

THE WINTER OF OUR DISCONTENT

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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Paris Unitarian Fellowship
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Reading:

Marge Piercy, "The Low Road"

What can they do
to you? Whatever they want.
They can set you up, they can
bust you, they can break
your fingers, they can
burn your brain with electricity,
blur you with drugs till you
can't walk, can't remember, they can
take your child, wall up
your lover. They can do anything
you can't blame them
for doing. How can you stop
them? Alone, you can fight,
you can refuse, you can
take what revenge you can
but they roll over you.

But two people fighting
back to back can cut through
a mob, a snake-dancing file
can break a cordon, an army
can meet an army.

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four

you can play bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.
A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no,
it starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

Sermon:

As the third act of Shakespeare's play Richard III opens, Richard reflects with satisfaction upon the recent upturn in the political stature of his family, the House of York, which had long been oppressed by Henry VI and the Lancastrians. Richard's brother Edward IV has taken back the throne, and now the sun shines once again upon the House of York. Richard says:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son of York;
And all the clouds that low'r'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

The clouds would soon return, of course, seeded in large measure by Richard himself. Nonetheless, the glory of the summer sun had banished the discontented gloom of winter, if only for a brief season, and if only for the House of York.

For anyone paying attention to the global gloom that now burdens our world, this has been the winter of our discontent. As we marked the centennial of World War I last year, we were left wondering whether current regional conflicts and tensions could once again metastasize into a global conflagration.

The belligerent expansionism of Vladimir Putin, the neo-Neanderthal savagery of ISIS, the near-genocidal brutality of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which has mostly been matched measure for measure by the brutality of his foes, the wanton barbarism of Boko Haram in Nigeria, the lethal carnage at *Charlie Hebdo* and the kosher market here in Paris: there's a lot to be gloomy about. And none of these storm clouds appears to be receding anytime soon.

It's true that rockets and missiles no longer fly over Gaza, at least not at the moment, and car fires no longer burn in Ferguson, but the deep-seated structural violence that has long savaged both places shows no signs of abating.

Built-in sources of violence fester elsewhere as well, as chasms of inequality deepen around the globe, as competition for water and other basic resources becomes fiercer, as millions of young men with no hope of a wife or a job become angrier and better armed, and as the backlash against women becomes bolder and better organized.

The problem with these problems is that they are so complicated and so deeply-entrenched that it's hard to know how you and I as individuals should think about them, much less how we might do anything about them. What can one person do? For that matter, what can one congregation do?

Given the odds against making any headway against these problems, it's tempting not to do much of anything. It's even tempting to do our best to ignore them. We could, like Henry David Thoreau, head for the woods and hole up in a cabin, either physically or emotionally.

During a rare weekend respite from my duties as a minister, I read the latest book by the romance novelist Holly Jacobs. I'm not a typical reader of romance novels, but this book had been recommended to me by someone whose judgment I trust. It tells the story of Lexie McCain, who did head for the woods, though not because of troubles around the globe. Lexie found her crises closer to home.

After their daughter Grace died young of cancer, Lexie and her husband eventually divorced, driven apart by their shared suffering rather than united by it. When time and circumstances eventually merged their paths once again, they gave marriage another try, a fledgling triumph of hope over history that soon came to an even more painful end.

In the wake of these devastating losses, Lexie retreated to her family's cabin deep in the woods. She lived there alone, tending her garden and weaving tapestries at her loom. She often walked in the woods with her dog Angus, seeking solace in his bounding company and in the play of light and shadow among the trees. Once in a while, she would venture into town to buy a few essentials. But otherwise, Lexie withdrew completely from the world.

Then, one Monday night after four months alone, she walked two miles into town and took a seat on a barstool in a tavern called The Corner Bar. She chose the stool furthest from the door, hoping to be left alone. She ordered one Killian's Red draught from the bartender, a man named Sam. She drank the beer slowly and then walked back

home. This night in town became a routine: always the same bar stool, always one Killian's Red and never more than one, and always on Monday nights.

