

## **We Are Jazz ©**

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel  
At The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist, North Andover, MA  
February 5P, 2017

*“We’ve got to do some jazz- bring the Gospel, a little Gandhi, the social gospel movement,  
and the radical churches that fought against slavery. Bring it all together.”*  
*“We are all one- and if we don’t know it, we will learn it the hard way.” – Bayard Rustin (1912-1987)*

It’s been an eventful past 7 to 10 days for people of faith in this nation-  
particularly for those of minority faiths—such as Native Americans, Muslims and Jews.

76 water protectors at Standing Rock were arrested  
and executive action taken towards approval of a final easement  
for the Dakota Access Pipeline to go through tribal lands;  
Holocaust Remembrance Day was noted by the White House  
without a single mention of the Jews;  
our country was closed to all refugees;  
90,000 people were affected by a 90 day travel ban  
on visitors and immigrants of certain Muslim-majority countries;  
the Islamic center in Victoria, Texas was burned down;  
and a far-right extremist killed 6 Muslims and injured and terrorized many more  
while they prayed at their mosque in Quebec City.

In the past ten days, families have waited for hours at airports,  
thousands of people once again took to the streets,  
and they took out their phones to make calls and donations,  
while lawyers took cases to the courts.

Research has found that it takes 3.5% of a nation’s population  
engaging in active, non-violent civil disobedience to alter governments,  
a rule that I preached about last January in a sermon called *Resistance to Empire*.  
I wonder if, given the last 10 days, we may see this theory tested  
in the months to come.

Over the past two and a half weeks- 17 days- we have found ourselves living in a changed situation, a changed nation- a nation that has undergone a peaceful transfer of power, but a transfer of power that has been massive, dizzying and disruptive all the same. This power shift has brought to the fore vastly different interpretations of foundational documents and values such as the Constitution and religious freedom.

If you've had the flu or took a two week vacation, you've missed an awful lot. You've missed certain signals sent to those within certain minority faiths... and the depth of concern, fear and pain that this has caused. It's no wonder. Our Native American, Muslim and Jewish sisters and brothers have historical knowledge of the dangers of being vulnerable due to their religious identities- how non-dominant faiths can be ignored or discounted, misrepresented or maligned, isolated or seized upon, and used to create an understanding of an entire people as "the other", leading, at times, to the separation of families, the isolation of communities, and attacks on personhood and community life, even unto death.

**We humans seem so vulnerable to "othering" one another.**

As individuals, as communities, as religious people- it seems a human tendency to set ourselves apart- and above- our neighbors. We are at risk of this even in this modern, diverse and pluralistic society, as we have seen throughout our history.

In his poem *We Are Jazz*, UU writer Adam Lawrence Dyer writes about the challenges of our pluralist nation. He says,  
*"The sound that swings, blues and rocks is us, is U-S.  
Its dissonance is our politics, its harmony, our dream...  
The United States of Otherness, we are jazz.*

*African rhythm played on European instruments  
toying with Asian harmonies  
in a language made of Middle Eastern letters  
while standing on the First People's land where none of us belongs."*  
He goes on to say, we're "*just lucky to be in the same key, in the same room,*"  
making "*make the most beautiful music, with depth, range, beauty, heart.*"

This image of community as jazz is fitting not only for our country,  
but for us as a faith.

Our Unitarian Universalist congregations- full of theological and other kinds of diversity- contain both dissonance and harmony.

They also remind us that we're lucky to be in the same key, in the same room,  
making music that has depth, range, beauty and heart.

Our Universalist heritage reminds us that what we're aiming for,  
even if we don't feel it yet- even if we struggle with it-  
is an understanding of ***universal solidarity***—  
an inner sense of one's self as related to the whole of humanity, to all of life.

So let's pause for a moment, and just take a breath-  
since I've brought up some things that some of you  
might not have wanted to think about today.

Let's take a breath...

and remember for just a moment where we came from...

the parents and grandparents or others who raised us-  
maybe you have pictures of them, maybe not.

Let's remember that long line of ancestors reaching back through time...  
all the way back to the first single celled organisms,  
back to the dust of exploding stars.

Let's remember what a miracle it is,  
and what a triumph of Life, of the divine, it is

for each one of us *to simply be alive*, in this time, this place,  
*to be able to draw a breath* like all people  
and many other living beings around us...  
each one of us a new thing brought into being,  
to grow and struggle and love and add our notes to the song  
as only we can do.

