



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“A Constitution of Stars”

Delivered 6 November 2022

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“But overnight, a vine you’ve never battled
creeps out of the dark furrows, scales
the long necks of the sunflowers, chokes
every black-eyed Susan, and coils around
the peonies, beheading them all. You snap
apart its greedy tendrils, cast your hands
back into the dirt, pull at its ruthless roots.
Still, it returns with equal fury and claim:
the red poppies scream, the blue asters
gasp for air, strangled in its vile clasp
that lives by killing everything it touches.”

A few weeks ago I spoke about democracy and small-d democratic ideals in order to draw our attention to the value of civic engagement, the importance of giving our attention to the processes of our governmental functions on every level of our society.

Today I need to talk about the weight that rests on our hearts when we try to take an honest look at the state of our democracy.

It’s best in fact if I start talking about the weight that rests on my own heart, for it is unfair for me to project my own experience, reactions, or deep emotions onto anyone else.

Right now I want to tell a personal story, and to preface that story I want to tell you two things. One, this story involves a death by suicide, and I want you to

know that going in so that you can prepare yourself, or choose not to listen for the next few minutes. I fully support you making the choice you need to make for your own mental health. Please remember that if you are struggling, the Suicide Prevention Hotline can now be reached by dialing 988. Two, I will break one of the primary rules I was taught about preaching, which is not to talk about my process. I think in this particular instance it's important to share with you that I have been cared for, helped, and come to terms with the story that I am about to tell you. I have been fortunate to have resources - therapy, supportive friends and peers, a loving faith community - that allow me to speak to you today about this in a way that is healthy for me. One of the rules of preaching that I am not breaking is "Preach from scars, not wounds."

Today I want to tell you a story about my friend Abby. Abby was kind, fiercely loyal, passionate about fighting injustice wherever she saw it. She loved deeply but privately; having survived an abusive marriage she cherished the safety she found in privacy in many aspects of her life. Abby supported me by coming to some of the first sermons I ever gave as a lay leader in my home congregation, though she'd never otherwise darken the door of a church. Abby is the one who convinced me to become a clinic escort. Abby and I supported each other as we began attending Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2015, two white women beginning a journey of learning, and unlearning, that became a deep part of both of our lives. Her stances on some issues, principally the Movement for Black Lives, estranged her from most of her family. She seemed to take it in stride, feeling it was the only way for her to continue to live her values.

In November of 2016, I was excited to vote. I thought very specifically of my grandmothers that morning, the ones both born in the United States at a time when women could not vote. In the morning I went to my polling place, cast my ballot, got my sticker, and went to work. That evening, I had plans to go see punk rock icon and thoughtful writer and performer Henry Rollins do a spoken word show with a few friends. It seemed like a good way to spend my evening, rather than glued to an electronic device. We had a great time at a great show, then said our goodbyes and headed home.

I didn't have to go to work the rest of the week, I had taken the days off because I was moving. My main job that Wednesday morning was to pack up my kitchen for the movers arriving the next day. When I woke up that Wednesday I was surrounded by news, news that I will confess here personally I was not happy to hear. I was very grateful to have a task to distract me. I set about the work of packing my kitchen into boxes, and then my phone rang. I answered the phone to hear a woman's voice I didn't know, quietly asking if she had reached me. This woman introduced herself as Abby's sister-in-law, and told me that Abby had died by suicide in the early hours of the morning. I started crying, and she started crying, and there wasn't much else to say, except to please let me know if the family needed anything, and when the funeral was planned. She said that she would, that Abby had left a list of people to contact, and that we would all know the plans when they were made.

In that instance, I knew a different kind of sorrow and world-shattering feeling than the one I had woken up to. I had no idea what to do. I reached out to our mutual friend, who had also been on the list, and we spoke our shock and sorrow to each other. I texted with one of my best friends. I told my roommate. But mostly I sat in tearful silence, not packing my kitchen, unable to do anything else. After an hour or two, I stirred. I couldn't postpone the movers, so I couldn't postpone the packing anymore.

