

Holidays and Communication
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These are interesting times. Everyone I speak too is exhausted and nervous and worried about friendships, alliances, outcomes, the future. People are feeling the need to justify themselves in new ways, to retell their stories, to explain, to friend and de-friend on facebook, to hold each other accountable in new ways.

A friend of mine reminded me of a Buddhist saying: You thank the universe for all the good things in your life but you do not thank the universe for all the bad things in your life. And that is where you go wrong.

The universe is not some sort of super-parent who rewards good behavior. The universe encompasses all life, good and bad!

Here is what I took from that: There are times when we get what we want and times that we feel things go terribly wrong and neither time means that we are outside of the laws of nature, or the universe or god. It just means that different things are being asked of us.

So, what is being asked of you these days?

I find myself being asked to be more accountable for the way I express what I think and feel. We are all being called to respond to our beliefs or morals or values in new ways, in ways that are defining us as a people here in this congregation, on this island and in this world, and I don't just mean as Unitarian Universalists but as people of a liberal tradition.

Before I go on, let me clarify, I do not think that anger is wrong. Or that public protest is wrong. These rights are protected to us by the constitution. It is not mine to judge what we are feeling right now. It seems important to that we take time to feel it.

I think too that a time for reconciliation, for hearing each other, matters and that this time must happen along side of vigilant witnessing. When those who are less comfortable or protected due to race, class, gender, identity, ability, religion, sexual orientation or immigration status are being harassed or threatened, the tools of reconciliation and close listening are needed along with action and intervention which puts some of our own comfort at risk. Let me say all of that before I begin, because it must be said.

And then for the rest of this sermon, I want to ponder together how we can feel what we feel and create outcomes that move us closer to seeing and hearing one another across divides.

I was talking to a friend of mine who voted for Trump the other day. We had a long conversation about his reasons for doing so. I listened. And then he told me his concerns about some of Trump's recent appointments as advisors and to his cabinet. He also spoke of his pain at watching the increase in hate crimes and the use of misogynist language in school systems. After completing these thoughts he said, "If you had pushed me into a corner and told me that because I voted for Trump I was racist, misogynist and homophobic, I would not have just told you any of this. I would have just told you what I think is wrong with Clinton. Thank you for letting me be complex."

And let me be clear before you think too much of me, I did okay in this conversation and then told a close family member who voted the same way I did in another conversation that his statements were misogynist and that he had a long way to go in understanding women's politics! Oy vey!

Anyway, I thought about this for a long time- about human complexity, about the danger of a single story and about non-violent communication and how it is more important and necessary now than ever before, and not just between us and those who did not vote the way we did, but between us who voted the same way as well as we get impatient with each other's awareness and capacity and multi-cultural acumen.

We are all on the edge of disowning each other right now. It is running so deep. A friend told me she is afraid to go to buy a pair of shoes where she has shopped for years because she thinks she will be unwelcomed by the shop owner who voted differently than she did.

The first thing I would like to say is this, Give yourself a break! Don't be too harsh on yourself. Don't be your own executioner as you reflect on the day's events. We need each other's compassion right now and we cannot possibly give it if we are damning ourselves to hell. Remember, the Universalists relieved us all of the myth of hell a long time ago!

It is hard to take responsibility for so much right now. Sometimes I want to hide from it all. It is hard to watch the news, to hear about acts of racism, homophobia, and misogyny increasing around us. I feel overwhelmed in deciding what is best and right and necessary to do in response to it all. Reading recently about our own high school and acts of misogyny and hatred increasing What the heck are we supposed to do in the face of this all and when are we supposed to feel good about resting and refreshing ourselves?

David Brook in his NY Times op-ed piece, *The Danger of a Dominant Identity* writes, "Bigots turn multidimensional human beings into one-dimensional creatures. Anti-Semites define Jewishness in a certain crude miniaturizing way. Racists define both blackness and whiteness in just that manner... But it's not only racists who reduce people to a single identity. These days it's the anti-racists, too... A single identity

walls off empathy and the imagination... People's classifications...shape how they see the world.”¹

Brooks goes on to argue that when we see the other as a total identity: racist, misogynist, homophobic or liberal, politically correct, out of touch with the needs of the working class, there is no room for another's humanity. In this landscape, a multitude of actions become acceptable, actions that are only acceptable when enacted on those who are a type, a cast, a not-fully-human other.

In that world, we all become capable of monstrosities, the liberal and the conservative, the Trump and the Clinton voter, the blue and the red.

As many of you know, I have facilitated nonviolent communication classes, also known as NVC classes, here at The Meeting house.

In every class, we read and discuss various principles of NVC and each time I find myself exploring another aspect of who I am, the tools I employ to get my needs met, and how my judgments of others keep me from my wholeness and theirs.

