

An Altered Universe?

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading – Nancy Wood

Hold on to what is good
even if it is
a handful of earth.
Hold on to what you believe
even if it is
a tree which stands by itself.
Hold on to what you must do
even if it is
a long way from here.
Hold on to life even when
it is easier letting go.
Hold on to my hand even when
I have gone away from you.

Sermon

Many of us awoke to a strange, new world on Wednesday morning.

A world which seemed to upend many of our basic assumptions
about how things work.

A world that now rewards egregious behaviour with political power.

A world that discounts the fundamental virtues of human decency.

A world that invites verbal and physical attacks on people
because of their gender, the colour of their skin,
their country of origin, or who they love.

A world that feels less stable and less safe.

A world that is confusing.

A world that is set against so many of our deepest values, as Unitarians.

It seems we have entered into a new “age of anxiety.”

Yet, if history is any guide,
things should be back to “normal”
in just a few months, if not a few weeks.

Other tumultuous moments in history
have shown we humans have a remarkable capacity to adapt,
to take changes—even when they’re deeply disturbing—in stride.

Sure, we can be scared or scarred by it all,
but, more often than not,
we simply somehow “keep calm and carry on.”

Eventually, we find a new set-point
and learn to live well enough, at least on the outside,
with whatever life has handed us.

While this capacity to adapt is very often a positive thing,
there are times when adapting is ill-advised.

Times when we must resist
in order to save or protect something precious.

Much ink has been spilled this week
about the meaning of this present political moment.

Most of the reporting has tried to predict the impact the next president
will have on the U.S., and by extension, the world as a whole.

Not an easy task with such an erratic leader
so prone to contradicting himself.

Most of what the media has had to say,
and what I suspect most of us have felt,
is that this election marks a turning point,
that we are, indeed, now living in an altered universe.

But like the story Lynn Torrie told earlier,
it may be too soon to tell.

Too soon to know whether and how the change now upon us
will truly alter our universe.

Now, to be clear, I have every confidence the new president will take provocative steps to shake things up.

That's what he promised,
and just under half of the U.S. population
is fully expecting him to deliver.

Living on this side of the border,
we are almost certain to face the consequences
of what he chooses to do and not do.

His promise to withdraw from the Paris accords on climate change,
to pull U.S. support from NATO,
and to renegotiate or leave NAFTA altogether,
could have a profound impact on
our environment, our economy, and on our national security.

There's little doubt the next presidency will scramble the status quo.

But will it really alter our reality?
Will it truly alter our universe?

Will it change us?
Shake us up?
Will it stir us to action?

Or will we simply adapt,
and, in a few months' time,
accept the state of things as the "new normal"?

My deepest prayer is that we will resist the seductive pull to accept,
to go along with, to acquiesce to anything
that threatens the well-being of the web of life—
anything that violates our values of love and justice,
anything that threatens a future of human flourishing on this earth.

* * *

Fifty years ago last May, Martin Luther King, Jr.
delivered an address to the General Assembly
of the Unitarian Universalist Association, of which we were then a part.

In that address, he famously said:

There are some things in our nation and in our world
to which I'm proud to be maladjusted...

I never intend to adjust myself to segregation and discrimination.

I never intend to become adjusted to religious bigotry.

I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions
that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few,
and leave millions of people
perishing on a lonely island of poverty
in the midst of a vast ocean of prosperity.

I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism,
and to the self-defeating effects of physical violence...

And I call upon you, [he said,]
to be maladjusted to these things until the good society is realized...¹

He went on to argue for the establishment of a new organization, the International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment.

Mind you, this wasn't meant to be a formal institution, per se,
but a movement of resistance to whatever is unjust,
to that which threatens life rather than serves it.

We are in a moment that cries out for creative maladjustment.

The truth is, we've been in this moment for a while now already,
but our response to it has yielded mixed results.

As it turns out, it's not easy
to sustain maladjusted creativity over the long haul.

We get tired.
We get bored.
We get distracted.

And so we adapt.
We acquiesce.
We accept what is.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Don't Sleep Through the Revolution," speech delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in Hollywood, Florida, May 18, 1966.

We adjust, and we move on.

So, I ask the question again:
are we now living in an altered universe?

It's too soon to tell.
It's still too soon to tell in what ways it will be altered—
both by others, and by our own efforts.

And it's too soon to tell whether and how we will be altered.

* * *

That's why it's useful to look for signs of change.

As full of despair as many of us have been this week,
I'm finding hope in the voices that are rising in response.

I find hope in the protest marches held across the U.S. and around the globe
to denounce the bigotry and violence that's erupted
in recent days and months,
all in the name of a sordid politics
that trades on fear of human difference.

I'm inspired by people reaching out in resistance to racism—
conveying to the minority groups targeted by bigotry that they are not alone.

I'm filled with hope seeing the number of non-Muslims
who've decorated the sidewalks outside of mosques
with affirming messages written in chalk.

And I'm moved by the many times this week
I've heard parents say their young children
can't wrap their heads around the election outcome.
That their children just keep asking, "Why?"

