

Rev. Deborah Cayer      To Trust the Dawning Future More      May 31, 2020  
Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Durham, North Carolina

## Introduction

In a recent meeting my colleague, Rev. Stacy Grove has mentioned how often she's noticed people talking about what they've learned these past two months, and how many people say they're going to do something differently when it's over. This is true for people who have rigorously been quarantining and also for people who don't have the privilege of staying at home.

Whatever our differences, wherever we are in terms of socio- economics, gender, or racial identity, this experience has definitely got our attention. We've all been suffering. And when we hold our suffering consciously, it opens us. It helps us feel our compassion, and find our empathy. Or as the novelist Rita Mae Brown puts it, "Sorrow is how we learn to love."

And so we notice this and name it, not because we like walking on the dreary side of the street, but because this is where our search for truth takes us.

Stacy also observed that Jews have just celebrated Shavuot—the festival of Weeks—50 days from Passover. This was originally a celebration of the barley harvest. It also celebrates the giving of Torah to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Jewish holy days all begin at sunset the evening before. And some people spend the night reading and sharing insights from Torah all night long. This is their way of participating in ongoing revelation, in honor and reverence for how Torah was revealed to Moses. But revelation is continuous—it can happen for us too when we show up, when we've prepared ourselves.

Today Christians also are observing Pentacost—it's been 50 days since Easter. Christians recall the stories about the disciples who after Jesus' death were driven by their terror, wild grief and despair into hiding for 50 days. At which point the Spirit descended upon them and they were able to understand each other across all their differences. This too is a story about revelation. One way to interpret this is that as the first disciples worked through their terror and grief they found new meaning, and eventually love and solidarity with each other. "Sorrow is how we learn to love."

So what might revelation be for Unitarian Universalists? This morning we're going to look through a liberal religious lens at what's being revealed in Minneapolis, Louisville, and Brunswick, Georgia after the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery.

The next hymn is Tranquil Streams, originally written in the 1930's as Universalists and Unitarians shared resources and considered merger for many years. It was sung in 1961 when the two traditions finally did merge. "a freedom that reveres the past but trusts the dawning future more..." we don't sing this often, but I requested this particular hymn this morning for that one line in particular.

Reflection

What's Being Revealed

Rev. Stacy Grove

Many of you may have heard the term 'apocalyptic times.' We hear it most often spoken of as the final end of the world. But **Apocalypse** actually is a **Greek** word **meaning "revelation"**, "an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling".

So what is being revealed to us now at a time when it seems only this pandemic has the global capacity to shake up all the constructs that we are living within? It is hard to imagine there would be a global shutdown that would stop most everything from its normal rhythm of daily life. And yet, here we are...

How are we learning to adapt to a new normal, one that keeps shifting as we learn more about this virus? What are the ways we've been living our daily life - socially, economically, spiritually? What no longer serves for the common good? Just as the prophet, Joel, said "in the last days it will be...that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh and the young will see visions and the old will dream dreams..." I wonder how people are & will collaborate in their communities & globally... or not...within these constructs to support one another moving through this very turbulent time to live into the visions and dreams of a better future?

I don't mean the 'end of times' - like total mass destruction, evil, and all that, although forms of that possibility exist as tensions rise with major change and fear grasps our senses. I'm pondering the ending of a cycle of time that opens a door, making space for creative collaboration in new ways -- with potential for a new time that provides better justice for all, honoring more intently the inherent worth and dignity of all life, dismantling racism and disparities with a Love that truly embraces all differences.

What is the potential for new understanding with awakened consciousness that propels us forward through these turbulent times with courage and conviction for a better world...How can we co-create the future together?

Sermon, part one

Rev. Deborah Cayer

My colleague, Rev. Erica Hewitt, points out that this week after George Floyd suffocated under the knee and full body weight of a Minneapolis police officer, outrage has become the language of our public lamentation. And with good reason. She points out that, "...This was a 21st century lynching. [And] It wasn't an isolated act of white violence. It's what's been happening to black and brown people—and especially black men—for centuries..."

Let's sit together and breathe in honor and sacred memory of those who have been beaten, bound, lynched, all whose dreams have been suffocated because of the color of their skin...

