

Growing the Soul

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon
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Recently I returned from our Unitarian Universalist Association's annual national gathering, General Assembly, when representatives from UU congregations across the country gather to do the business of the Association, educated ourselves about history and theology and congregational best practices in countless workshops, and connect with our Unitarian Universalist kin.

It's a time every year that is overwhelming to say the least.

This year, I, and several delegates from our congregation were there at General Assembly in Portland, Oregon on Friday, June 26. It's two hours earlier in Portland than here, and three hours earlier than East coast time, so we UUs woke up in Portland on Friday the 26th, in hotel rooms across the city, to the news that the United States Supreme Court had decided in favor of same sex couples in *Obergefell vs. Hodges*.

Literally, it was the CNN news app on my phone that woke me up that morning... with the headline: Same Sex Marriage declared Constitutional Right by Supreme Court. I got to work right away, issuing press releases announcing our marriage equality reception and sending in a letter to the editor. I paused only to read Justice Kennedy's beautiful decision and look at photos of celebrations across the country and ugly cry into my laptop.

That morning at General Assembly, the business lectern was draped with a rainbow flag, the President of our Association invited same sex couples to come up on the stage to celebrate the legal recognition country-wide of their marriages, and a room full of thousands of UUs cried and laughed and sang *Standing on the Side of Love*.

For Unitarian Universalists, a victory for marriage equality was the culmination of literally decades of steady effort and often heart-breaking work.

Love wins, we shouted with the power of years of hope and heartache in our voices.

Moments after this celebration, dozens of UUs gathered around a TV screen in the sports bar at the entrance of the convention center and watched soberly as The Honorable Rev. Clementa Pinckney's baby daughters walked past his open coffin. Tears of a different sort rolled down our faces as President Obama eulogized a man who gave his life to service of his people and his God and who was murdered in his own church, in a time of prayer, by a racist terrorist. Our president sang *Amazing Grace*, and we joined him.

The victims of the massacre at Emanuel AME church in Charleston welcomed Dylann Roof into their midst with open arms. They prayed with him. They prayed for him.

Sometimes Love is met with gunshot. Point blank. Does that mean Love did not win, in that church, on that day?

July 26th was a complicated day, to say the least. A day to remind us that Love always wins and has not won yet. A day to remind us that there is a time to laugh and a time to weep and sometimes that time is now. All at once.

It reminds me of a poem, by the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai:

A man doesn't have time in his life
to have time for everything.
He doesn't have seasons enough to have
a season for every purpose. Ecclesiastes
Was wrong about that.

A man needs to love and to hate at the same moment,
to laugh and cry with the same eyes,
with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them,
to make love in war and war in love.
And to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history
takes years and years to do.

A man doesn't have time.
When he loses he seeks, when he finds
he forgets, when he forgets he loves, when he loves
he begins to forget.

And his soul is seasoned, his soul
is very professional.
Only his body remains forever
an amateur. It tries and it misses,
gets muddled, doesn't learn a thing,
drunk and blind in its pleasures
and its pains.

He will die as figs die in autumn,
Shriveled and full of himself and sweet,
the leaves growing dry on the ground,
the bare branches pointing to the place
where there's time for everything.

We struggled on that day at General Assembly, to hold everything. There wasn't enough space, there wasn't enough time in a day for it all. There were those who couldn't see their hard-earned celebrations interrupted. There were those whose grief had no patience for celebration. These feelings were real and true. Most of us just felt gob-smacked. Pulled and stretched by hearts that were breaking and rejoicing.

A person, it turns out, needs
to hate and forgive and remember and forget,
to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest
what history
takes years and years to do.
And we have to do it in a moment. The day will not wait.

This life. It is ambiguous and intense. And on that day we felt it. Intensity and ambiguity.

Incidentally, that is number 5 on the humanist list of spiritually mature character traits developed by my esteemed colleague Kendyl Gibbons. A tolerance for intensity and ambiguity, the capacity to hold many things at once and live with courage into a world that is neither one thing nor the other, but more often everything at once and more than we know we can handle.

It feels as imperative now as it ever has, in this time of technological wonder and environmental devastation, in this time of progress and backlash.

I am convinced now more than ever that the state of our soul as a nation and the state of our souls as human siblings, rests on our capacity to be brave and vulnerable and hopeful and true in a world that is burning around us.

Now more than ever, we are called to spiritual maturity. We are compelled to grow in soul, for just such a time as this.

That is why we are here: sharpening our consciences, joining in the lonely yearnings of the heart, longing together for a world made whole, though we each hold one of the missing pieces.

We are here to find courage and to find our voice in a world that is burning around us.

Since the massacre of 9 beloved souls at Mother Emanuel AME church in Charleston three weeks ago, churches have been burning across the south. Historically African American churches have been set on fire, 6 of them in the course of one week.

You'd think this were 1965, except for the fact that Twitter has been our main source of information regarding these fires, in the face of early mainstream media silence.

Black churches are burning across the south, and lest you think it's happening far, far away, you possibly should know that the Sunday after the Charleston massacre, our local AME church had armed guards positioned around the church. Because this terrorism is real and terrifying.

Because black and brown bodies are and always have been under threat in our country. Under threat because of racial hatred and under threat because of indifference. Under threat from white supremacists, and under threat from centuries of economic exploitation. Under threat of violence by the fearful and under threat of silence by the well-intentioned.

There is an awakening going on in our country right now. Ferguson started the alarm and a powerful and courageous movement of young people of color has arisen, forcing the American conscience away from the snooze button, declaring that #BlackLivesMatter and demanding that we stay awake.

And I speak to the white liberals in the room now, using the language of us. It's going to take our transformation, collectively and individually, to stay awake in this time. It's going to take more than our good intentions. It's going to require our spiritual maturity: Our capacity to hold tension, to hope, to be present to pain without looking away, to see our own role in that pain with self-aware honesty, to acknowledge our complicity and to change.

Now is the time for our souls to grow and stretch. Because the world is burning around us. And if you are white, the systems of power and privilege around you will conspire to hide the flames. You don't have to be a racist to support this system. You just have to close your eyes.

One day, the Buddha was approached by a student. The student asked him, "Are you the messiah?" "No", answered the Buddha. "Then are you a healer?" "No", the Buddha replied. "Then are you a teacher?" the student persisted. "No, I am not a teacher." "Then what are you?" asked the student, exasperated. "I am awake," the Buddha replied.

And is that not why we are here, from whatever tradition we emerge? To stay awake in a world that is ambiguous and intense, beautiful and brutal, in a world that burns us with the fires of passionate love and the fires of destructive hate alike.

Is that not why we are here, To laugh and cry with the same eyes, with the same hands to throw stones and to gather them, to make love in war and war in love... And to forgive and remember and forget, to arrange and confuse, to eat and to digest what history takes years and years to do?

We are here to fall in love again with our fellow human, to be not indifferent, or

silent or afraid. But together in the time of the shared heart's yearning to find courage, and hope, and strength. We are here to grow our souls. Our nation and our world depend upon it. Our human family depends upon it. Love, itself, the love that wins and has not won yet, depends upon it.

Let us make it so.