

“Faith in Human Goodness”

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Unity Church Unitarian

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HOW TO FALL IN LOVE WITH THE WORLD by Jess Reynolds

I am standing on the bow
Of the ferry, and the sea
Is calling me to jump-Don't worry
The sea is just a metaphor.

It Love who calls me
With a voice like driftwood,
Rough and wrinkled and sand-worn,
To love the world as she does.

I have walked a muddy path
Between two alligators
Who slept with closed eyes
And knife-sharp grins.

I have eaten split pea soup
Beneath an old oleander tree,
Only wondering idly if a blossom
Might fall into my bowl.

I have braved the teeth
And the poison, but the sea rolls with more danger
Then anything I have ever known.

The only way to love this world
Is to climb up on the rail,
Take one breath of salt air
And dive.

REV KAREN: About ten days ago, Sara Ford and I met to discuss this morning's service. We began by sharing the description that I submitted for the November newsletter.

To say that the ensuing conversation was mutually stimulating is an understatement of epic proportion. In the next 90 minutes we generated enough ideas for a month of sermons or a lifetime of rumination and action. For today we have scripted some thoughts and stories that address the dilemma raised by this question.

In the face of so much pain and violence in the world, how do we resist the temptation to dismiss the possibility of human goodness out of hand and lose our way back to a belief in "inherent worth and dignity of every person"? For those of you who are here as your first experience of this faith tradition, inherent worth and dignity of every person, stands as the first of the principles which we covenant to affirm and promote as Unitarian Universalists.

It is easy to think of this in the abstract and it is helpful to think about the lived experience where we find this tension and some glimmers of a way through. Sara Ford's lived experience holds both the tension and the light of this possibility.

SARA: In the days and weeks before this fall's election, I was, as I think many of us were--balancing on pivot point between utter despair and some kind of space that held room for hope. How, How, I wondered, how can any of these races be so close when the policies we are talking about are so brazenly, shamelessly, cruel? How do I operate with hope and love, how can I find meaning in anything I do when so many seem not to care? How is it that so many Minnesotans are fine with a political campaign that openly ascribes danger and threat to dark skin, that brutally dehumanizes transgender people? How can I take the self-indulgent time to find a beautiful tree and revel in its splendor when so many lives are hanging in the balance? Trying to breathe, smile, laugh while all of this was happening felt like a terrible risk. Like Jess Reynold's poetic metaphor of "walking a muddy path between two alligators, sleeping with closed eyes and knife-sharp grins".

KAREN: That there is such a path seems undeniable. The danger is real. Many people DO seem not to care – to be unaware. Public acceptance, in politics and elsewhere, of behavior that threatens dark skinned and dehumanize transgender

people is real. Many lives DO hang in the balance. Human beings show an amazing capacity to disregard the humanity of others.

AND, as Sara and I discussed, that muddy path between the alligators as named in Jess Reynold's poem, seems to be narrow and lacking in off ramps. It can feel like the only way off is to give oneself up to be eaten up by gloom and doom and helplessness. Helplessness in the face of human destruction and violence is not an issue of faith. It is a palpable, observable reality; but as a single story that we choose to occupy, might we simply evoke more sadness and pain, more disconnection? What happens to our souls and our capacity for kindness when our responses to this reality are shaped by despair? What to do?

SARA:

In the late days of May, in 2020, parts of our city were on fire, both literally and metaphorically. Our Black brothers and sisters, and so many others of us were grieving and enraged at a system that kills and kills again. At the same time, in the same span of just a few days, White supremacist groups gathered in our city, in our neighborhoods, hoping for chaos. Law enforcement advised us to scour our property for incendiary devices by day, and to stay locked in and careful at night. First responders were spread so thinly that we were told we could not rely on emergency services should something happen. In my neighborhood, we were told to keep our hoses out, ready to fight fire on our own if arson should come to us. Thousands of people of color and their allies were out in communities, grieving and protesting the madness of this systemic brutality.

In those early days, after the awful night of protest and then rioting in the Frogtown neighborhood in St. Paul, my wife and I desperately wanted to be of help. Our community was bleeding, burning, and the violence was focused, once again, in our communities of color. We drove the two miles to the corner of Frogtown nearest Snelling and University. Most of the businesses in the Midway area were burned down and still smoldering, looted and smashed up, or still on fire. In the residential streets, it was eerily quiet, as if even the streets and sidewalks and houses were holding their breath. We were, too.

Then we drove north on Lexington, through Como Park, just two miles further. We drove where Lexington curves gently around the hills of the park, around the corner where you first see the golf course. As if someone was changing the

channel, the view shifted so dramatically it was difficult to comprehend. Outside our car, it was a sunny, pleasant spring morning, and the golf course was full of mostly white men, golfing.

