

Toward the Light
Sunday, June 7, 2020

What a week it has been. A week of mourning and anguish and despair, but also a week of hope and connection. We gathered Tuesday evening with a couple hundred people in person and another couple hundred on Facebook Live to host Scituate's Vigil for George Floyd. We breathed in silence for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, many on bent knee, as we remembered those whose breath was taken from them by the structures of racism in our country: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade and so many more, too many to name. We remembered too the more than 100,000 people in the US whose breath was taken from them by COVID-19 and the ways those same structures of racism have meant that a disproportionate number of those who died were people of color. We watched the President and Attorney General clear peaceful protestors from in front of a church, tear-gassing clergy and lay people who were caring for the injured and feeding the hungry, so that the President could pose with a Bible, a book which tells in many voices of a God whose great commandment is to love. We watched as some police officers attacked protestors and those witnessing and reporting on what was happening, and as other officers lifted the fallen and knelt in solidarity with protestors. We were reminded again that life is not simple.

Here in Scituate, many stood at the Rotary and on the Common witnessing to that truth and need for change. Some took to Scituate Monthly to enlarge our community's understanding of the ways racism permeates even our small, overwhelmingly white town. Many were moved by the account on Scituate Monthly from a recent Scituate High School graduate of being harassed and disparaged publicly for her Muslim faith and the ways the town and the community whited out her experience. And many of us participated in the STRIDE meeting which was founded as the Scituate Unity Council in part in response to her experience. Life is not simple.

To give myself heart, I went back to Elizabeth Alexander's beautiful poem *Praise Song for the Day* which she wrote for Barack Obama's first Inauguration. Here's a little of it:

... Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by *first do no harm or take no more
than you need*. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

“What if the mightiest word is love?” Now it doesn’t take much effort on our part to say “Yes,” to the poet’s question. As Unitarian Universalists we believe in the power of love. We believe that the world and all that inhabit it are rooted in love, were created in love, and are supposed to live in love. But our “yes” isn’t as easy as it seems. And it’s not just that we ourselves don’t always live in the fullness of that love – that would be too much to expect – but that our ancestors both in this place and in the larger UU context have played a part in narrowing the meaning of “love.” So that part of what we are seeing in our country is the fruit of our teaching and doing.

It's all about the individual versus the collective. Is religion about my understanding truth? Or is it about living out the truth of our understanding in a way which promotes the welfare of all? Too often our tradition has been focused on our individual understandings rather than living it out. Think back to our ancestors in this place. John Lothrop and the other Puritans who joined with him to form the First Parish Church of Scituate didn't come here because they were not able to practice love and justice. They came here because they were not allowed to think about the Bible and its teachings as their minds and hearts led them. Freedom of mind is important. I don't mean to undermine that. But too often our freedom of mind has led us to prize our view of truth over the world it could lead to. And if my view of truth doesn't align exactly with your view of truth, then we can't work or explore more together. Think about this congregation splitting only 8 years after it was gathered over the correct way to do baptisms. Really? Does it matter whether you are immersed fully in running water or merely marked with water? Wasn't the point that by this ritual people were promising to follow Jesus' teachings of love and justice? So from our beginnings we have prized purity of thought over how it is lived out. And this focus on purity of thought over and over led to more splits among the churches of New England – most noticeable the one in the early 1800's over the doctrine of the Trinity and whether Jesus was God or a great man to follow which led in Scituate as in so many other towns to the seceding of the First Church from the First Parish. Did they have to separate over a difference in understanding? Couldn't they have agreed on the following Jesus part?

While we were on the narrower side of the baptism question, we, like all the Unitarian congregations, were on the broader side of the Unitarian/Trinitarian question, with the understanding that Jesus was someone to follow, and we might have continued in that more inclusive stance had we followed leaders like William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker who believed in an expansive spirit of justice and that it wasn't so much what we believed as what we did that mattered. But instead Ralph Waldo Emerson became our dominant voice.

Now don't get me wrong – I love Emerson. As I've said, it was Emerson's *Divinity School Address* which sent me to divinity school. But Emerson was all about each of us alone communing with the spirit. And that has been a harmful legacy both for our tradition and our country. For Emerson's views have permeated much of religion in America even, and perhaps especially, among those who would be horrified to think that the heretic Emerson had any part in their theology and world view.

