

The New Day  
Jan 22, 2017  
Paris

Call to Worship: The words of Leslie Takahashi

Here in this place of peace may we find hope.

Here in this place of connection, may we find life-giving  
community.

Here in this place of rest, let the unrest of our hearts turn us  
toward justice.

Here in this space made sacred by memories of connection,  
Let us feel ourselves part of the new that grows from the old  
In the spiraling unity of years.

Come, now, and let us worship together.

## Together Time: St. Francis and the Wolf of Gubbio

Perhaps the most famous story of the holy man, St. Francis, is when he tamed the wolf that was terrorizing the town of Gubbio. The wolf was so hungry that it was not only killing animals, but attacking people, too. The people took up arms and went after it, but those who encountered the wolf were killed. The villagers became afraid to leave the city walls.

Francis, who could talk to animals and sometimes preached to birds, decided to go out and meet the wolf.

As Francis walked outside the city walls, followed by townspeople, the wolf, jaws wide open, charged out of the woods at him. Francis made the Sign of the Cross toward the wolf, so the story goes, who immediately slowed down and closed its mouth. Then Francis called out to the wolf: "Come to me, Brother Wolf. I wish you no harm." At that moment the wolf lowered its head and lay down at St. Francis' feet.

St. Francis explained to the wolf that the people of the town were living in fear and wanted to kill the wolf. The wolf explained to Francis that he had been injured and could not keep up with his pack. The only food he could catch were the slow moving animals of the townspeople. He had just been defending himself when the humans attacked him.

"Brother Wolf," said Francis, "I want to make peace between you and the people of Gubbio. They will feed you each day and harm you no more. And you must no longer harm them. All past wrongs are to be forgiven."

The wolf showed its assent by moving its body and nodding its head. Then Francis asked the wolf to make a pledge. As St. Francis

extended his hand to receive the pledge, the wolf extended its front paw and placed it into the saint's hand. Then Francis asked the wolf to follow him into town to make a peace pact with the townspeople.

By the time they got to the town square, everyone was there. Francis offered the townspeople peace, on behalf of the wolf. The townspeople promised in a loud voice to feed the wolf. Then Francis asked the wolf if he would live in peace under those terms. Once again the wolf placed its paw in Francis' hand as a sign of the pact.

From that day on the people kept the pact they had made. The wolf lived for two years among the townspeople, going from door to door for food. It hurt no one and no one hurt it. When the wolf finally died of old age, the people of Gubbio were sad. The wolf's peaceful ways had been a reminder of the importance of understanding the needs of others, even when they might seem dangerous and different.

Reading: A Better World by Kendyl Gibbons  
(who will be in our pulpit at the end of the month and  
keynoting Seminary for a Day)

Out of a community of diverse heritage and belief,  
We come together to share our hope,  
And to create good in the world.

The prophets of all traditions and times have taught  
That we are called to mercy, generosity, and mutual care,  
And that to be great is to serve.

We know that there can be no enduring happiness for  
humanity as long as suffering and want go unrelieved;  
Until all may be sheltered, none of us is truly at home.

May the power of our various faiths sustain us in this work,  
That we may be the hands of holy creativity and justice;  
And together build a better world.

Sermon: A New Day

Reading: From “On Optimism and Despiar” by Zadie Smith

Zadie Smith is the celebrated author of *White Teeth* and her new novel, *Swing Time*. She is bi-racial and British by citizenship. This is a quote from her remarks, entitled “On Optimism and Despair” which she delivered when she received the 2016 Welt Prize for Literature in Berlin a few weeks ago.

“If novelists know anything it’s that individual citizens are internally plural: they have within them the full range of behavioral possibilities. They are like complex musical scores from which certain melodies can be teased out and others ignored or suppressed, depending, at least in part, on who is doing the conducting. At this moment, all over the world—and most recently in America—the conductors standing in front of this human orchestra have only the meanest and most banal melodies in mind. (Here in Germany you will remember these martial songs; they are not a very distant memory.) But there is no place on earth where they have not been played at one time or another. Those of us who remember, too, a finer music must try to play it, and encourage others, if we can, to sing along.”

Sermon: The New Day

Thank you so much for inviting me to be with you this morning. I’ve always been willing to preach and speak about Unitarian Universalism and liberal religion, even when times have been tough.

Well, truth be told, all times are tough; all times have their challenges. At least I’ve have never lived in a fully realized

Beloved Community. That is language from Dr. King, whose holiday is being celebrated in the US on this complicated weekend.

