

First Universalist Yarmouth, ME
All Souls Worship Service, November 1st, 2020
Sermon: “Break On Through,” by Rev. Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick

Our Chalice lighting words come from Representative John Roberts Lewis, who’s life we lost this year but who’s spirit remains thoroughly with us.

Do not get lost in a sea of despair
Never be afraid to make some noise
Stay hopeful until your dying day
We can find a way out of no way
We can find a way out of no way

Reading

Our reading this week is a poem by Joy Harjo, a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation and the current United States poet laureate. Her last name, Harjo, is derived from the Muscogee Creek word “had-cho” which translates to mean “so brave it seems crazy.”

Joy So Brave It Seems Crazy - what an affirmation, what a prayer.

Her poem today is entitled:

For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet

Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that bottle of pop.

Turn off that cellphone, computer, and remote control.

Open the door, then close it behind you.

Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel the Earth gathering essences of plants to clean.

Give it back with gratitude.

If you sing it will give your spirit lift to fly to the stars’ ears and back.

Acknowledge this Earth who has cared for you since you were a dream planting itself precisely within your parents' desire.

Let your moccasin feet take you to the encampment of the guardians who have known you before time, who will be there after time. They sit before the fire that has been there without time.

Let the Earth stabilize your postcolonial insecure jitters.

Be respectful of the small insects, birds, and animal people who accompany you. Ask their forgiveness for the harm we humans have brought down upon them.

Don't worry.

The heart knows the way though there may be high-rises, interstates, checkpoints, armed soldiers, massacres, wars, and those who will despise you because they despise themselves.

The journey might take you a few hours, a day, a year, a few years, a hundred, a thousand, or even more.

Watch your mind. Without training it might run away and leave your heart for the immense human feast set by the thieves of time.

Do not hold regrets.

When you find your way to the circle, to the fire kept burning by the keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed.

You must clean yourself with cedar, sage, or other healing plant.

Cut the ties you have to failure and shame.

Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet. Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way for those who are heading in our direction.

Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Call your spirit back. It may be caught in corners and creases of shame, judgement, and human abuse.

You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return. Speak to it as you would to a beloved child.

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

Your spirit will need to sleep awhile after it is bathed and given clean clothes.

Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place else to go.

Make a giveaway, and remember, keep the speeches short.

Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.

Prayer and Litany of Names:

I invite you all now to pause, take a breath, and if you are able bring near a candle to light, or an object that makes you feel good and steady.

Today, in honor of All Souls, of Sow-win, the festival of life and death, we offer sacred space to lift up the lives we've lost of those we've loved, those who have loved us, those who have taught us how to live and taught us about ourselves. These beings no longer walk the earth, but their spirits remain with us.

With words inspired by Rev. Erika Hewitt and Rev. Florence Caplow, today we offer a ritual of remembrance for these lives.

In a moment I will read the many names I received from you these past few days, names of loved ones, of ancestors, of leaders and artists who inspired and strengthened us as individuals and as a collective.

I will also read the names of those who died unjustly this year, names of those who call out to us to repair this broken world.

I am well aware that there are many more names that could be added to these lists. Throughout the reading of these names I will offer moments of silence. These are times to center yourself in prayer or to speak the names of those you wish to honor. When we remember a person who touched our lives, when we speak their names and tell their stories and bring them into our circle, we are carrying their spirit along with our lives.

We offer this space today not only to honor these important lives, but also as a reminder that we're not alone in our sorrow nor our joy. Unitarian Universalists believe that, no matter what happens to us, we don't have to do it alone. We are here to listen, to comfort, and to bless each other with wholeness and healing.

As I read these names, I invite you to light a candle, or meditate on that object that makes you feel good - and honor the loved ones you have lost and the loved ones we all have lost.

Please won't you take a deep refreshing breath with me right now, clearing away anything that does not serve you at this time and center yourself in this tender moment.

We lift up the lives of our family, our friends, our ancestors:

Anne, Richard and Mark Sarapas - My mother, my father and my brother.

Alice and Harold Lord, to be thankful for in my life on All Souls Sunday. (Janice Tooker)

Stephen Chinlund & Edwin F. Chinlund

My cousin Jane Cleaves, her mother Eleanor Weston

My parents Willis and Ada Reed

Lisa Witte

Andy Marshall

George C Thomas who was an artist and storyteller who would sometimes push the truth to make a better story.

Dr. Margaret G. Cartwright, prominent women's physician in Albuquerque, New Mexico and who founded the YWCA there.