In his critique of religion in America, the critic Harold Bloom argued that whatever the tradition, religion in the US has developed into the American religion – whether we worship Yahweh, follow Jesus, practice Buddhist meditation, cast a circle, or commune with nature, it’s all about the individual’s relationship with God. Bloom said that the paradigmatic American hymn is *The Garden* which is about me (not me, literally, but you know what I mean) me and Jesus alone in a garden, where “he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own.” It’s all about my salvation, and my salvation has nothing to do with yours in this interpretation. And though that is a specifically Christian hymn, we see that emphasis even in Buddhists here, where the practice is all about one’s personal meditation, rather than understanding the quest for enlightenment as part of the work of reducing suffering for all people. The Buddha didn’t sit basking under his Bo Tree after he reached enlightenment. But here in the US Buddhists are only recently beginning to acknowledge that social justice is part of their work. Bloom takes all this emphasis on the individual back to our own Ralph Waldo Emerson.

So when it comes to racism, it’s no wonder that we can’t see beyond our own individual role. We’re not used to looking beyond the self. Like the fish who doesn’t know it’s swimming in water, we haven’t been able to see that racism is built into the structures of our society especially when those structures benefit us.

So what can we do about this? How can we make up for the radical individualism we unwittingly have promoted for centuries?

Last Sunday in her reflection, Mary Beaulieu invited us to lean into the church. And leaning into the church is a place to start. But only if the church we lean into is one which supports this understanding of our life here being about our life together and what we can do together to offer healing and wholeness to the world. Too often our churches, and I don’t mean First Parish in particular, have focused on the individual’s search for healing and wholeness. And so we haven’t expected much of people, because it’s all about their needs, and we have let stand the false equation that communing with the divine in the woods is the same as worshiping and practicing in community. But it’s not the same. Yes, we need to cultivate those moments when “the currents of the Universal Being circulate through [us]; [when we are] part or parcel of God.” – there I go, quoting Emerson again. But that’s not what we come to church for. I can’t guarantee that you will find that moment here on any given Sunday. And if you do, chances are it’s because you’ve trained your spirit outside of Sunday mornings at 10:30 a.m. to receive it. We come to church instead to practice the harder job of love. Love takes others. And here we find others committed to the practice. Our worship is just the start of our practice. And

so if we're going to lean in so that love may flow out, I'd like to invite you to think about church differently. It's not a time or place you pop into when you need to be fed. It's a commitment to a practice. We show up to practice loving, to learn about how we may love more widely, more deeply, and more effectively. We show up to hear how others are succeeding and failing in their attempts to love and to encourage, commiserate, and celebrate with one another.

The world needs us to lean in and flow out. We could be doing this better, more intentionally. And I'd like to challenge us this Sunday and next to think about how we can do this. One idea I have is to divide the congregation into groups of 10 or 12 people and ask us to commit to gather in these small groups – over Zoom for now – once a week. Perhaps we'd begin by getting to know each other more deeply – what brings us here; what are we seeking; how have we been hurt; what do we know about love – and then move on from there as the path unfolds.

We also need to focus on reaching out to other people who are also seeking to deepen their knowledge and practice of love. So many people have been hurt by other traditions or were raised without any understanding of what church can be – how do we reach out to them and let them know that they don't have to do the hard work of loving alone? Who were all those people who attended our vigil? How do they need to deepen and offer love? Where are they being supported? And we need to reach out to them not so we can fund our building and our budget, but so that we can transform ourselves along with them and our world. We need First Parish to grow not for the sake of keeping First Parish alive, but for the sake of the world, because we have a life-saving message that is needed more now than ever it was, a message of inherent worth and dignity, which, if we really lived it out, would transform us – the collective us as well as the individuals who make up the “us” and our world.

We're now going to sing a verse of Carolyn McDade's hymn *We'll Build a Land* to lead us into a time of beginning to envision the church and land we want to build. As we sing, Carey and Michael are going to place you into small groups. Each group will have a facilitator from the Parish Committee who will invite you to share what you need from First Parish to root yourself more deeply in love and how you'd like to work with others at First Parish to help that love flow into the world. Over the week we'll take what comes out of this brainstorming and divide it into areas of church life. Then next week when we break into groups, we'll ask you to choose an area you want to focus on next year and begin to plan with others who are also called to that focus.

For those of you who are watching this service later, we are not going to record the groups, so we wish you peace in the coming days and invite you to join us in the mighty work of love.

I invite you now to join Beth in singing our hymn.

Come back together:

Thank you all for hanging in for these conversations and for sharing your thoughts. We'll be talking more about your ideas next week and building out from them into what we're going to work on together in the coming year. For now, hear again the end of Elizabeth Alexander's poem:

In today's sharp sparkle, this [summer] air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

- Pamela M. Barz