

# Cast Your Vote, Your Vow

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**G**ood morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well. The title of this morning's reflection is *Cast Your Vote, Your Vow*. It begins with one of my favorite poems by one of my favorite poets.

I have had this old book for years and years and years. I like it more and more as time goes on. Its pages are stained with milk, beer and butter (from late-night pancakes) and with coffee. Late-night pancakes and coffee. That meal was an old, college habit of mine. It was so common that it actually had a name—"The Nine-Cake Plate." My friend Chris Lathrop thought that name up. It wasn't a particularly creative name but it was really fun to say...because it's fun to call things exactly what they are sometimes. It's important to do that ...so, that's what we did.

The Nine-Cake Plate and a decent supply of coffee, that was the reason that most of my college term papers were turned in approximately on time. Only recently have I started drinking coffee in the morning. Now, I get it.

Late-night pancakes and coffee...because I'd lose focus after midnight. I'd take breaks and read books of poetry and stain the pages when I needed a reset...which apparently happened a lot, judging from the condition of this book. Each stain was a gesture of love.

The cover ripped off ages ago. I'm surprised that I haven't lost it. Strangely, the obvious idea of rebinding it with a couple of pieces of tape seems like a violation to me, somehow. It's not a logical thing but it's a real one. I feel that way for some reason. In fact, I'm only realizing that I feel this way right now, in this process of Reflection. I have whispered this feeling secretly to myself, over and over again but I tried never to listen because even secretly, it seemed silly to me. Of course, I know that a couple of pieces of tape would do the trick...but I guess I just like the meaningless danger of the possibility losing the cover. I don't know. I just love this book!

It's wonderful. It's called *Dragonflies, codfish & frogs—SPEAKING PEOMS* by RIC MASTEN. The meaninglessly dangerous cover reads as *Cast Your Vote, Your Vow—1*

follows:

If this book should fall into your hands, my wish would be that you wouldn't read it but would find a friend to read it to you.

This book is magic to me. It contains poems that have stayed with me since the 1980s and New Wave Rock and Roll!

I looked for this old book today because of a poem that it contains, a poem called ENCOUNTER and I'd like to share it with you. It goes like this:

it was just that i was  
very touchy that day  
and really that's  
all i can say  
to explain why  
while walking through  
the sears & roebuck department store  
i happened to get into  
this fist fight with a mannequin

I love this poem. It captures a feelings of futility and rage, innocence and failure rolled up as one. The holy DRAT of life seems perfectly encased in just 40 words...so small a package. It's quite beautiful. I really love this poem.

I identify with it...because I get touchy like that, especially when the world goes off the rails. And the world is off the rails these days. Good God!!! ...with the COVID crisis gone insane and some of our leaders mocking the means of achieving safety at campaign rallies...which is truly dangerous. I know folks on both sides of the aisle who are voting in all kinds of ways at election time and NO ONE still thinks that mocking masks is a compelling idea. It's not. It's ruthless and it's reckless and it's wrong in the face of sorrow. And the worst part is that, in our hearts, we know how hard things are...and that we are all at risk...no matter our politics. If you don't believe me right now, just go ask Herman Caine. May he rest in peace.

Herman Cain was the co-chairman of Black Voices for Trump in the 2020 campaign. Three months ago, he died of COVID-19. [] He was admitted to the hospital nine days after attending the rally that was held in Tulsa. He was defiantly unmasked. He wasn't social distancing and he died and his own people were a mess about it. His own staff said,

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...there was "no way of knowing for sure how or where" he contracted the disease. The editor of Cain's website, said, "I realize people will speculate about the Tulsa rally, but Herman did a lot of traveling [that] week, including to [Arizona](#) where cases [were] spiking." [44]

Where and when he contracted the virus is only a matter of irony. That he is no longer with us is a matter that is real.

The point of saying all of this is not political. It's not morose. I'm trying to call attention to the pervasiveness of the trauma from which we are—all of us—so very deeply suffering. Losses of life are not political losses. We dishonor ourselves when we try to make them so.

