

Another F Growth Opportunity
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
November 17, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Lacey Stokes

It's been a hard couple of weeks. I've spent quite a lot of time meditating on our theme for this month, noting how very easy it is for fear to transform into hate.

While there have been times in these past two weeks that I have felt the pull of fear and hopelessness, a message without hope is not one I want to spread.

I do not want my contributions to this world to look like the very thing I have passionately spoken out against.

I don't want to allow my fear to transform into hate which means I've had to be diligent and intentional about purposely transforming my grief, my fear and my anger into something that resembles hope.

Because I am grieving. And I am afraid. And I am very, very angry.

And I am also choosing hope because I believe it is something I can choose, not something I may or may not feel.

Hope is a choice I make as I look at the world and do not accept the way things are.

One of my favorite anonymous quotes says, "People speak of hope as if it is this delicate ephemeral thing made of whispers and spider's webs. It is not. Hope has dirt on her face, blood on her knuckles, the grit of cobblestones in her hair and just spat out a tooth as she rises for another go."

My hope is not delicate.

My hope will continue to speak out. My hope will continue to give of myself and my resources to help my community and help those people whose voices have been taken away, people who have been marginalized by our society.

My hope will cry out for justice for the millions of people around the globe in danger from war and famine.

After all, this hope is rage and grief and fear transformed into power.

My hope is not a delicate thing because I refuse to allow the alternative. I will not sit in my despair and let it curdle into hate.

Hate is what got us into this mess in the first place. I will not allow myself to become a part of a cycle that could easily continue in its destruction of actual human beings.

The more I sit with these feelings, the more I realize how much they are born of love.

Love for my sisters, who I want to see free and in control of their own bodies.

Love for my trans friends and children who I want to see living their truth without judgment or fear.

Love for people I have never met but have mourned alongside as I watch their homes destroyed, their children slain, their lives irrevocably damaged.

If my love can transform into a rage and grief so crushing it feels like it might swallow me whole... Surely I can transform all of that into hope.

My hope is not a delicate thing. Nor has my love ever been anything other than fierce and protective. And I am committed to using all of that to transform as much of the world as I can reach.

***Another F Growth Opportunity*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

Even when the dark comes crashing through, you will be found. (lyrics from *You Will Be Found* from *Dear Evan Hansen*)

Many of us feel like the dark came crashing through this last week. Our deeply held values have been challenged at a national level, as I talked about last Sunday, and the future feels uncertain and scary. The truth is (that) the future by definition is uncertain and therefore potentially scary. Sometimes we are aware of it, we can see it coming, like when you're following a truck with a tarp that isn't secured and flapping so much you know it will fly off any moment. This moment feels a little like that. We can see the insecurity of the flapping tarp and we fear its sudden take-off, not knowing where it will land and who it will hurt. And not knowing if we – that one little car among many - should swerve, brake, or stay on course.

I love that reading for the description of elongated time, the way liminal moments – before and after – seem to distort our perception of time, often lengthening it and sometimes shortening it, but warping it in ways that are distinctive from “normal” time and events. We are experienced with this phenomenon collectively – so much of the COVID pandemic was lived out in a warped sense of time. But we know this personally, too, when a loved one dies, time slows down, even stops for a bit.

We are in that vehicle, driving behind a truck with a loose tarp. Our fellow citizens voted to let it loose and it will fly off. Right now is when we need to make some decisions about what we will do when the inevitable happens.

“Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells notes that the ability to act from presence and instinct is the goal of theological ethics—to be so present in the moment and so steeped in our spiritual values, beliefs, and aspirations that we act from that place without needing to think about it. It's no longer what we do; it's who we *are*.”

Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells is a Christian ethicist who served as dean of Duke University Chapel and is currently vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London. I'm struck by the two word phrase, “presence and instinct.” Because, and I'm speaking for myself here, so much of what I do is “absence and instinct” – by that I mean, I am absent in the moment – not aware of what is really happening around me, but bringing forward my own personal history or bias to infer and speculate and am reacting to that. Sometimes those instincts serve me well, because the situations are enough alike. But often, those instincts backfire because I've failed to notice that this moment is not the same as the one from my personal history or cultural bias that I've conjured up. *Meet What Arrives* was the title of that reading.