As a public witness, in the chatbox I invite you to write the names that you know of people of color who have been killed because of white violence...

"A riot is the language of the unheard," Dr. King told us. And he continued: "And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay."

Some of us have delayed, and there is much for all of us to grieve. We avoid this emotional work at our individual and collective peril.

If you are a person of color, take care of yourself. Tell your story, claim your anger, don't let go of your truth. And when you've wrestled, as Jacob did with that terrible angel in the night, don't forget to claim your blessing: your true name is Beloved. And you have a choice. If you wish, when you're ready, if it's right for you, you can put down your suffering and enter in, carrying this fruit, this harvest, this sweet, sacred truth: you are already fully, truly wanted and welcome in this

new country, even if some of the residents don't yet know this. No one's ignorance or arrogance can alter this truth.

If you identify as white, this is a moment to wrestle with the terrible angel of privilege that attends your identity. For more than 400 years, racial violence has been at the core of our nation's history and people with white skin have benefitted, some more, some less. But all have started farther forward on the starting line than people of color, and have carried less of a burden that would slow their progress.

All of us, black, brown and white, have inherited a terrible legacy from our history of enslavement and the genocide of native peoples. The price of white privilege is that white people are required to remain unconscious about the sources of their relative wealth...And remain unconscious about the lived experience of people of color.

But when we are unconscious we cannot fully love. We cannot accurately think or make decisions. We cannot accurately tell when we are being played and taken advantage of, we cannot tell that the planet is being exploited and that our children's future has been sold to pay for our comfort.

Our ignorance is making us terribly ill. As Ibram X. Kendi points out, "We have metastatic racism, and it is literally killing America."

We'll pause here for now. Stacy has the meditation and prayer for us this morning.

Sermon, part two

Rev. Deborah Cayer

We have metastatic racism and it's killing us. Our life threatening illness comes from our unacknowledged history. And still, communities of color suffer more. This week, Dr. Elias Ortega, President of Meadville Lombard Theological School pointed out that, "As a nation, we seem to continually fail to resist this evil; as a nation, we opt instead to ask communities of color to remain calm and hold on just a little longer. [But] How long is long enough and who gets to decide?"<sup>i</sup>

If you guessed that the answer is “not just the people with privilege,” you’re correct. And if you’re wondering how and where to begin, here’s something to consider.

Paolo Freire was an educator who worked with the most marginalized citizens in Brazil. His work was rooted in his deep belief that every person regardless of social location carries within themselves the image and likeness of God. In other words, every person has inherent worth and dignity. Freire also understood that everything and everyone is deeply interconnected, at a time when few thought this way.

Amid atrocious racialized injustices and the dehumanization of Brazil’s poorest citizens, Freire was committed to an equitable, horizontal process of dialogue in which all people are treated with respect, as equals. He understood the poorest of the poor as active agents who are capable of naming their own needs and figuring out the solutions to their own problems. He said that to be in this kind of relationship takes humility on the part of anyone with resources—it asks those with more to let go of their personal agendas, their certainty that they know the right way, the correct path to the future.

What’s more, Freire discovered that these radically egalitarian relationships led to solidarity across differences as the people began to recognize each other as *subjects*, each in their full humanity. Each became both teacher and learner in a relationship that was alive with faith and love.

Freire understood this relationship to be a kind of dialogue. But to be in this truly, those with more resources must develop greater humility. Freire wrote: “Dialogue cannot exist without humility. How can I dialogue if I regard myself as an “I” and others—mere “its”? How can I dialogue if I consider myself . . . the owner of truth and knowledge . . .? How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contributions of others? Self-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue. At the point of encounter there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know.”<sup>ii</sup>

When we are in this kind of relationship we to begin to shift from seeing others as a means to our ends, to seeing others as unique and precious opportunities for spiritually alive relationships.

We begin to move from isolation and separation to solidarity as we experience each other's inherent worth and dignity. We experience the ways in which we are deeply, truly interconnected.

