

**Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, Missouri**  
**Worship Service – 10:30 a.m. Sunday, August 19, 2018**

**Opening Reading**

The following is an excerpt from a paper titled "The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action" by the late African American poet Audre Lorde, which she delivered at the Modern Language Association's "Lesbian and Literature Panel" in December 1977:

"The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break the silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken... My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you."

**Second Reading Preceding Delivery of Reflections**

Excerpt from Chapter 12 of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Charles Dodson, writing under the pen name Lewis Carroll:

"Are they in the prisoner's handwriting?" asked another of the jurymen.

"No, they're not," said the White Rabbit, "and that's the queerest thing about it."  
(The jury all looked puzzled.)

"He must have imitated somebody else's hand," said the King. (The jury all brightened up again.)

"Please your Majesty," said the Knave, "I didn't write it, and they can't prove I did: there's no name signed at the end."

"If you didn't sign it," said the King, "that only makes the matter worse. You MUST have meant some mischief, or else you'd have signed your name like an honest man." There was a general clapping of hands at this: it was the first really clever thing the King had said that day.

"That PROVES his guilt," said the Queen.

**Reflections: Being UU in an Era of Blood-Sport Politics**

**By Steve Scott**

*[Note: Following is the full text as originally written. Certain parts were omitted when these reflections were delivered to fit within the available time during worship.]*

Did the reading from Alice in Wonderland ring a bell? It did for me, reminding me of the many arbitrary and capricious decisions made by our current national government. Charles Dodson, writing as Lewis Carroll, was no fan of the goings-on in Queen Elizabeth's court, as I'm sure virtually none of us are fans of our current regime.

These times of blood-sport, winner-take-all politics marked by xenophobia and hyper-nationalism may feel new and different, but they are actually recurring patterns in American history. This morning I plan to remind you of some of this history and explore how we as UUs can resist these ugly phenomena while remaining true to our principles.

To begin, we need to see clearly that a ruthless movement has seized the United States. One of our major political parties went rogue decades ago and to advance its own ends and has systematically:

- disenfranchised millions of Americans,
- put the majority under the thumb of a possibly permanent ruling minority,
- slipped any remaining traces of civic decency, and
- cynically installed immoral and incompetent grifters in high office.

We also need to see clearly that xenophobia and racism have been baked into our culture from the outset, starting with Native American genocide and African American slavery and continuing with waves of racist anti-immigrant sentiment aimed at, among others, the Chinese, the Japanese and other Asians, the Irish, the Italians, and Mexicans and others from south of the border – all leading up to the current hysterical animus toward Muslims.

And these racist and xenophobic attitudes go hand-in-hand with the nationalistic fervor that sees Americans – mostly white – as the best people and others as enemies. The love-it-or-leave-it nationalism prominent in the Vietnam and 911 eras and resurgent today drapes an American flag over festering resentments about the changing shape of society – one in which:

- black people gained political agency,
- women popped up here and there in positions of power,
- Native Americans demanded sovereignty over their lands,
- queer folk asserted their right to exist,
- non-white people became more visible throughout the population, and,
- sex was reframed as something people do with each other instead of a means of control.

The way democracy is now conducted may have hit a new low in our lifetime – but not in the life of our country. For the first century of the United States' existence, politics was a zero-sum game – and often a blood sport. All fights were to the death, and the parties that lost were eliminated:

- The Federalists ceased to exist.
- So did the old Whigs after losing their battle to the death with the Democrats.
- The battle between the antebellum Democratic Party and the Republicans ended in the Civil War.
- The Democrats continued to exist in name, at least, but the national party was shattered in 1860, and for the next 70 years, it was able to win power only when Republicans were divided.

Politics was conducted like combat, too. Legislators frequently resorted to fisticuffs or dueling pistols:

- In one memorable battle in the House of Representatives, Democratic-Republican Matthew Lyon defended himself with a pair of fire tongs against Federalist Roger Griswold, who was beating him with a wooden cane.

