

Now What?
Arlington Street Church
November 9, 2008

Our nation made history this week. We made new history with the election of our first African American president. And at the same time we repeated sad history with passage of several state ballot propositions that enshrine discrimination against immigrants and gay and lesbian families. We live in a time of hope and we live in a time of fear – hope and fear in a time of change.

The news media tell us that 52.6% of those who cast ballots in the presidential election voted for Barack Obama and that 46.1% voted for John McCain. So even as many of us gathered here this morning rejoice in the making of this history, there are folks with us today – members of our own beloved Arlington Street Church community – who are in that other 46%. The victory that so many of us cherish now is indeed a hollow one if nearly half of our country feels foreclosed from it.

Hope has no audacity if it pertains to only half of us. We must move beyond the politics of division and the comfort of our own demographic groups if the promise of this new history is to be fulfilled. As Unitarian Universalists, we are uniquely suited to

extend ourselves out beyond the bounds of comfort and familiarity to create change that is real, sustained and inclusive.

Reverend Forrest Church, minister of public theology at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, says it best:

The president of the United States is not going to save us. The president can help us, can work with us and for us, but is not going to save us.... The votes we cast for president are far less important than the votes we cast for our neighbors and ourselves, the votes we cast with and in our lives.¹

Alas, we witnessed this on Election Day 2008. Numerically speaking, many voters who could look beyond skin color and ethnicity in voting for a president were unable to recognize the humanity, worth and dignity of those who were born in other countries or who love members of their own gender. Only we can save ourselves.

Forrest goes on to say:

I want to talk about us. Who we are and who we can be. If the United States is about anything it is about that. *E pluribus unum*. Not one for many, but out of many, one. It is far less important that the trains run on time than it is that the

¹ *Hope and Fear: An Election Day Sermon*. Originally preached October 25, 1992. Appears in November 2008 issue of *Quest*, the monthly worship publication of the Church of the Larger Fellowship. <http://clfuu.org>.

passengers are willing to take responsibility for one another's welfare.²

He also posits that hate is not the opposite of love, fear is. When we are frightened, by others or by life itself, we cannot love. We can hide. We can fight. But we cannot love.³

So the hope that we seek to incarnate and the change that we seek to create for our future, cannot happen in a climate of fear. Even, or perhaps especially, when it is a numerical minority of us who are locked in fear. Just think of how so many of us have felt over these last eight years. If we the victors in this election cycle do not act in a way that shows our higher purpose, we will be unable to love the fear out of the other 46% of our country. The last eight years of our history are powerful testimony to that.

There is a powerful and instinctual urge to give back to them the fear that they have foisted on us. Again, Forrest Church speaks to this:

We are good at fear. That's why politicians play on our fears. Fear gives power to others, and inspires us to try to take power away from them. Fear divides and then conquers us. It feeds on our weakness and envy and jealousy. It leads us to follow those who tell us we are victims. It closes hearts

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

and poisons minds.... Imposed order almost always rises phoenix-like from the ashes of scapegoats. Jews, gays, feminists, Blacks; take your pick.⁴

So now that we are in a place where our years of fear might be replaced by their years of fear, we are called upon by our faith and by our hope to extend our hearts and hands across the great divisions and barriers that scar our society to make of *all* of our futures a time without fear. This is not the time to make the hate-mongers, conservatives, neo-conservatives and Republicans the scapegoats of our new order. And our president-elect, no matter how remarkable and capable he is, cannot do this alone; only we can. Only we can save ourselves.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote, “Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.” We must choose our enemies carefully, for we will become like them. Perhaps the true audacity of hope is to choose to see no monsters among us, to choose to have no enemies.

That other history-making president from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln, once said, “The question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on the side of the God.” For us today this

⁴ *Ibid.*

might sound like, “The question is not whether love is on our side, but whether we are on the side of love.” Only we can save ourselves.

In today’s reading, Universalist minister Gordon McKeeman writes of moving beyond the goal of justice to “the restoration of the whole fabric of community through mercy. The claim of mercy is a claim for all – the judges as well as the judged, for the victims as well as the victimizers.”⁵ It is no wonder that he entitled that essay *A Hard Place*. Every sense of hurt, of disappointment, of perceived and actual injustice cries out for recompense. “Now it’s their turn to be at the short end of the stick.” And while there might be some justice in that, there is no hope in it; there is no real change in it and there is definitely no promise for a better tomorrow in that. Only we can save ourselves.

