

Elections Transform Us
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
November 10, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Alexis Balkowitsch

I don't feel qualified to be up here today. Whatever that means.

I had originally planned to be sharing some cute stories about my childhood experiences with elections. How I was probably the only seven year old making their own "Vote Mondale" yard signs. How my dad—a blue collar democrat who worked so many hours that he wasn't around to teach me much of anything—made absolutely sure I learned the importance of unions, voting, and organizing. That though I learned that yes, elections are very important, they're also boring. And usually disappointing.

Because that's how it was in a Democratic family in the 80's. I may have been born in the Carter years, but the first President I remember is Reagan. And then Reagan again. And then Bush. And so I grew up believing two things about elections. One, they are always disappointing. And two, we never give up hope.

And then the years of winning, and losing, and winning again...nothing was ever really perfect, and sometimes it was downright awful, but somehow it all still felt survivable.

And then 2016 happened, and a shock that left so many of us blindsided—transformation of our country, our politics, even our friends and family. Maybe we shouldn't have been so blindsided by it, but that's neither here nor there now. And what we *need* now, is *continued* transformation. Hope, love, and support out of despair, fear, and isolation.

Now I know I've mentioned before my dislike for toxic positivity. That doesn't mean that I don't fall victim to it—especially in times like these, when I see my loved ones hurting, and all I want to do is immediately give them their hope back, instead of giving them space to feel their feelings.

But one facet of toxic positivity that I will always dislike is calling a bad situation acceptable because it made you stronger...or that we should have gratitude for a terrible event because something unexpectedly good came out of it later.

Bad situations are Bad, period. It's okay to recognize that some things just plain suck. And that our feelings—anger, grief, fear, misery, confusion, and everything between and beyond—are all valid. We should give space to and honor our honest reactions—I remember crying until my eyes swelled shut in 2016. I haven't managed to cry yet this time, but I can tell you I had the mother of all panic attacks.

And yes—I can tell you that there are aspects of my life that transformed in positive ways. I met people and joined communities I never would have found otherwise. I protested, and spoke at public hearings, and was resilient in a myriad of ways that I never thought possible. I learned—about politics, law, history, racism, gender, societal structures—and then used that to adapt, change, and grow. And yes, now I can take a little comfort in knowing I've done this before, that I've proven to myself I can survive scary things, I can help others, I can learn and build on that foundation. I will never say the bad things aren't bad, I will never be grateful they happened, but I can be open to the things they teach.

So yeah...I still don't feel qualified to be up here today. I can share a story, but I don't feel like I have an amazing nugget of wisdom to share, or a fancy new coping mechanism, or that I'm any less hurt, confused, sad, and angry as anyone else. All I know is that now is not forever, and we are not alone.

Elections Transform Us© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

I'm wearing a special stole this morning. It's one that grounds me and provides me comfort. This is a week in which grounding and comfort are needed. When I first began in the ministry, which is over twenty years ago now, I wore this stole every single Sunday, over a full-length black robe, believe it or not. (I'll wear it this afternoon over that robe when I attend the ordination of Stephanie Skalac in Oregon City this afternoon. She's preached here before – you may remember her.) I probably wore it every Sunday for the first two years of my ministry. It is one made for me by my sister and given to me at my ordination. She asked me to help her design it and I told her I wanted it to represent my theology. I wanted the sea at one end and the sky at the other, with trees and flowers, a rainbow and blackberries – I was very specific about blackberries for they remind me of the Northwest and the countless times I picked them as a child, eating nearly as many as I brought home. My sister did most of the work on it, but so did other women in my family – my mother, my grandmothers, my niece... and so when I wear it, I bring the strength of the women in my family with me.

I bring the strength of the women in my family with me to this pulpit this morning, and the strength of the natural world. The strength I bring is not dictatorial or autocratic, it is not power-over strength, but power-with strength. Its impact is not always immediate or even visible, as it doesn't rely on domination, discrimination, bullying, oppression and control. Instead, the strength I bring this morning is one of respect, trust, mutual support, solidarity and inclusion.

