

Bending The Arc

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This sermon is dedicated to my late mentor and friend Joseph Wei, whose wisdom, humor, encouragement and willingness to take a stand helped shape, and continues to inform and inspire, my understanding and call to ministry.

Roughly nine years have passed since my mentor's unexpected death in 2016. Joseph had companioned me on my journey from a bewildered man in my early thirties wondering why, of all people, I would be called to the ministry, right through to my ordination at forty-three and the early years of a decade long ministry serving two congregations.

A lot happened along that journey. There were ups and downs. Things to work through or overcome. A lot of Buddhism...Joseph was a Buddhist...But most of all there was a refusal, on Joseph's part, to entertain even the possibility that I wasn't enough. It's not that he thought I had nothing to learn or skills that needed no further development or sharpening. Rather, he wouldn't allow any lack of self-acceptance get in the way of my calling.

It didn't really come as a surprise then, when reading through a binder of letters to the editor Joseph wrote during his life and given to me by his Executor, I discovered a piece Joseph wrote speaking up against the use of religion to promote anti-gay bigotry. In the letter, he states, "To deny the value of and full humanity of any person bespeaks of a spiritual bankruptcy born of ignorance and fear."

Attached to the clipping from the newspaper of Joseph's editorial was an envelope containing a long, beautifully written thank you letter. Written some forty years ago, it begins with the author apologizing for sending it anonymously. The author, it seems, was afraid, even in writing to an ally, to reveal his name. He spends part of the letter affirming his own belief in a loving God. Then speaks of the fear he lives with in daily life. Fear of being judged. Fear of being verbally assaulted or physically attacked. Fear of being shunned. Near the end of the letter he says, "I am who I am- I can be no other. I can protect myself against AIDS- that's easy to do. But how do I protect myself against hatred and intolerance?"

At noon tomorrow, as power transitions from one administration to a new one whose traitorous leader and closest allies have exhibited an unabashed,

disturbing preference for using offensive, threatening, callous and violent rhetoric, have openly engaged in racist, xenophobic, transphobic, misogynist rants, not to mention chronic lying, and an utter disregard for democratic norms and plain human decency, people around the country...and around the globe... will legitimately be asking themselves that same question in one way or another...

How do we protect ourselves...our families...our communities...our country...rights...values...and freedom against hatred and intolerance...against injustice...assault...attack...alienation?

To this question, Maya Angelou offers a sage, saving response,

“We rise.”

And indeed, looking to the values our faith: interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity, and equity, centered in love, and this congregation’s mission the same response emerges,

“We rise.”

But what does it mean to rise?

As I see it, it means we take a stand. It means do what you can.

Now it is true, when we take a stand we are deliberately taking sides.

But what side? Right? Left? Somewhere in between or beyond?

No. We’re not talking about political identities here, which are little more than caricatures of something far more complex at work within us and to which many are oblivious as evidenced by our current reactionary politics. Set aside the political and listen to these words of the Jewish Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel,

“I swear never to be silent whenever and wherever human lives endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented...When human dignity is in jeopardy, that place, at that moment, must become the center of the universe.”

Notice Wiesel, in talking about taking sides, doesn’t talk about choosing a political party or ideology, he talks about people. Lives enduring suffering and humiliation. Thus, he calls us not to a political position, but a spiritual realization... the inherent worthiness of all people.

In her poem, “Still I Rise”, Maya Angelou, defiantly claims this birthright that she (and indeed her oppressors) know belongs to all human beings. But as Elie Wiesel insists, and the anonymous author of the letter to my mentor attests, we are sometimes called to, “help speak for those unable or afraid to cast their voices.”

In this context, taking a stand, then, is taking the side of human worth and dignity over and against abusive or oppressive forces which threaten, actively disregard, or deny it.

When we take a stand for human dignity, we take a step toward the liberation of all. For as the noted Universalist minister Clarence Skinner wrote, “The fight for freedom is never won...Each generation must win for itself the right to emancipate itself from its own tyrannies, which are ever unprecedented...Therefore those who have been reared in freedom, bear a tremendous responsibility to the world to win an ever larger and more important liberty.”

Indeed, the pursuit and expansion of freedom is itself a spiritual practice, a process of discipline and deepening engagement to empower ourselves and others toward the life we’re called and, as our young friend Ron from our story for all ages knew, the life we all have the right to live.

In addition to the need to take sides, Wiesel insists, “When human dignity is in jeopardy, that place, that moment, must become the center of the universe.”

This is where we’re called to go beyond proclaiming the inherent worthiness of every person and affirm it by taking action....to journey to the center of the universe... and do what we can.

Multiple centers exist around the globe where human dignity is in jeopardy and several new ones are emerging here in the United States as the new administration prepares to assume power. These centers are the places, policies, and personalities to which, or to whom, we are called to respond by taking the side of human dignity and engaging in the spiritual practice of liberation:

Over the decades, we’ve witnessed, and some of us have participated in dramatic journeys to such centers, from great cities to small towns; town halls to church basements, where one or two to hundreds of thousands of people have gathered to take a stand. Responding to threats to human dignity that have been dismissed, promoted, or acted upon.