- One of the inciting incidents of the Civil War itself came when Democratic Congressman Preston Brooks infamously beat Republican Senator Charles Sumner senseless with a cane.
- Founding Father Alexander Hamilton was shot dead by Aaron Burr in a political duel.

Immigrants were an early target of our government when Federalists under John Adams passed the 1798 Alien and Sedition acts to combat both dissent and Democratic-Republican strength among immigrants. The laws extended the naturalization period from five years to 14, allowed so-called "dangerous" aliens to be imprisoned and deported, and led to Democratic-Republicans being jailed and heavily fined for saying or writing almost anything against Adams and his government.

The Alien and Sedition acts provoked Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans into formulating the doctrine of "nullification," the idea that states had the right to ignore any federal laws they deemed to be unconstitutional. Nullification may have seemed a perfectly reasonable reaction to the Federalists' overreach, but it later empowered every misbegotten states' rights crusade from the Civil War to efforts by contemporary vigilantes to usurp public lands.

This sort of tit-for-tat, of playing for all the marbles all the time, could have become irreversible, and it only abated because in the years after Reconstruction, two powerful new mass political movements, Populism and Progressivism, disrupted the traditional structure of the two-party system.

As a result, U.S. politics was essentially made over into a four-party system, with malleable liberal and conservative wings in each major party. These wings crosscut regions and ideologies in ways that seem incomprehensible today:

- Southern white populists, for instance, often favored liberal economics, farm subsidies, suffrage for women, Prohibition – but also the KKK.
- Nelson Rockefeller, a major Republican leader for almost two decades, was an adamant Cold Warrior; a fervent advocate of civil rights; a champion of greater spending on public education and infrastructure; but also a supporter of draconian, mandatory prison sentences for drug use.
- Democratic Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson backed a massive defense build-up and a hard line toward the Soviet Union – but also supported unions and a greater welfare state.

The four-party system forced greater cooperation onto our political system. Every bill, every appointment was no longer a fight to the death because you knew you might need someone across the aisle tomorrow. So the parties worked with each other, and none of the people in charge were looking to win all the marbles forever.

The four-party system prevailed for about a hundred years until it began to crumble in the 1970s as politics hardened once more along regional and ideological lines, beginning with the Republicans' "Southern strategy" to scoop up Wallace voters and followed by the reshaping of the Democrats from a culturally diverse party with shared liberal economics into a center-right economics party with shared cultural values.

So we're back to the winner-take-all past, not least because of the extreme backlash of segments of our society against the election – twice! – of an African American President. Barack Obama's success, far from bespeaking a post-racial America, had the effect of spurring a more alarmed and virulent racism among sectors of the white population.

Among the many privileges certain Americans enjoy is the right to protest political and societal change, to demand that things revert back to how they were before. The angry demand for a reversion to the past – the politics of backlash – has been the basis of the right's electoral success for decades. They have held up one social or political development after another and told voters, "These changes are the symptom and cause of what you have lost, and we can help you get them back." The shrewd deployment of backlash is how the right has managed to win so many elections while representing the economic interests of a small elite. The narrative of loss was seldom more clear than in the Obama years, where the mere presence of an African American in our highest office was seen by many as a kind of theft.

But now we're seeing something extraordinary – a liberal backlash, potentially as potent as what we're used to seeing from the right. As the recent argument over "civility" has shown, we tend to treat conservative anger as something to be analyzed, understood, even empathized with, while liberal anger is greeted with stern lectures about proper behavior. But more than ever, liberal anger is something the political system is going to have to deal with.

Much of that anger will be focused productively into organizing and activism that takes power away from the officeholders at all levels who have brought us to this point. But it will also be visible in ways that are spontaneous, emotional, and even uncivil. Those matter too, because they show us how Americans are reacting to the damage being done to their country and their lives.

Now I turn to my views about how we as Unitarian Universalists should engage. Should we make war, or should we make love? I say we make love. I say we embrace love as our means of war on hate, while adhering as closely as possible to our Unitarian Universalist Principles. Please review our Principles on the back of your Order of Service. I'll give you a few moments before proceeding.