We need all the strength we can muster in the days and years to come, but we need the strength of the collective, not a strongman. We need the strength of inclusion, not discrimination and exclusion. Like Robin Wall Kimmerer, I choose to uphold the laws of reciprocity, regeneration, of mutual flourishing. I choose the Maple and the trees as my guide. Being in the Pacific Northwest, perhaps I choose the Douglas Fir, but I choose the sea and the stars, the flowers, the rainbow, and the blackberry. Kimmerer has an entire chapter on strawberries, but I choose the blackberry – and I know that what I consider a blackberry is actually an immigrant or refugee, a displaced plant, an invasive species, but I can't help but love it all the same.

In the wake of this election, the result of which is devastating, even though we knew it was possible, I have turned to Nature and the writings of Robin Wall Kimmerer, to remind myself of an alternative set of values than those which were celebrated in this election, that are glorified in this country.

Transformation is our theme this month and when I say that Elections Transform Us, what I really mean is that the results of our elections transform our own understanding of ourselves.

We knew we were divided. We knew we were polarized. But each side hoped their side would win and represent their cherished values. Our values lost this week. The values of a White Supremacist Culture that permeates these United States of America won this week, even if those who voted in those values wouldn't describe them that way or see them as problematic.

Individualism, for example, doesn't seem problematic to so many in our country – 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps,' they say, not understanding that we only exist in a state of relationship and

interdependence and that pulling up our own bootstraps is sheer illusion. We depended on others, but just didn't notice them or take them into consideration.

I don't know how you grieved this week, or comforted yourself, or if there was something even worse going on in your personal life that made the election seem remote and far away. I know that in my home, we turned off the news for a couple of days and binge watched Ted Lasso again.

Ted Lasso, you may know, is a comedy series that came on the scene in 2020 when we all needed a little hope. Ted is an American football coach recruited by an English soccer team owner who secretly hopes his lack of knowledge of British football will cause the team to lose. She wants to destroy the team because it is precious to her ex-husband and she is righteously angry at him. But Ted's emotional intelligence, optimism and kindness lead instead to surprising results. His character exemplifies the opposite of white supremacy culture – he is kind and relational, treats the kit man with the same respect he treats the owner. The sheer kindness and respect he shows the players provides a stark contrast with the American culture where winning is valued at all costs, and making money is the point. In fact, Alexis, one of the themes Ted Lasso repeats over and over again is that “now is not forever and we are not alone.” He tells his players to be like a goldfish who reportedly have the shortest memories of all species. (I'm not sure how they measure that) but his point is that the mistake we've made now – and we've made a huge mistake – but it is not forever. We can and must move on from that mistake and try again. Ted Lasso also reminds us over and over again that we are not isolated beings, that we have each other, that community and friendship matters, and you do not have to go through this alone.

Tim Walz, the little I got to know him in the weeks leading up to the election, reminded me a bit of Ted Lasso – a kind and caring coach whom players revered, and who respected the players in return. A feminist in a male body and a man not at all hesitant to play #2 to a woman who would be elected president.

The other theme of the show Ted Lasso, which is not insignificant, is that of mental health. We have a mental health crisis in this country, in my opinion, not because individuals are sick, but because the culture we live in is sick – which is a traumatizing experience for otherwise healthy humans.

The result of this election transforms our own understanding of ourselves. It tells us we have more healing to do. It tells us our American history is not yet history – that we've not healed from the trauma enacted at our founding. The quote from Abraham Lincoln that I shared last week in the reading, “As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master” rather sums it up. Traumatized Europeans came to this land, slaughtered and pushed aside the inhabitants, brought in people from Africa forced into labor and slavery –made themselves feel superior because they were better than the “savages” they controlled. These are our Founding Fathers. Our Republic was founded on this original sin – the sin of slavery – though I would add to that original sin, genocide and mass deportation. And though I know that there are those on the political right and in the middle who think those wounds are long gone in our history – there are those in our liberal churches who think those wounds are so far in our past as to no longer affect us – I believe they are wrong and that this most recent election is my evidence and proof.

So what do we do about it? How do we move forward? I'm glad you asked.

