

Grounded Faith

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This summer, as part of our family sabbatical travel, Wayne and I returned to Munich, Germany, to show our sons where we had met 30 years ago and to share some meaningful places that shaped our lives. Included on my list was the concentration camp of Dachau – the very first Nazi camp after which all future ones were modeled. When I was abroad as a college student, I visited Dachau several times as part of my personal journey to understand my religious identity and heritage. As a Jewish American, I wrestled with the disturbing realization that, but for the randomness of being born in a different place and a different time, my fate would have been the same as my ancestors. As a Unitarian Universalist, I walked the grounds looking for scraggly strands of green weeds growing up through the cracks in the pavement so that I could pay silent tribute to Dr. Norbert Capek, creator of the Unitarian Flower Communion ritual. Survivors told how he would gather them to celebrate the flower communion in the camp as an act of resistance and hope before his death there. As a human being, I

tried to comprehend how such evil could be allowed to happen, and what could be done to ensure that it never happened again.

Returning three decades later to the camp, I was unprepared for how radically different it felt to be walking on those graveled, grey grounds at this moment in our world. The exhibits, especially those on the 1930's, seemed less about history and more a clear warning for today. I visited a rebuilt prisoners' barrack and couldn't stop thinking about children and families in U.S. border camps. I watched the documentary of the early propaganda speeches and felt chilled. Thirty years ago, I shared my visits with buses of school children and a handful of other visitors, mostly white. This time, the visitors came from all over the world, and the audio tours were offered in many languages. I could tell that it wasn't just me who felt the alarming relevance. My teenagers got it instantly. Conversations swirled around us in hushed tones. But there was a surprising sense of solidarity, too – each of us had made a choice to be there, freely returning to this one-time death factory- to learn and remember, but also to bear witness to the beauty and dignity of a full, diverse humanity that endures.

Wandering through the camp, past the memorial chapels, I kept thinking about faith and resistance. What is the foundation, the ground of

our faith, that saves us from such despair and dehumanization? What redeems us, not just as individuals, but as the messy and wonderful human collective? What did the Unitarian Universalism of my childhood give me for a time such as this? And how is it calling me to live out my faith in this moment? In this day, when liberalism in general is under clear attack, it matters how liberal religion responds and shows up. Some critics would say that we are not up to the task, that liberal religion, especially Unitarian Universalism, is too individualistic, too wishy-washy, too optimistic, too uncomfortable with its own power for the task at hand. They argue that our commitment to religious freedom is too free to hold a meaningful, coherent center of conviction and purpose.

But, like Erika, I know in my bones that those critics are wrong, because Unitarian Universalism was also the anchor that saved me and my family in our own hour of need. Not just once, or twice, but many times over the last 40 years, this faith and its people returned us to our own dignity and worth, reconnected us to life's mystery and hope, and recalled us to a larger vision of what community should be. I tell the stories over and over again: how the delivery of a simple meal during my parents' hospitalization, including my first jello salad, will forever embody for me

the sustaining power of the compassion of strangers. How the memories of sitting in shared silence in the church sanctuary with the sunlight filtering down taught me the strength of being still with the eternal amid all my doubts, an image which still helps me to find my breath when I need to ground my being. How marching in my first protest as a teenager, with a hand-made sign in my hand, connected me to the long arc of justice-seekers who are needed in every age, and to the presence of the ancestors who raised their voices in their time, so that mine could be heard now.

The personal testimony of Unitarian Universalism's efficacy in our lives that I hear among us makes clear a larger story of the importance of sacred community and connection, a broader and deeper foundation of our faith that we don't always take the time to claim. But the times in which we live are calling us to reframe that story, to take up its strength and its power in more intentional ways. At the risk of Unitarian Universalist blasphemy, and with apologies to our beloved Transcendentalists, I don't believe that religious liberalism is ultimately about being a free individual or about going off into the woods to discover the Sacred there. Those can be important elements of the liberal religious experience, but it doesn't end there, just as being a Unitarian Universalist doesn't end with only the open

search for truth and meaning. Something more is required. The whole point of going off into the woods to experience awe, or of having the freedom to be who you are called to be at the depths of your soul, is to come back out into the world and to bring that insight into the relationships and communities we hold dear. For, it is ultimately the free community which will defend the rights of the individual. Being an individual for the sake of individualism itself isn't enough to save the world. Being an individual for the sake of our collective freedom and dignity is everything.

My Unitarian Universalism is grounded in the conviction that human freedom entails a responsibility to our shared humanity and the life that binds us together for our time on this earth. We are community, Elandria Williams reminds us – above all differences and beyond all other distractions. We are “part of the connective tissue that holds the legacy and future of our faith.” But that connective tissue doesn't just happen. Becoming a strong community demands intention and practice, failure and resilience, even though they often happen in a jumbled and messy order. Yet, at its best, I believe that the connective tissue that is Unitarian Universalism offers a deliberate counter to the forces of alienation and

oppression that threaten to divide and diminish us. The practice of community recalls us to our freedom to act together – for love, for truth, and for transformation.