So many of the ways we unintentionally hurt one another come from this place of absence and instinct. Because if I'm reacting to someone who hurt me in elementary school when I'm talking to someone trying to share their truth with me in this moment, I am likely to miss the opportunity in the present relationship.

Opportunities. Yes, in seminary, we learned to frame our learnings as opportunities – even when they were opportunities we didn't want and hadn't asked for. Like this election. Or the sudden death of a loved one. Or a car crash.

We called them AFGO's – Another Fabulous Growth Opportunity. Although, to be honest, we didn't use the word *Fabulous*. The F stands for something else. Because we weren't happy about those "opportunities" even if we did grow from them and may not have grown in those ways without them.

What these opportunities require is presence and instinct, or presence and action. Wells says that the goal of theological ethics is that we are so steeped in our spiritual values, beliefs and aspirations, that when we act, when we are present in the moment, we act from a place of certainty and instinct because it is *who we are*.

Last week, we talked about some of those values that describe who it is we are – a people fueled by Love, who value Justice and Equity, Transformation and Pluralism, Interdependence and Generosity. We are steeped in those values. Some of them are also beliefs – that is we believe we are interdependent. We reject the lie that we are isolated and alone. Yes, we've all felt like we were alone, *that nobody was there, we were forgotten in the middle of nowhere*. But it's simply not true. Because you couldn't have survived this long without people. The science tells us it's true, but it is also a belief. *You will be found*. So is Transformation. Yes, all things change, but the fact that we can change things for the better is a belief. "Hope is a choice I make," said Lacey this morning, "as I look at the world and do not accept the way things are."

Wells says that when we are so steeped in our spiritual values, beliefs and aspirations, and when we are present in the moment, we act from a place of certainty and instinct because it is *who we are*. Being present in the moment is about accepting the fact of our situation, as unwanted as it may be, we need to accept the reality, notice all the contours and colors of this reality, and act on our values. *Meet What Arrives*.

Deepen, Grow, Act is our mission. We deepen our spiritual experience by grounding ourselves in practices that nurture and sustain us and that bring us back to that Center of Love. We grow beloved community by learning new ways to be together, transforming our instincts learned for survival into skilled responses to each other and the world. And we act on our values in the wider world, transforming the world into a more loving and just, equitable, pluralistic, interdependent and generous society.

It always gives me great hope when we welcome new members into this congregation. Because they change us as much if not more than we might change them. Among our newest folks are some who are young or identify as BIPOC, Black Indigenous People of Color, and Queer and Nonbinary. That has been a recent trend in our gatherings and it gives me hope – that our faith has reached outside the often unspoken but nevertheless rigid boundaries of Unitarian Universalism and that, perhaps, we are getting better at welcoming people. I'm realistic, too, so perhaps congregations like ours are just more needed in this world. Because we are needed.

The existence of the Global Majority Group is helpful, I think, that BIPOC folks don't feel so alone, *like nobody was there, that they were forgotten in the middle of nowhere*. This is that support group that

Rachel Maxwell mentioned last week. Rachel was our stewardship consultant who spoke to the congregation last Sunday afternoon and she referenced the existence of this group for people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color. There are more than a dozen folks on their mailing list. This is within this congregation.

Our congregation, like most in the United States, is steeped in white supremacy culture – it's the air we breathe and the water we swim in – and so of course, we tend toward a toxic individualism and perfectionism and that quick fix mentality, which can interfere with the welcome of anyone who doesn't meet those unspoken standards, including bicultural folks who sometimes have (and sometimes have not) experienced other ways. It's not that we value our BIPOC and Queer members more than white, straight, cisgendered congregants... Please, if you're joining the church this morning, and you are older, white, and cisgender, please know you are welcome, too. It's that we have a collective history of neglecting (and even harming) our members with those identities and we have amends to make. We need all of us together, working together, in the same direction, toward the same vision, with our different gifts and different ways of understanding the world.