Contemporary spiritual teacher Richard Rohr says that to truly be in solidarity, people with privilege have to move themselves off of the dead center that they've been taught is their rightful place. "Authentic solidarity requires our voluntary displacement from our position(s) of privilege—whether that be class, race, gender, physical ability, nationality, or religion—we have to move toward someone who is not like us in a real and tangible way."<sup>iii</sup>

We continually trip and fall all over our privilege until we get the hang of this more equitable, egalitarian way of being in relationship. Solidarity is not a one up, one down relationship in which "I'm helping you." Instead solidarity is a commitment to travel, to learn and grow together.

The good news is that we can learn the skills for solidarity and right relationship. And we don't have to go to a fancy or exclusive ashram. The teachers are everywhere and they don't cost a dime. The psychologist Roger Walsh says, "If we choose to, we can see everyone as our teacher. Confucius was very clear about this: "When walking in the company of two other men I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy; the bad points of the other I correct in myself." Walsh says that people who have admirable qualities can inspire us; those with destructive qualities can remind us of our shortcomings and motivate us to change.

To begin, we choose "...a time period such as a morning or a day. During that time, imagine that each person you meet is a teacher who's bringing you an important lesson. Your challenge is to recognize what that lesson is, then to learn as much as you can from this person. At the end of the day, look back and review your interaction with each person, the lessons each one brought, and what you learned." As you practice, "Every person becomes a teacher and a reminder of our spiritual nature, while every experience becomes a learning opportunity . . . the world [becomes].. a sacred schoolhouse designed to heal and awaken us."<sup>iv</sup>

We are in this apocalyptic moment. We would benefit from all the teachers we can find and all the wisdom we can distill from them. Right now we could choose to pass along a new story of health and wholeness to our children and grandchildren. We can do this if we are willing to see and hear the truths that people are speaking, crying, chanting, screaming about their lived experience in the streets of our nation.

Whoever we are, whatever our identity, we can support them by joining together in solidarity and donating to the Movement for Black Lives. Or contributing money to bail funds set up for black and brown protestors who have been unfairly arrested. Or supporting movements that are working to finally abolish slavery as its patterns echoes through all our institutions today.

Or we can choose to stay in the old story of metastatic racism in which a few elites are winners who take all, and everyone else is a loser who hasn't "earned" or who doesn't "deserve" adequate health care, housing, food or employment. If we choose this story chaos and destruction will continue and we'll continue to divide along the lines of anyone who is "not like me/ not like my people."

In this story, privilege is the coin that staves off having to deal with our suffering and sorrow. Can we find the courage to sit with our sorrow, and let our grief inform us? Change us? Transform us? So that we in turn can act for change? Even as we're choked by our outrage, as the world spins and splits apart, can we find a way through the chaos to our deepest values and greatest principles? When our action comes from these sources, it has great power.

May we choose the path of love that leads to a story rooted in solace and solidarity. To get to that sacred place we must trust the dawning future more than the dead certainties of the past.

May we choose love. Because Love has already chosen us...is right here, waiting for us to help each other find our way home.

## Closing Words from Black America Again, by Common

You know, one way of solving a lot of problems that we got  
Is lettin' a person feel that they're important  
And a man can't get himself together until  
He knows who he is and be proud of what and who he is  
And where he come from,  
and where he come from...

...See black people in the future  
We wasn't shipped here to rob and shoot ya  
We hold these truths to be self-evident  
All men and women are created equal  
Including black Americans.  
[Including black Americans.]

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<sup>i</sup> “Resourcing our Mutual Survival,” Dr. Elias Ortega, President, Meadville Lombard Theological School, May 29, 2020 <https://www.meadville.edu/ml-commons/details/resourcing-our-mutual-survival/>

<sup>ii</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30<sup>th</sup> anniv. ed. (Continuum: 2005, ©1970, 1993), p. 90.

<sup>iii</sup> Richard Rohr, Daily Meditations, May 24-29, 2020. Center for Spirituality and Action, Albuquerque  
<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#inbox/FMfcgxwHNgWxXRSwwbFMfcCKgiRSXMhW>

<sup>iv</sup> Roger Walsh, *Essential Spirituality: The 7 Central Practices to Awaken Heart and Mind* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.: 1999), pp. 203–204.