

# Leadership and the Common Good

January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley/Sophie Leggett  
North Universalist Chapel Society

**G**ood morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. My name is Leon Dunkley and I am honored to serve as minister to North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) here in Woodstock, Vermont.

Today is Sunday, January 10<sup>th</sup> and the title of this morning's reflection is Leadership and the Common Good. I know that we are witness to the spectacular events that unfolded this week...in ourselves, in our nation and around the world. How shall we strike a balance with everything that's been going on? The run-off elections in Georgia have balanced the Senate for the first time since Trent Lott and Tom Daschle shared power back in 2001. Merrick Garland has been named as the new Attorney General—finally bringing to rest a fire that has been burning in Washington since the last stages of the Obama administration. And in Wisconsin, Michael Graveley, the District Attorney in Kenosha, just announced that no charges will be brought against the officer, Rusten Sheskey, who fired seven bullets at point blank range into the back of Jacob Blake on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, this past year. Blake, who is 29, the father of three and now partially paralyzed, was shot re-entering his minivan, in front of his three children of 8-, 5- and 3-years-of-age. [] After being surprisingly quickly washed away right around Christmas, the snow has returned, blanketing the Upper Valley in winter beauty once again. And, during a session of Congress, hundreds of people breached the United States Capitol after being rallied by the American President and his lawyer. There was theft and vandalism. There were weapons and violence. There was death... Oh, great Darkness..., I appeal to you...in the ways in which we sang this morning...

Darkness, soothe my weary eyes,  
that I may see more clearly  
When my heart with sorrow cries,  
comfort and caress me.  
And then my soul may hear a voice,  
a still, small voice of love eternal.  
Darkness, when my fears arise,  
let your peace flow through me

Darkness, here, is a good thing...is a positive power in this morning's hymn. Darkness soothes the weary. It comforts us in times of sorrow. Not the kind of darkness that we just saw in Washington but the kind that helps us open up our eyes. We need the comfort of this darkness so we can let our eyes adjust. For the darkness, strangely enough, can be most illuminating.

Open mine eyes that I may see  
Glimpses of truth though has for me  
Open mine eyes, illumine me, Spirit Divine

Sometimes, as James Baldwin reminds us, we have to “open the unusual door.” The unusual door for us today is the door of ambiguity. Opening this door and willfully standing in the gray can help—and help us—to surrender the glibness we may possess, in order to step in to the best in ourselves...to open our eyes and see the best in ourselves and one another.

Romeo blew this play...if we recall, if we remember from Shakespeare’s writing.

Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,  
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.  
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;

It was terrible. The two like-house—the Montague for Romeo and the Capulets for Juliet—they were like the Hatfields and the McCoys. It was a family feud. They could barely even tolerate each other. Romeo and Juliet tried to rise above it all but the failed when two terrible deaths betrayed them. Tybalt from the house of Capulet killed a Montague and Romeo, in turn, took Tybalt’s life. Tybalt was beloved by Juliet. In avenging the death of his friend, Romeo broke the heart of his dearest love. As he realizes what he has done and sees its likely consequences, he falls down to his knees and he shouts up to the heavens, “I am fortune’s fool!!” and all Hell breaks lose.

Shakespeare was awesome. He was really something else. He really knew how to tell a story! Willie, the Shake, as my hippie friends called him...way back in the day.

Romeo failed to open up his eyes to see...to see the glimpses of truth that were illuminating. He didn’t open what Baldwin called “the unusual door”—the unusual door of ambiguity. But if had, if he had chosen not to avenge his slain companion, I doubt that anyone would have understood his choice...maybe, not even his beloved Juliet.

I watched the events of the rally-turned-Capitol-breach as they unfolded in real time. When I learned that there had been gunfire, I prayed that no one was injured. When I learned that a woman had been struck by a bullet in the neck, I prayed that she would not die. When I learned that she had died, I thought of Romeo, fortune’s fool. It felt to me like Hell had broken lose. And so, I looked for some heaven. I looked around for stories of laughter...and I didn’t have to look that hard before I found one. One came to me. I remembered a story called Where’s the Stone about a friend of mine. I’ll share it briefly because the stone part is important. Here’s the story:

I remember laughing at my college roommate—not at his expense, but at him. He was and is a wonderful man and I laughed at him in love. I still do. I laugh at him—as I laugh at myself—because he chose to follow his heart...and, for some reason, I find that funny.

It was sophomore year, 1984-85. The year before, Eric broke the bank in Organic Chemistry. Orgo, as we called it, was the hardest class at college. It's a second-year course. My roommate took it freshman year.

On the day of the big midterm, I found him sitting in our room. He was sad so, I consoled him. I assured him that the midterm was generally graded on a curve. In other words, the test was just so hard that everyone does poorly. On really hard tests (like the Orgo midterm), the highest grade was sometimes as low as 70. So, the test is graded on a curve. If the highest score was 70, 70 becomes the new 100.

I knew my roommate well enough to know that he must have done fairly well. My intuition told me that he was in the B range. So, I consoled him. That year, though, someone broke the curve. Someone had done so well on the test that the teacher could no longer adjust the grades. It's hard to argue that the teacher or the subject matter was the universal problem when someone in the class was doing fine.

That was my roommate. He was the one who shattered the curve. He was sad after the test because he knew he got one wrong...because he knew precisely what mistake he'd made. He was amazing. And he just showed up that way. No ego and no journey of his becoming. He came fully arrived. When I got to college, I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up but my roommate...he was almost already a doctor. He was gonna be rich. Then, one day, he confessed to me that he wanted to be an artist, that he wanted to be a sculptor. "Sculpting..." I said curiously. "Now, that's where all of the money is!" Then, we laughed at ourselves and at each other. We still do. He's family to me. Always.