*[Note – Unitarian Universalist Principles are as follows:*

- 1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person*
- 2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*
- 3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*
- 4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning*
- 5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large*
- 6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*
- 7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.]*

OK, I think that you'll see that all of our principles, in one way or another, speak to the conditions of our time and provide guidelines for how we should frame not only our resistance to those conditions, but also our advocacy for a new order.

One key Principle I want to focus on this morning is the First, "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." Frankly, this is the one that has inspired me the most but also has given me the most trouble. It's virtually impossible for me to believe in the "inherent worth and dignity" of many of our so-called political leaders, particularly some at the very top.

However, with the help of Rev. Molly and other UU clergy whose writings I have studied, I have come to understand that our First Principle does not require us to believe that no people are bad. Indeed, we know from our life experiences that most people are a mix of good and bad traits. "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" is not a statement that all people necessarily are good – rather, it is an ethical principle. Worth and dignity is not something we confer on others when they are good and rescind when they are bad. It's not something that necessarily resides in others – *rather, it is something that is demanded of us.*

In short, to affirm and promote the worth and dignity of every person is to always strive to have worth and dignity ourselves. Our inherent worth and dignity lies in the fact that we are capable of acting with loving kindness and compassion. To affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person is not to view the world through rose-tinted glasses. Rather, it is to see the world as it is – a combination of the good and the bad – accompanied by the realization that by acting with worth and dignity ourselves, by acting with loving kindness, we can create the possibility that every other person's inherent worth and dignity may become manifest.

Circling back to the recent "civility" arguments, it's ironic in view of the incivility of many on the right that they complain mightily when their opponents act in an uncivil manner. But I believe that civility is a corollary demand of our First Principle. I also believe that incivility is a charge that tends to be leveled by people who have power against people with lesser or no power, so I do not propose that we condemn those who may sometimes be uncivil in pushing back against power structures – but I do believe that as UUs our approach should be unrelentingly civil.

Now, I acknowledge there is a certain satisfaction in uncivil name-calling. There is no shortage of phrases that can be deployed – for example, Agent Orange, Cheeto Fuhrer, Bouffant Buffoon, and Der Gropenfuhrer, to name just a few. In moments of rage, in private, I confess to using these and similar expressions, but I submit that using them in public is contrary to our First Principle. In addition, name-calling amounts to an *ad hominem* argument, which is a logical fallacy, and we're better off focusing on issues rather than personalities. So, if someone calls you a "libtard," resist the temptation to respond with "Trumptard."

One strategy you can use when responding to those who deploy Bible verses in support of abominable actions is to be ready with a few Bible quotes of your own. Here are some possibilities:

- Psalm 101, Verse 7 - "No one who practices deceit will dwell in my house; no one who speaks falsely will stand in my presence."
- I Corinthians 15, Verse 33 - "Evil communications corrupt good manners."

If there's one thing the Bible has plenty of, it's fulminations against putting up with bad people doing bad things. A little searching will turn up other Bible quotes that you can deploy when confronted with use of the Bible to support evil.

Another of our principles speaks of democracy, and that entails voting. I suspect that virtually all of us vote, but how often do we work on encouraging others to vote? Turnout will be critical to determining the outcome of the upcoming elections, and as Barack Obama told us, elections have consequences. Turnout will be super-critical in our own state, where the same forces behind the 2016 hack of the Democratic National Committee's emails have already attempted to get into Senator Claire McCaskill's computer systems. So get out the vote!

And people need to demonstrate. Part of the fix will be the sound of feet walking and the sight of everyday people displaying their resistance fiercely.

And we need to engage in more debate. While some argue that respectfully debating ideas seen as racist or sexist legitimates them, refusing to debate carries a price as well – it conveys a message of weakness, a lack of faith in one's own ideas. But don't debate everyone – there's no point in trying to engage hucksters who will stick to their talking points and be unmoved.

Ultimately, we cannot settle for a return to normalcy, a backward march to national equilibrium – rather, we should fight for a new national consensus. We need to assert that America is a country defined by the pluralism declared in its founding documents and not by the segregation and racial terrorism practiced since its inception. The old politics was built in service to white supremacy and was never dismantled to reflect our emerging plural society. So a return to the *status quo ante* is unacceptable.

