

On Change: Resistance Is Futile

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Unitarian Society of Hartford

## READINGS

“Societies are never able to examine, to overhaul themselves: this effort must be made by that yeast which every society cunningly and unflinchingly secretes. This ferment, this disturbance, is the responsibility, and the necessity, of writers. It is, alas, the truth that to be an American writer today means mounting an unending attack on all that Americans believe themselves to hold sacred. It means fighting an astute and agile Guerrilla warfare with the American complacency which so inadequately masks the American panic.

One must be willing, indeed, one must be anxious, to locate, precisely, that American morality of which we boast. And one must be willing to ask one’s self what the Indian thinks of this morality, what the Cuban or the Chinese thinks of it, what the Negro thinks of it. Our own record must be read. And finally, the air of this time and place is so heavy with rhetoric, so thick with soothing lies, that one must really do great violence to language, one must somehow disrupt the comforting beat, in order to be heard. Obviously, one must dismiss any hopes one may ever have had of winning a popularity contest. And one must take upon one’s self the right to be entirely wrong—and accept penalties for penalties there will certainly be.”

- James Baldwin, “AS MUCH TRUTH AS ONE CAN BEAR: To Speak Out About a World as it is, . . .” *New York Times*, January 14, 1962

This body, O youth, is a guest-house: every morning a new guest comes running (into it).

Beware, do not say, "The (guest) is a burden to me," for presently he will fly back into non-existence.

Whatsoever comes into thy heart from the invisible world is thy guest: entertain it well!

Every day, too, at every moment a (different) thought comes, like an honoured guest, into thy bosom.

O (dear) soul, regard thought as a person, since (every) person derives his worth from thought and spirit.

If the thought of sorrow is waylaying (spoiling) joy, (yet) it is making preparations for joy.

It violently sweeps thy house clear of (all) else, in order that new joy from the source of good may enter in.

It scatters the yellow leaves from the bough of the heart, in order that incessant green leaves may grow.

It uproots the old joy, in order the new delight may march in from the Beyond.

Sorrow pulls up the crooked rotten (root), in order that it may disclose the root that is veiled from sight.

Whatsoever (things) sorrow may cause to be shed from the heart or may take away (from it), assuredly it will bring better in exchange.

(Whenever) the thought (of sorrow) comes into thy breast anew, go to meet it with smiles and laughter.

- Jalaluddin Rumi, "The Guest House" (translated by Reynold Nicholson)

## SERMON

I've been thinking about Baldwin's words this year, given all the political and electoral chaos that continues to clog computer and television screens, all the rancor, all the emails and text messages, the debates and television ads. The amount of information coming at all of us is enough to make many of us stop reading our email, turn off the television and hide under the covers until the week is done. (I have a new duvet which makes this option all the more comfortable.) The clamor for allegiance to this party's version of events or that investigation seems deafening. And the anxiety provoked by the visions of what will happen if the agenda of one or another group is acted upon is enough to make us catatonic with fear.

To participate in this venture and to remain energized about efforts to make for real change in this country relies mainly on one's ability to forge a vision of a better future and to have the capacity to engage those who may differ from us, sometimes dramatically, more with a sense of curiosity than outrage.

Hear me out. In important ways what we all hold in common across the political spectrum is fear. Fear that is stoked by the actual experiences and the perceived or real consequences of the election. Many of us have been increasingly worried, especially since January 6 of last year and the recent attack on Paul Pelosi as well as other horrendous events like those in Charlottesville and most recently at Michigan State University. We have experienced again, firsthand, what fear can devolve into and the anxiety that change can manifest in those whose power and privilege is challenged by such circumstances. And we have witnessed again the devastating consequences of the unfettered fury of nuclearized autocracy. For many in our community, this is a time that harkens back to the riots and upheavals of the 1960's

and those few who are left to remind us of the cost of a world at war. Some, even, have even begun to ponder the possibility of civil war.

During all of this, it is hard not to get caught in the quagmire of fear and anxiety. What might it take then to not only shed the emotional mayhem of this tumultuous time but to foster a pathway out of violence.