Golfing! Sunshine! Was it even sunny in Frogtown?

Smoky. It had been smoky. Grief stricken—it was grief-stricken. But nobody on those streets would have looked around and thought, Nice day!

My wife and I did what white liberals are very good at. How can they be golfing, we scoffed? While the world is burning, while their neighbors are scattered in grief and fear—today, really, today, how did anybody wake up and think about their tee time? We stared in disbelief, and no small amount of self-righteous anger. How dare they? Don't they see? Don't they care?

But that reaction, I think, is where we get stuck far too often. There is something very dangerous about that stance, that very white, liberal way of positioning ourselves against an uninformed other.

Turns out the two of us driving in our car, defining our righteous selves against the backdrop of the golfers wasn't doing any more good than the golfers were doing themselves. It only made us feel better, because even though we didn't know how to help, at least we could find comfort by declaring ourselves not to be the golfers. When our city needed connectedness, we had been busy othering. KAREN: New alligators, it might seem. A new narrow path between denial and righteous indignation. This is a path with its own kind of danger. As Sara told this part of her story, this is the path I found myself on. Less gloomy, this illusion of well being, but no less dangerous.

What intrigues me about this metaphor is a consideration of what motivates the alligators.

When I think about the alligators along the path there certainly is potential for violence and destruction that is "inherent" in the alligators (as in eating people is in their nature and they will do it because that is what they do and they do it as an act of survival) and there is also the kind of violence that arises when any threatened species perceives the need to defend themselves, their space, their livelihood, their ideas, at all costs).

It matters what we believe about the sources and causes of violence and prejudice, of righteousness and denial. It matters because different beliefs ask for different responses.

If we believe, that the tendency toward prejudice and violence, righteousness and denial are inherent, inevitable and justifiable then those responses become, well, inevitable and justifiable.

But if we believe that, as our Unitarian Universalist forbearers claimed, that we are born with an unlimited capacity to access and express goodness and that the human, social and political structures and institutions that nurture those capacities need our constant and unflagging attention, then, at all costs, we defy the alligators of violence and prejudice and denial and righteousness because they are not only unhelpful response but they suck the energy out of our capacity for the kindness and goodness and repair.

Do I believe that accessing and expressing our own worth and dignity in aggressive expressions of kindness and goodness will change the direction of history. I don't know. I do believe that every one of my own cynical and self righteous and dismissive acts adds to the load of violence in the world. What I believe is that as Unitarian Universalists the antidote to despair, is the invitation away from inherent violence and prejudice toward inherent worth and dignity.

How do we grow different kinds of responses? How do we create spaces for a larger understanding, that does not exist mainly over against the uninformed other. How do we invite belief in human goodness? How do we claim our inherent worth and dignity and seek it in others – not just compatible others but in those we would scorn for their lack of consciousness? What could we do to find, encourage and tease out the goodness and dignity which we claim resides in every person? This does not, I think, mean turning away from the sources of despair, but leaning into them with a different kind of energy.

SARA: Looking for a different way to begin, we returned to the Midway area. We gathered brooms and trash bags and gloves. Having no idea what else to do, we started street cleaning. We swept. We picked up trash. We got down on our

knees and dug hundreds of tiny pieces of glass from broken liquor bottles out of the grass. We picked up a child's homework, carefully completed. We found a woman's scarf, bloodied. We found hundreds of what the police call rubber bullets, which may be rubber on the inside, but are heavy, blunt cases made of hard metal. We found the detritus of looting—plastic hangers, price-tags, entire armfuls of clothes off of a rack, empty shoe boxes. A few other people joined us. Everybody quiet. We just cleaned.

As I was loading a trash bin, a younger Black man approached me. He shouted to me upon approach, with an ironic laugh, that I needn't worry, as he wasn't going to light that trash bin back on fire. It seemed to me that his assumption was that I would be afraid of him, that my goal was to clean up property and that he was the threat to that property. He also looked exhausted. I expect he'd been up all night. I turned to him, with tears in my eyes, and asked the only thing I could think to ask: Are you ok?

"What?" he responded. "Did *you*, just ask *me*, if I'm ok?"

"I don't understand how you could possibly be ok" I said.

And he stared at me, and finally loosened tight shoulders, shrugged, and said, "I guess I'm doing alright." We stood there for a moment, staring at the trash all around us—at each other. He eventually walked off. I continued picking up.

I have no idea whether Kim and I helped anybody in any way that day. I don't know whether a similar scene played out the next night, and the same blocks we'd cleaned were trashed again, with more bloody scarves, more children's homework, more rubber bullets. I don't know if it mattered to anybody that we were there.

But maybe all we can do is find the next good thing.

Maybe

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