I cannot think of a more sacred question
than hearing a small child wonder at why injustice is allowed to persist.
At wondering why the bully won.

There are many complex reasons to explain why—
reasons that will involve much soul-searching for years to come.

Yet, out of the mouths of babes comes the call

to “the better angels of our nature.”

* * *

For most of my life—in my bedroom as a teenager,
and now in my office as a minister—
I’ve kept what’s called a “Newton’s Cradle” on display.

You’ve probably seen one before.

(If not, watch this: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijkG1hw8TcQ>)

There are, with this one, five steel balls, suspended from a frame.

They demonstrate Sir Isaac Newton’s 1st and 3rd Laws of Motion.

That an object at rest will remain at rest
unless a force acts upon it.

And that for every action
there is always an opposite and equal reaction.

The energy of pulling back one ball
and releasing it against the other four
transfers that energy through the resting balls
until it causes the last ball to spring into action.

Back and forth the energy is transferred.

By using two or three or four of the balls,
we see how the first action causes an equal and opposite reaction.

Here *endeth* the science lesson.

But here *beginneth* the life lesson.

Call them, if you like, Newton’s 1st and 2nd Laws of Human Emotions.

When a powerful catalyst sends energy
out into the world through some action,
that energy moves through one person to another,
stirring people to take meaningful action
they may not have previously intended to take.

And for every action, there is the possibility of a meaningful reaction.
A powerful catalyst can act in a way that gives rise to a response,

that calls forth an answer, that provokes resistance.

As concerning as the next four years may prove to be,
we always, always, have the capacity to make some response.

The energy released by destructive actions can be met—
by resistance, by inspired action, by compassion,
by love mobilized in the service of life.

* * *

It has felt odd to me these last few days
to sort through how to react to an election held in a foreign country,
even though I'm a citizen of that country and voted in its election.

On one level, I've never felt more Canadian than I have this week.
Never have I felt so grateful to live in this, my adopted country.

I've also felt genuine empathy for the many Americans
who've proclaimed their readiness to move to Canada.

Indeed, the best comic relief I found this week
was from our own Bill Dunk-Green's post on Facebook.

From here in Toronto, he wrote:
"I'm moving to Canada, er... I'm applying for the mission to Mars."

There's really been no place to hide this week
from what's happened south of the border.

But it has been interesting to see so much American attention
directed toward fleeing to the Great White North.

Obviously enough, we have problems of our own.
We have much work to do
to fulfill our promise as a country.

And that work is becoming all the more important in a changing world.

Many commentators in the media have pointed out recently
that Canada is moving in the opposite direction
from the other major western democracies.

On government investment in infrastructure,

on immigration, on refugees, on celebrating diversity.

An article in *The Walrus* on Wednesday called Canada
“the last country on earth to believe in multiculturalism.”²

As far-right political movements gain traction in other democracies,
many of them with ultra-nationalist views
that distrust immigrants and refugees,
there is a question about the possibility
of similar movements taking root here.

Already, one of the federal MPs from Ontario,
vying for the leadership position of her party,
has praised Trump for his recent success
and said we need a similar message delivered here.

While there is an understandable anger about the status quo
that needs to be explored,
I hope against hope that the message she intends
isn't one of racist bigotry, of misogyny, of queer-phobia, and misguided nativism.

It's been said that living next door to the U.S.
is like sleeping next to an elephant.

There's obviously a certain vulnerability
to the unexpected moves the elephant might make.
That vulnerability is palpable now.

Yet it feels to me that there is a vital and powerful opportunity
emerging for Canada in this moment.

Now more than ever is an opportunity
to lean in to the promise of this country,
to make real our commitment to multiculturalism,
to nurture the sacred human hope
that we can learn to overcome our fears of difference
and, instead, celebrate the unique experience and gifts of every person.

To stand on guard for Canada, to my mind,
means doing what we can to protect
this unprecedented experiment in building human community.

² Stephen Marche, “Canada in the Age of Donald Trump,” *The Walrus*, 9 November 2016.

It means doing the hard work of reconciliation
with the Indigenous Peoples of this land.

It means taking steps to ensure the wellbeing of all.

It means recognizing we share a common destiny on this planet.

It means keeping alive for the rest of the world,
in this time of tumult,
a compelling model of what a compassionate society can be.

It is, I believe, a happy coincidence that these aspirations
are rooted in the bedrock principles of Unitarianism.

As one of the largest liberal religious communities in Canada,
we occupy a privileged place to help our country realize its promise.

But we will only be effective in taking up this challenge
if we are actively putting our own principles into action.

If we are building bridges instead of walls.

If we are bringing more love and justice into this world—
the one right here, right now,
in this place, in this city—
by practising compassion,
by working toward greater understanding,
by moving hearts, including our own,
toward acceptance and encouragement of one another.

By doing all we can—
to borrow an image from our Universalist heritage—
to love the hell out of this world.

For then we will know we are living in an altered universe.

A universe altered, a universe transformed,
by a people creatively maladjusted to the injustice of our times,
a people living out the power of love
to help heal our world.

So may it be.

Amen.