Many UU churches have this problematic sentence on their website where they say they are a "diverse community of like-minded people." It's the "like-minded" phrase which is problematic, given we are non-creedal and don't require like-mindedness. I think the phrase has meant, quite unconsciously, that we share a cultural understanding of the world – sometimes that cultural understanding includes those problematic traits of a white supremacy culture we inherited and have not yet fixed – that your value is based on what you do in the world rather than that you are, or that education equals intelligence, etc. etc. Instead, we might talk about a diverse community that shares important values centered on love.

All this is a way to say that we can do better. I would like to invite you, all of our members and friends, regardless of identity, into the work of intercultural skill building. The group at church called the Beloved Community Work Group has spearheaded this project giving you an opportunity to take this class together and discuss it with other congregants, so we can learn to talk to one another in the glory of our diversity, with conscious acknowledgement of our differences.

The blurb for the class says: "Each of us has culture-conscious and unconscious ways of being in the world. To become a truly multicultural faith, we need leaders who can build relationships effectively across difference including ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, and more.

"Learn about a model of understanding cultural competence which will help you learn these skills.

"This training is helpful for both congregations that have racial and ethnic diversity and congregations who perceive themselves to be homogenous." In other words, the training is helpful to all of us.

I think this is a start. It's been my observation that we could also use more information about trans issues – this is a population that was targeted in this election and will continue to be under fire. In fact, since 1999 there has been a Transgender Day of Remembrance. This Wednesday will be the 25th Transgender Day of Remembrance. Locally, the event will be held at the National Women's Coalition Against Violence & Exploitation.

"While transgender visibility has increased, the community continues to see the tragic suicides of transgender youth and the brutal murders of transgender people. Research shows that transgender people face harassment and discrimination in numerous contexts throughout their lives, and for many transgender women of color, the threat of violence is constant.

"The first Transgender Day of Remembrance was held in honor of Rita Hester, whose murder in 1998 led

to the “Remembering Our Dead” web project, and a San Francisco candlelight vigil in 1999. Since then, hundreds of cities around the country and the world have hosted annual Transgender Day of Remembrance events in solidarity with transgender hate crime victims.” (Human Rights Campaign website)

To be the best allies we can be to our trans members and friends, we are going to have to brush up on our facts and understandings. I recommend the Human Rights Campaign website which I quoted above about the Transgender Day of Remembrance. The truth is, it is often our youth, who take a lifelong sexuality class called OWL, who understand gender identity issues far better than their parents and grandparents. We could all use a refresher course, or accurate information for the first time in our lives. There has been a lot of misinformation disseminated, and I think we could use some good information in order to do the work that needs to be done. Fat phobia is another area I’ve observed in which we could use some work as well as disability awareness – well, as you know, the list is long and our work is ongoing. But let’s start with the intercultural training because the skills learned there transfer across all kinds of difference.

As Dr. Mark Hicks, the developer of the Beloved Conversation curriculum at Meadville Lombard Theological School, says - almost all interpersonal interactions are in fact cross-cultural.

We’re bringing back Dale Rhodes again to do some work with the Enneagram in February. The Enneagram is a system that helps us identify the strengths and limitations of our preferred strategy, giving us a way to develop more capacity beyond it. It also helps us understand others. It helps us develop better relationships and communication because by understanding how we view the world differently than others helps us navigate those differences by broadening our skills.

“Hope is a choice I make,” said Lacey this morning, “as I look at the world and do not accept the way things are.” By making that choice, we are choosing to meet what arrives – “to be so present in the moment and so steeped in our spiritual values, beliefs, and aspirations that we act from that place without needing to think about it. It’s no longer what we do; it’s who we *are*.”

We have yet Another Fabulous Growth Opportunity: We are in that vehicle, driving behind a truck with a loose tarp. Our fellow citizens voted to let it loose and it will fly off. Right now is when we need to make some decisions about what we will do when the inevitable happens. Let us equip ourselves and choose hope. Let us turn this world around.