

Sermon (Elizabeth): “Creative Resistance”

This past Monday, people from across the country, including trans youth from sixteen states and our candidate for UUA President, the Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancort, gathered on the Capitol lawn in Washington DC to hold an event that was equal parts protest and celebration. Called Trans Prom, it was organised by teens Grayson McFerrin, Libby Gonzales, Hobbes Chukumba, and Daniel Trujillo, ranging in age from twelve to sixteen. Grayson and Libby are from Texas, Hobbes is from New Jersey, and Daniel from Arizona. The four got to know one another through their families' involvement in the Parents for Transgender Equality Council at the HRC. Hobbes said of the event, “The trans prom is meant to emphasize the pride and joy and happiness that is within the trans community that cannot be broken. We’re trying to show that trans people can and will continue to be brilliant and great. And really, it’s meant to be a space that lets trans kids be kids.” Attendees held signs saying “You are loved,” and “Celebrate trans joy.” They watched a drag performance and listened to a playlist curated by the organisers. They showed off their amazing prom outfits. And at a time when hatred is on the rise, and twenty states have recently passed laws banning gender-affirming care for trans youth under eighteen, they came together anyway, And they danced. As Grayson put it, “You can make whatever kind of laws that you want. You can try to get rid of us, but we’re gonna be here, we’re gonna stay here. And there’s nothing that you can do about that,”

In throwing their prom, these teen organisers were building, consciously so, on a tradition of queer resistance through creativity and joy. The event had a seventies theme, calling back to the days of Stonewall and to the activism of Harvey Milk. And as we heard in our story earlier, Milk believed strongly in the importance of art to unify a movement. Milk’s friend Gilbert Baker was an artist, a clothing designer, specifically. At Milk’s request, he dreamed up a symbol, a piece of artwork that would instantly give hope to queer people fighting for their rights. And it did. Baker said, of raising the flag for the first time in 1978, "It completely astounded me that people just got it, in an instant like a bolt of lightning – that this was their flag. It belonged to all of us. It was the most thrilling moment of my life. Because I knew right then that this was the most important thing I would ever do – that my whole life was going to be about the Rainbow Flag.”"

The rainbow flag has been displayed across the world, at protests, and then in businesses and in classrooms and waving proudly in front of religious spaces, including those of many UU congregations, spreading Baker’s message of belonging and hope. I can testify to its power myself. When I was a closeted queer

teenager, growing up in a community that was not precisely what you'd call accepting, I went to an overnight at the UU church and there, in the nursery, was an enormous rainbow flag. I didn't even bring it up with anyone, but just by hanging that flag in the nursery, that church made me feel an immediate rush of acceptance I had never really felt before.

At the end of our service this morning, we'll be hearing another artwork inspired by the legacy and message of Harvey Milk: the hymn "We Are a Gentle, Angry People." This hymn was written by protest singer Holly Near directly in the wake of the assassination of Harvey Milk and George Moscone, and calls us to act, with love, in the face of hate. There is something about this kind of grief, and something about protest, that seems to call for music. Civil rights and labour movements have, it seems, always been drawn to singing. Many of us may immediately think of the protest songs of the Civil Rights movement in the sixties, and earlier, the spirituals sung by enslaved people in this country, and these are powerful examples. But although they might not spring as readily to mind in our context, as far back as the 1300s, the participants' in the English Peasants' Revolt were thought to have sung songs like the Cutty Wren, and early Christian Arians and trinitarians had competing anthems for their causes (which were in some ways, as economic and political as they were religious). Protest music has been with us for a very, very long time.

But it is not simply that art and music is often created as a part of protests and resistance movements. Protests themselves are often acts of creativity. As an example: In 1912, a woman named Elizabeth Gurley Flynn served as one of the lead labour organisers for the mill strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts, not so far from where most of you are today (and even less far from where I am!), commonly known as the Bread and Roses strike. As a representative of the International Workers of the World, often referred to as the Wobblies, she went to Lawrence to help the female textiles workers, who were subject to horrendous working conditions. She and the women workers organised together across barriers of language and culture, and were enormously creative in their tactics. The authorities would arrest them if they stood still protesting outside the mills, and so they came up with the idea of the moving picket line, thus avoiding arrest. And those female workers who had children were also frequently arrested for negligence if they left said children at home to attend meetings, and so they created a network of women in other states, who, acting in solidarity, temporarily took in children from Lawrence so that their mothers could safely participate.