Here I return to the words of James Baldwin again, whose essay is largely a critique of the writers of a previous generation and the battle that often occurs between literary generations who cast a different vision of the past and the future, which is often the way that generational transfer occurs. To this Baldwin says, in the language of his time *“ONE must be willing, indeed, one must be anxious, to locate, precisely, that American morality of which we boast. And one must be willing to ask one's self what the Indian thinks of this morality, what the Cuban or the Chinese thinks of it, what the Negro thinks of it. Our own record must be read.”*

To read our own record is to come to this moment with a different sensibility. Instead of experiencing the “violence” that is done to language, as Baldwin put it, that disrupts “the comforting beat, in order to be heard” as an ultimate truth or perilous threat, we must be willing to ask what experiences energize such rhetoric. To ask what another thinks, or feels, is to invite a story.

I’m mindful here that this effort, at this time, to listen differently, parallels the efforts of many in our community to become “trauma informed” in their approach to those who are suffering or exhibiting challenging behaviors.

The discipline of being trauma informed is fundamentally to shift from the perception that one’s words and actions are what are to be

fundamentally addressed or resolved (which we have a history of doing through various methods of incarceration) and instead to experience them as symptoms of deeper struggles and challenges which offer us an opportunity to witness to and companion people into more lasting health and healing. This is how I hear *“the air of this time and place is so heavy with rhetoric, so thick with soothing lies, that one must really do great violence to language, one must somehow disrupt the comforting beat, in order to be heard.”*

The art of trauma informed interventions, like that of addressing the difficult behaviors which often accompany complicated grief is to be willing to support and uphold means which do not violate the welfare of others while at the same time honoring the difficult experiences which often energize violence.

For instance, like many of you I find it inconceivable that the Gov. of Florida flew displaced people to Martha’s Vineyard or bused them to other cities unannounced. I am appalled by such behavior and hope that those responsible are held accountable for their actions. And, at the same time, I am also concerned that most of our country has been willing to allow states on our southern border to bear most of the challenge of responding to the overwhelming desire of so many to enter our country. Until we all act as though it is our country’s responsibility to respond more effectively and humanely to this reality, tensions will inevitably rise.

And the border struggle isn’t the only place where we must apply such a response. Consider climate change as another.

I was drawn recently to [an article published last spring on the movement of stars](#). Not the observation of the seasonal movement which gave rise to the study of astronomy, but the observation which startled at least one star-gazing observer.

In Kivalina, Alaska, a village of about 500 people, the city administrator was approached by a curious neighbor with a perplexing question, She reports, *“An elder in the community has gone outside every night of her life to look at the stars and she told me one day. . .the stars have moved. How could this happen? What could cause that?”*

When the question was posed to Joshua Griffin, assistant Professor of the University of Washington’s School of Marine and Environmental Affairs and American Indian Studies, and his team of scientists and students, who are collaborating with the community of Kivalina to create a hazard assessment for the village as it faces drastic climate change impacts, they set out to investigate the an answer.

As the article states,

*Some of these community-level climate challenges facing Kivalina can be traced back to broader Arctic changes. Loss of sea-ice extent and thickness, glacial retreat and thinning, loss of snowpack, permafrost thawing, ice sheet melting and warming of ocean water near outlet glaciers (which leads to ice loss from both ocean and atmospheric warming) have all contributed to shifts in the cryosphere.*

*The cryosphere, a term which encompasses all areas of Earth’s surface covered in frozen water, has many components, all of which are experiencing some type of change. Because the role of each component in the earth system is different, the impact of those changes vary as well. The trend towards a shrinking cryosphere paired with a warming ocean has already had diverse impacts on food security, water resources, water quality, livelihoods, infrastructure, transportation, tourism and recreation around the world.*

*Colleen’s question about the stars has been posed by Inuit people from other communities as well, but was often ignored or discarded by*

*Western researchers in the past. However, it turns out that these changes in the cryosphere leading to melting ice, along with alterations to water storage distributions at different latitudes, are contributing to a shift in the way the planet wobbles on its axis which effectively alters where the constellations normally appear overhead.*

