

American Peace of Mind  
The Gift of Integrity in Challenging Times  
December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. To all souls, I say,  
“It is good to be together.”

This morning’s reflection is entitled American Peace of Mind. A poet and a friend and a Unitarian Universalist minister named Ric Masten used to tell me rhyming stories that sometimes troubled me a little bit. He wrote these beautiful poems that left me strangely dissatisfied. A little uneasy. They didn’t resolve as cleanly as I wanted them to. He shared a rhyming story about a man who struggled with his mental health. It was called “Another Kind of Noah.” It was about a man named Marv—a nutty, old friend of his, he would say. Old, nutty Marv who lived his life with one shoe off and one shoe on, coloring outside the so-called normal lines of life. Old, nutty Marv who “limped in his mind,” insanely rhyming the things that mattered to him most, confessing his deep and abiding of passion for artists in general, painters particularly...especially the colorful, edgy ones—Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh... Gauguin who struggled *against* drug addiction and van Gogh suffered *for* his sanity. Ric Masten related to the challenges that these artists faced in an interesting way. He wrote,

paul gauguin  
watching through his own window pain  
his crazy friend

vincent  
winding his head up in gauze  
knowing the hurt to be the very ground  
in which art grows  
and far better for him at least  
than filling galleries with slick paintings  
of wet city streets — colors reflecting  
or of little kids with big sad eyes  
at fifty bucks a throw

and though it seems unfair of me  
i need him there — at sea  
adrift  
tending his mad menagerie  
another kind of noah

i need him there — dropping me a line  
each time I fall  
into the awful  
blue period of mine

Each of us has a gift to give to the world. Some gifts are modest and others are precious. Sometimes, our gifts are quite profound. Every gift is holy and no gift truly costs us in any way. There is a religious way of saying this. There is a Christian way: The kingdom of God is within us and is everywhere around us and everywhere we go, we carry a little piece of heaven. Our gift is that little piece of heaven.

It should come as no surprise that heaven is not the exclusive lair of Democrats. It doesn't belong to men...or to wealthy people or to any group. All of us are welcome and are called to be our best. In this sense, heaven is a radical idea that we are responsible for the beauty that we carry, that we owe the little piece of heaven that we carry to ourselves and that we owe that little to one another. We can share it with the world in which we live. Of course, there is no American piece of heaven—p-i-e-c-e. I realize that there is no region or realm, no quadrant or quarter, no zone of enclosure that is uniquely prepared for us in some way. I realize that but I wonder about the possibility of an American peace of mind—p-e-a-c-e—not somewhere up in heaven, there and then but here on earth...here and now. I wonder about that...especially with all the troubles that we've been going through as a country.

You know, I've discovered something that doesn't make me laugh. I've discovered that President Joe Biden isn't all that funny. Last week, I watched the speeches from this year's White House Correspondents Dinner. I was looking for some political levity. I wanted some American peace of mind. Soon enough, I discovered Trevor Noah. Trevor Noah is the comedian who delivered the most honored address that evening. A room chock full of seasoned journalists in tuxedos and fancy evening gowns sat together and listened to a young, biracial South African man roast the presidential media. They sat together in a mix of laughter and anxiety, comfort and displeasure to what was, I believe, a timely and moving message of a funnier man.

President Biden spoke before Trevor Noah did. A gracious host invited him to the podium and Joe Biden said,

Thank you...for that introduction. And a special thanks to the 42 percent of you who actually applauded. I'm really excited to be here tonight with you, the only group of Americans with a lower approval rating than I have.

His numbers were down, despite being on the eve of great achievement. The President continued. He said,

This is the first time the president [has] attended this dinner in six years. It's understandable. We had a horrible plague followed by two years of COVID. [] Just imagine, if my predecessor came to this dinner this year, now that would have been a real coup...

There were groans from the gathered assembly.

