

Good Grief!

Rev. Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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*“Things could be stranger, but I don’t know how.
I’m going through changes now.”¹*

Did you catch that opening line
Gaby sang so beautifully?

It just about says it all, doesn’t it?
*“Things could be stranger, but I don’t know how.
I’m going through changes now.”*

And so we are.

This week, a friend sent me an image
of a visual calendar for 2020,
with a different photo depicting each month.

Maybe you’ve seen it, too.

For January, it was the fires in Australia.
For February, swarms of locusts in Kenya.
For March through May, it was the global pandemic.

The month of June is marked with protests and riots.

And the coming months,
with some wild (or maybe not-so-wild) speculation,
include everything from solar flares and an asteroid hit,
to massive volcanic eruptions
and, in September,
an alien invasion, complete with flying saucers.

¹ From “Changes” by Langhorne Slim & The Law.

“Things could be stranger, but I don’t know how.”

It’s been quite a year so far,
and we’re not even halfway through.

I remember seeing a meme on Facebook in mid-March
that said, “Before the 90-day warranty expires,
I want a refund for 2020.”

Mid-March now feels like half a lifetime ago,
rather than the three long months it’s been
since the pandemic demanded our undivided attention,
and upended so much of daily life.

And, then, three weeks ago,
just as Spring was finally kicking in
and a few aspects of life
beginning to return to normal,
or at least our weird “new normal,”
the murder of George Floyd rocked the world.

Some have taken it as a wake-up call.

It’s even been called a Great Awakening,
as people everywhere are stirred to a new awareness
of both the legacy and present reality of systemic racism
and the police brutality that it so often feeds
in the U.S., in Canada, and elsewhere around the globe.

But for all the waking up going on right now,
there are also people, so many of them Black,
Indigenous and other People of Colour
who are rightly wondering why it took so long.

Wondering where the rest of us have been.

Wondering why our society has slept through so many other alarms.

Wondering why we’ve been roused from our slumber,
from time to time, when the murder

of a Black or Brown person makes the news,
before pressing the snooze button
and drifting back off to sleep.

These people understandably wonder
whether this time will be any different.

That is the pressing question of the moment we are in:
Will this time be different?
Will this time be any different from all of the other times?

I want to acknowledge right upfront
that this is no idle question for People of Colour.

And that there is a legacy of pain,
centuries in the making,
that goes into this question.

Because to ask if this time will be different
is also to ask if Black lives really matter.
If Indigenous lives really matter.
If the lives of People of Colour really matter.

This question cannot go unanswered.

And to be clear, a non-answer is, indeed, an answer.
Just as it has too often been.

But here's the thing:
each of us has to answer this question this time—
especially those of us who are White.

It might be tempting to press the snooze button,
and roll back over to sleep,
to allow ourselves the luxury of distraction
from an issue that is, as we have seen once again,
quite literally, a matter of life and death.

We must resist that temptation.
Resist the temptation to sleepwalk through history.

Again, to avoid the question
of whether this time will be different—
to keep silent,
to not offer an answer either way,
to passively hope it all just somehow works out—
is, in fact, to give an answer.

It's just not an answer that is in any way helpful.

For this time to be different,
there is no room for indifference.

This doesn't mean everyone has to head out
to protest in the streets—in a pandemic, no less.

But it does mean, I believe,
that we have to make a conscious, intentional choice,
as many others have said in recent days,
not only to not be racist,
but to actively work to be anti-racist.

And, let's be honest,
for those of us who are white, this is work.

To work at being anti-racist means
educating ourselves about the reality of racism,
and then actually doing something about it.

It means actively working to dismantle racism
in our society, in the world we navigate on a daily basis—
in our congregation,
in our social circles,
and in ourselves.

It means listening and learning.

At times it means speaking up,
and at other times, keeping quiet.

It means cultivating some humility in all of this.

And some capacity to make mistakes.
And to then receive feedback graciously.
Did I mention that this is work for some of us?

The beauty of becoming anti-racist
is that you're not expected to be perfect.

But you are expected to be on a journey with a clear destination:
to help dismantle racism, both within and without.

In his book, *How to Be an Antiracist*,
Ibram X. Kendi argues
that the opposite of “racist” isn’t “not-racist”
but, instead, “anti-racist”.

To explain this sense of things,
and the choices it presents,
he writes²:

There is no such thing as a “not-racist” policy, idea or person....
All policies, ideas and people
are either being racist or antiracist.
Racist policies yield racial inequity;
antiracist policies yield racial equity.
Racist ideas suggest racial hierarchy,
antiracist ideas suggest racial equality.
A racist is supporting racist policy
or expressing a racist idea.
An antiracist is supporting antiracist policy
or expressing an antiracist idea.
A racist or antiracist is not who we are,
but what we are doing in the moment.

