



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"How We Remember: International Holocaust Remembrance Day"

Delivered 28 January 2024

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"Never forget."

What is the opposite of welcome?

Disregard.

Distrust.

Ambivalence.

Neglect.

Abandonment.

"I asked Brenner what he felt when standing on this platform and seeing these dates, these numbers, these words. He paused and looked around at the trees above us, his eyes moving slowly back and forth, as if he were searching for the answer in the leaves. 'I cannot process it. My mind cannot process it. And obviously'—he wiped at his eyes—'my body can process it.'"

There is a way that welcome feels in the body. And disregard, distrust, ambivalence, neglect, abandonment - the body carries those, too.

We are asked not to forget the Holocaust that killed millions of Jews and untold numbers of Roma people, LGBTQIA+ people.

Whatever the opposite of welcome is, the terror and uncertainty was certainly felt in the body of those removed from their homes and sent to concentration camps. Whatever the opposite of welcome is, is still felt today in those who

had family members die during this horrible and malignant time in history. Whatever the opposite of welcome is, it changes the body. We know now about the effects of generational trauma. We know that our bodies carry the messages that hate carves into them for long past the moment of the injury.

We know we live in a hurting world.

We know that we are faced every day with images of hate writ large.

We know that when we are hurt, we become defensive.

We know that when we hurt, it is easier to lash out.

We know that it is our responsibility to understand our own reactions.

We know that it is our gift and our liberation to work for our own healing and the healing of all.

If we are to heal, if we collectively are to learn about the deep harm of the past and heal ourselves collectively for the future, we must name these hurts, these times of defensiveness.

As I and the rest of the world have watched and read and listened and scrolled, we have borne witness to the cycles of generational trauma still causing harm in our world. It is not within my knowledge or my ability to stand here before you this morning and tell you exactly why Israel's leaders have responded in the overwhelming and outsized way that they did to the harms done to them by the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023. I have wrestled with this personally, trying to pick apart what I know of the how and why and when, like grabbing the same rope hand over hand with another for so long that the rope slips away between you and you are left holding nothing, knowing nothing, wanting only to see the killing stop. I have thought of every time I was taught the Golden Rule, or to turn the other cheek. I have thought of every time we have had public debates over the right to defend oneself, one's property, one's personhood. I have thought of all the times that world leaders entrusted with the ethical care of those who elected them have instead attacked their personhood.

I keep trying to know in my heart and my head what is right and finding my hands empty, the thread lost, the despair growing within my chest.

How can we right the wrongs of the past? What can heal us? How can we be true to our vow not to forget but also take up the task of healing that ensures we ourselves will not continue to perpetuate harm?

“The platform stretched off into the distance in both directions. I craned my neck over the edge and looked down at the train tracks, their weathered steel stained with spots of brown rust. To the right, the tracks were visible until the rail line curved and disappeared into the forest. To the left, the tracks were partially buried beneath a cluster of trees whose thin trunks arched upward into an orange-and-yellow canopy. The trees’ presence was intentional. The trunks growing between the tracks were there to say: No more trains will ever pass here.”

Clint Smith’s [powerful piece](#) in The Atlantic which Molly shared with us this morning (thanks Molly!) arose out of Smith’s work on his own book How the Word is Passed about how America deals - and does not deal - with the legacy of slavery upon which this nation was founded. He kept using Germany as an example of a nation that did a better job of reckoning with the evils of its past, but he had not traveled there himself. The long piece that was published in December 2022 turned out not to be enough; Smith is working on a book on the subject. Because what Smith discovered is that there are many ways Germany has indeed faced its history - and that those ways in many instances feel frozen. A monument shifts over time. When talking to the same person mentioned in our reading, Frédéric Brenner - a photographer who has devoted 40 years to documenting the Jewish diaspora - warned Smith not to visit Auschwitz, because people there don’t give it the respect it deserves, tourists taking selfies and videos to share on social media without contextualizing the full terror and inhumanity of what occurred there.

The growing tree monument, however - that blocks the train tracks that once transported humans to their deaths (their murders) - is meant to grow. A

growing thing can shift and heal over time. A scar in the bark of a tree will eventually close and change and heal. It won't disappear. But recovery is possible. Every scar is a testimony to healing.

When we challenge ourselves to take a long hard look at our scars, we must ask ourselves which ones have healed and which ones still hide infection, hide harm. What haven't we treated? What haven't we named?

We must never forget the Holocaust because other evils done around it, before it, after it, in its name, do not erase the original evil, the original harm. But we must also call ourselves to consider the challenge to counter our own disregard, distrust, ambivalence, neglect, and abandonment. We must do what we can not to ignore the evil that we see but to name it, to sense it both externally and within ourselves. I know there are times I look away from harm and hurt. I often think of Pastor Martin Niemöller's words in my own context - who are the groups that have been "come for" that I allowed myself to look away from because I was not one of them?

I know it is hard. Take a pause. Take a breath. Picture that growing tree, which over time will not merely block the railroad tracks but uproot them entirely, the long work of root-building and branch-spreading pulling up the ties and tracks, twisting them until they are unrecognizable, shaping them into sculpture, forming art from the pain and the sorrow.

Just because we cannot forget the evils of the past does not mean we cannot work to transform them into dreams of a better future. Indeed, this is one of the deepest calls of being human. Our Unitarian Universalist values call us to the work of transformation - we cannot transform what we do not know. We cannot heal the hurt we do not recognize. We cannot bind the wound we cannot see.

Never forget.

Always welcome.

Work to heal.

So may it be.