We are community, grounded in the faith that the circle of humanity needs us in order to be whole. When we forget, as we inevitably do, the practice of community extends an invitation to return and to remember. One of the treasured elders of my childhood church, Nancy Fitts, died this year, but I remember her as the embodiment of this belief in practice. There is a song in our hymnal about drawing the circle wide, and drawing it wider still, but Nancy had a particular way of personally bringing the circle to you, until she was certain you felt its solid embrace. When I stood alone at coffee hour, she crossed the room to talk to me. When I began to choose sleep over church, she called to ask if I could help her out with a Sunday project. When I lost my temper at an ICU nurse, she sat with me, until my fury and grief subsided. When my grandfather hung up on her offer of pea soup, she called back anyway, without mentioning the soup. When our congregation decided to begin the process of becoming a Welcoming Congregation to the LGBTQ+ community within and beyond our congregation, she was the first in line to encourage participation and

attendance. Honestly, over the years, there were probably some people who feared to see her coming, but her invitation was always warm and genuine. And it was never really about the task alone, Nancy understood the power of the experience of belonging to something larger than ourselves. Even when I had to say no, I knew that I mattered in the eyes of my church and that sometime soon another invitation to join in shared ministry would come.

I think of Nancy, when I witness that same spirit of invitation here at Unity among us, and we talk openly as your leaders about how to draw the circle wider here, how to bring it to each of you in ways that you feel confident in its embrace and in extending it to others. The power of the invitation is met with the freedom to say yes and no, and maybe, and yes again, but when answered, it allows the collective tissue of our shared humanity recall us to life's meaning and joy and our own place in it. Perhaps it seems like a small response to all that is at stake in the world. Yet I found echoes of Nancy's determined, caring spirit in the exhibit in Dachau that told stories of the resistance and resilience of the prisoners – the secret choirs, the poets circles, the collaborators who found ways to circumvent the rules to get money and medical care to those who had

nothing; those who risked communicating with the outside to share vital war information, or simply to send a Mother's Day card, sometimes at great cost. Even in the midst of death and devastation, there was a circle of humanity created at the same time, in the same circumstances, to hold onto for strength and sustenance, and there were always those who made sure that the circle was open and available to all.

We are community, grounded in the faith that the struggle of any one of us against oppression must become our collective struggle for liberation. Despite the fundamental truth of our interdependence, such solidarity can be elusive in a world where centuries of oppression have become hard-wired into our very being. The practice of community calls us to keep finding ways to show up to the collective struggle, especially when it's hard. This weekend, our nation remembers and commemorates the landing of the first slave ship on these shores 400 years ago. In August 1482, a British pirate ship called the White Lion arrived at Point Comfort, near what is today Hampton, Virginia, with 20 prisoners kidnapped from Africa (near modern Angola), and then captured from a Portuguese slave ship. A British Colony official recorded in a letter that the prisoners were exchanged for food. The details of what happened to them are still



unknown today, but in that moment the horrific legacy of American slavery began. A century ago, the NAACP reflected on the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary in its magazine “The Crisis” with these words: “We must remember because if once the world forgets evil, evil is reborn...”

Yesterday’s commemoration in Hampton began with a cleansing and naming ritual, presided over by visiting chiefs from Cameroon, as participants released themselves and the names and memories of their ancestors into the ocean waters. The day of healing was both a renewed call to bring the truth of slavery and its legacy into the center of our nation’s understanding of itself today, and to reclaim from the dehumanizing silence of statistics the stories of resilience and the names of the people, whose lives slavery stole and forever changed. The African American heritage tours planned across the Atlantic shores seek to break the silence of the history that has literally been buried under colonization and to honor 400 years of perseverance and influence in the building of America. As more than one participant observed, African American History *is* American History: they cannot be separated.

I have to confess that it disturbed me that the news of the commemoration was not on the front pages of every newspaper I follow,

even though some offered in depth features in the past month – yet another example of our nation’s ambivalence and resistance to atonement and reconciliation. The anniversary and the events throughout the weekend are more than a local story for Virginians. They are a reminder to engage in the truth-telling that will break open the single story of white supremacy and to join the collective struggle for liberation wherever we are.

Here in Minnesota, there are many ways to engage in the truth-telling, reparations, and equity work that is happening through the leadership of the Black Visions Collective, the Circle of Peace Movement, the new initiative of Opportunity St. Paul, Healing Minnesota Stories and more. (All of which you will be invited to engage and support in the coming year.) But today, I want to lift up the dedicated staff and teachers of the Barack and Michelle Obama elementary school who will gather in our Parish Hall early tomorrow morning to kick-off a new school year. This summer, over 40 Unity members have signed up to be a part of the Obama school community this year - in the library and in the classroom, but mostly in one-to-one connections with the scholars. The scholars of Obama elementary are not statistics to us, buried in a report on Minnesota’s racial disparity in education. They are our children, our partners, our neighbors,

and our community. Their future doesn't depend on us. It is really our future that depends on them. The collective struggle for liberation reminds us that we have much to learn from each other, at all ages, that can spark our prophetic resistance and imagination.

We are community, grounded in the faith that the Holy, however we name it, is never quite done with us. The practice of community is the commitment to life-long learning and the transformation that comes with it. After all these years, I confess that I am still learning how to be a Unitarian Universalist and what the practice of community requires of me. Some days, when I am tired or discouraged, I don't want it to ask for anything. But then, inevitably, an invitation comes, often from one of you, and I am brought back into the circle of our shared humanity and the possibilities of this congregation's ministry in our troubled world. Some days, when you are tired or despairing, I am the one to find you, to remind you that this community and this world are not complete without your love, your joy, your courage, and your commitment. Faith is the ground on which we meet and to which we return to meet again.

Together, we ground ourselves in the work and the vision of this place. Together, we bear witness to the beauty and power of our human

collective. Together, we strive and struggle for a future that redeems the sorrows of today. Together, we defend human freedom, that one day we all might be free. Together we are more than we can ever be alone. May we be grateful.