



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"The Challenge of Action"

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In the spring of 2020, I took a lot of long walks. Daily morning walks have been a part of my life for a long time, but that year they went from being an important part of my routine to being a vital part of my routine. I would take long meandering courses throughout all the surrounding neighborhoods. Of course in 2020, four years ago, it was also an election year. In the course of one of these long walks, I turned down a small side street I didn't often choose, and that's when I saw it: On one side of the street was a house with a flag flying out front in support of one presidential candidate. Across the street from this house, there was a house with not fewer than seven yard signs, one for every major candidate running for the nomination of the party in opposition to the candidate named on the flag. What it said, even to someone who might claim to pay zero attention to politics, was: "Vote for literally anyone except that guy."

At the time I lived in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C., and no one could claim to pay zero attention to national politics. It was our actual backyard! And in the spring of 2020, why, the national concentration had only a few big spots where attention was drawn again and again.

"Literally anybody except that guy."

When I saw this configuration of flag and signs, I confess that at first, I laughed. But then I remembered another political message I'd seen on a recent walk - this time in the back window of someone's car, spelled out in letter-stickers assembled from a craft store. "Re-Elect [candidate redacted] 2020: Make Liberals Cry Again."

I didn't laugh at that one. And thinking about the whole situation honestly did make me want to cry.

Not the election specifically - that's another story for another place and time - but the dialogue surrounding the election. The national conversation that was happening not in person - since we were not gathering much in person at the time - but that was happening on bumper stickers and yard signs, flags and hats, store-bought sentiments or handcrafted ones, and that was happening online in thousands of posts and forums and comment-sections and screeds.

There were SO MANY big emotions. And people were generally so tired and stressed that many - maybe most - of us were simply not able to do much with those emotions other than shriek them aloud into the void...or push them way, way down.

"When in doubt,
Treat all sentient and insentient beings as kin.

When in doubt,
Forgive us our myopia
As we forgive those who are myopic against us."

Forgive us our myopia / As we forgive those who are myopic against us.

Myopia, nearsightedness, means we can see things close to us clearly...and the farther away we look the more blurred the images become. We cannot see things clearly that are far from us.

The first time I heard [this poem by Sandra Cisneros](#) that was our reading today, it was those lines that stopped me in my tracks. Right on the heels of "treat all sentient and insentient beings as kin," I thought, "it's the things that are close to us that we can easily feel a relationship with - sentient or insentient."

“When in doubt,
Err on the side of generosity.

When in doubt,
Greet everyone as you would the Buddha.”

What if I had known this poem at the time I saw those signs? What if I had somehow been able to insert these lines into the minds and the hearts of those neighbors of mine, those neighbors of each other, who were being decidedly un-generous and un-Buddha-like in their front-yard-and-car-window dialogues? Would it have changed anything?

I don't know.
But wouldn't it have been worth a try?

Just like we talked about today when we had our Time for All Ages and said a blessing for our banner - everyone has emotions, sometimes very big ones indeed. Emotions are completely human, natural, and valid. The key thing, the magical thing, is what we DO with the emotions.

Wait, how is what we do with our emotions *magical*?

Take this poem, today. Take poetry. Take any kind of art. Music, pottery, film, painting, cooking, knitting, any of it. Making something out of nothing. Making something new out of something old. Transformation by the hand and the imagination that communicates something larger than we might be able to do with words alone.

When we are filled with an emotion that is hard to name or contain - grief over climate change, anger over war, agony over famine, heartbreak over the constant news of gun violence, powerlessness over any kind of injustice - what can we do? What can we do that is not just pushing it aside and pretending it does not exist? What can we do other than allowing it to rush out of us in a

blast, possibly leading us to harm others by word or by deed? When we are hurting, how do we keep from hurting others? When we are healing, how do we heal others?

“When in doubt,
Carry a handkerchief *and* a fan.

When in doubt,
Thank everyone. Twice.

When in doubt,
Heed the clouds.

When in doubt,
Sleep on it.”

Be prepared. Be kind. Be attentive. And get some rest.

As we face this strange and uncertain year ahead, now that we are nearly one-quarter of the way through it, now that we reside in spring and see literal embodiments of hope pushing their way up from the frozen earth and out from the tightly-wrapped buds - how do we perform the emotional alchemy that allows us to contain our emotions, to consider them, not to run from them but to regard them, not to act on them without thought but to wonder where they could be fuel to the fire of change?

Be prepared. Be kind. Be attentive. And get some rest.

Know when you are being activated. Be curious about your own response and kind to yourself when you are frustrated. Look for that same curiosity within yourself when you are frustrated with someone else. Ask yourself: Am I tired? Am I hungry? Am I in pain? Remind yourself: This other person may be tired, or hungry, or in pain. Remind yourself: In a just world everyone would have time to rest, would have enough to eat, would be able to tend to their pain.

Remind yourself, again and again, that giving attention to these matters even in tiny pieces is better than pushing them away, than pretending they don't exist, than resorting to a shouting contest and abandoning empathy.

Embrace imperfection over inaction.

“When in doubt,
Absorb biographies to avoid life's major mistakes.

When in doubt,
Make life's major mistakes.”

When we put up a sign we are saying something. But oftentimes we're saying more than the thing that is printed on the sign - or the bumper sticker - or the tshirt or the flag or the hat. We have a history of having a sign in front of this congregation and we have a history of wrestling with that sign. Today we blessed a new sign that upholds values this congregation chooses to share with the world. When UUCYork first put up a Black Lives Matter sign, the bottom of the sign said “Join the conversation.” At some point that sign was altered to remove that part because, it was observed, we weren't having that conversation. Our sign both declares our values and also declares that we are ready to talk about them, to think about them, to consider how they might impact ourselves and others in our daily lives. We bless our new sign and we also bless every iteration of the old sign, every part of our journey to wrestle with the values that call us to address injustice, that call us to lovingly live our faith all the time, not just on Sunday morning. Our sign and its history should also ideally remind us that we are doing this work imperfectly, incompletely, and that it is still absolutely and utterly worth doing.

Action doesn't have to be a sign. It can be a song. Change doesn't have to be legislated from above, it can be planted like a seed from below. Anger doesn't have to be the only emotion that motivates us to consider change. When we talk about alchemizing emotion into energy, we don't just mean the so-called

“bad” emotions. Whatever fills your cup prepares you for the energy that alchemy requires.

Whether you choose to protest or to paint, whether you choose to march or to mend, whether you choose to shout or to sing, know that the fullness of all these activities can plant seeds of change deep in your soul. Know that any of these choices are valid and that these dichotomies are false - that you can paint and protest and sing and shout and you can pause to discern which is best for you and those around you at any given moment. Know that you are called to have the courage to change your own mind and heart, not just to seek to change the minds and hearts of others. You are called to be courageous agents of alchemy for that which is closest to you, that which you can see the best, and you are called to the challenge of lifting your attention to all that you do not see as clearly, to all that may seem strange or other, and to err on the side of generosity.

Be prepared. Be kind. Be attentive. And get some rest.

So may it be.