Their slogan, too, centered the importance of art and creativity to resistance and to

making a meaningful life generally: Give us bread, they insisted, but bread alone is not enough. We need roses, too. Or, as a familiar song puts it, "It is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses, too." Although the phrase had a number of sources, the song Bread and Roses, which is in our hymnal as As We Come Marching, Marching, and which we sang this morning, written about the Lawrence protests, immortalised these women and their message. And Flynn herself was the inspiration for an extremely popular protest song of her day, called, "The Rebel Girl," written by famed labour songwriter Joe Hill. And she is still, it seems, causing controversy today; Republican lawmakers have just successfully removed a newly-installed placard commemorating her life and work in Concord, New Hampshire as of two weeks ago.

As another example, several decades, in 1977, disabled activists staged the longest sit-in at a federal building to date to pressure Congress into enforcing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, passed in 1973, which had theoretically finally granted equal access to federal programs for disabled people, but was being held up indefinitely by the Department of Health Education welfare. During this protest, participants sang protest songs associated with the civil rights movement to keep up their spirits, but they also used some truly unique tactics: for one, Deaf activists reportedly coordinated with allies outside the building by signing ASL through the windows, evading the notice of government officials. The sit-in was, incidentally, a remarkable triumph of solidarity, with members of the Black Panthers and local queer groups in San Francisco, as well as the machinists' union, providing transport and supplies to those inside the building. And in 1990, a new generation of disabled activists, facing Congress' reluctance to passing the Americans with Disabilities Act, found a new way to capture the media's attention: disabled activists, including eight-year-old Jennifer Keelan, quite literally dragged themselves up the steps of the Capitol, demonstrating in a very visceral way the barriers they faced (and continue to face) to civic participation. Protests, too, can be art.

Certainly, this connection is not always taken for granted. Activists have sometimes dismissed the arts as decadent or frivolous. (I think that's also a serious case of anti-femme bias, but that's a whole other sermon.) There's a famous line, commonly attributed to Emma Goldman, about a revelation without dancing not being worthwhile. What she actually said, albeit after discussing her love of dance, was, "I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy...I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things." I think the organisers and attendees

of the Trans Prom would very likely concur.

But beyond the longstanding association between resistance movements and art, and beyond even the idea that protest movements are often themselves a creative act, I think there is a more fundamental connection at play here. Although art certainly does not have to be revolutionary nor progressive, and protests do not necessarily have to be artistic, I don't think it's a coincidence that so many activists are also artists and vice versa. Because in the end, to be an activist is to be engaged in imagining a world that does not currently exist, and perhaps never has. It takes tremendous courage and imagination to believe that things can be different from how they are, to have confidence that change is possible, to drag oneself up the steps of the Capitol building, or to throw a joyfully defiant party on its lawn. Those who have started peace movements dared to dream of a world that no longer knew violence and war, and the visionary Martin Luther King, Jr., drawing on the theological work of Josiah Royce, popularised and imagined a particular articulation of a nonviolent, just future called Beloved Community that has become particularly important to Unitarian Universalists. We do not have a precise blueprint for how to achieve this future, but when we engage in activism, we open ourselves to new possibilities, to imagining the Beloved Community into being. And that is, I think, an inherently creative act.

And how does this apply to our own community? Well, that's up to us. Unitarians and Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists, have, of course, not always been perfect. We have often gotten it right, and we have a strong history of supporting fights against injustice. But even so, there are times when we have been on the wrong side of history, and times when we have perpetuated oppression. There are times when we continue to do so. But nevertheless, we are, I think, always trying to side with love. We are trying to widen the circle, to build the Beloved Community, and to resist with joy. We are, in the words of Holly Near, a justice-seeking people, and we are singing for our lives. Let us continue to make it so, together.