polarized.

The minister Carl Gregg reminds us of the classical meaning of liberalism and conservatism. He writes:

When we describe Unitarian Universalism as a “liberal religious movement,” that is a reference not to a political party, but to the much older philosophical tradition of Liberalism, from the Latin root *liber*, meaning *free*. Unitarian Universalism cherishes the *freedom* for individuals to choose for themselves, based on the dictates of their conscience. We seek to be *liberal* in the best sense of the word: open to new ideas, generous, openhanded, open-hearted, and open-minded. And that means there is room within our big tent for those who are *conservative* in the best sense of the word: caring about the conservation of nature, upholding the beauty of traditions and rituals which have accrued deep meaning through time—reminding us of the importance of individual responsibility, community, authority, sanctity, and loyalty.ⁱⁱ

I’ve observed that within our congregation, we actually have quite a bit of that kind of diversity. We have liberal and conservative members in the classic sense. We are stronger and wiser for it. And we all benefit when we keep our hearts and minds open to nuanced conversations. Political rhetoric is too blunt a tool for those.

Another reason for a church to maintain its separation is that to identify with a politician or party can obscure our understanding of what winning means. While an election can open or close certain doors, winning in a revolutionary love kind of way is something much larger and longer term. It’s something only regular people, working together, can make happen.

In our reading, Aurora Levins Morales encourages us to “imagine winning.” Levins Morales is a Puerto Rican Jewish writer. The title of her poem, V’ahavta is the name of a traditional Jewish prayer. The words of that prayer are from the Hebrew scripture called Deuteronomy. The traditional V’ahavta:

You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, and with all your might.
Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day.
Impress them upon your children.
Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away,
when you lie down and when you get up.
Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead;
inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In UU terms: keep in front of you that which is worthy of your love, love of the highest order, and remember it. In Levins Morales’ poem, she echoes the prayer in humanist terms:

Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,
embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your shoulders,

teach them.... recite them...:
Another world is possible.

Another world is possible. A world where everyone eats, and lives; where the “sheer and astounding shamelessness” of the greed—the economic inequality— that seems normal today, is unimaginable. Along with violence. A world where people are free to thrive. In the Hebrew scriptures this world is the definition of peace, shalom. In the Christian scriptures it is called the kingdom of god.

Levins Morales invites us to visualize winning this other world, and she warns that if we who believe in love and liberation “lay down [our] souls” and become like that which we resist, then we will have lost everything. In other words, we can’t achieve liberation and transformation through further dehumanization. We have to be on the look out for that tendency within ourselves.

And, in order to achieve liberation and transformation we have to keep our eyes on that true goal. We won’t get there by going back to “normal.” It is one of the gifts of 2020—which, by the way, is officially the year of the rat according to Chinese astrology—it is one of the gifts of this year that it has revealed some of our country’s deadliest patterns and structures. Poverty. Racism. Lack of access to healthcare and sick leave. The neglect of so many of our elders.

The poet Theodore Roethke wrote, “In a dark time, the eye begins to see.” In a dark time, the eye begins to see. This year we *all* saw what has been there the whole time, what has been there through Republican and Democrat administrations for generations and generations. We saw those things result in suffering and death. We saw what happened to the Navajo Nation, and to George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and Elijah McClean and others. We saw 10,000 cars waiting in line at a food bank in San Antonio. We saw that in this same year, in 2020, American billionaires have seen their wealth increase by \$637 billion. That’s over a half a trillion dollars.ⁱⁱⁱ That’s what happens when politics favors the rich. The rich get richer, while other people struggle to eat. Like a Jesus story, that food bank served all of those people, by the way.

We all saw this stuff and we can’t unsee it. To go back to normal would be to accept a society that is deadly to our neighbors and ourselves. “This is not a moment, it’s a movement.” Cathy McGill preached that to us back when she visited in July. Remember that? This is not a moment, it’s a movement. To truly win, to WIN, is to live into the better world that’s possible. It’s possible, if we keep in front of us that which is worthy of our love. If we stay true to it and stay together. This hard year has moved us forward. The national conversation has changed. Have you noticed that? I was struck by it in the victory speeches last night, which included race and anti-racism in a direct way we haven’t seen before. Now, it’s up to us to take all our faith, hope, and joy and keep moving forward together even when things are hard.

I want to close this morning with a story from *Walking with the Wind*. That’s a memoir by the civil rights icon John Lewis, who died this year. In it he tells this story from his childhood.^{iv} It happened in front of his aunt Seneva’s house, where he was playing and goofing around in her dirt yard with about fifteen other kids when a sudden storm formed—a very dramatic one. The sky turned dark. Lightening flashed. The wind began to howl. It was one of those really strong

storms that strikes fear in people. His aunt Seneva was the only grown up there at that moment, and so she brought all the kids inside, into her house. It was a modest wood frame house. It had a tin roof that you could sometimes see the stars through at night.

As the storm grew stronger right over the house, the kids and Aunt Seneva grew very quiet and very afraid. And then the house started to sway. And the wood plank flooring started to bend. The storm was trying to pull that little house right up into itself, with the people inside.

Aunt Seneva told everybody to clasp hands. Line up and hold onto each other tight. And then she had them walk toward the corner of the house that was lifting. "From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked," Lewis said, "the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift." And with the weight of their little bodies they held that house down. Lewis wrote:

More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.

He remembers how in the 1960's there was so much tension and division it seemed like the country might burst at the seams. (The greater the transformation, the stronger the forces of resistance. That's what we are living through again now.)

But people of conscience stayed in the house, linked together, the weight of each other's company outlasting storms. And, Lewis said, they always knew there'd be more storms and they'd have to do it all over again.

You understand.

Another world is possible. Another world is possible. This week, a door was opened. And a glass ceiling was broken.

To quote another poet, "Give me your hand."

ⁱ Zaveri, Mihir. *New York Nightmare: Man Falls Through Sidewalk Into Rat-Filled Chasm*. 29 Oct. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/nyregion/rats-sinkhole-sidewalk-bronx.html.

ⁱⁱ Gregg, Carl. *Carl Gregg: Pluralism, Progressivism, Pragmatism.*, Patheos., 31 Aug. 2017, www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2017/08/orwell-atwood-butler-reading-resistance-resilience-age-trump/.

ⁱⁱⁱ Woods, Hiatt. "How Billionaires Saw Their Net Worth Increase by Half a Trillion Dollars during the Pandemic." *Business Insider*, Business Insider, 30 Oct. 2020, www.businessinsider.com/billionaires-net-worth-increases-coronavirus-pandemic-2020-7.

^{iv} You can see Lewis tell the story himself here: <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/congressman-john-lewis-bringing-country-together-and-his-aunts-shotgun-house>

Or read it as an excerpt here: <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-12/walking-wind>