I liked it best when President Biden put the jeers and the jokes aside and reminded us all that American politics is not reality TV and toward the end of his remarks, he said,

Let me conclude with a serious word. We live in serious times. [] Overseas, the liberal world order that laid the foundation for global peace, stability, and

prosperity since World War II is genuinely, seriously under assault. And at home, a poison is running through our democracy.

He was talking about the massive and dangerous influx of disinformation that creates an environment “where the truth is buried by lies and the lies live on as truth.”

Have we forgotten how to speech with one another? Has our language become foolish and unintelligible? Have we forgotten how to see the little piece of heaven that each of us carries? Have we forgotten how to make it manifest?

Trevor Noah took over from there. Noah is the current host of The Daily Show. He took over after Jon Stewart left. He’s only 38 years young but it did just fine. Trevor Noah roasted everyone. He began by roasting Jeffrey Toobin for being inappropriate on Zoom call and then, he roasted Tucker Carlson and Kyrsten Sinema. He roasted Kellyanne Conway by way of Will Smith and what happened at the Oscars. He wondered anxiously, as if to himself,

...what if I make...a really mean joke? You know, about, like, Kellyanne Conway, and then her husband rushes up on the stage and thanks me.

Kellyanne Conway was deeply committed to the former President and was highly situated in his administration. Her husband, George Conway, is also political but not nearly as committed. In fact, George Conway is radically unsupportive of the former president. That was part of the backstory that made Trevor’s inside joke so funny. A backstory is that which bridges our divides and keeps us all connected.

Now, there is a book entitled Backstory. It was written by Ken Auletta. I think that he use to be the ombudsman for the New York Times. In any case, he’s known in the media business as “America’s foremost [journalism] analyst.” He believes that journalism is incredibly important. In his book, he asks great questions:

Didn’t reporters brave Bull Connor’s dogs to report on the struggle for civil rights? Didn’t the New York Times face down President Kennedy when he wanted [investigative journalism] yanked from Vietnam? Didn’t the Washington Post back two cub reporters over an incident known as Watergate? I saw how [young writers] perfected something called New Journalism... This was a profession that could educate and entertain.

It’s important to know the backstory if we want to be included. We need a certain amount of backstory in order to get the joke. So, if you don’t know what happened at the Oscars... If we don’t know that Chris Rock was roasting Jada Pinkett Smith when her husband, Will Smith, became angry and rose from his seat, approached Chris Rock directly and slapped Chris Rock across the face on live TV. When we don’t have the backstory, we don’t understand Trevor Noah’s anxiety...George Conway, Kellyanne’s husband, might rush the stage...and thank him. I’m sorry to belabor the humor. It’s just that the backstory is so important. Remaining connected with one another is so very important these days.

Trevor Noah roasted everyone—Jeffrey Toobin and Tucker Carlson, Kyrsten Sinema and Kellyanne Conway...Chris Cuomo and Governor Greg Abbott of Texas,

Meghan McCain by way of her father and Madison Cawthorn of North Carolina. He mentioned Ron Desantis twice and not undeservedly. He mentioned Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Bernie Sanders of Vermont. He mentioned Matt Gaetz and his girlfriend. He mentioned Maggie Haberman and Jennifer Psaki.

He gave a shout out Joe and Mika out in Scarborough Country, to Peter Doocy and to Chris Wallace, to Abby Phillip and Yamiche Alcindor...and to Mick Mulvaney who assured everyone back in the day that Donald Trump would concede gracefully if he lost the election, a prediction that was...shall we say...inaccurate. He tipped his hat the work of Anderson Cooper and Don Lemon, Shepard Smith and Chuck Todd. He saw that Jonathan Swan was in the house.

Caustic, biting and sometimes abrasive, Trevor Noah pulled down the veil for everybody. He stripped away the curtain as much as he possibly could in order to prepare the way for his closing statement....and what he said was so beautiful. He softened his voice and he said to the room of incredibly well-dressed journalists, Every single one of you...is a bastion of democracy. And if you ever begin to doubt your responsibilities..., look no further than what's happening in Ukraine. Look at what's happening there. Journalists are risking and even losing their lives to show the world what's really happening.