Kendi’s call to action is a call to do something.
To overcome apathy or indifference.
To understand our choices on a daily basis.
To examine our behaviour.
And to choose the anti-racist path, over and over again.

² Ibram X. Kendi, “This is what an antiracist America would look like. How do we get there?” *The Guardian*, 6 December 2018.

But, do you know what the hardest part
of becoming anti-racists is for white liberals?

It's mistakenly believing that we're already there,
that we've already arrived.
That our work is somehow done.

And it often shows up in unhelpful ways
as we work to prove just how very "not-racist" we are.

I witness this a lot in my social circles,
in our congregation,
in Unitarian Universalism writ large,
and, not least, in myself.

No one wants to be labelled a racist.

But as Kendi reminds us, the goal isn't to be not-racist,
which is an arguably impossible thing to do,
given we humans are prone to implicit bias
and exist within systems and structures that are racist;
instead the goal is to become anti-racist,
working to build an anti-racist society.

As important as this external work is, though,
it also has to involve some real internal work,
some real soul work.

Getting at this point,
Black philosopher and activist Cornel West
addressed a large gathering of UUs
at the UUA General Assembly in 2015.

At one point, he shared the following quote from W.E.B. Dubois:

"I want to keep track of the integrity,
beginning with the intellectual integrity.
Who is willing to tell the truth—
good and bad, up and down,
insights as well as blindnesses of ourselves first,

then our communities, then our nation, then our world?"

Dr. West then said, "I've got a lot of vanilla brothers and sisters that walk with me and say, Brother West, Brother West.

You know, I'm not a racist any longer.
[I mean, my] Grandma's got work to do,
but I've transcended [all of] that."

And then Dr. West continued:

"And I say to them, I'm a Jesus-loving,
free, black man, and I've tried to be so for 55 years,
.... and when I look in the depths of my soul
I see white supremacy because I grew up in [this context].
And if there's white supremacy in me,
my hunch is you've got some work to do too."³

Earlier, I said that the defining question of this larger moment
is whether this time will be different.

The answer to that question isn't a simple yes or no.
On some level, no one can know with any certainty
how things are going to ultimately turn out.

But we can set our resolve to move in the direction
of a society that is truly just and truly equitable.

One of the central ideas of what is known as Process Theology
is that we are co-creators, co-collaborators, with all living things.

Together, in each unfolding moment,
we are making and remaking the world.

The possibilities are endless.

But the path we set for ourselves matters.
The direction, the trajectory, of our intention makes a difference.
Because our actions build one upon another to make the world.

³ Cornel West, Ware Lecture, UUA General Assembly, Portland, Oregon, June 2015.

We are at a crossroads.
A moment when we are being asked
to commit to one path over another.

The pandemic has revealed many harsh realities about our society.

It has pulled back the curtain and shown
that inequality is a major factor
in who is most affected by the coronavirus,
in our very own city.
People of Colour and the working poor have been hit hardest.
And we must grapple with the moral question of why that is.

Likewise, the recent waves of protests against racial injustice
have reminded us, yet again, of the staggering disparities
that so negatively impact the lives of those
who are Black, Brown, or Indigenous.

We must grapple with the moral question
of why, of why they are subject to police violence—
and so many forms of violence.

We must grapple with the moral question
of why the Ontario Human Rights Commission
reported in 2018 that Black people in the City of Toronto
are 20 times—20 times—more likely
to be killed by police than White people.

And we must grapple with the moral question
of what policing has meant in the past in this country
and what it means today,
especially when excessive and lethal force
is so disproportionately directed at People of Colour.

It's been often said in recent months
that post-pandemic life will be a "new normal."

Well, I certainly hope so.

Because it's becoming obvious in ways we can no longer deny

that the “old normal” failed to serve so many,
failed to serve Life.

This is, of course, old news to so many of us
who have dedicated much of the energy of our lives
to trying to build a different, better world.

But with the multiple crises we currently face,
we are all being presented with a rare opportunity
to choose a better path.

The pandemic, the economic crisis,
and the protests against racism
are providing us with an opening
to set out in another direction.

This afternoon, at 12:30pm, Leslie Solomonian and I
will host a Congregational Conversation
about a new initiative called A Just Recovery for All.

It’s one Canada-wide effort
to try to bring people together
around a compelling vision of how we want the future
to be different from our past and our present.

Though it’s one piece of a larger puzzle,
this call to seek “the more beautiful world
our hearts know is possible”
is one way to leverage hope and vision in this moment.

It’s been said that one should never let a crisis go to waste.

We now have three, which, are deeply intertwined,
and which, in unprecedented ways,
open up a world of possibilities.

This confluence of opportunity
may not come our way again.

So let us make the most of this moment
by declaring in thought, word, and deed

that this time will, in fact, be different.

May we strive on to make it so.