

A Love Letter from the Church

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel at The North Parish of North
Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
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*“Come... and face your distant destiny...
Come, rest here by my side...
Here, root yourselves beside me...
Lift up your eyes upon this day... Lift up your hearts...
Do not be wedded forever to fear.” – Maya Angelou*

Over the last two days, there has been a lot of energy released in our nation. There has been a lot of energy and prayer and emotion in the air in our country, as people have come together in the streets— first for an inauguration and then for marches in Washington D.C., in Boston, in cities all over our country. It will be interesting to see if and how that energy is sustained.

It is clear that, as a nation, we are still experiencing an *incredulous* political divide— utterly not understanding one another. In some families, those who celebrate and those who demonstrate sit at the same table. In just about every town and city, we live and work side by side.

There is uncertainty and anxiety about what is going to unfold over the next 100 days, and the next four years. Some are desperately worried. Many are on edge—individuals, families, communities— one might even say the nation and the world.

When a person or a nation is on edge, the ground feels shaky and keeping balance is tricky. When you're on edge, it's harder to think straight and use your energy well. When we're anxious, we humans revert to the reptilian part of our brains,

the part that has only two modes of operation: either fight or flight.

The fight and flight reactions of the reptilian brain are ancient, life-saving responses in crisis. But they are not particularly creative, strategic, or designed for the long haul. They are not concerned with non-violence. They ignore the risks of avoidance. They are not focused on anyone but one's own self.

But we are.

We church folks, we religious people, remind each other, week after week, to expand our circle of concern beyond the self. We are dedicated to non-violence. We are wary of avoidance, because we know what can happen when we avoid hard truths- you can see it throughout our institutional history, when we reinforced instead of challenged an unjust status quo.

Fortunately, we have also taken stands for justice. And talk about the long haul... we've been around since 1645-131 years before our nation was even founded! To survive as an institution for so long, our people have had to be creative and strategic, decade after decade, century after century, year after year.

So it occurred to me that perhaps we, the church, might share with our nation and its people what we know. So I sat down to write a love letter, and here it is so far... and perhaps you can help me make it better.

Dear Good People of our nation,

We've seen so much of each other in these last two days- in Washington D.C. and in Boston, all over the country. You really are beautiful! In all your particularities, in all your diversity, in all your singularities— in what you look like and sound like—in all that makes you, *you*.

We love your kindness, thoughtfulness, curiosity, creativity,
questions, observations and stories you have to tell.

It is clear that your love for each other is fierce, even as you fight,
even as competition in the fight for supremacy—
of winning ideas, legislation and our nation's direction--
threatens to rip us all apart.

You are so different in many ways,
and yet steeped in the shared experience of living here,
in this country, on this common land, and sharing our nation's historical DNA.

We are writing you from North Parish, in the Merrimack Valley,
near the Merrimack River and Weir Hill.
We have been here since 1645, 131 years before the birth of this nation.
We've been trying to get it right- this business of being human,
of being a religious people- for 371 years.

We have a long way to go, but we've learned a few things along the way.

In our DNA we have known witch hunts and wars,
the impact of racism and sexism on people and institutions.
We know about guilt and resistance, privilege and progress,
changing rules and changing laws, re-imagining ourselves and a *whole* lot of change.
We are often painfully aware of how imperfect we are,
and how much we've been given by those who came before us.
We are aware of the mixed legacy of our ancestors-
those who suffered, those who benefitted, those who struggled, those who survived.

Today, we want to say this first: **we see you.**

We see that some of you are excited, others hopeful but wary,
others distracted, others resolute, and still others- scared or angry, sorrowful or in pain.

This love letter is for all of you, but you will forgive us
if it is this *last* category of people that we hold especially in our hearts—
the scared, angry and the sorrowful, the ones in pain.