These days feel especially troubling...at least for many of us living in the US...perhaps here as well.

But I don't pretend to understand the reality (the realities) that you live with here. I don't want to make the mistake of missing the mark and assuming that the US reality is capital "R" REALITY around the world. Colonialism can take many forms and I will try to avoid it.

But for progressive folks, some of our most cherished assumptions and values do feel threatened.

Perhaps some of my reflections on our faith that grow out the American context of 2017 may ring true, or true enough to pose some helpful questions for you...questions about liberal religion and how we are called to live it out today.

There is no doubt that last November's election set me, and many of us, back on our heels. "Flattened" might be more accurate language.

It was as if all of our confident assumptions about the way the world works, about the possibility of progress and the reasonableness of hope were called into question, contradicted even as the election results were announced.

We love to quote 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker: "The arc of the moral universe is long...but it bends toward justice." In the days since the election, it feels like

justice is being rejected as a central value and a goal in our political process. At least our understanding of justice.

But the risks are very real and our vision of the Beloved Community **has to be** strong enough to survive one election defeat. We do not have the luxury of remaining down and out. We must prepare to rise.

Most of us were looking forward to this Inauguration, ready to celebrate the first woman to be US President. We loved having an African American President...even though we disagreed with many of his decisions and most of his political compromises. Oh, we understood that there was tokenism involved...but we also believe that there is value in symbols.

Nothing gratified us more than having that first African American President usher in and bless Marriage Equality.

We believed in the progress we were making, even while we understood that it was incomplete...that income inequality and corporate power remained to be addressed...that immigration laws defy both common sense and compassion...that the criminal justice system is not a justice system at all.

We saw progress being made...incomplete, but still. And we came to trust that progress would continue, that progress toward the Beloved Community was somehow...almost inevitable...if we worked at it. The arc of the universe bends toward justice...right?

We progressive folks are quick to critique the desire to return to a 1950's America. Make America Great Again looks backward with a nostalgia unavailable to so many of US.

As Zadie Smith says: “In the 1950’s I could not vote, marry my husband, have my children, work in the university I work in, or live in my neighborhood. Time travel is a discretionary art: a pleasure trip for some and a horror story for others.”

We are quick to criticize “Make American Great Again.” And viewed from the US, it seems that there may be similar energy fueling Brexit and Frexit...a new term I learned only this morning. There may be a similar wish to return to a lost Eden here in Europe, an Eden that never existed here either, an Eden that was more mono-cultural, where women knew their place...

Oh, it is so easy to criticize nostalgia for a lost Eden.

But there may be a comparable nostalgia developing on the progressive side of the aisle. That progressive nostalgia holds up the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s, and the other great civil rights movements that followed...for the rights and safety of queer people and differently-abled people and, yes, still, female people...

Our nostalgia holds up those civil rights movements that worked to guarantee individual freedom regardless of the categories of individual identity. Identity politics it has been called by progressives. Political correctness by social conservatives.

And those victories are very real and life-savingly important to many of us.

But since November there has been a vigorous debate in the public square about whether identity politics “caused” the election result and the tilt to the right.

The debate was framed by Columbia professor Mark Lillam in a NYT editorial entitled, "The End of Identity Liberalism." He wrote:

"the fixation on diversity...has produced a generation of progressives narcissistically unaware of conditions outside their self-defined group and indifferent to the task of reaching out to American's in every walk of life."

It was damning criticism. Was it warranted?

Zadie Smith was asked, at that presentation in Berlin, whether she would now admit that multi-culturalism was a failure.

My first response is that virtually the entire sweep of our history has been based on a consistent and persistent campaign of identity politics...white, male identity.

But beyond that, we are so far from living in a post-racial, post-sexist, post-homophobic, post-zenophobic world. As one of the many people whose identities have kept us on the margins, I bear witness that identity politics was no wrong turn...if justice matters to you...if you are not willing to settle for a world of winners and losers based on race, or gendfer, or orientation or clss.

And that there is so much more that we need to do to redress the harm done in both our history and our present.

But back to our progressive nostalgia. We have come to believe...someplace deep within us...that progress on those justice issues is not only a positive good but normal...that more

victories are in store...and that those victories on individual issues...that those victories alone were enough to sustain hope.

We heard the racism and the misogyny and the xenophobia from across the aisle...you seem to be hearing it here as well...we heard the hate but we couldn't believe it would carry the day.

We heard the hate but we missed the hurt that fueled it.

