

The Ties that Bind and Set Us Free
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
November 19, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Ronnie Mars

I've come to realize what it means to be reborn. Eight years ago, I was just continuing a pattern of packing up and moving. I moved four times in the eight years I've lived here in a ten-mile radius of Clark and Multnomah Counties. Psychologists say those who choose to move frequently are likely to be risk-takers. I never thought of it that way. They go on to say that people may be experiencing what Freudian analysts call "repetition compulsion," or a Goldilocks complex, always looking for just the right place. One thing I've learned is, it's not necessarily where you live when you can say "this is just right", but the state of your mind.

Who is Ronnie Mars? My mother named me after the British actor Ronald Coleman. My Christian name might have been Ronald if my mother's friend, Edna Blakely, hadn't named her son Ronald, born the year before. Nelson, my middle name, was taken after my maternal great-grandfather Nelson Williams. It gets a little murky when it comes to my surname, Mars. I'll just submit the impact of SLAVERY; my ancestors were torn from their homeland, family and identities, ending with them adopting surnames of former slave owners or people they admired.

The gratitude I have during this week's bountiful feast, is reaped every time I speak to you. If you had seen the commercial I made fifty years ago, you would have seen a very nervous nineteen-year-old young man. But it wasn't Ronnie Mars they wanted. I was just a black face who fit the bill to advertise low-income housing in the Black community. That Ronnie Mars was a diamond in the rough. That stone's rough edges have been cut and polished over the forty-four months I've served as a Worship Associate.

Like our theme for this month, Democracy, I too have been a work in progress. UUCV has been a beacon for me; the lighthouse with its bright beam, showing me my past in ways I would not have seen if I hadn't felt a safe harbor I now call my church.

I wondered what was on the horizon after I moved on from being a Worship Associate. Not only will I continue as an instructor at Clark College this Winter, but I'll be teaching two courses beginning in January. Talking about The Civil Rights Movement and Social Justice allows me to shed light on the view that *everyone* deserves equal rights, equal treatment and equal opportunities. That constant struggle manifests itself from those in power who choose to forget about our past or pretend it never happened, making social mobility difficult to achieve.

I unwittingly separated from my roots when I assimilated into America's majority group. When I should have been reading Richard Wright, I was reading Philip Roth. What was my fear in not acknowledging the plight of my ancestors? The only thing that makes sense is that the truth was too difficult to bear while living with the shame and stigma of my status as a slavery survivor.

The Ties that Bind and Set us Free© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

We all believe in justice. Let's talk about what that looks like.

And we believe in compassion. Let's look at what that really means.

We believe in the holy work of listening, to every voice.

Let's start our conversation there...

This song is the perfect segue to letting you know about a 3pm vigil this afternoon. It's called Staying Human: A Unitarian Universalist Vigil for Gaza. It takes place online this afternoon at 3:00pm. Hosted by concerned Unitarian Universalist ministers, religious professionals, lay leaders, DRUUMM and more. DRUMM stands for Diverse and Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries. Vigil officiants include two ministers who have spoken at UUCV recently, the Rev. Mitra Rahnema and Rev. Joseph Santos-Lyons along with others.

"This vigil, open to all, is to honor the emotional work toward ending the violence. They are calling for a ceasefire and end to the indiscriminate bombing of Gaza, a release of all hostages/prisoners, humanitarian aid, and an accountability process that is not rooted in revenge. They/we deeply honor the worth and dignity of all Palestinians and all Israelis." (I'm reading to you their description of the vigil)

"In this hour of reflection, we aim to be present with one another and deepen our attention to the crises in Gaza. We are mindful of the deep and complex roots in the minds and hearts of Westerners. The intention of this first vigil is to re-root ourselves in our feelings. Join us as we grieve, rage, learn, and find solace together."

You must register online to attend – you'll get the link to the vigil once you've registered. Information about this was in your Friday bulletin.

I'm struck by the language they use, both the title "Staying Human" and the purpose, "to honor the emotional work toward ending the violence." It is emotional work, as indicated in the song by Elizabeth Alexander, and in the reading Ronnie shared. Gabor Maté, the author of the book *The Myth of Normal*, is an expert in trauma, addiction, stress, and childhood development.

The reading we shared deals with – as he calls it – the 'small-t' trauma expressed in a disconnection from the self even in the absence of abuse or overwhelming threat. But of course, in Gaza, the threat is overwhelming and the trauma is with a capitol T. But as the title of the vigil this afternoon suggests, this big T trauma begins with the small-t trauma, the need to "stay human."

Staying human, or becoming human, in the sense of humanizing, centering ourselves in justice and compassion – is the work of a lifetime and, in my opinion, the work religion should aid.

This is not going to be a long sermon this morning, given the fire drill we had earlier. I just want to share one particular learning with you that I think helps us understand this journey we are on. Ronnie already shared it in the reading, well - in his reflection as well.

