

What's Our Story?

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered November 13, 2016

at The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

Most of you won't be surprised to hear that I, too, was shocked and dismayed by last week's election results. I, too, got little sleep Tuesday night and have spent many hours struggling with my feelings about where to go from here. One thing that remains clear is that I remain deeply committed to our Unitarian Universalist statement of seven principles. Since I haven't referenced or quoted them lately, let's take a moment to review. Please turn in our hymnals to the unnumbered page just before the first hymn. Let's read them together:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Although I usually refrain from any direct reference to the details of our political process, I am forced to admit that these principles seem even more countercultural and even now that we have elected a president whose campaign repudiated each and every one of them.

I believe that this is a time for reflection and healing. Perhaps one place to start is a brief review of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross' five stages of grief. They present us

with an overview of the challenges we face in dealing with loss, even though individuals won't necessarily experience them all or in the same order.

The first stage is denial. In this stage, grieving people are unwilling or unable to accept that the loss has taken place. It can feel like a bad dream, and they are waiting to "wake up," and for things to return to normal.

The second stage is anger at the loss and the unfairness of it all. Next comes bargaining, which usually doesn't change anything and is followed by depression. The final stage, ideally, is acceptance, when people are able to admit that the loss has occurred and cannot be undone, and are once again able to plan for their futures and re-engage in daily life.

We can certainly see various versions of this across our nation. Some are still numb, in denial, unable to quite believe what has happened. There are many caught up in the second stage of anger, as we can see from the many protests across the country. Bargaining, never a rational response to loss, is in evidence as well. And for those who have managed to realize the depth and consequences of what has happened, there is no shortage of out-and-out depression. There is depression for lost hopes and dreams; no shortage of despair for the future of our country and the world.

There isn't a wide evidence of acceptance yet, but it will come, because that's what we need to be able to face what is to come and move forward, whether individually or together.

I think that part of what makes this outcome so challenging is that it comes on the heels of what seemed to be a joyful flowering of hope that our government could embrace the values of our seven principles. To paraphrase something I said at Bob Williamson's memorial service this week, "It is because we knew, loved, and delighted in the eight years of a progressive but imperfect administration, that we feel sorrow for its loss. Our joy came first. If we feel a sorrow now, it is because of that joy. We know that, in time, joy is what will remain.

Finding our way to that joy may seem impossible just now, but we must not lose sight of our goals. We need to refuse to be defeated by this loss – we need to keep our eyes on the prize.

In order to do this, we need to take a sharp look at ourselves, to understand how this could happen. It's too soon for clear answers, but it's not too soon to begin the process.

One thing I've seen is the reaffirmation of the power of story. There's an old Hopi proverb that says, "Those who tell the stories, rule the world." As I said last week, stories are what give us meaning and purpose. Stories don't tell us what to do as much as they tell us what is important and why. And I think that this election demonstrated the power of story over the power of reason. The Republican candidate had a clear, cogent, powerful story. No matter that it contained many elements that we found repugnant: it was a powerful story. The Democrats, like many progressives and Unitarian Universalists as well, ran on the power of reason, logic, and fact. We argued our points, produced relevant information and evidence, and expected them to carry the day. They did not.

There are some who have said that Unitarian Universalists should call themselves "argumentarians" instead, because they persist in the belief that making the best argument for principled action would change the world, even though that has never even once happened in the history of the world. When you look at world history, every major change, for better or worse, has been the result of a powerful narrative, a story that captured people's imaginations so completely that change became impossible to stop.

We may be deluding ourselves if we think that reason and fact will carry the day. If human nature is what it appears to be, we, too, are motivated by narrative, by story, as much as anyone. I believe, at this time, it is incumbent on us to search our souls, individually, as a church, and as a movement, to discover the powerful stories that motivate us, that could motivate others if we could express them clearly and cogently enough. Because reason isn't going to get it done.

One story that seemed to be relevant to all this is the background story of Sleeping Beauty. One recalls the king and queen with their beloved daughter, full of hope and love, inviting all in the kingdom, including 12 fairies, to her baptism. But they overlooked a thirteenth fairy who felt the snub keenly, who appeared uninvited and cursed the child, bringing tragedy to the kingdom.

Carl Jung said that the reason for evil in the world is that people are not able to tell their stories. There is a community in our nation whose story we refused to hear. And now they have spoken. It's true that we need to fight for our story, but we need to hear theirs, too. How else can we find common ground?

But even as we listen, we need to speak. Our voices will be even more needed over at least the next four years. We have a moral obligation to keep our principles at the forefront of our national conversation. And we need to find ways to make our voices listened to, and not just heard. How can we do that? We need to find, embrace, and lift up the stories that can change hearts as well as minds as we move forward into an uncertain future.

Our work as a Beloved Community is even more important than ever. The First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon used to describe itself as "The conscience of Portland." I believe that we, both as a church and as a denomination, need to join with the interfaith Moral Monday movement to serve as the conscience of the nation. We can't settle for anything less.

And we need to draw together, to support one another in this difficult time. Even as our voice is needed in the nation, living our principles right here and now, doing the hard work of creating a truly Beloved Community is absolutely essential.

In troubled times, heavy hearts, wounded hearts, need the safety of sanctuary. Sanctuary – this church, this community, can be that for ourselves, be that for the world – a safe place.

So I ask, what is our story? We need to look for it, to find it, to speak it and to live it. We need to find it in gentleness and caring in our support for one another. We need to find it in lifting our voices so the cries of suffering will not be ignored. We need a story, a positive story of hope and love that is more compelling than the stories of bigotry and fear that have dominated this unfortunate election.

Let's find that story together.

May it be so.