

“On Dreaming”
Rev. Laurel Gray
January 17th, 2021

It's hard to know what to say right now, because there isn't a right thing to say. To talk about dreaming feels fluffy to a point of light-headedness, when life these last few weeks and months has felt like dystopian fiction. To celebrate the life and work of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, junior, on this MLK weekend, in light of the violent and proud white supremacists who have threatened to gather at state houses across the country today - to hold this national holiday and this national reality together, feels like the definition of cognitive dissonance and paradox.

But I wonder if it's actually just honest. As Donald Glover says, “This is America.”

As Catherine and I reflected last week - maybe nurturing our imaginations was, strangely, exactly the right thing to focus on after the violent attack on the Capitol. When life makes us freeze, it's good to remember that we can move and create and find joy. It's good to recall our agency.

Similarly, when elected officials have been participating in this attack on democracy and it has become common for them to publicly spew conspiracy theories and incite violence, in the face of this reality-warping behavior, it is good to dream of a world built within a clear sense of justice and moral clarity.

I had planned to preach today about the action-reflection model of justice work and it's origins in liberation theology, but last Sunday many of you asked me to clarify the separation of church and state. It is a timely question, so let's talk about that boundary.

In simple terms, the separation of church and state means that we, as a religious organization, cannot support political candidates or political parties. It would have been illegal, for example, to put presidential lawn signs in front of our building and I will never tell you who to vote for. We, as individual people, can of course have our allegiances to parties and candidates, but we cannot do so as a congregation.

But the separation of church and state does not mean that religious organizations are forbidden from commenting on politics. To say that affirmatively, speaking truth to power and denouncing political injustice is well within our rights as a religious organization.

Our fifth principle states that we affirm the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

To say we affirm a democratic process is to say we make choices together and we prioritize the collective good and the collective will of a people.

This is not nationalism, it's a way of doing things in which we believe everyone should have a say. The commitment is not to a nation, not to any political party, the commitment is to a process in which all people have an equal vote.

Our Unitarian Universalist Association, can condemn the attack on the capitol because it was an attempt to stop a democratic process. It has nothing to do with the political allegiance of the perpetrators or the candidates in question.

We can also condemn the flagrant white supremacy, the profound anti-semitism, the invocation of lynching and anti-Black violence, we can and we do condemn all of these things. And we can do that as a religious institution without violating the separation of church and state. Because white supremacy does not belong to a candidate or political party.

So we respect the boundary between church and state while refusing to whither. We respect the boundary without forgetting what we as Unitarian Universalists stand for.

It matters that we ground ourselves in our theology, in our sense of meaning, in our hope and our vision for the world. This is one of the key recommendations of the Commission on Institutional Change, which was the multi-year study and report regarding white supremacy within Unitarian Universalism.

It is worth remembering that Martin Luther King considered becoming a Unitarian Universalist, but he decided ultimately that the civil rights movement needed a spiritual foundation in order to survive the violence along the path, and Unitarian Universalism wasn't enough to do that. This was in the early days, just as the Unitarians and Universalists were merging together to form our Unitarian Universalist Association. And we have learned so much about ourselves and our tradition since then.

So I invite us to be clear with ourselves and each other about the heart at the center of our tradition. In our commitment to making room for our differences of belief

and practice, we cannot forget that Unitarian Universalism is something, that we are all a people committed to a covenant, that we have a spiritual lineage woven of our Unitarian and our Universalist roots. This house of ours is not empty space.

And if we're going to talk about dreaming, I can tell you that my mind and my creativity work better within some confinement, within a set of parameters, because it's more relational, because it gives me more to work with. Too many options, too much freedom is, I find, not liberating but paralyzing and isolating.

Boundaries, the lines between what are and are not okay with, make connection possible.

So I invite you to hold Unitarian Universalism similarly. There are clear boundaries, clear commitments and values, and it's all held in relationship with each other, with our spiritual heritage, and with the world as it is.

Inside of that house, given those parameters, can you start to imagine a new world? Can you feel possibility filling the air like the hopeful scent of spring? Can you feel yourself grounding into your courage, your intuition, your curiosity, and your community?

Because we're not lost in the ether, we're here in this house together, dreaming of a world that affirms the right of conscience, that treats everyone with dignity, that strives for justice before some false unity. We do this together, grounded in our collective moral clarity.

There's an article that Rebecca Solnit wrote in November called "On Not Meeting Nazis Halfway" that I've been seeing lots of minister colleagues sharing lately. In it Solnit underscores how problematic calls for national unity are - she writes this:

"Nevertheless, we get this hopelessly naïve version of centrism, of the idea that if we're nicer to the other side there will be no other side, just one big happy family. This inanity is also applied to the questions of belief and fact and principle, with some muddled cocktail of moral relativism and therapists' "everyone's feelings are valid" applied to everything. But the truth is not some compromise halfway between the truth and the lie, the fact and the delusion, the scientists and the propagandists. And the ethical is not halfway between white supremacists and human rights activists, rapists and feminists, synagogue massacrists and Jews, xenophobes and immigrants, delusional transphobes and trans people. Who the hell wants unity with Nazis until and unless they stop being Nazis?"

Our dreams for our communities and our country cannot be naive. They must be steeped in moral clarity, in truth telling, in clear and consistent boundaries.

The COIC report talks a lot about the importance of theology, as I said, of tapping into our sense of meaning, the values that we share, the sacredness of life and community. Because, like Martin Luther King knew, we need a steady foundation to weather the storms of violence and resistance to change. We need our collective moral clarity, our clear boundaries, to house our dreams and help us build a new world together.

When conspiracies and lies are being freely sown, when so much about life has become unrecognizable, it matters that we gather in this house together. It matters that we remember our boundaries together. It matters that we practice dreaming of the world we long for. There is already so much inviting our terror, so let this be your respite. This house of ours can weather the storms of life.

It matters that we sing together. It matters that we dream together.
And it matters that our singing and our dreaming infuse our living.
May it be so.

Amen