

Between Truth and Community

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Ellsworth, Maine

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Our political candidate sign disappeared. Just vanished. It was out at the end of our road, minding its business, and then one morning it was gone. One wire was left, but not a trace of the sign itself. Apparently it's not just us—the Weekly Packet published “a lemon” to those who were stealing signs, signs for both major parties, and the folks at party headquarters told us that it's been happening a lot. Yes, it's disgraceful. Yes, it's petty. Yes, it's illegal. But there's something more. I've seen one large sign defaced—the original name blacked out with spray paint and the opponent's name painted in—and that amplifies the whisper of missing signs. This is no mere political rivalry; this is not just campaign tactics gone awry. This is not the thing that we do when we have had all the conversations and the election is still two weeks or two days away. This is bigger. This is deeper. This is anger. And under the anger, fear.

There's plenty of fear to go around right now—fear of being poor, fear of being powerless, fear of being cold, fear of being hungry, fear of being trapped, fear of not being heard, fear of wrong decisions, fear of being in danger, fear of doing the wrong thing, fear of distance, fear of isolation, fear of change, fear of fear itself. In fact, we might have more fear in this country than any other one thing right now. If only it were a commodity, we could package it; trade in it; export it!

But we are not like that, right?

We're not people who think like that, right?

We would not choose to profit from other people's angst and horror and discomfort, right?

(pause)

Fear is hard. It's so hard that we are tempted to get rid of it at any cost, and if we cannot, then to share it, spread it, make it a condition of humanity itself. But fear feeds on fear—it gets stronger with every heart that worships at its bloody altar. We humans discover this over and over, but discover it too late, over and over, after the terror has risen up and is spreading over the world like a rising sea. Fear drives us to cultural insanity when at last, we can only sit still; we can only sit, and rock, and weep.

We are tempted to avoid it at any cost, and this temptation is like the temptation in the desert—food when we are hungry, water when we are thirsty, surcease of pain when our liver is ripped from our body every day and every night returns to be consumed anew. It is desperation born of the struggle to survive.

And into this desperation comes hope, comes possibility, comes...

anger.

Anger salves our wounds. It dulls the pain of depression and the sharp edges of terror; it numbs us enough to get us off the ground and running or off the ground and fighting, and makes us care less which we choose, just so we are uncurled and in motion. Anger brings us hope in the middle of our paralysis—hope for some-any-thing other than where we are now. Anger masquerades as courage and conjures possibility from thin air. And when we can imagine nothing beautiful, nothing hopeful, nothing joyful, we are so hungry that we will grasp at anything.

It's survival at work. Anger reminds us of our own power. It is the snake in the garden, reminding Eve that she can choose to eat the fruit, just as she can choose to let it lie. Anger, like

Shakespeare's archetypal fool, is a double-edged sword. We need its reminders. We need its strength. We need its hope. We do not need its deception. Because in order to get us on our feet and shouting, it reduces the world to black and white, mine and yours, us and them. It strips away the shading and leaves us with a cartoon image—true as far as it goes, but not nuanced enough to be real.

We must remember—nuance is part of nature. Nuance is part of reality. Nuance allows those incredible stories of lions adopting prey animals as family members; nuance allows falcons to be companions to humans; nuance allows us to live lightly on the land and still love our lives. Nuance is not no-man's land; nuance is both-and.

We live with nuance. We live in nuance. Our faith is built on the idea that there is more truth than will ever be seen in print and that truth rises up when we are gathered, each with the other. When we are gathered.

When we gather for worship, when we gather for fellowship, when we gather for stewardship, we are engaged with the nuance of a living tradition. And these are the things we do: worship, fellowship, stewardship. Together.

Our UUA principles say that we as member congregations affirm and promote seven things. Fifth on the list is “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

The right of conscience must be upheld by community but it must be practiced by individuals. Democratic process must be practiced by individuals in community. Together, these components are our call to ourselves to engage deeply and willingly in the practice of being together. The framers of the original principles and the several redrafts since then have been engaged in the herculean task of naming that which we hold in common and they have settled on action-centered ideas, because living is an act, and we are a living tradition. No individual, no community, no association of congregations, no country will be the same a half-century after its beginning as it was when it started. Even the most stable and entrenched of traditions must begin somewhere, and somewhere it must almost certainly end. In between it will be, if it lives, everything imaginable. It will shape-shift, take every possible form and shine with every possible color. This is life.

Life requires risk, it requires moving around and being, it requires opportunity, it requires effort, it requires transformation. Certainly we must nurture and develop our skills, we must protect our resources, we must be alert to danger. Anything else is dangerously naïve. But too much self-protection, too much anger, too much thinking and acting out of fear is not good democracy.

Stealing signs from someone's lawn is not good democracy. Spreading lies is not good democracy. Stealing ballots is not good democracy.

Throwing away your own ballot is not good democracy.

There are several ways to throw it away: you can request one and throw it away; you can submit an incorrectly marked ballot; you can vote in a way that is both invisible and ineffective; you can not show up at all; or you can vote and then fail to communicate.

When someone makes any of those choices, that person is choosing nonparticipation. The first ones are all clear—not casting an effective vote takes one's voice right out of the process from the start. The insidious and tempting one, especially if conflict is hard, is to vote and then walk away when things get tough.

Voting is only part of the process. It is vital. Without a vote, it's hard to claim a voice afterwards. But speaking—often and regularly and with depth and honesty and compassion, and with the entire community, including elected leaders—is at least as important. Democracy calls

leadership from the ranks of the people. Democracy calls leaders from our ranks. No functioning democracy is led by some nameless, faceless “them”. “They” are us, our people, our voices. They are not people to choose and then leave in isolation. These are those whom we have chosen because their voices say what we want said, and their ears hear what we want heard. Which means that even if we didn’t vote for them, they are always our leaders, our representatives, our senators. There’s no such thing as “not my president.”