We have to know this and we have to practice this. As Gordon wrote, “A religion that claims for itself the mission of wholeness, of reconciliation, of universal redemption is challenged daily to move beyond justice toward mercy and the restoration of the human family to holiness and happiness.”⁶ This is our religion.

⁵ McKeeman, Gordon. “A Hard Place” from *Out of the Ordinary*. Skinner House, Boston. 2000.

⁶ *Ibid.*

This is our challenge. It is our promise. It is our duty. Only we can save ourselves.

Lest any of us here think that our tiny denomination of 200,000 members and 1,100 congregations does not have the presence or strength or resources to restore the human community to wholeness and redemption, let me assure you that we do. Was anyone here today watching CNN on election night? Shortly after 11:00 p.m., when Barack Obama was declared the winner of presidential race, African American correspondent Roland Martin, his eyes flushed with tears, announced that he had just received an email from the daughter of Viola Liuzzo.

Martin correctly reported that Viola Liuzzo, a white woman from Michigan, had been “blown to bits” by members of the Ku Klux Klan while she worked in Selma and Montgomery Alabama during the 1965 civil rights marches. There was no time for CNN to tell her story that evening but it is my deep honor to speak of her this morning.

Viola was a Unitarian Universalist. She was a 39-year-old mother of five and a member of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit at the time of her assassination. She was a high school

dropout who had lived in poverty throughout the segregated south during her childhood. At the age of six, Viola took money from her mother's small Georgia grocery store to give to an even poorer black child and his family. She witnessed first hand the discrimination and hatred of the Jim Crow south and she never forgot it.

After her youngest child began school, she became active in the Detroit chapter of the NAACP and in civil rights actions sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association. In the early months of 1965, the nation witnessed the brutal murders of civil rights workers throughout the south, culminating in March 7th's "Bloody Sunday." There, 500 peaceful and prayerful marchers were attacked by Alabama State Troopers with dogs, billyclubs, gas grenades and other homemade weapons designed to inflict permanent and painful injuries on the marchers. Dr. Martin Luther King issued a call for people of faith throughout the country to come to Selma.

Over 100 Unitarian Universalist ministers responded to the call and one of the first on the scene, Reverend James Reeb, was beaten to death on the streets of Selma. Viola attended his memorial service at the Detroit church and left that night for Selma. Her best

friend, an African American woman named Sarah Evans stayed in her home to care for her children. Sarah pleaded with her not to go, fearing she would be killed. Viola replied that that too many people were just standing around and talking about it and she “had to be part of it.”

One evening while she shuttled protesters from Montgomery back to Selma, the Ku Klux Klan spotted her driving her car with Michigan license plates and with passengers who were both black and white. After discharging all but one of her passengers, a young black man, the KKK gave chase. She sped away, singing freedom songs “And long before I’ll be a slave I’ll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.” As the pursuit grew more perilous, she sang at the top of her lungs, “We Shall Overcome.” It was then that her pursuers pulled up next to her and began firing. She was struck with two bullets to her head and died instantly. Her blood stained passenger survived by playing dead.

President Lyndon Johnson addressed the entire nation the next evening to speak of the tragedy. He called her widower saying, “I don’t think she died in vain because this is going to be a battle, all out as far as I’m concerned.” Her husband Jim replied, “My wife died for a sacred battle, the rights of humanity. She had only one

concern and only one in mind. She took with her a quote from Abraham Lincoln that all men are created equal and that's the way she believed.”⁷

Less than five months later, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law. He spoke of her at the signing ceremony. Many sources claim that Viola was the only white woman to ever be martyred in the struggle for African American civil rights. She is memorialized at the Unitarian Universalist Association Headquarters here in Boston and in the Alabama Civil Rights memorial in Montgomery.

There is so much more to her story, but that is for another time. The fact that her name and her sacrifice were put before the world within moments of Barack Obama's election as president of the United States assures me that, in fact, her death was not in vain. My dear friends, only we can save ourselves.

We do not have to sacrifice our lives to do the work of restoring our human community to wholeness and reconciliation. We need merely live our faith, to embody its promise and to be agents of that audacious hope that shines on all, that encompasses all and

⁷ <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/violaliuzzo.html>

that offers a place beyond justice – redemption and wholeness for all of the human community, not just the victors of Tuesday's, or any other's, election.

We can do this. We must do this. We will do this. Only we can save ourselves.

May it be so.

Amen.