How can we as individuals have an impact? A good start would be to join one or more of the teams in our church working for social, economic and environmental justice, such as our Social Action Team, our Green Sanctuary Team, and our immigrant-supporting Sanctuary Team. If you're more reclusive, just work in a supporting role somewhere in the church, which frees others to go out and speak out. Or join with those from other faith traditions by working with Missouri Faith Voices. And there are numerous local groups you can engage with, including Peaceworks and Race Matters, Friends, just to name two.

If you want to think globally about the range of issues that need to be addressed, you can hardly do better than the well-thought-out program you'll find at <http://campaignforamericasfuture.org/>, which addresses all of our UU principles in one way or another. You can pick and choose from among the 13 points in this program to speak out and campaign on the ones that most engage you:

- No. 1. **Jobs for Everyone.** What is needed is a large national investment program to put millions of American to work rebuilding America.
- No. 2. **Investment in a Green Economy.** Catastrophic climate change is a clear and present danger. We should lead the global green industrial revolution.
- No. 3. **Empowerment of Workers to Reduce Inequality.** The key to reversing inequality is strong unions – and a step in that direction recently was taken by Missouri voters by soundly defeating a so-called "right to work" law.

● **No. 4. Opportunity and Justice for All – with a Focus on Communities Harmed by Racism.** Special attention must be directed to communities harmed by the legacy of Jim Crow, segregation, discrimination, criminalization, deindustrialization, and destruction of the public sector.

● **No. 5. Establishing a Fair and Humane Immigration Policy.** Need I say more?

● **No. 6. Guaranteeing Women’s Equality.** We should guarantee that women earn the same pay, protections and opportunities as men in the workplace and in society.

● **No. 7. High-Quality, Free Public Education – Pre-K to University.** Every young person must have high-quality, free public education from preschool through college. Public education must be controlled by the public – not by corporations and charter school hucksters.

● **No. 8. Medicare for All – And Shared Economic Security.** Health care is a right, not a privilege. That requires moving to Medicare for All. And no one in America should go hungry or homeless.

● **No. 9. Making Corporations and Wealthy Pay Their Fair Share.** Corporations and the rich do not pay their fair share in taxes – even though they pocket the greatest benefits from public investments.

● **No. 10. A Global Economic Strategy for Working People.** Our global trade and tax policies have been created for and by multinational companies. We must renegotiate trade deals and rethink tax policies that benefit the already-wealthy while encouraging the export of American jobs, driving down pay and worker protections, and harming the environment.

● **No. 11. Reformation of National Security Policy.** Our current policies commit us to policing the world. We need a real security policy that makes military intervention a last resort and focuses on global threats like climate change, poverty and inequality.

● **No. 12. Closing Wall Street’s Casino.** Financial deregulation has devastated our economy. We need to break up the big banks, levy a speculation tax, and provide low-income families with safe and affordable banking services.

● **No. 13. Rescuing Democracy from the Special Interests.** Big money has corrupted our democracy. We need to fight for public financing of elections that bans corporate and big money.

As Rev. Molly reminded us last week, we are all part of a web of influence, and we all count, no matter how small our individual contributions. Just showing up is often the most important thing you can do. But take care if you show up in support of a marginalized group that you let them take the lead and don't presume to show them how it should be done.

So, I say unto you, go forth and resist – but don't just resist. Go forth and help create a new society that works for all and affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person on Earth. And don't forget – your silence will not protect you.

*[Closing reading follows on next page.]*

### Closing Reading

The following is an excerpt from *The Ordeal of Mansart* published by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1957:

"How shall Integrity face Oppression? What shall Honesty do in the face of Deception, Decency in the face of Insult, Self-Defense before Blows? How shall Desert and Accomplishment meet Despising, Detraction and Lies? What shall Virtue do to meet Brute Force? There are so many answers and so contradictory; and such differences for those on the one hand who meet questions similar to this once a year or once a decade, and those who face them hourly and daily."