Grief wears a mask these days, as it parades around our neighborhoods. Grief wears many masks, actually, when you look closely and with compassionately. Grief wears the mask of denial...before trading that one in for the mask of anger. Grief wears the mask of bargaining...before trading that one in for the mask of depression. At last and in its maturity, grief wears no mask at all...but shares the gentle face of acceptance for all to see.

Leadership depends on maturity...for loss is hardly childish and hardly new. The losses of life, of course...these painful things are hardly new. Leadership and maturity is all about who we are because of these losses. It's not about who we might rather be instead of them. That's not leadership. It's the mask of denial.

Some of us might have recognized the sequence that our grief is going through—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This is a sequence of experiences that was first identified by a woman named Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. In 1969, when I was four, she developed what has come to be known as the Grief Cycle.

Denial

Anger

Bargaining

Depression

Acceptance

When one is in the Denial Stage, one experiences feelings of shock and fearfulness, acting out behaviors of confusion and avoidance. This is where we were in March, when the threat of the pandemic became so real to us.

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When one enters the stage of Anger, one experiences frustration, irritation and anxiety. This is where we seem to be politically right now—with our bitterness, our abusiveness and our stridency.

During the Bargaining Stage of the Grief Cycle, we start struggling to find meaning. We may be entering this good phase now. We're in Bargaining with one foot still in the Anger Stage... which explains why it is that we might be so wound up and so spring-loaded and so spoiling for a fist fight... with a mannequin...regardless of what obnoxious things that mannequin did or did not say!

As a people, we are clearly in a cycle of grief. As a diverse and competitive political body, we are at war with ourselves...and for no real reason, really. We do not have to be. We need a rest. We've lost our grounding. We seem to be at war with our own health and wellbeing, so stricken with the masks of grief that just about everything becomes a distraction—even and, perhaps, especially when those things are really important.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September. It was a Friday. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, it seemed like every major paper in the country carried the story. The New York Times was front and center. [show] And the Valley News covered it. [show] The Valley News wrote,

[Supreme Court] Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg [] has died at her home in the nation's capital. [] She was 87. [] A feminist hero lovingly dubbed Notorious RBG, Ginsburg emerged over the last decade as the leading voice of the court's liberal wing, best known for her stinging dissents on a bench that has mostly skewed right since her 1993 appointment.

A Clinton appointee, Ginsburg was inspired by Thurgood Marshall, the first African American Justice of the Supreme Court. A trailblazer in his own right, Thurgood Marshall argued the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. As I learned from Judge-now-Justice Amy Coney Barrett, *Brown v. Board* set what is called a "super precedent" in American law. It is a decision that, as of this morning, has gone unquestioned for sixty-six years, five months, two weeks and a day...much unlike the confirmation of Justice Barrett herself.

Public life has become so polarized and so bitterly contentious. As I learned from the daily news, "For the first time in 151 years, a Supreme

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Court nominee was confirmed without a single vote from the minority party." So polarized. Now, I don't "feel bad" for Justice Barrett. She's perfectly capable of taking care of herself and I'm sure that she will. I just hope that she's keeping her finger on the pulse of our culture right now...because life is not normal these days. We should remain aware of that.

Senator Klobuchar from Minnesota, from where I used to live... She put in best during the Confirmation Hearings. She said, "We needed a reset." Late-night pancakes and coffee. She said,

While I think that judicial philosophy is an appropriate and an important topic for this committee to explore...this isn't normal right now. We have to understand that what people are dealing with, that 7.7 million people have gotten this virus. That 214,000 Americans have died.

That was two weeks ago. As of this past Friday, that number had risen to more than 234,000. Senator Klobuchar continued. She said,

For people watching at home and wondering what we're all doing in this room right now...and maybe you're home because you lost your job...or maybe you've got your kids crawling all over your couch right now... maybe you're trying to teach your first grader how to do a mute button to go to school...or maybe you've got a small business that you had to close down or that's struggling..