One blogger commented: "Hate is just a bodyguard for grief. When people lose the hate, they are forced to deal with the pain beneath."

A bodyguard for grief.

We called people to move beyond the hate, but we missed the hurt in them.

Because something hurts in there...and not just in us.

We see clearly the trauma of the victims of racism and misogyny and xenophobia. Too many of us know that violence personally. We see the incarcerated and the abused, the hungry, the homeless, the undocumented...

But we have not seen clearly enough the betrayal and the feeling of being left behind of those on the other side of the aisle.

Blogger Charles Eisenstein writes: "They feel [the hurt] in mirror image adding damage to their souls atop the damage that compels them to violence. Thus it is that suicide is the leading cause of death in the US military. Thus it is that

addiction is rampant among the police. Thus it is that depression is epidemic in the upper middle class. We are all in this together.”

Something hurts in there. So few of us are being well served by the world we share.

I must confess, it takes real effort for me to hold that thought honestly. It is so tempting to blame “those people” who want to travel back to 1950.

And I know I don’t talk to enough people who voted for Donald Trump. Like most of us, I live much of my life in a progressive bubble.

But I do believe that “those people” feel left behind...just as we fear that we will be left behind now.

What do we need to do? What questions do we need to ask? And, perhaps most important, what relationships do we need to foster?

We can accept the divisiveness...hunker down...make resistance our mantra...cling to the successes of our past as the only model for moving forward...

Resistance is certainly going to be required.

But a blanket resistance...well, isn’t that what we railed against during the Obama years?

More importantly, doesn’t blanket resistance close us off to the real possibility in these times?

We are entering a space between stories, a time of great uncertainty.

The dissolution of the old order seems to be well underway. Norms of behavior, in the political realm, are being shattered every day. One President at a time...nope. Nuclear policy made in 140 characters. Facts denied or disregarded. No press conferences but plenty of rallies.

Norms of behavior are being shattered. What possibilities does that open?

Eisenstein again:

“Normal is coming unhinged and that presents a tremendous opportunity [as well as] danger, because when normal falls apart the ensuing vacuum draws in formerly unthinkable ideas from the margins. Unthinkable ideas range from rounding up the Muslims in concentration camps, to dismantling the military-industrial complex and closing down overseas military bases. They range from nationwide stop-and-frisk to replacing criminal punishment with restorative justice.”

Anything becomes possible.

Unthinkable ideas from the margins? Don't we have a few of those to put on the table?

Our fear is that what is being born will be based on hate and greed. Our nightmare is that fascistic and totalitarian forms will emerge and cancel the modest progress toward justice that we have been able to create thus far.

I know I feel that fear.

But we are Unitarian Universalists and we proclaim that revelation is not sealed. We are the theologians of process who believe that our efforts and our agency matter.

We may not be able to determine outcomes but we most certainly can encourage the possibilities that love suggests. Every choice we make and every act we take can help a different force animate the new structures and understandings that are emerging.

What would it take for love to break through in these uncertain times?

Anything is possible when normal comes unhinged. Right?

The weekend after the election, we hosted an ACLU gathering at First Unitarian. It was planned for 50 people.

We filled the sanctuary...600 in person... an additional 500 took part on line.

It was the first sign I saw that a ground of hope might be firming.

Yesterday, in cities across America and around the world, and here in Paris, hundreds of thousands of women and men and children took part in marches.

They were acts of resistance. Yes they were. And they emerged almost spontaneously. People needed to say that we are not willing to go back.

We need resistance, but we need more to cast a true populist vision:

Not just defense of Obama-care, but health care as a right. In the US we can look to Europe. Our safety net is so porous in comparison.

Not the politics of division...of racism, religious intolerance and fear of the other...but making common cause for a more equitable distribution of wealth and power.

Not a debate about funding Planned Parenthood...but a commitment to make family life and women's lives less difficult, not more difficult.

There are US examples, but I have to believe there are comparable issues here.

Can we not cast such a vision? What examples would you give?

Can we imagine advocacy that crosses borders...men at the women's march, Black Lives Matter banners at the Pride parade...climate justice is a women's issue after all.

We are hungry for things to do. Anxious to make our witness.

We are, I believe, ready to rise.

What would it take for empathy and compassion to break into our politics and inform our policies?

What would it take?

As people of faith we are called to be naïve enough to believe that love is real—can be real if by our living we make it so.

Can we, as people of faith, play a finer, more loving music and invite those around us – all those around us—to sing along?

What new day can dawn, if together, we not only resist the hate, but help make love live?