Why Mondays? Lexie explained, "Fridays and Saturdays were for dates and desperate people looking to 'hook up' with others. I wasn't dating, nor was I interested in hooking up. Sundays were for church, and it seemed wrong to go to a bar that day, even though I wasn't attending church anymore... God and I weren't on speaking terms. Still, no bars for me on Sundays. Midweek was filled with work around the cottage. So, Mondays were my day."

After six months of serving Lexie on Monday nights without question or comment, Sam's curiosity overcame her obvious reticence. He paused before he set her beer down and said, "Tell me just one thing." Lexie decided that telling him one thing about herself was easier than arguing with him, so she told him her name.

Thus began a new pattern on Monday nights, to which Sam and Lexie adhered faithfully. "Just one thing," Sam would say as he served her each week, and she would respond by telling him yet another thing about herself. She soon began asking him to say just one thing in return.

Eventually, the things they said to one another began to describe not only the superficial facts about their individual lives, but also the deep suffering they had endured, she as a mother and wife, and he as a badly-wounded combat veteran.

The story of Lexie and Sam – the book is titled *Just One Thing* – is a story of tragedy and of healing. It's about finding the courage to step over the line that divides what's past from what's possible. It's about realizing that the tipping point that moves us from despair to hope doesn't require us to put everything at risk. It only requires us to put one thing at risk – just one thing.

Near the end of the book, Lexie says, "I know I will suffer other losses, but I can trust that I will mourn and recover. I know there will be other lines [to cross] and [other] tipping points. That things will happen. But I'm sure I'll be fine because I realize now that I am always evolving—always becoming more. And I know that we're all more than just one thing. That I'm more than one thing. That Sam's more than one thing. And maybe the one true thing is that together we are so much more than we are apart. Sometimes the journey to forgiving yourself – to finding yourself – starts with one person, one step... with just one thing."

The reason we feel the suffering in the world around us so deeply – the reason the violence devastates us, and the racism appalls us, and the sexism infuriates us, and the bigotry enervates us, and the greed enrages us – is that, as Lexie says, we're all more than just one thing. We are all made of the air we breathe, and the water we drink, and the food we eat, and the social media we devour, and the suffering we observe, and the structural violence we passively participate in. We are all of these things, and even more. It's no wonder that we sometimes feel like running away – heading for the woods, or the hills, or even the beach.

But we can't run away. When we gather for worship, we do so in part to remind ourselves of what I call the experience of God. It's the experience of being deeply connected to everything: all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible. When the pain of the world becomes our pain, we experience most fully the life of the divine.

The experience doesn't end there, however. The experience of God includes not only everything that's past and everything that's present in our world; it also includes everything that's possible. Especially in times when suffering prevails, the experience of God points us toward the future – toward whatever glimmer of hope might shine through the gloom.

To be sure, hope shines first only as a glimmer. The future we long for, whether for ourselves or for our world, won't come to pass all at once. This is why Sam and Lexie's mantra must become our mantra as well: just one thing. Say just one thing. Do just one thing. And then say one more thing. Do one more thing.

Wherever we find ourselves, with whatever resources we can muster and whatever talents we can bring to bear, the key is to ask ourselves: What's the one thing I can say or do here in order to cultivate hope and foster possibility?

If you're enraged by what happened at *Charlie Hebdo*, what's one thing you can do? If you come upon a coworker who's having a bad day, what's one thing you can say? If you're appalled by the brutality of ISIS or the devastation in Syria, what's the one thing you can do? If a friend has gotten a bad diagnosis, what's one thing you can say? If your child has had a rough day at school, what's one thing you can do? Just one thing. And then maybe one thing more.

The Talmud, as the oral tradition of rabbinic Judaism is known, urges us: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now." The Talmud adds, "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Our calling in each moment of life is to do just one thing – never more, but never less. One thing to show compassion. One thing to extend mercy. One thing to bend toward justice. One thing to show love. Just one thing.

Over time, as the seasons ebb and flow, our discontent may eventually fade away, or it may not. Sometimes wickedness prevails; sometimes losses endure. Even so, we will rest in the knowledge that we have responded faithfully to the divine call. We serve whatever is possible, doing the one thing that we can do.