We should be doing something else right now. We shouldn't be doing this [confirming a Supreme Court Justice]. We should be passing coronavirus relief. Like the house just did, which was a significant bill that would have been a big help. And I think people have to know that right now. Whether you're Democrat, independent or Republican. That's why I started out yesterday by telling people that they need to vote. [end quote]

Basic truths and values have become anomalies. They are rare. They are uncommon. The basic things we hold in common...are now uncommon. Normal, everyday behavior in a time of crisis is irrational. This is why the poet that I quoted got into a fist fight with a mannequin. We are all, in part, the poet Ric Masten right now—whether we are sitting in Senate Confirmation Hearings or standing up for justice, whether we are on the road and maskless at presidential campaign rallies or sheltering at home right here in

Woodstock, VT. We are all a bit on edge. We're deeply grieving at this time and we have never gone through this before. None of us have. We are all in sorrow and—you know what else?—we're doing so well.

The weight upon our shoulders is tremendous. That's for sure. And yet somehow, against the odds and against the grain, we are doing what we need to do to survive. Embedded in the earth, beneath this first light snow, we are tucked...we, the humble seeds of life and living. If you just look around, you can see the seeds of life and living everywhere.

For stress relief, I watched this YouTube video— 50 BEAUTIFUL MOMENTS OF RESPECT IN SPORTS. More than 10 million views...just think about that. Story after story touched my heart—the high school senior who proposes to his girlfriend center-court...right before the basketball game, the tennis star who jumps the net mid-match when he sees that his opponent is injured... My favorite one was the story about the water-boy for the professional football team, the water-boy with Down Syndrome. AS they reported,

This NFL team let their...water boy with Down Syndrome score a touchdown.

*[commentator] Number 24 gets the ball and watch as Robbie runs twenty yards. His mom breaks down as she witnesses Robbie's dream of scoring a touchdown come to life.*

It was incredible, incredible to watch as little Robbie ran down the field—full pads and uniform—and his crying mother fell to her knees when he spiked the ball in the end zone and she said, "It was incredible!" Tears running all down her face. You gotta love it. This is what more than 10 million people are tuning into these days. This is also happening. I take a great deal of pride and pleasure in knowing that little fact.

And I get just as much from the sound of the mountain rain that fell down softly Thursday night and became snow by Friday morning. Each drop was uneventful and totally spectacular. Every snowflake was normatively miraculous. I just love that.

And I get as much from the best of our theology. A few days ago, I sent around a particular passage to the Board of Trustees here at North Chapel. It was an address called that was delivered by my former teacher, Rebecca Parker. She was speaking in New York City in April of 2017. She said,

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"The world is too beautiful to be praised by just one voice and too broken to be healed by just one set of hands. And that is why we need these companions and this community for the important work of savoring and saving the world."

These words are from my colleague, Rev. Rob Hardies, at All Souls Church—Unitarian in D.C. These words were to have grounded us since November.

All Souls had gone deeply into crisis six months earlier. The church community was torn apart. The church's ministry was shattered and yet, they cleaved to words as beautiful as these. Rebecca Parker told a story then that has real meaning for us today. She said,

The morning following the election, people began to arrive at our church. There were no meetings scheduled but people came. One young adult said to me, "I don't know where to go or what to do. Can I just hang out at the church today?" [] We lit candles and sat together for long, quiet meditation and chanted out prayers.

What might we do now, four years further down the line? Dr. Parker continued. She said,

We all know that this is a critical moment for our nation. An avowed sexual abuser has been elected to the highest office in the land, an abuser who first rose to political prominence by leading the charge...to discredit the legitimacy of the nation's first African American president by lying about him over and over and over again. Racism and heterosexism are now on the throne and bodies that were already at risk...are now in even more danger.

How prescient. You should see her. She's unassuming. A quiet woman with thunder enough to fill canyons and cross oceans in her front pocket.

We were at a difficult moment back then and we are at one now... multiplied by the many, many thousands gone in just the last seven months... and rather than taking Dr. Fauci seriously, our leaders are trivializing the COVID crisis and disparaging Dr. Fauci on the national stage...and rather than taking Dr. Gebreysus seriously, they've politicized the virus, withdrawn from the World Health Organization and weakened global integrity on the stage of the world at a time of crisis. We are in the adolescence of our

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passage through the stages of grief. We are so far from the maturity and acceptance. It's enough to make you want to punch a mannequin.