I'll start with Ronnie's powerful statement that he couldn't – for a long time – acknowledge the plight of his ancestors out of fear – the truth was too difficult to bear, he felt shame from the stigma of his status as a slavery survivor. This is the "emotional work toward ending the violence" that DRUMM refers to in

their description of the vigil this afternoon. Feelings of shame make us want to hide; not investigate, get curious, or explore. Its difficult work to sit with feelings of shame, even if we know intellectually that the circumstances which bring about the feeling isn't our "fault."

Maté, in the reading, talks about the competing needs we have as humans for both attachment and authenticity. We need to belong to others, and we need to listen to our own gut feelings. Sometimes those needs are compatible, sometimes they are not. And childhood is the formative stage of development in which these competing needs can cause such harm, confusion, and trauma.

I've been reading and re-reading the book, *Transforming Conflict*, by Terasa Cooley – [share slide] I know many of you have been reading it also – and I was reminded in there of the tool of polarity management by Barry Johnson. It's such a helpful tool to break ourselves out of polarized, either/or thinking – the kind of thinking expressed in the song – *divide/unite, exclude/invite, day/night, wrong/right – no end in sight*. The kind of thinking that says it is either the Palestinians or the Israelis but can't be both. Or, as democracy is our theme this month, in this country, the two-party polarity of Democrat or Republican.

And so I decided to try this polarity management tool with these competing needs – sometimes conflicting needs for belonging and attachment over and against authenticity or the mature solid self. I've created a slide which only folks online will be able to see, [next slide] so I'm going to describe it for those of you in this room.

+ There is a definite plus side to being in community and belonging to a family or a group. Staying connected to others is a basic human need. We need those feelings of attachment, in fact, to want to care for our young and for our young to receive care. So I've put the words "Belonging, Staying Connected, and Attachment" in the upper left quadrant of the chart, with a plus sign.

- But there is also a downside. We can go along to get along - that is, not pay attention to our own reality, but accept the reality of the group. We can get into the problem of "group think" where we all agree all the time, and no new ideas will ever emerge, and we can construct a self that isn't real - I put the term "pseudo self" down, but all that means is that we've constructed a false self that conforms to the group even when we inside we don't hold those beliefs, or aren't sure.

+ There is an upside to being authentic and self-differentiated, to having a solid self that knows their own mind, is well boundaried and true to themselves.

- And there is a negative way of being too centered on one's own needs and concerns to the exclusion of the needs of others. This is the rampant individualism that plagues our culture, where people are dislocated and isolated. From that place of isolation, it is easy to think that we are at fault/ or credited for circumstances that really don't have anything to do with us – like being born into a formerly enslaved family. [stop share]

None of us chose the family we were born into. Some of us got lucky and others, not so much. As we mature, we tend to move through these quadrants. First, we belong to our family and then as we begin to notice the negative aspects of our particular family, we begin to assert our individual identity and then by focusing on our own distinctiveness, we can lose connection with others and feel alone, which might bring us back to the group. The symbol I didn't put on this diagram, which Cooley has in her book, is the infinity symbol as we go in and out of the various quadrants. That movement is what is called "polarity management."

The goal of maturity, of course, is to reconcile the upper quadrant qualities and benefit from belonging and authenticity both. But as the Matés write, the clash between attachment and authenticity “is ground zero for the most widespread trauma in our society: namely, the ‘small-t’ trauma expressed in a disconnection from the self even in the absence of abuse or overwhelming threat.”

Small-t traumas can be as simple as cultural norms like “girls are nice” or “big boys don’t cry” that clash against the reality of an appropriately boundaried girl who is perceived as mean because she doesn’t want to go along with the group, or a boy who cries when he’s sad – again, an appropriate response, or the child for whom the categories “girl” and “boy” don’t even make sense to their gender identity. We’ve all had such experiences, even if we grew up in loving families with relatively mature adults to nurture us. We are shaped by such experiences, and often wounded by them.

It is these ‘small-t traumas’ that can lead to large T traumas such as the violence in Gaza or Ukraine. Greater exposure to violence is associated with more aggressive behaviors among children, according to a recent story on National Public Radio entitled “How a history of trauma is affecting the children of Gaza.” When I read about how the aggression starts out as pushing and shoving other kids, I couldn’t help thinking of the former house speaker Kevin Mccarthy recently shoving Tennessee Representative Tim Burchett. So though I am framing this conversation in the personal context of our lives – the lives we control – please know that it is about the larger world in which we live. It is about our democracy, our government, and the breakdown of democracy worldwide.

The task of becoming more fully human, or staying human, in the sense of humanizing, requires us to look at those foundational experiences and reworking them and healing from them so that we might center ourselves in justice and compassion. This is the emotional work toward ending violence. It is the work of a lifetime and, in my opinion, the work religion should aid.

That’s all I wanted to share this morning. Your homework, should you choose to take it on, is to consider your family of origin this week, whether you gather in thanksgiving with them or not. If you are alone this Thursday, take some time to journal about your family of origin, remembering times you felt like you belonged and times you felt like a stranger and different from the family. If you are with others this Thursday, notice the competing pulls of belonging and authenticity, and notice in which quadrant you are most at home. Pay attention to your gut feelings when they arise and honor them, and feel the connections with others and all of life. I give thanks for the opportunity to mature and grow throughout our lives, with the help of others.