You realize how amazing it is. Like in America, you have the right to seek the truth and speak the truth, even if it makes people in power uncomfortable. Even if it makes your viewers or readers uncomfortable. Do you understand how amazing that is?

I stood here tonight and I made fun of the President of the United States, and I'm going to be fine... Do you really understand what a blessing it is?

A slideshow was presented just before Trevor Noah took the podium, a slide show honoring the deaths of journalists whose lives were lost in the preceding two months for their reporting in Ukraine. Their faces were displayed and their names made known to that gathered assembly:

Maxsim Levin  
Roman Nezhboretz  
Vira Hyrych  
Brent Renaud  
Oksana Baulina  
Yevhanii Sakun  
Zoreslav Zamoysky  
Pierre Zakrzowski  
Oleksandra "Sasha" Kuvshynova

So, when Trevor Noah made his closing remarks, his words were so very poignant. He said,

Honestly ask yourself this question: If Russian journalists, who are losing their livelihoods [] and their freedom for daring to report on what their own government is doing, if they had the freedom to write any words, to show any stories, or to ask any questions, if they had, basically, what you have, would

they be using it in the same way that you do? Ask yourself that question every day because you have one of the most important roles in the world.

Soon after Trevor Noah's address, the White House Correspondents Dinner ended and the many journalists were scattered in the wind.

Journalist have the role of telling story of our lives which is hard because we don't understand one another very well these days. Journalist have the role of telling the backstory and filling us in...letting us in on the joke and keeping us together in community. Remaining connected with one another is so very important for us these days. It means everything...because it is so easy for us to become confused.

Wisdom teachings tell us that long ago, there was another Noah. Not Trevor Noah and not the Noah that Ric Masten wrote rhyming stories about...but the ancient Noah that the Book of Genesis talks about—the Noah who was called upon to build the ark and who filled it, two by two; the Noah who, with his family, survived that great, big, global flood; the Noah who saw the rainbow sign and received the olive branch carried by a dove; the Noah whose many descendants repopulated the world that God made new, as the Good Book says. Scripture tells us that at this time...

...the whole earth had one language [and that as the people] migrated from the east, they [settled] in the land of Shinar [and the built a great city...and in that city, they built a great tower] with its top in the heavens and [they wanted to] make a name for ourselves [to distinguish themselves with excessive pride.]

The city of Babel and its tower were impressive but God was concerned about their arrogance and excessive pride. So, God confused their language so they could not understand one another and then he scattered them all across the world.

Now, we may not be Biblical scholars here but the story of the Tower of Babel is not unfamiliar to us. It's an important story in light of what has been happening to us these days. Our arrogance and our pride are so excessive that sometimes, we don't even want to talk to one another. It isn't that God has confused our language, it's that we have done this to ourselves, writing books like this one—How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must). What a waste of time! How antithetical to our larger project! How insulting and how corrosive to our American peace of mind! My dear Ann Coulter, you can do so much better than this. Trevor Noah said,

Honestly ask yourself this question: If Russian journalists, who are losing their [lives] for daring to report on what their own government is doing, if they had the freedom to write any words, to show any stories, or to ask any questions, if they had...what you have, would they be using it in the same way that you do? Ask yourself that question every day because you have one of the most important roles in the world.

And ok, I get it. Some storytellers aren't journalists and, yes, there is room enough even for Ann Coulter's acerbic wit but there must be a covenant, a common language for us all to speak lest we, as a people, will not get to the promised land but will be

scattered to the winds like the descendants of ancient Noah...because right now, in this country, we are deeply misunderstanding one another.