And if we turn around and walk away; ignore the leader we elect; leave him to solve the problems of our country because we’ve been trying for so long and we’re *tired*, we are throwing away our vote. He is still one of us. He is still a representative of a great many apathetic and a great many opinionated people, and if we have ideas, he needs to hear them. It is up to us to write and call, and email; it is up to us to make ourselves audible before we betray our responsibility, or believe ourselves betrayed.

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And how do we manage betrayal?

This, before social justice, before growth, before everything except hope, is the question before us today. Before everything except hope, because managing betrayal, addressing, acknowledging, encountering betrayal, is a *part of* hope; it is part of the foundation on which hope must be built.

Betrayal is endemic to gatherings of people, all gatherings of people. We cannot gather, even two of us, without eventually betraying one another. If we are to be strong, and tightly bound together, we must not let betrayal run deep ruts beneath our foundations and then wait for us to fall.

When we speak of humanity, of human-ness, we talk of brokenness and occasionally of sin, we mention mistakes that we all make and try to set aside, over and over. What makes forgiveness so hard, what makes it harder than anything else, perhaps in our human lexicon, is the knife wound that is betrayal, that instant when we are certain that someone, clearly understanding what we have agreed upon, does something else.

Betrayal is a tragedy not of action but of intent. One who kills the king by accident while operating a forklift in the driving rain cannot reasonably be said to have betrayed her lord, not even if she hated his rule and his kingdom. It is the deliberate, the deliberated, the thought-through process of undermining trust and relationship that turns an accident into a crime of the heart.

More often than not it’s not legally a crime, just a word, a gesture, a choice.

And the grand irony is, more often than not what is perceived as betrayal is not, in fact, objective betrayal at all. The alleged perpetrator usually meant no such thing. But we are left with the wound, the wound that comes before understanding, before comprehension, before knowledge. We are left with the festering wounds of our own assumptions, and even if we learn the truth, once we learn the truth, we are still wounded. We are still wounded because our hearts don’t heal as fast as our intellects do. We can understand the circumstances much faster than we can turn ourselves around. Our minds are salamanders, already growing another tail; our hearts are thick layers of muscle and blood vessel and nerves. Repair requires time and often, intervention. Repair requires commitment, and a will to live.

That will to live can be dangerous—not to us as individuals, but to the community. Our survival instincts are so swift and so powerful that we will do anything, even gnaw off our own leg, if it means getting out of the trap. When we think we are trapped, when that fear rises up and cuts off

our air, we can see nothing else, nothing beyond our leg and the trap in which it is held. Given such a small world: leg, trap, leg, trap...we will do what we must. This is not just metaphor—several years ago there was a mountaineer named Aron Ralston trapped just that way, pinned by the arm on a solo climb when a rock fell on him. After five days and no rescue, he amputated his forearm with his pocketknife and hiked out.

[[http://hike.mountainzone.com/2003/news/html/030502\\_amputate-arm.html](http://hike.mountainzone.com/2003/news/html/030502_amputate-arm.html) accessed October 30, 2008. [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/08/0830\\_040830\\_aronralston\\_2.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/08/0830_040830_aronralston_2.html) accessed October 30, 2008.]

As an individual trapped in a slot canyon for a week, he needed that focus and that drive. There are times when we all need that focus and drive. When we are being damaged, when we could be destroyed, when all avenues are blocked there's no question what must be done. But when we take the same focus, the same drive, the same single-minded determination into community, into places of emotion, we can move to amputate too fast. The pain is intense, the panic is real. When the fear shifts ever so slightly, from paralysis to power, our instinct is to grab it and go wherever it takes us, because anything has got to be better.

When Ralston cut off his arm, it hurt. Later he told National Geographic: "Overall, it was a hundred times worse than any pain I've felt before. It recalibrated what I'd understood pain to be."

Fear can take us there, to places we never thought we would go; to vistas we never thought we would see. Fear can help us do things that look impossible but must be done.

But fear can also short-circuit the reasoning process.

When we act out of fear and remove ourselves from connection, from communion, from community; when we let the pain of the wound be our guiding principle we ourselves become the betrayers. We betray the community or the connection; we betray the friendship, the relationship, the trust. We betray the possibility and the hope itself by walking away. Healing comes from talking, from listening, from understanding intent, from faith in good intentions. If there is any possibility--any at all--that we have misunderstood one another, we are called to conversation by the very interdependence which made the betrayal possible.

--because we cannot be betrayed if we have no shared hopes, no dreams, no expectations.

Betrayal is a consequence of being together. When we say "our values", "our life", "our future", we invite a tempest of misunderstanding. We have spent almost 50 years in this faith trying to avoid that. But we are caught, because our connection is also an incredible source of power. We cannot move forward until we find in our hearts a love equal to the healing work which will bring us together and make us strong.

We must lift it up, this repeated, inevitable betrayal, give it channels, bend its power to our will. The healing must make us strong, and stronger. We must have love and we must have skill equal to fear, equal to anger, equal to this world that we would make whole. Possibility fueled by that which would destroy us is twice a triumph.

Democracy is a practice of our faith. Speaking is a practice of democracy. And community is the foundation on which they are built. Walking away is a practice of anger, a practice of fear, a practice of self-effacement, disempowerment, and destruction. Walking away is a practice of

last resort, a response to violence that cannot be otherwise addressed. We are not in a time or a place of last resorts. We are pinned by no boulder, caught in no trap. Tuesday is election day. Practice your faith. Be in the conversation. Put signs on your lawn, drive people to the polls, and by all means, if you can, vote.