

Creation and Deconstruction
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
October 29, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Eric LaBrant

In the early 1100s, the Persian poet Omar Khayyam wrote a series of verses reminding us to make the most of this short life, numbering somewhere between 1200 and 2000 verses. Let's get started. In 1859, an Englishman named Edward Fitzgerald translated and compiled 101 of them into a collection he called *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. That's the version that my mentor Charles shared with me when I was 19. This morning I've whittled it down even further to 7 verses.

As time has passed, the meaning of Khayyam's poetry has evolved for me, and different verses will catch my attention. My friend Charles passed earlier this year, so recently it's doing double-duty in my heart, reminding me of the shortness of life, and of happy times spent with my beloved friend. As I grow older, I'm sure its meaning will continue to evolve. One day, nature will take me apart and make new things from me, and there's something comforting about knowing this was on Omar Khayyam's mind almost a thousand years ago.

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled;
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears
Dropt in her Lap from some once lovely Head.

And this reviving tree whose tender Green
Shades the riverbank on which we lean--
Ah, lean upon it lightly! for who knows
From what once lovely Lip it springs unseen!

And we, that now make merry in the Room
They left, and Summer dresses in new bloom
Ourselves must we beneath the Couch of Earth
Descend--ourselves to make a Couch--for whom?

With them the seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with mine own hand worked to make it grow;
And this was all the Harvest that I reaped--
"I came like Water, and like Wind I go."

I think the Vessel, that with fugitive
Articulation answer'd, once did live,
And drink; and Ah! the passive Lip I kiss'd,
How many Kisses might it take--and give!

For I remember stopping by the way
To watch a Potter thumping some wet Clay:
And with its all-obliterated Tongue
It whispered--"Gently, Brother, gently, pray!"

Said one among them--"Surely not in vain
My substance of the common Earth was ta'en
And to this Figure moulded, to be broke,
Or trampled back to shapeless Earth again."

Creation and Deconstruction© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Thank you, Stuart. That song is quite meaningful for me. I know I've had Stuart play it for you before in worship. If you don't know, I'm married to him, so I know that he wrote this song the day after the 2016 presidential election, when none of us knew what would come of Donald Trump as president of the United States, though we feared the worst. Stuart and I had watched the election results the night before with our neighbor, a political science professor at Michigan State, who realized early on in the evening what was to come – I remained in denial longer. Stuart had to leave the next day for his songwriting retreat, and I was left to help a shocked congregation come to terms with what I had not really considered possible. Like this congregation here in Vancouver, we held a vigil that night and tried to make sense of the nonsensical.

Of course, some sense has been made of it since: The backlash analyzed and so many books have been written and published to explain what happened in this country and is happening still. I trust none of us will go into the 2024 presidential election with the same naiveté that I'll admit to having back then. But Stuart's lyrics helped me then, to remember that love's not dead.

Because the hateful rhetoric and destruction of norms that characterized the candidate and then president challenged our deepest held values of love, pluralism, interdependence, equity, generosity, justice and evolution. We expect evolution not devolution, progress not regression, creation not destruction.

Creation has been our theme this month. We've looked at origin stories, and stories of our faith – from long ago and many lands (to borrow the title of one of the classic books from our tradition). From long ago, the story of Universalist minister Olympia Brown, and from many lands, we learned about Unitarian Universalism in the Philippines. We examined the creation of stories themselves and how they inform our worldview and Creation with a big C for the Natural World and our part in it. This morning I wanted to look at creation and the opposite – which could be indicated by the word destruction, but there is too much violence in this world. So, I've chosen the word deconstruction to depict the other side of creation. "What we call a beginning is often the end," wrote TS Eliot, "and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."

Since I mentioned the violence, let me take a moment to acknowledge the pain: another mass shooting in our country and another war raging in our world. It is hard to listen to the news these days. Our fears that this violence touches our lives and not just our neighbors' is real and well-founded. In fact, this congregation received a threat of violence in July by a hate group masquerading as a church, and we've had a couple of break-ins on our property – of our community garden and the Religious Education building, when it was empty of people. These intrusions into our sense of safety remind us of the dangers which exist and which harm the most vulnerable of our society on a daily basis.

I draw a distinction, however, between violent destruction and intentional deconstruction. At least in my head, the distinction has to do with whether or not anything is left behind from which new creations can be made. Like the regular girl in our story for all ages, we might find parts of the wrong things that are really quite right and we don't have to throw out everything to start over again. I love that story of perseverance, because that is what we need these days – the courage to persist when frustrated and discouraged and angry.

There is a difference between the **destruction** of our personality structure and the **deconstruction** of it as presented in our reading. "Liberation" from *the way we are* (or the way we think we are) gives us choice and "our genuine strengths remain, with more room than ever before to stretch out and make themselves known." Healing from trauma – such as the violence I was just talking about – has a lot to do with deconstructing the personality structure we created in order to survive adverse conditions. Then, we can create a new path of health and strength.

Not healing from trauma and not making conscious the way we've compensated for trauma results, unfortunately, in the kind of violence to ourselves that can also bring down others.

Many of us in this church and around the association have been consciously deconstructing white supremacy culture of late. And as Eric pointed out in the land acknowledgement, this culture led and leads to violence. So, we are trying to notice how this violent culture shows up, when we are exhibiting traits of supremacy or hierarchical thinking, or assuming the norms of a capitalist culture that commodifies just about everything. We are trying to deconstruct, take apart, this culture that values winning and power over sharing and compromise so that a new culture can be created. This new culture would exhibit the values of love, pluralism, interdependence, equity, justice, generosity and evolution.