As months passed, I started to hear from more and more people about the emotions that they felt on the morning after that election. They ranged the full spectrum, from disappointment to happiness to anger to confusion to excitement to uncertainty and more besides. And I would take my grief out then, and re-examine it. That day for me was about much more than the election, though that was certainly a factor in Abby's decision it was far from the only one. But my anger and sorrow was much more deeply personal than it was for many.

There was a greedy and ruthless vine in the garden of my life, and I felt the echoes of this in larger society. No matter what anyone's personal experience was on that day, there was an overarching shift in the national consciousness that people carried deep in their hearts even when they hid it from their faces. What do we do with this vine? This grief that threatens every part of the garden, that is also compounded within each of us by the personal grief of our own hearts?

Let's return our attention to Richard Blanco's powerful [poem](#) that Steve shared with us (Thank you!).

“The sun's eye closes behind mountains, but you lose sleep tonight, uncertain if the garden is meant to inevitably survive or die, or if it matters—one way or the other—with or without you. Maybe it's not just the garden you worry about, but something we call hope pitted against despair, something we can only speak of by speaking to ourselves about flowers, weeds, and hummingbirds; spiders, vines, and a garden tended under a constitution of stars we must believe in, splayed across our sky.”

This is what I really want to speak about: hope pitted against despair. I felt I could not speak about it without acknowledging that there are times when despair wins; we have all carried sorrows and struggles that no one knows about, and they color the way we perceive everything else in the world around us. We are each battling more than one vine.

I want to invite everyone hearing these words to take a few steady breaths now. Putting our attention on despair deliberately can feel heartbreaking. Despair is a part of life. Without despair, hope cannot fill us up the same way. Every time we cry out in lamentation, we make room for the next cry of jubilation, which will feel that much sweeter.

This constitution of stars we must believe in, that Blanco gently points us towards after the hard work of tending our gardens, asks that we look at the tools in our hands and the dirt beneath our feet and know this work will be of benefit. Even in the darkness when we don't know and worry that we might never, this work will be of benefit.

Staying under that night sky, the gentle scatter of stars, I would like to also turn our attention to our chalice lighting. Poet W.H. Auden wrote [“September 1, 1939”](#) shortly after hearing about Germany's invasion of Poland on that date, the beginning of the Second World War. It was first published in October of that year. Auden famously came to despise the poem, widely regarded as one of the greatest written in the 20th century. Because the truth of art is that once an artist has released their creation into the world, it cannot be called back. And the most powerful creations take up their own place no matter their creators' intent or desire. For our chalice lighting we heard the final two stanzas:

“All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die.

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light

Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.”

Those flashes of light, those affirming flames sent up by even those struggling with despair - Auden and Blanco are drawing our attention to the same sky. The sky that covers us all, the sky beneath which grow hope and despair beyond measure.

This is our garden, beloveds, and this is our work. No matter what happens on Tuesday, on Election Day, we know two things. We know that the work will not be over. We know that both hope and despair will live and grow in the hearts of people all over this nation.

Take exquisite care of yourselves in the coming days. Take to heart the reminder that not a single one of us can truly know the mind or heart of another. Take tender care of all those you meet in the coming days. You cannot know what part of the garden they have tended, nor whether hope or despair is the one they currently feel blooming in their hearts.

If you find yourself in darkness, remind yourself of the beauty of darkness. Beneath the moon and stars we take rest, we take shelter, and we take comfort. The moon will be full this Tuesday, and its light will wash the land with a glow that reminds us that no single color - neither red nor blue - is the entire truth of any object. “We must love one another or die.” Auden struggled with this line particularly - after all, as mortal creatures we will each die. But the creation remains despite its creator, and that reminds me that there are many kinds of death. A life lived without loving one another is not the kind of life I want, nor do I believe it’s the life nearly any human wants.

So tend the garden within your heart as well as you tend the garden of your family, your community, your world. When there are vines that would strangle your hope, separate you from the knowledge of your worth, know that love means more people who can help. If you are struggling, please don't struggle alone. Spark out, and see our affirming flames.

May it be so.