I've brought a friend with me to worship. A friend lovingly created by our most recent Director of Religious Education, Elise Massicotte, who resigned a few short weeks ago.

I know that she intended this guy (a pink stuffed pig with a jetpack on it's back) to be a regular in the Time for All Ages, but I thought I'd bring him out – or perhaps they're a *her*, or a *them*, I thought I'd

bring JETPIG out this morning for the adults, adults who have been punched in the gut this week and could use a stuffed animal to love in their lives. We could all use a little fun and inspiration.

This is JETPIG. They haven't been named yet – I believe we're still soliciting names from the children, so we'll just call them JETPIG for now. This is a pig with a power pack on their back. Do you know what fuels the jetpack on Jetpig's back? Can you guess? (LOVE)

And do you remember what JETPIG stands for? Why their name is JETPIG? Jetpig is an acronym for our common values with Love at the center, or in the jetpack.

J is for **Justice**. It is not hierarchical and oppressive, nationalistic or anti-democratic.

I'm contrasting our Unitarian Universalist values with the values which just won in this election – and, I know that a lot of issues and people were on the ballot, and there wasn't a single outcome, but I think most of us are focused on the office of the presidency and the promises made that we won't ever have to vote again....

The E is for **Equity**. Equity does not exist in a society where a few hold most of the resources and most of the people are without. Equity does not say that some people are more worthy than others and that access and inclusion apply only to some.

The T is for **Transformation**. Transformation is not trying to hold the status quo or take society back to an idealized past when white people ruled and those at the margins were deported, enslaved, or slaughtered.

P is for **Pluralism**, which is not saying that there is only one way and that must conform to a single standard. It is not a fear of difference.

Interdependence is not an extreme individualism that pretends that one can exist or even thrive in isolation and on their own. It is not an exploitation of the earth and its creatures and an abuse of people and relationships.

Generosity is not hopelessness and despair. It is not hanging onto our resources and depriving others of them, creating relationships of domination and control.

You'll hear more about Generosity at 12:30 this afternoon when our Stewardship Consultant, Rachel Maxwell, provides her report to the congregation.

JETPIG is not happy with the results of our presidential election either. They remind us of the values we hold which are in stark contrast with the traumatized culture at large, the consumerist, capitalist, culture that monetizes people and relationships that says some people are more important than others and that some can even be considered garbage and a waste. A culture that encourages isolation and cut-off, blame and shame, power-over rather than collective liberation.

Though JETPIG is mad and sad and angry – JETPIG has big feelings about the results of this election – JETPIG also has a jetpack. These jets on their back are fueled by love. They help them move forward – propel forward – fly above the toxic culture which permeates our lives and get to a new place, a place of Justice, a place of Equity and Transformation, a place where Pluralism is celebrated and Interdependence understood. A place of generosity, where we cultivate a spirit of gratitude and of hope.

Love is our fuel.

About 30 of us gathered Wednesday night here in this sanctuary. We sang songs, made music, lit candles, howled and hugged. Various people offered what they had and asked for what they needed. At one point, someone asked us to name the things we loved – and it was extensive. Even in the midst of the coming terror – and we should not minimize the danger here – but even in the midst of this new reality, we found things and people and places that we love. That love is what will get us through. That love is how we will fuel the resistance. It is how we will achieve collective liberation. Love will prevail.

“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe” said Theodore Parker in 1810. Parker was a Unitarian minister and abolitionist. “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

Martin Luther King Jr. read that sermon and improved and made more succinct his sentiment – “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

This does not mean that justice is inevitable and that we need not apply ourselves – but just the opposite, that must keep working for justice even when we can’t see conditions getting better, even when it seems like things are getting worse. Despite what the American huckster will try to sell you, despite the rhetoric of our president-elect, there is no quick fix to our problems. Transformation takes time. Healing and recovery take time. As my favorite benediction goes, the words of Wayne Arnason – “...the way is often hard, the path is never clear and the stakes are very high. Take courage,” he tells us, “for deep down, there is another truth. You are not alone.” Be like a goldfish. Now is not forever and we are not alone.