They have responded by rising in protests. Such protests, sometimes been derided as senseless rioting or dismissed as the whining of overly sensitive groups, instead seek to make clear:

In response to violence against women...(against anyone.)

We rise!

In response to threats against dissenters and the press.

We rise!

In response to the disparagement of entire groups of people based on their race, religion, ethnicity, immigration or refugee status, as well as sexual orientation or gender identity, and physical ability.

We rise!

In response to reckless foreign policy and defense positions or statements - and tweets- that threaten to undermine alliances and the safety of the world's most vulnerable citizens and embolden murderous despots.

We rise!

We rise and take our place at the center of the universe...wherever and whenever human dignity is in jeopardy.

A second center of the universe, so to speak is government policy, legislation and appointments. Policies, laws and appointments that address education, criminal justice, healthcare, labor, economics, poverty, civil rights, voting rights, immigration, the environment, and the like, become the center of the universe when they privilege short term monetary savings, political expediency, or ideological victory over the dignity of the lives they impact and are supposed to serve.

Further, laws and policies that ignore, reinforce, or promote institutional oppression or benefit the wealthiest at the expense of the most vulnerable are centers of the universe. Laws like voter ID laws that disproportionately disadvantage minority and poor voters, bans related to gender identity and gender affirming care, used to discriminate against transgender people including by, in effect, imposing a gender on them, and policies to initiate mass deportations with no regard to the social, psychological, and economic impact of families and communities. While such policies, laws and related efforts may not always be intended to harm people, nor everyone who supports them does so out of hatred or intolerance of others, when they have revealed their actual or potential harm to human dignity, we are called as people of faith to take a stand...and do what we can.

We are called to rise.

How?

When we educate ourselves on the issues and their potential impact.

We rise

When we petition lawmakers in support or opposition of policies, laws and nominees to agencies and the courts...

We rise

When we join or support others and advocacy groups working together...

We rise

When we vote and encourage and empower others to vote...

We rise

When we remember it is not about positioning ourselves on the left or the right, but on the side of human dignity...

We rise

The third center of the universe where human dignity is at stake, is a realm I call personalities. That is, our interpersonal relationships. The election has strained many relationships. Times are tense, a lot of people are scared, angry, and sad. Others are excited and hopeful, and a few are smug... even cocky. Some of us live in politically divided homes or know, work or are friends with people who may think differently than we do. In such relationships, it can get ugly really fast. Words, despite the claims of a familiar saying from childhood, can and do hurt...sometimes more than sticks and stones.

So how do we rise when what we really want to do is knock someone down with our words, if not our fists? What does it mean to take the side of human dignity when our anger and pain goads us toward reducing another to something we so fear for ourselves? What can we do?

We rise.

First, we can remember our values as Unitarian Universalists and respond from them rather than react out of our pain and anger. This, by the way, is another way to engage in the spiritual practice of freedom. And it is not easy. I struggle with it mightily...and sometimes I fail in my efforts. For better or worse, when pushed too far, I'm capable of demonstrating a level of proficiency in the use of expletives that would make the late George Carlin proud...and maybe even blush.

When this happens, a couple of deep breaths, a reminder that responding versus reacting takes practice, and I'm able to get back on track.

Second, we can follow the lead of the anonymous author, who near the end of his letter to my later mentor said,

“I hold no ill feelings or vindictiveness towards (those who hate or are intolerant of me) but I do most fervently pray...someday...they will understand.” Of course, this isn’t the author’s idea or mine. Jesus instructed, “love your enemy...and pray for them.” And the Buddha reminded followers, “respond to hatred with love.”

These and similar teachings from other traditions are not instructions to passively accept abuse, but to cultivate compassion and empathy. Be it prayer, meditation or something else, with practice these become the means to remember the worthiness of others and a means to honor our own in the face of all that threatens or attempts to deny it.

And so it is:

When we respond from the strength of our values rather than react from the fleeting intensity of our pain

We rise

When we cultivate compassion and empathy for others and ourselves through regular, intentional practice

We rise

We rise and grab hold of what Theodore Parker and Dr. King called, “The moral arc of the universe.” We grab hold and we pull, we pull like young Ron from our story this morning. And inspire others to do the same. And together we bend that arc toward justice.

When we rise we bend the arc:

We affirm the worthiness of every person

We promote and protect human dignity...

This is what makes a just, equitable society possible. And is essential to the creation and sustainment of the beloved community where everyone has the right to flourish. Indeed, the very idea and advancement of civil or human rights flows from a belief, reaffirmed and enlarged by theologians and philosophers over time, that we are all inherently worthy.

Thus we are reminded these claims and our work to promote and protect them reflect a religious value; an American value; a human value. And so, in this and any time or place, under this or any administration where the worthiness of any is called into question and human dignity is in jeopardy, let us heed the call of our faith, our country, and our humanity and together, and for all, let us rise!

Amen and Blessed Be