It is our tradition to do so-
to lift up in our hearts, prayers or loving kindness meditations

the ones who are struggling the most in body, mind or spirit--
those on the margins of society, the hungry, the naked, those in prison.
Our prophets remind us that this is our calling.

And so, if you live at the margins of society,
if you are afraid for your marriage or your family,
if you've been out of work and worry about survival,
if you are afraid your children will lose health care or mental health care coverage,
if your fears about the nightmarish impacts of climate change keep you awake at night,
we see you and hear you.

If you are anxious or afraid, if you are a teacher or health care provider,
a worker or a CEO, a scientist or an artist, if you work for the government,
we are ready to listen.

If your family includes immigrants, or young women, or GBLTQ persons,
or evangelicals, or radicals, or disabled people,
we want to hear your story, from whence your passion comes.

If you are wondering if your sons and daughters
in the police force, the military, the national guard will be safe-
or if they may be asked someday to enforce laws
that go against their conscience, we hold you in our hearts.

And we hold you in our hearts if you are wondering if your sons and daughters
who have a darker shade of skin than some or who wear a hijab will be safe-
or if they may be asked someday to submit to laws
that go against their conscience, or their rights, or their freedoms.

We hold you in our hearts.

We do not wish to abandon you.

And we want to offer what little wisdom we can.

**To begin with, we in the church know this:
how to hold space for pain and lament *and* truth-telling.**

We know how to honor grief, lest it go underground and poison us.

We know how to listen for voices that are silenced or can't speak.

We know about the strange, challenging and patient practice of discernment,

of listening to all the voices in the room.

**We also know there is enough love for everyone,
for every man, woman and child. It doesn't run out.**

It's not a limited pie with only 8 slices.

Ours is a land of abundance. Our hearts are hearts of abundance.

Our understanding of the holy, of Creativity, of Goddess or God, is one of abundance.

So we invite you, right now, to take a deep breath. You are not alone.

Taking a deep breath is a good practice.

It can save your sanity, your health, your life.

And it can offer these sweet reminders:

There is love and glory on earth *for you*.

AND... it's not *all* about *you*.

Here's what we know:

The Jews knew what they were doing when they set aside a Sabbath.

We continue in our truncated version of that-
gathering for at least one hour, one day a week.

And we root ourselves in gratitude and praise,
shifting our focus from our own little worlds to something larger.

Together, we recall gratitude for the earth, for people around us,
for all life and all unfoldings of love-

for all that is behind it, however that may be named-
for God or Creative Mystery or the Big Bang.

**We know that if you're in something for the long haul,
gratitude and praise are important.** Pausing is important.

When we pause, we see that we belong to a vast reality
that sustains us and upholds us and makes our very breath possible.

And so we church folk do these old fashioned things—

singing, giving thanks, meditating or praying,

and now and then shouting "Halleluiah!" - but probably not often enough!

(We need to learn some things from our Baptist friends

who say all the time, “The Lord is good!”)

We still have things to learn from people of other faiths who, like us, gather each week in community.

Speaking of community, we know a few things about that, as well. Community- religious or otherwise- can only survive and thrive over the long haul when people step up, and step in, and we get creative and strategic together.

There is a lot of unglamorous work behind the scenes to keep things running- to keep the doors open and the coffee brewing, to keep people gathering over the long run.

There’s a *lot* of unglamorous work.

We know that voluntary organizations- like churches- aren’t as popular as they once were... and we know that they can change the shape of history.

But they need to be sustained.

Some churches talk about this as the difference between “discipleship” and “membership”— one is focused on receiving benefits and having a vote, the other is a call to a certain way of living, a call to personal ministry. We don’t talk about disciples too much in our congregation, but we do invite each other to engage, and to see that engagement as a personal ministry.

We know that we are called to generosity— to offering a percentage of our time- and our money. We know that- while we may come to church for ourselves in the beginning, that *it’s not just about us, in the end.*

We pay it forward. We open a pathway for others.

That is what we do here.