Now, the journalists may not have built the prideful towers in the centers of our cities but the corporations for which the journalists are writing...they certainly built those towers...and each tower seems to speak a different language to a specific audience. We have been slowly learning to speak in the languages of TV networks and cable news channels—in the languages of ABC, CBS and MSNBC; in the mother tongues of FOX News and DemocracyNow!; in the parlance of PBS Newshour and National Public Radio. We speak the early morning dialects of Barbara Walters and Whoopie Goldberg and in the late night lingo of Jimmy Kimmel and Stephen Colbert. We argue in different languages and with different sensibilities. Those who speak the conservative language called Sean-Hannitese rail against those who speak the liberal language called Rachel-Maddowese on a regular basis...and in lieu of Walter Cronkite, the common ground is too embattled. The common good is lost in the translation...and no one spans the distance anymore and it's hurting us. It's costing us our sense of connectedness.

Senator Cheney just lost the primary in Wyoming. She knew that she was going to lose her seat. In her concession speech, she said,

Two years ago, I won this primary with 73% of the vote. I could easily have done the same again. The path was clear.

But she couldn't do it...not without compromise the little piece of heaven she holds inside. She said,

No House seat, no office in this land is more important than the principles that we are all sworn to protect, and I well understood the potential political consequences of abiding by my duty. [] This primary election is over but now the real work begins.

Are we ready for it? Or do we want to keep fighting with one another in useless ways? Are we ready to honor our pieces of heaven and our American peace of mind? Or will we choose to become confused, babbling in foolish in coherence. As Harry Chapin said,

Sometimes words can serve me well  
Sometimes words can go to hell  
For all that they do.  
And for every dream that took me high  
There's been a dream that's passed me by.  
I know it's so true

I'm afraid that this excerpt might leave you strangely dissatisfied—a little uneasy—because it does resolve as cleanly as we might want it to but here we are.

So, it's 6-5 and pick 'em which way this one's gonna go—honoring an American peace of mind or babbling in foolish in coherence. It might seem obvious but babbling foolishly is pretty gratifying—in the short term, at least. It makes me feel like I am better than other people. Of course, in the long run, it doesn't pan out. So, we'll just have to see.

All I can do is to leave you with a little poetry that does resolve. Some poetry that tries to make sense of the picture on the cover of this morning's orders of service. The storyteller is David Wilcox and his rhyming words are these:

Well, I don't look all that ragged for all the time it's been  
But I'm weakened underneath me where my frame is rusted thin  
And this year's state inspection, I just barely passed  
Won't you drive me 'cross the country, boy  
    this year could be my last

I'm a tail-fin road locomotive from the days of cheap gasoline  
And I'm for sale by the side of the road going nowhere  
A rusty old American dream

I rolled off the line in Detroit back in 1958  
Spent three days in the showroom, that's all I had to wait  
I've been good to all who owned me, so have no fear  
C'mon, boy, put your money down and get me out of here

I'm a tail-fin road locomotive

Now, this car needs a young man to own him  
One who will polish the chrome  
I will give you the rest of my lifetime  
But don't let me die here alone

Just jump me some juice to my battery  
    and give that old starter a spin  
Hear me whir, sputter, backfire through the carburetor  
And roar into life once again

I'm a tail-fin road locomotive  
You can polish my chrome so clean  
We can fly off into the sunset together  
A rusty old American dream  
Still runnin'

Now, it's not a perfect closing poem. There are obvious, environmental flaws. The hope is that we might recover our senses of American grace and gratitude and that we might reclaim our senses of American humility and peace of mind. The hope is that we suffer through some tragedy, some trauma and some positive transformation. The tragedy and the trauma have already befallen us. We might as well make good use of it.

The tailfin road locomotives that we need right now are fully electric and solar driven. They greatly appreciate the fact that Vermont is improving its infrastructure and they carry inside of them—safely protected—our collective dignity and decency. It is still possible for all us to rediscover the common and

ground and the common good dream American dreams, ones that nurture the best in us best in us becoming possible.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.