



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"National Day of Silence: Whose Voices Do We Hear?"

Delivered 14 April 2024

Rev. Jen Raffensperger

["you are enough](#)

your work is enough

you are needed

your work is sacred

you are here

and i am grateful"

Two days ago - Friday, April 12, 2024 - was the National Day of Silence. The National Day of Silence was first held at the University of Virginia in 1996 as a student-led protest to draw attention to the silenced voices of LGBTQIA+ students. This protest and day of action went national in 1997, and in 2002 it became an official project of the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). On the second Friday in April, students are asked not to speak throughout the day, and then to break silence at the end of the day at rallies and calls for action.

This year, however, GLSEN and other advocacy groups joined together to call for a "[Day of NO Silence](#)," because of the alarming and increasing numbers of anti-LGBTQIA+ bills being proposed - and far too often passed - throughout our nation.

Silencing the stories of any community causes harm. It is when we share our stories, when we get curious about those whose lives and experiences are different from our own, that we build the trust that can allow communities to

join together, to address harms done in the past and commit to healthier ways to be together in the future.

Many of you may know that I found Unitarian Universalism when I joined a group called Marylanders for Marriage Equality in 2011. At one point, in a very challenging conversation with my mother, she asked “why I cared so much when it didn’t affect me personally.” My heart aches just to think of that question - not just of her fundamental misunderstanding of me but also the fundamental failure of empathy - shouldn’t I care if others are suffering, if others are denied rights, even if I am not?

I joined Marylanders for Marriage Equality in part because I have empathy. I joined in part because new language and new ideas about gender, sexual orientation and identity, and relational or affectional orientation and identity meant I was coming to a more nuanced understanding of myself. And in large part I joined because I used to be someone who made casual, off-handed judgements and remarks based on ignorance and lack of understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community. I did it to make amends for my own thoughtless and careless words and actions.

Finding Unitarian Universalism while attempting not just to learn and grow in my understanding of other people and myself but also to become a vocal advocate for those whose rights were being infringed felt so *right*. It made so much sense. Here we are, a pluralistic faith with the audacious idea that we can take people of many different faith backgrounds and understandings of the sacred, and we can do the work of healing and of justice together.

We just widened our circle today, welcoming our new members. We are so grateful to add more stories, more experiences, more unique perspectives on the world to our shared community, to this audacious faith that wants us to reach for justice no matter how far away it feels, to bolster ourselves with joy together when all that reaching makes our arms tired. Welcome to a space where we prize imperfection over inaction.

“you are enough
your work is enough
you are needed
your work is sacred
you are here
and i am grateful”

You are enough.
You are needed.
You are here, and I am grateful.

The National Day of Silence came along exactly as I left the educational system for a good many years. When I was in high school, from 1986 until 1990, there was no PFLAG, no Gay-Straight Alliance - no one in my high school was out. Because silence was what the world demanded to keep all these beautiful young people safe - and that is an injustice. That is wrong, and antithetical to anyone who values the inherent worth and dignity of all.

Our schools have changed, and our laws have changed. And yet, as I alluded to earlier, of course - there are changes happening now that would seek to roll back progress that was hard won and well-deserved. We do not want to return to a world where people have to hide who they are to be safe, to be known and loved and respected for their full selves. Our faith compels us not to let this silence descend again.

My faith also compels me, this week, to honor the call of a “Day of NO Silence” and speak to those harms done in religious institutions to our beloved queer and trans and nonbinary siblings and selves. My heart broke to read this week of the document “*Dignitas Infinita*’ on Human Dignity,” released on April 8 by the Vatican. This document says too many harmful things about gender identity, abortion, surrogacy - and it says nowhere near enough things about the unconscionable legacy of abuse within the church. There are many reasons that I left the Roman Catholic faith in which I was raised, and I wept as I read about this document that I know will turn others away from a faith that they

love, that somehow proclaims to express the love of God through Christ on earth and yet sometimes falls very so short of the mark.

In religious institutions the world over, not just the Catholic church, LGBTQIA+ people have too often been made to feel not just unwelcome but unloved, unwanted, unworthy. The invocation, oft-repeated, that we are “made in God’s image” has been used as a tool, a blunt instrument, a weapon again and again by those who have decided - impossibly - that they know what God looks like.

This is not just hubris, this is evil. Pretending to know the mind (the nature, the very existence) of God is to wield a great power, and to use it to outright reject and condemn an entire group of people is an abuse of that power. It is wrong.

It is not just an affront to human dignity and what we have learned about human nature through human wisdom... it might just be an affront to god herself.

[“to be clear,](#)

god is not you.

god is somewhere in the 14 billion years

which have come to mean that you are.

god is, after all, at least a verb.

she is neither pharaoh’s rod nor moses’ staff.

we must be the ones to cease our slavery.

she is not interested in blame, neither does she offer praise. truth, gratitude are ours to breathe.

she will not have your answers.

she is too large for answers.

she dances too wildly to be fastened to them,

and answers are nouns anyway.

god is at least a verb,

twirling in the radiant reds of spring

blossoms,
singing in the rare silences between rapid opinions,
attending the tears of dark-skinned deaths, learning in tiny, alabaster smiles.

god is waiting in the space between fingers
that might connect.

he is waiting for us
to stop naming her.
she is waiting for us to
see all of him.

god is waiting

to be un-shrunk”

If you have been harmed in another faith tradition, I weep with shame at the actions of those who proclaim to act in the name of a god I do not understand.

If you have never been in a faith community that called you beautiful and beloved with full throat, I call that to you now. You are beautiful and you are beloved.

Do not shrink god into human ideas nor use them to justify injustice. Honor the worth and dignity of each person, for the spark of that which may be named divine resides within us all.

If you are able and you are safe, leave your silence behind and use your voice and your hands to call for the loving justice that will free us all into our full selves. None of us are free until all of us are free. Reach for justice, and when your arms are tired, come here to rest, to renew, and to emerge ready again for the holiest of work.

“you are enough

your work is enough
you are needed
your work is sacred
you are here
and i am grateful”

So may it be.