In fact, in our church, we don’t agree to a creed, we agree to a covenant- to walking together.

Sometimes we are literally walking together—as some of us did yesterday!
And sometimes we find ourselves walking together
with people with whom we disagree.

In our church, there's an old saying,

“In a truly diverse UU church, there should always be something going on
of which you don't approve.”

And there's an even older saying: “We need not think alike to love alike.”

This applies even to people beyond our doors.

Religious tolerance and pluralism are a deep part of our tradition.

As I shared with the congregation of a local synagogue on Friday night,
our foundational stories include people
whose Unitarian or Universalist theology
was linked directly to religious freedom, tolerance and pluralism.

People like King John Sigismund, the only Unitarian king in history,
who over 450 years ago issued an Edict of Religious Toleration,
declaring “*no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone... for faith is a gift of God.*”
Or people like George DeBenneville, converted to Universalism
after an encounter on a boat with people who worshipped differently from him.
250 years ago, he wrote, “*...love must be based upon mutual respect
for differences in color, language and worship,
even as we appreciate and accept with gratitude those differences.*”

Dear good people of our country,
it is hard to accept and understand our differences right now.

**We offer you the guideposts of lament and storytelling, gratitude and praise,
engagement and generosity, and we would offer this:
when we are anxious, when there is violence, or pain,
there are a variety of ways to respond.**

One way is to look away, to say I don't want to see it! (*hands crossed in front of face*)
A second way is to give up, to say “What can I do?” (*hands up in a “who knows?” position*)
A third way is to raise the fists, to say “I'm ready to fight!” (*hands balled up in fists*)

Then there is a fourth way, a non-violent way,
a way that *refuses* to alienate or humiliate.

It is this: One hand that says “No. You have gone too far. I resist you.

This is the line I will not cross.” (*one hand held up like a ‘stop sign’*)

But the other hand is held out, in invitation, saying “Join me?”

(*other hand, palm up, held out in front of chest*)

Our Principles offer one source of guidance for our congregations
to discern the lines we will not cross, to discern when we are called to resist.

Among other things, those principles speak of promoting

the inherent worth and dignity of every person,

affirming the interdependent web of life.

You can find them online, or in the front of our hymnals.

As for inviting others to join us, as for finding new companions on this road,
we might be guided by our curiosity and our love.

Here’s a story about that:

Down the road a piece, closer in to Boston,

there is a gas pipeline being routed through West Roxbury.

Some of the church people there became very active in resisting it-
standing in the way, keeping vigil.

They did this so often, they often saw the same policemen,
and got to know each other a bit.

When the day came for the first arrests to be made,

one of those policemen- as he was making his first arrests- began to cry.

We, people of faith, who follow a tradition,
are called by that tradition to offer space for lament and grief,
for gratitude and praise, for engagement and generosity,
for religious pluralism and an invitation to truly see one another.
And we are not alone.

On Friday night, some of us attended a service in a synagogue,
and learned to say the Jewish Friday night greeting, “**Shabbat Shalom.**”

(Can we all try that? "Shabbat shalom!")

Tonight, some of us will be at an interfaith potluck in our Meeting House,
and we will say "**Asalaam Alaykum**" - peace be upon you.

(Can we all try that? "Asalaam Alaykum"!)

And then there is "**Namaste**" - the divine in me greets the divine in you,
for our Hindu and Buddhist friends. *(Can we say that?)*

It is good to begin by greeting one another.

This morning in our church, we heard a poem
by one of our great fellow Americans- Maya Angelou.

It ended with these words:

"Here, on the pulse of this new day

You may have the grace to look up and out

And into your sister's eyes, and into your brother's face, your country

And say simply-- Very simply - With hope -- Good morning."

Good morning, dear country, dear people.

You are lovely, and we love you.

Amen.