Joann Titcomb, our family matriarch.

Steve Micoleau

We lift up the lives of the leaders and the creators that strengthened, inspired, and brought joy to our nation and world:

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

Representative John Lewis

Guitar hero Eddie Van Halen

Superhero Chadwick Boseman

AIDS Activist Larry Kramer

Poet and musician John Prine

And Katherine Johnson, whose behind-the-scenes job in a segregated NASA inspired the film "Hidden Figures."

We lift up the spirit of life of those who died unjustly this year:

Rayshard Brooks

Daniel Prude

George Floyd

Breonna Taylor

Ahmaud Arbery

Elijah McClain

Tony McDade

Nina Pop

Monica Diamond

And over 230,000 people who died from Covid-19 in the United States

And approximately 1.1 million people who have died from the virus across the world

As we kindle this the flame, we honor and remember
Those who have passed into the mystery.
Their brightness lives on in our vision;
their courage lives on in our commitments;
and their love continues to bless the world through us.

Amen, and Blessed Be.

Homily

So, for a slew of reasons that will become obvious to you, there's this Buddhist parable - or koan as they are called - that keeps repeating in my head these days.

As some of you probably know, a koan is by nature a paradoxical tale - a story that purposely doesn't make sense.

I know, I know - we have a lot of these stories just in our daily headlines at this point - but koans, unlike your daily news feed - are supposed to free you from the clenches of worldly anxiety, not exacerbate it.

Koans are so illogical it's believed they can snap your brain out of its normal rut of thinking into a new liberated state - if you're a really good Buddhist your koan meditation might even lead you to the profound and utterly desirable state of enlightenment! Where you will find total peace and equanimity and the remarkable ability to meet fear and anger with wisdom and compassion.

Think the joy, wisdom and care evoked by the Dalai Lama - that's the state of enlightenment. Seems nice right? Especially right now!

So the koan that's been circling my brain these days is a well known tale of the Buddhist cannon. It's a story I bet many of you have heard before, whether you knew it was a koan or not. And, just to give you a hint of how good of a Buddhist I am, this koan has not only exacerbated my anxiety, it's annoyed me and made me mad.

So...I guess my liberated state is still a few incarnations away.

The story goes like this:

A man is walking through the woods when suddenly he sees the eyes of a tiger peering at him through the brush. The man steps back, the tiger steps forward, the man begins to run, the tiger begins to run. Sprinting through the woods, the man runs for his life and the tiger bounds after his lunch.

Suddenly the woods open up to a high cliff and the man skids to a halt. He looks behind him and sees the tiger steadily approaching. He sees a vine growing off the side of the cliff, reaches for it and begins to climb down the cliff just as the tiger pounces.

Clinging to the vine as the tiger peers at him from above, the man takes a moment to look down and plan his next move. As he does he is dismayed to see another tiger emerge from the woods below him, looking up at him at the bottom of the cliff.

So I just want to stop here for a second, and highlight the word "dismayed" in that last sentence.

In several readings of this story, the word "dismayed" is used at this point. The point when the man is dangling off the side of a cliff trying to get away from a hungry tiger above him and sees that there's another tiger below him as well.

Dismayed?

Dismayed is a feeling I get when I spill my coffee on my shirt, when my zoom connection is unstable- it's a "Aww man, this is annoying" feeling.

Dismayed is not really the word I would use to describe the experience seeing a tiger emerge below me as I hang off the side of the cliff trying to escape a tiger above me. I think “alarmed” or “totally freaking out” would be more apt a descriptor.

But, as I said before, I have many incarnations to go before I get enlightened.

Anyway, back to our man friend, he’s dismayed, hanging onto a vine on the side of a cliff with a hungry tiger above him and a hungry tiger below him. And then get this, a little mouse comes out of a crack in the cliff, scurries toward the vine and begins gnawing on it.

Just as the vine begins to break the man notices a patch of wild strawberries growing out of a clump of dirt next to him. They are perfectly ripe, warm from the sun. He reaches for one, puts it in his mouth and it is absolutely delicious.

The end.

Ok - did anyone just get enlightened?

Post it in the chat if so and maybe we can find a time zoom or something this week.

So, like I said, this story has been cycling over and over through my mind these past couple of weeks - “hanging on a vine, tiger above, tiger below, mouse eats the vine, you eat a strawberry.”