*Earth has always moved on its polar axis, and in the past that movement was guided by natural factors like Milankovitch Cycles, ocean currents and magma convection. However, in 1995 the North Pole turned away from its predicted migration facing Canada and instead began moving towards Russia. Even more alarming than the about-face in direction was the rapidity of change: over the next 15 years the pole accelerated 17 times faster than had been observed over the 15 years prior.*

*Greenland alone has lost more than 270 trillion kilograms of ice a year on average since the early 2000s. Because liquid water is denser than frozen water, these massive melting events have led to changes in the distribution of weight on Earth, causing the poles to tilt in a different direction. Overall, scientists have found that loss of ice has altered the direction of the planet's polar movement by some four meters since 1980. In addition, the influx of cold, fresh water has been found to cause the Beaufort Gyre, a major Arctic current, to become faster and more turbulent.*

Here's the thing, when we individually, or culturally ignore each other, especially when changes are experienced that induce fear or alarm, we deprive ourselves of the wisdom of those observations and experiences which can alter our understanding of the power we have to be co-creative or co-destructive with the forces which strive to save lives or those that strive to maintain power and control.

And, the news is now reporting that recent findings from image analyzed from the Webb Space Telescope have given rise to the idea that the first galaxies may have formed far earlier than previously thought and that this is reshaping the understanding of the early universe.

[Scientists note,](#)

*“these galaxies are very massive, with lots of low-mass stars like galaxies today, and had to start forming 100 million years after the Big Bang, which occurred 13.8 billion years ago.*

*That is 100 million years earlier than the currently held end of the so-called cosmic dark age, when the universe contained only gas and dark matter.*

*A second possibility is that they are made up of “Population III” stars, which have never been observed but are theorised to have been made of only helium and hydrogen, before heavier elements existed.”*

The second of these explanations seems more appealing to some scientists because it would not upend our current cosmological models.

And yet, it is precisely moments like this which have helped reshape our understanding of our place in the universe since antiquity. Think of Galileo’s contribution to our understanding of a heliocentric universe, the first inclining of which, as the story goes, was that he was bored at church and was looking at the ways in which the candelabras above were rotating. Who says religion doesn’t have an impact on science!

And Galileo was treated with disdain by the powers that be, excommunicated from the church for heresy, and shunned by many of his colleagues. Because such discoveries prove dangerous for those who want to control the narrative of our existence.



This I think is at the heart, by the way, of the response to the 1619 Project and critical race theory in our schools. And the response to transgender identity and freedom. And, if I might medal for a moment, I think this is also part of the response of those who are very angry that we are rethinking our Principles and Purposes. And I wonder what the difference would be if we remembered that every generation needs to be able to grapple with the truths that we all have taken for granted and recreate them new for themselves, in order to bolster their own relationship with them. I'm also mindful of the fact that, for those who have been very ardent about the Principles and Purposes, when you look at our hymnal none of the former statements of how we decided to describe ourselves are absent. You can look through the readings and find all manner of ways we have historically described ourselves and ways that congregations still do.

So the question I ask congregations who are grappling with this is "Why so angry?" What is really being threatened by this conversation? Your understanding of who we are? Good. Because we get to have a conversation about what is most meaningful to us. But if we decide not to have that conversation because we are too angry about the idea that someone would even posit a question, we miss the point all together. We all ought to have the kind of mind and heart that starts with curiosity instead of our own fear; asking, What do you think about this? How does it move you? And invite a conversation about meaning instead of control.

Baldwin concludes his 1962 Review Essay with these words. "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Words that harken back to a previous paragraph.

*"We are the generation that must through everything into the endeavor to remake America into what we say we want it to be. Without this*

*endeavor, we will perish. However immoral or subversive this may sound to some, it is the writer who must always remember that morality, if it is to remain or become morality, must be perpetually examined, cracked, changed, made new. He must remember, however powerful the many who would rather forget, that life is the only touchstone and that life is dangerous, and that without the joyful acceptance of this danger, there can never be any safety for anyone, ever, anywhere.”*

Remember the words of Rumi?

*“Whenever the thought (of sorrow) comes into thy breast anew, go to meet it with smiles and laughter.”*

AMEN & BLESSED BE.