Reading: *On the Pulse of Morning*, by Maya Angelou

VOICE ONE:

A Rock, A River, A Tree

hosts to species long since departed,

marked the mastodon, the dinosaur,

who left dried tokens of their sojourn here on our planet floor.

Any broad alarm of their hastening doom

is lost in the gloom of dust and ages.

But today, the Rock cries out to us, clearly, forcefully:

Come, you may stand upon my back and face your distant destiny,
but seek no haven in my shadow.

I will give you no hiding place down here.

You, created only a little lower than the angels,
have crouched too long in the bruising darkness,
have lain too long, face down, in ignorance--
your mouths spilling words armed for slaughter.
The Rock cries out to us today,
you may stand upon me, but do not hide your face.

VOICE TWO:

Across the wall of the world, a River sings a beautiful song.
It says, Come, rest here by my side.
Each of you, a bordered country,
delicate and strangely made proud, yet thrusting perpetually under siege.
Your armed struggles for profit have left collars of waste upon my shore,
currents of debris upon my breast.

Yet today I call you to my riverside, if you will study war no more.
Come, clad in peace, and I will sing the songs the Creator gave to me
when I and the Tree and the Rock were one.
Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your brow
and when you yet knew
you still knew nothing.
The River sang and sings on.

VOICE THREE:

There is a true yearning to respond to
the singing River and the wise Rock.
So say the Asian, the Hispanic, the Jew,
the African, the Native American, the Sioux,
the Catholic, the Muslim, the French, the Greek
the Irish, the Rabbi, the Priest, the Sheik,
the Gay, the Straight, the Preacher,
the privileged, the homeless, the Teacher.

They hear.

They all hear the speaking of the Tree.

They hear the first and last of every Tree
speak to humankind today.

Come to me, here beside the River.

Plant yourself beside the River.

Each of you, descendant of some passed on traveler, has been paid for.

VOICE FOUR:

You, who gave me my first name;
You-- Pawnee, Apache, Seneca;
You-- Cherokee Nation, who rested with me, then forced on bloody feet,
left me to the employment of other seekers –
desperate for gain, starving for gold.

You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede,
the German, the Eskimo, the Scot.
You the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru,
bought, sold, stolen, arriving on the nightmare, praying for a dream.

Here, root yourselves beside me.
I am that Tree planted by the River,
which will not be moved.

VOICE FIVE:

I, the Rock,
I the River,
I the Tree--

I am yours -- your passages have been paid.

Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
for this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain
cannot be unlived,
but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.

Lift up your eyes upon this day breaking for you.
Give birth again to the dream.
Women, children, men,
take it into the palms of your hands,
mold it into the shape of your most private need.
Sculpt it into the image of your most public self.

Lift up your hearts--
each new hour holds new chances for a new beginning.

VOICE SIX:

Do not be wedded forever to fear,
yoked eternally to brutishness.
The horizon leans forward,
offering you space to place new steps of change.

Here, on the pulse of this fine day
you may have the courage
to look up and out and upon me,
the Rock, the River, the Tree- your country.
No less to Midas than the mendicant.
No less to you now than the mastodon then.

Here, on the pulse of this new day
you may have the grace to look up and out-
and into your sister's eyes,
and into your brother's face—your country,
and say simply,
 very simply,
 with hope –
 Good morning.

Opening words, from the Ojibway Native Americans of North America (*#518, hymnal*)

“Grandfather, look at our brokenness.
We know that in all creation, only the human family has strayed from the Sacred Way.
We know that we are the ones who are divided,
And we are the ones who must come back together to walk in the Sacred Way.
Grandfather, Sacred One,
Teach us love, compassion and honor
That we may heal the earth and heal each other.”

Closing words, by Walt Whitman:

“Be not dishearten’d,
affection shall solve the problems of freedom yet
Those who love each other shall become invincible.”

“I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America,
And along the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies,
I will make inseparable cities with their arms about each other’s necks-
by the love of comrades, by the... love of comrades.”