And so, it is clear that we need a reset but what on God's green earth can do that for us now? Answer...and don't take me wrong when I say this but The Beatles were right. All we need is love. The trick is in knowing what kind of love we're talking about. Paul, the McCartney had this to say. He said,

All we need is love [fake trumpet sound, chromatic passage]  
All we need is love [fake trumpet sound, chromatic passage]  
All we need is love, love  
Love is all we need

And he's right but that's not enough. Amy Klobuchar can't use it in Washington.

Paul, the Apostle had this to say. In First Corinthians, he said,  
Although I speak in tongues of men and angels  
I'm just sounding brass and tinkling cymbals without love...  
If I had the gift of prophecy and all the knowledge  
And the faith to move the mountains  
And even if I understood all of the mysteries  
If I didn't have love, I'd be nothing

This is a most familiar passage but do we really understand it? I don't think so. The meaning of the passage is not obvious. It cannot be shorn of its roots. It needs to be understood in context. It needs to be understood in context of conflict. Few of us find conflict comfortable. Yet, as Rev. Nancy McDonald-Ladd, my friend and colleague, reminds us,

For as long as two or more have gathered in the name of the spirit,  
[they have found themselves in conflict]. You remember, perhaps,  
that classical chestnut of a wedding reading from Corinthians which  
says, in part,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals or of angels and do not  
have love I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbals. If  
I have a faith that can move mountains but do not have love, I  
am nothing.

Nancy quoted a different source than I did but the meaning is obvious. She further explained (and I think, insightfully)...

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That letter from the Apostle Paul to the Christian community in Corinth has nothing whatsoever to do with the ushy-gushy, romantic sentiment that it is so often associated with at weddings. That is a letter from an over-extended pastor with occasionally dubious judgment to a congregation whose leaders are in a constant state of fierce and unremitting conflict.

They were shouting at each other, shouting prayers like clanging cymbals. They were beating each another over the head with the word of God, fellow-citizens against fellow-citizens...each side was so eager and so desperate to prove themselves more holy. This does not occur to us when a faith is based in peace. How is it that our faith can be like this?

I have been a Unitarian Universalist for as long as I can remember... which is becoming less and less impressive as I forget more and more about my life. I do remember that and in all my years within this faith, I have met few people who were as peaceful and as grounded in their faith as this man, this Riverbend Baptist man that I met in North Carolina.

He was so deeply at peace and I longed in my soul to be just like him—all faith aside. I longed to be as grounded in my spirit as he seemed to be in his. Naively, I asked him what church he went to and just he looked at me and smiled. Now, I had heard about all kinds of Baptists—the northern and the southern kinds, the conservative and the liberal kinds, the Baptists from the Great Lakes Region and those of the Eastern Region, the Baptists allied to the Council of 1879 or to the Council of 1912, halleluiah... But, up until that time, I'd never heard of a Riverbend Baptist.

So, I asked him again...and he looked and smiled again but he didn't tell me squat about this church. So, I asked him about his smile instead and then, he opened up a little. He did say anything. We were outside. He just nodded at the flowing water across the way where it angled around an old growth stand of trees, rooted pretty deep. Then, he gestured just like so [gesture] like he was holding an old fly-fishing rod. He was casting at the elbow of the river. And then, I got it. I was standing in the sanctuary of his church and I didn't even know it. This man was a member of the church of the great outdoors. He was a Riverbend Baptist, meaning he was a disciplined fly-fisherman, grounded in the theology of the good and natural world. And here I am, worried about fist fighting with a mannequin in some old Sears & Roebuck department store. That's not love. That's not what we

need. We don't need to be fighting. I don't need to fist fight with a mannequin ever again. And the worst part is that I don't even know if I won the fight.

Whatever happens on Election Day and in the difficult days that may follow, let ground ourselves in the most beautiful ways we can—taking stock of the beauty of our surroundings, finding that best nature within ourselves, seeing our goodness reflected in the falling rain and snow and in the elbow of the river. Cast your vote and cast your vow and whatever happens, come what may, let's reset ourselves and make our way to the deepest love we know.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.