Included in that deconstruction of white supremacy culture is dismantling racism, taking apart homophobia, undoing misogyny and patriarchy, pulling apart ableism and commercialism and all the -isms that plague us and prevent us from living into those values we say we hold dear, but sometimes betray.

In fact, it is in the betrayal of these values that many of us have discovered them. *When decency no longer gets in the way, honesty, is just a thing we say*, sang Stuart. As the man who held the office of the president from 2017-2021 broke so many norms and challenged so many of those values – ridiculing people and threatening them, inciting violence and ignoring the rule of law- many of us found our voice, insistent that this behavior was wrong and dangerous, and re-discovering the value we place on civility and kindness, and those values I keep listing which begin with the word love.

Our ideas of gender have been deconstructed lately, which has been confusing for many of us who grew up in a world with a binary understanding of gender. Some of you no doubt noticed the pronouns

projected on a slide for me that included “they/them” for the first time. I’m still comfortable with the pronouns she/her, but I’ve also decided that I am comfortable with they/them. For me, it is not an indication of a new understanding of my own identity, but something else, which I’ll explain later and is not very relevant (but because some of you will wonder, I will explain).

There are lots of different things going on with the deconstruction of the gender binary. There are those who feel different on the inside than how they are perceived on the outside – folks who identify as trans. There are those whose physical characteristics are ambiguous – intersex. Almost 150 million people worldwide are born intersex – with biology that doesn’t fit the standard definition of male or female. Biological sex is actually on a spectrum, having to do with genitalia, chromosomes, gonads, internal sex organs, hormone production and hormone response and secondary sex characteristics. (This is some of what our youth are learning about in the Our Whole Lives sexuality curriculum – and believe me the information they get will be more up to date than what you and I received in any sex ed class, even those taught at a UU church just ten years ago.) In most cultures and most languages, we throw all that diversity of traits into two categories: male or female.

But many people whose biological sex may not be very ambiguous, feel the ambiguity of their identity. They may feel neither male nor female, or both at the same time, or sometimes one and a different day another. These are just some of the variations that come with gender identity.

But now I’m going to digress and talk about my pronoun selection this morning. It rather took me by surprise, frankly. I’d been noticing my colleagues coming out of seminary using the “*they*” pronoun, including our first intern, cristy cardinal, and a worship associate that year, Quinn McCray, began using both *he* and *they*. Then, a more recent Worship Associate, Alexis Balkowitsch also younger, I might add, changed their pronouns to *she/they*. And I practiced, as I did just now, referring to Alexis as *they* instead of *she* because it was awkward for me. At the time, I think I told them that if I were of a different generation or younger, I’d probably be comfortable with *she/they*, but just wasn’t. It was new and different for me.

And then, I remembered. I remember that in college I would write papers with sentences using the *they* pronoun to avoid male biased language. For example, I loved Gandhi in college, so I’ll quote him – and since he was born in the late 19th century, I understood his language was dated – but he was to have said “Man should forget his anger before he goes to sleep.” and so had I written that sentence in a college paper – not quoting him, but as an original sentence - I would have written “One should forget their anger before they go to sleep.” And, of course, I got corrected constantly and told that my sentence was not grammatically correct, whereas I would reply that the grammatically correct sentence was not inclusive. I don’t actually recall when I submitted to the tyranny of grammar, but I did, even though we know that language is always changing and the rules of language are not static. So, I submit no more, and if you want to talk about me with the *they* pronoun, feel free!

My reasons for adding pronouns to my identity are mine alone – I am not suggesting that cristy or Quinn or Alexis or anyone else who uses *they* have similar reasons. As I’ve said, there is so much diversity in this discussion – and breaking the binary is about accepting this diversity and not trying to put everyone into the same box, or one of two boxes.

That is deconstruction. We break down the ideas that got us to think one way so that we might think and act differently, if we so choose. Without it, we cannot create something new because we keep repeating the same patterns over and over again.

This deconstruction can be frightening because it can challenge our deepest held assumptions, those assumptions that come with culture, beliefs we inherited from our families and ancestors and society.

And it can be frightening because it can destroy – which is sort of my segue into next month's theme of democracy which has been under attack by those who are intentionally tearing apart institutions that many of us value and wish to continue.

In either case, new things can be created from the disassemblage. Like the regular girl in our story for all ages, we might find parts of the wrong things that are really quite right and we don't have to throw out everything to start over again. It is a story of perseverance and that is what we need these days – the courage to persist when frustrated and discouraged and angry.

Because I don't know about you, but I am pretty frustrated and discouraged and angry. So much is beyond my control. What I can do, however, is that healing work which does help heal the world. As I free myself from my automatic programming, I gain access to what is underneath, to what is essential and to the strengths I do have and gifts I can share with the world.

And I can remember those values of love, pluralism, interdependence, equity, generosity, justice and evolution. We seek evolution not devolution, progress not regression, creation not destruction. But sometimes we need to deconstruct what was created before in order to create something new. This is the way of Nature, too. Twelfth century poet, Omar Khayyam, understood this as did the twentieth century poets, TS Eliot and even William Carlos Williams in that poem about the plums. *Forgive me. They were delicious. So sweet and so cold.*

I know from history that every generation thought they were in the midst of unprecedented change, often on the brink of destruction, and it is tempting to think, in retrospect, that they were mistaken, but that that this time we are prescient. I don't know what is true. I only know what values I hold and that love is at the center. Like the people who were enslaved on this land, brought from another land, to this land as property, I have to believe that there is more love somewhere and that if I keep on, I will find it.