We, too, are members of a minority faith- Unitarian Universalism.  
Our crazy, wonderful faith openly embraces agnostics and atheists,  
Humanists and Theists, Christian and Pagan and Jewish and Buddhist UUs,  
believers in process theology or natural theology  
and those who have no idea *what* they believe  
other than that love is good and beauty can make us cry  
and gratitude can change our lives and our dependence upon  
those who came before us and upon the earth is very, very real.

Our history reminds us that we've always been in the minority.  
Some of our religious ancestors-  
the Universalists who first came to these shores,  
were refugees and immigrants who were maligned and persecuted in Europe,  
and so left, seeking religious freedom.

Now, we blend in pretty well with the dominant faith of our nation.  
Some driving by our Meeting House may assume that  
we fit perfectly within the boundaries of traditional Christianity.  
And we at North Parish can trace our congregational roots  
back to the founding families of this town,  
and enjoy the pride of place that goes with that.

Nor do we face the challenge of being the faith  
of an ethnic minority in this country.  
But the truth is we are a minority faith, a tiny group nationwide-

mighty, yes, expansive- certainly, creative- definitely,  
but in terms of numbers, we are small.

**Now, the *good* thing about being a tiny religious minority  
is that we can entertain no illusions that we can make it alone.**

As a minority faith there is no doubt that-  
as a guy named Thomas Long once described the church--  
we are “overpowered, outnumbered and often overlooked”.

When you’re as small as we are, it is very clear  
that we cannot save the world alone,  
nor can we exist without others willing to defend our religious freedom.  
Our existence and our power depend, in part, on our relationships with others.

It’s sort of like living without quite enough money,  
or without any family nearby, or in a new culture or country.  
You learn that you have to depend on others; there’s simply no other choice.  
And this dependence is not only OK, but in turn makes you also valuable to others,  
in relationships of give and take, and of deeper acquaintance, of kindness.

Has that happened to anyone here?  
Living without quite enough money, or in a new place or culture,  
or without family nearby?  
Some sort of situation where you needed some help,  
and because of that, you became more intimately connected  
with some pretty cool people?  
Maybe that’s how it’s always been for you.

As the UU minister the Rev. Kenn Hurto has written,  
*“Who we are is a direct function of who we are with.*  
We are relational creatures.  
*Everything* is shaped by our connections- or disconnection- with those around us.”  
Ironically, those most at risk of disconnection  
can be those with the most money and power,

shielded as they can be from others  
and from felt knowledge of our interdependence.

Being in need can lead to connection, and connection changes us.

So again, let's pause for just a moment- and think about who we spend our time with.

Are you feeling connected or disconnected from those around you?

Do you feel connected or disconnected from your ancestors?

Most of us are descendants of immigrants,  
and some of us descendants of refugees.

Have you thought about any of them this week?

Do you know any recent immigrants?

Has any of this impacted how you've felt this past week?

You might share your answers with someone today.

Do you spend any time with folks who are different from you  
in significant ways, or not so much?

What about religious differences?

Do you have any relatives or friends who are Jewish, Muslim or Native American?

Are any of you connected to people from places like Iran, Syria, Iraq,  
Somalia, Sudan, Libya or Yemen?

If so, has that impacted how you've felt this past week?

You might want to ask each other at coffee hour.

Are there any new connections emerging in your life right now?

Is it possible that Life or God or human endeavor is bringing about a new thing,  
and you are part of it?

Given this past week in my life, it seems to me something new is happening.  
I can be fairly sheltered and isolated in and focused on the UU world-  
talk about living in a bubble! But not this week.

On Tuesday, I was invited by an Episcopal priest to go to  
an interfaith Declaration of Conscience at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Boston.

I've probably never been in a crowd of so many Episcopalians,  
with of course other clergy mixed in besides,  
in an Episcopal Cathedral with a foot washing station for Muslims off the Parish Hall.

And then there was the guard at the State House who struck up a conversation,  
a Unitarian Universalist from the Brookline church,  
who used to go to a gospel singing church, and still misses that music.  
I told him we're working on the music, and encouraged him to go back to church.