And like I said, this story annoys me. I am dismayed by its constant presence in my mind, but, as it goes with parables, I think it’s, um, gnawing at me for a reason.

As I’ve come to understand it, there are two traditional readings of this parable - the first is accept the fact of death and enjoy the precious sweetness of life.

The second is, distracting yourself with life’s sweetness will not save you from death.

One reason “The Tale of the Tiger and the Strawberry” frustrates me is because I don’t like either of these interpretations. One feels trite and the other bleak.

The thing that bothers me the most about this koan, though, is that interpreters let the end be the end. When clearly we don’t know the end - we are just at the climax of the story - left literally at a cliffhanger. We can make an assumption as to what might happen next - but so far in this story all kinds of random stuff has happened - and clearly anything could happen next.

You can fault me for overthinking a story that’s supposed to keep me from overthinking, but I think there is a far more complicated and important lesson to this story.

A lesson that is important to this day, All Hallows, Samhain, the time when the veil between the earthly world and the spirit realm is at its most permeable.

A lesson that is important to this extraordinary moment as we gather at the cliffside of a momentous national election.

This lesson - there is more than just tigers and what might seem like the end is not the end.

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Thanks to the wonderful Worship Council who led our service last week, I was able to have a Sunday off and therefore have a real Sunday morning! I bought a Sunday paper, I made scones, I drank coffee and then I sat down and read an article about Angela Davis in the New York Times magazine.

You know, Angela Davis, right?

Scholar, activist, woman warrior for the cause of black liberation, anti-capitalism, prison abolition, and feminism. She has been everything from a name on the FBI’s top ten most wanted list to the recipient of human rights awards.

Her sister Fania, is a leading innovator and healer in the work of Restorative Justice. Growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, Angela and Fania were friends with the four girls killed in the 1963 bombing of the 16th street Baptist Church - Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair.

These deaths were only the beginning of the many unjust acts of violence they would witness, work through, and carry with them for the duration of their radically resilient lives.

One could make the argument that Angela Davis probably knows the experience of hanging off a cliff with a tiger above her, a tiger below her, and a mouse chewing on her vine.

One might also make the argument that after a brutal year of racialized violence, a pandemic with no end in sight laying waste to black and brown communities, an ideologically right wing supreme court, and a president endorsed by the KKK refusing to say whether he will accept the election results - one might argue that Angela Davis might not be finding much sweetness in her life.

Such is not the case.

Over and over the article notes how optimistic Davis currently is.

“As we discuss her past,” the author, Nelson George writes, “I detect no cynicism, no despair nor frustration — this despite decades of glacial progress.” He continues, “Her optimism is particularly remarkable when you consider how long she’s believed that America *can* change.”

In the article, which is titled, “Angela Davis Still Believes America Can Change,” Davis makes a call for activists to cultivate the power imagination so we can see beyond how unjust systems work and shape new visions of how they could work.

“The most difficult and urgent challenge today, she says, is that of creatively exploring new terrains of justice.”

Davis calls this work the development of abolitionist imagination - that which “de-links us from what is and allows us to see new forms of safety, harm reduction, justice.”

Angela Davis definitely sees the tigers, but also knows how to see more than tigers. She also is keenly aware there is no end.

I look to her unwavering optimism and radical imagination right now, at a time when I am seeing mostly tigers but know I must see beyond, must know this a continuous story, a long arc, there is no end.

“When we do this work of organizing against racism, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, “Davis says, “When we do the work of organizing to change the world — there are no guarantees that our work will have an immediate effect, But we have to do it as if it were possible.”

My friends, I invite you this week to see the tigers. Fully acknowledge their presence, and please, be more than dismayed should violence, deceit, and aggressive fear rule the days ahead.

Be alarmed, freak out - and then let that energy fuel your spirit and whatever sweet, precious, necessary good thing that it reaches for beyond the tigers.

Be so brave it seems crazy. Be joyful in your crazy bravery.

Cut the ties you have to failure and shame.

Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet. Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you. Call your spirit back. Help another find their way through the dark.

And, if nothing else, take a break from the tigers and remember this precious moment we share now - together as a collective that will be unbroken. We are with you, we will

help you, we will always welcome you with compassion and curiosity as precious as a wild strawberry in cold, dark november.

My friends, I am with you and I am praying for you as we turn the page and see what happens next in this cliffhanger.

Let only peace, goodness, and ultimate care for the earth and all of it's living beings carry us as individuals and as a nation through the days ahead.

Let it be so, let it be so, let it be so.