In our classes, we talked about empathy for self and others and all the ways this can be a rabbit hole. We can over-empathize with others and then find ourselves not taking the time or self care to state our own feelings and needs or we can over-empathize with ourselves and not ask others what they are feelings and needing.

The idea of non-violent communication is to take the time to tell another what is happening for you when you observe something because of what you are feeling and needing or taking the time to really see another and asking him or her what he or she is really feeling while suspending judgment.

There might still be time for this work my friends. There might still be time to get to know each other more deeply beyond our labels and genders and political parties and even our fears. There might still be time, in fact this might be the time, when we must take seriously the work of non-violent communication and ask questions that burn in our mouths because we want to yell and blame but asking them and receiving the answers will make us more whole, more capable, and if there is a fight ahead, more able of fighting it with more allies with whom to fight it.

Here are some non violent communication holiday tools:

First, honestly want to learn something you do not know about someone who is not you. Second, be willing to hear something that plugs you in and to not react, and third, be willing to offer compassion even when it does not feel available. Because in

¹ David Brooks, “The Danger of a Dominant Identity” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/opinion/the-danger-of-a-dominant-identity.html?_r=0

the end, you are not doing this work to change someone else, you are doing it to change yourself, to offer yourself more of your own holiness, wholeness and peace so that you might go on and be more effective, healthy and connected to what feeds you. And then be able and available to feed others and even change the world we so desire to change.

It will be necessary to set some ground rules. Set those that keep you and other safe like: Use “I” statements, no name-calling, express feelings and needs and not political slogans or positions.

Here are some questions to think about asking another:

- What is at the heart of your political beliefs?
- What hopes, concerns, values do you have that underlie your beliefs?
- What is in your life experience that led you to such beliefs?²

Make no mistake, this is difficult work. We all want to point fingers and say, You are wrong, bad, ignorant, misinformed, and your misjudgments will cost us all dearly!

I was talking to someone who practices the 12 steps recently and he told me about Step Eight: Make a list of all persons we have harmed, and become willing to make amends to them all & Step Nine: Make direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

I asked, What about when you had to make amends with someone who has done you wrong and never made amends with you. He said, “You don’t do this for them Linda. You do this so that you might be whole. You do this, because you cannot afford not to.”

And so post election, I have decided to live with more personal integrity as a first step. I have decided to take responsibility for the ways in which I transgress the rights and spaces of others, no matter their color or gender or ability or sexuality.

I have decided to be more willing to recognize when my own frustrations, exhaustions, and limitations contribute to words and or actions that are not in line with my own desire to be a person of compassion and awareness. This does not mean that I will get it all right. It has to mean for me that I am willing to be accountable when I get it wrong, which is more often than I wish.

There is a great article called *Don’t Bite the Hook, Five Things to Remember Post Election* published in the magazine, Lion’s Roar. This is a # 3 in their list: Reestablish Dominion Over Your World:

² Maggie Herzig & John Sarrouf, Essential Partners, Inc, “Reaching Across the Red/Blue Divide” <http://www.whatisessential.org/sites/default/files/Red%20Blue%20Divide%20Final%20-%20updated.pdf>

“A friend of mine sent out an email this morning that suggested we each elect ourselves president....What can you do for your world? What or who needs tending? What needs to be added or eliminated? ...Most important, we could focus on removing every obstacle that stands between us and doing our true work in the world. We need you to own your brilliance, stop pulling punches, and offer your gift.”³

David Brooks from his article *The Danger of a Dominant Identity* closes by saying, “The only way out of (the mess of the trap of making dominant identities for others) is to continually remind ourselves that each human is a conglomeration of identities: ethnic, racial, professional, geographic, religious and so on.

Even each identity itself is not one thing but a tradition of debate about the meaning of that identity. Furthermore, the dignity of each person is not found in the racial or ethnic category that each has inherited, but in the moral commitments that each individual has chosen and lived out.”⁴

I have decided the best gift I can offer the world is my own willingness to be human, present and awake. That’s my moral commitment post election. Have you made one? If so, perhaps we can talk about these and help each other with love and witness to live into them together. I know of no other way to change the world.

May we walk together, in our families, in our congregation, on this island, and in this world a while longer my friends. We need each other and the world needs our example.

In the meantime, be well, enjoy each other from time to time. Rest. Refresh your beautiful selves. Know that you are loved beyond belief and have a Happy Thanksgiving.

³ Susan Piver, “Don’t Bite the Hook: Five Things to Remember Post Election” *Lion’s Roar*, November 12, 2016. <http://www.lionsroar.com/susan-piver-election-response/>

⁴ Brooks. “The Danger of a Dominant Identity.”