Later in the week, I had a number of conversations about Sanctuary—  
a movement to offer shelter or support to immigrants at risk of imminent deportation.  
I did so because the North Parish leadership has decided to enter into a season  
of congregational discernment about whether or not  
to become a supporting congregation for Sanctuary locally.  
Does it seem like something new is happening?

I had an email conversation about Sanctuary with Dr. Joe Kelley  
of the Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations,  
just before he went off to meet with Cardinal O'Malley.  
I never expected to be just two degrees of separation from the Cardinal, let me tell you!  
Cardinal O'Malley had just met with the Governor and Muslim leaders the day before  
and written a long piece about a moral response to refugees and immigrants for *The Globe*.  
I suggested that Joe ask the Cardinal  
how he felt about encouraging Catholic institutions-  
churches and retreat centers and orders and schools- to offer Sanctuary.  
Rev. Lee making suggestions to Cardinal O'Malley- let me tell you, that's new!

I also met with an organizer for Merrimack Valley Project  
who provided all sorts of information on the Sanctuary Movement  
that I shared with our leadership and area clergy.  
I spoke for the first time with the Principal of the Islamic School for Peace,  
a Muslim school connected to Selimiye mosque in Methuen,  
and invited her folks to the interfaith meal packing event on Wednesday.

I met with a group sponsoring Courageous Conversations about race to plan their first event in Andover, a film we've already shown here.

It seems to me something new is happening.

Does it seem that way to you?

Last week, over 40 of us gathered in the chapel after service for a conversation about making connections, about the need for something new—for people and organizations to join together in **a moral movement**.

Our facilitator, Gail Forsyth-Vail, noted that it was the civil rights leader

Bayard Rustin, an African-American gay Quaker, who said,

*"We've got to do some jazz, bring the Gospel, a little Gandhi, the social gospel movement, and the radical churches that fought against slavery. Bring it all together."*

Well, that sounds like something right up our UU alley, doesn't it?

Jazz, the Gospel, a little Gandhi, the social gospel movement, the radical churches—that's us, right?!

Mixing it all up together is something we *love* to do!

Bayard also said, *"Every community needs angelic troublemakers."*

It seems to me we are good at that too.

Christians across the nation are hearing a certain reading today, the one where Jesus says to his followers,

*"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste,*

*how can its saltiness be restored?*

*It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."*

*"You are the light of the world.*

*A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.*

*No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket,*

*but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.*

*In the same way, let your light shine before others,*

*so they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven."*



Let us remember who we are.

We are Unitarian Universalists.

We are lovers of the earth and life and God, however it is we name the holy.

We are the descendants of immigrants and refugees.

We are salt of the earth, the light of the world.

We are angelic troublemakers.

We are Jazz.

So let's shine our light, and make some music- in the name of Love.

Amen.

### **Readings:**

***Opening Words, #488 in Singing the Living Tradition, by Langston Hughes***

Hold fast to dreams  
for if dreams die  
life is a broken-winged bird  
that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams  
for when dreams go  
life is a barren field  
frozen with snow.

**Words for Meditation and Reflection, Matthew 25:**

“I was hungry and you gave me food,  
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,  
I was a stranger and you welcomed me,  
I was naked and you gave me clothing.  
I was sick and you took care of me,  
I was in prison and you visited me....  
Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these  
who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

**Contemporary Reading:** *An excerpt from We Are Jazz, a poem by Adam Lawrence Dyer.*  
*For the whole reading, see Dyer's UUA Meditation Manual, [Love Beyond God](#).*

**We Are Jazz**

Just as soon as it began, we forgot how it started.  
Like a Coltrane tune  
we are so absorbed in trying to follow, to figure out,  
we forget that we are part of it...

‘Jazz is a heartbeat... its heartbeat is yours’  
said Langston, played Mingus, sang Ella.  
The sound that swings, blues and rocks, is us, is U-S.  
Its dissonance is our politics, its harmony, our dream.

The United States of Otherness- we are jazz.  
African rhythm  
played on European instruments  
toying with Asian harmonies  
in a language made of Middle Eastern letters  
while standing on the First People's land  
where none of us belongs.

Yet that is the brutal beauty of any combo  
because the instruments are not alike,  
the players are individuals,  
none of them belong together.  
A Dixieland chorus of separate lines  
just lucky to be in the same key, in the same room.  
Yet they make the most beautiful music  
With depth, range, beauty, heart...

Jazz is a heartbeat, our heartbeat is jazz.