I laugh about that story because I am very proud of him...for following his own heart...for being true to himself and his creative spirit...for doing that which he felt called to do. That can be very, very difficult. Sometimes, you get criticized for that—for thinking for yourself—and that's hard but if we don't do that, we pay a deeper cost.

Now, as a sculptor, he's done quite well and that is impressive. That started right away. In fact, when he was training, he got in trouble for it. He trained up here, in Rutland. He carved marble like no other. He carved with such proficiency that, when the work was done, it didn't even look like marble anymore. It looked like whatever he was carving. His teachers actually criticized him for it, lovingly and usefully. They asked him, "Where is the stone? All I see is your mastery of it. I really want to see your struggle. I want to see your work. Where's the stone? I want to see the stone." His teachers wanted to experience the rock-hard tension between the polished, final product and the brutal process. They wanted to see the struggle between the artist and the art.

This became a deep lesson for me...a lesson that has been with me for 30 years. How does one hold the tension between the product and the process? How do we balance the energies within ourselves—the energies within American society—when it feels like they are tearing us limb from limb?

I wonder if the answer is balance. I wonder if the answer is in standing in the gray. We've charted out our lives in black and white. We've gotten used to

it. We've left the common ground and we've retreated to comfort of our bunkers, hunkered down and all-too-well protected. We're so surveyed and measured out. We're so fenced in and so zoned off. We've been so reduced, so limited.

I remember, during the Bush years, during the H.W. years, between 1989 and 1993, there was a Women's March in Washington, D.C. I went alone, I figured that I would meet up with someone that I knew...but I was unlucky. I was alone. There were more people marching than I expected. I was ok being alone. It was a different kind of experience, though. I looked out upon the world with different eyes. I listened to the world with different ears and with my whole heart and I walked into a powerful situation. I met up with the Right-to-Lifers who were chanting terrible things and holding horrible signs with jars and hangers and indignity. And they were clashing, predictably, with the crowd that I felt closer to, a crowd that was also chanting terrible things and holding horrible signs.

On the ground, sitting by a fire hydrant, was a woman who was also alone. She was silent when I saw her. Her sign was on the ground. When our eyes met, it seemed like she was sad. I know I was. All of these passionate people yelling loud up to the heavens in a toxic din that would make average angels cover up their ears. For a moment, I was at peace with. It was the best few seconds of my day...but when the crowd surged forward, I went along with them and the beauty of the moment slipped into the past.

While my political and my religious commitments remain quite clear, I don't wish to impose them. I make no claim to moral authority here in an oppositional sense. I don't want to fight with her...not even in my memory of that day in D.C. I just wonder what it would have been like to talk to her, to have connected with her somehow. I didn't have the muscle back then. I lacked the nerve. I lacked the might...to stand with someone who thought differently than me on a hot-button topic. I knew all of the pro-choice chants we had back then. I had the talking points. I was skilled enough to win the arguments—at least, to win them to my satisfaction...but I didn't know how to sit down and speak with someone with whom I respectfully disagreed. I didn't know then how to do that then...and I didn't want to be caught trying. I was afraid of the judgments of my peers. And my guess is that in that moment, the woman with whom I had so briefly connected might have felt the same way that I did.

I didn't know how to connect with her back then. I wonder what would have happened if I had. Would I have been applauded or ridiculed. Probably both. It's not uncommon. Poets write about it. As David Wilcox explains in a song called Fearless Love, he tells us that...

...the high religious still will scorn  
Just like that did all that time back  
They'll say you helped the other side  
They saw you haul that soldier's pack  
But now how could you carry that man's sign  
In your heart the choice was clear  
You didn't join the other side  
The battle lines just disappeared  
When fearless love makes you cross the border

It's hard when we choose to be led by love like this but I think that we are being called to...by the chaos, by the din, by all the noise...because our purposes are mixed...and because our arguments are inconsistent...and because our lines of logic and reasoning are wildly skewed and, at times, entirely disconnected....and because, at this level of complexity in our culture, it is really hard to find common ground through grace....but it is possible. We are not hearing one another.

We're not listening. When another poet asked, "What did you hear, my blue-eyed son? ...my darling young one," the son responded and said,

I heard the sound of a thunder, that roared out a warnin'  
I heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world  
I heard one hundred drummers whose hands were a-blazin'  
and ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin'  
And it's a hard rain that's a-gonna fall

This is that hard rain...right now. We're soaking in it. We're drenched to the bone, willingly surrendering the common ground for narrow gains...by breaking Capitol police barricades and by allowing them to be broken. We surrendered common ground when we did that—we, the Americans. We surrendered what is best in us...

...by scaling walls and waving flags with which we do and do not agree  
...by charging through front doors that had been closed for our protection  
...by breaking shockproof windows with shields that were designed for defensive purpose  
...by terrifying law-makers on both sides of the aisle  
...by forcing Congress and the Vice President of the United States into places of hiding  
...by breaking furniture to fashion make-shift clubs for confrontation  
...by overturning desks and tearing down treasured paintings  
...by desecrating the house of our democracy.

Are we not temporary stewards here? How dare we? How dare we surrender what is best in us in this way...

...by doing what the President's attorney called "trial by combat"  
...by following the directions of a fallen star on the rallying stage whose violence and banality that is beneath us all

We're better than this...when we surrender neither our common ground nor the common good. We stand with one another, indivisibly. Leadership requires this of us. Anyone who says otherwise is not leading.

Wednesday night, from the floor of Congress, after all of the violence, Senator Romney spoke and, I think, made some sense. He said, I salute Senator [James] Lankford, [Kelly] Loeffler, [Mike] Braun, and [Steve] Daines—and, I'm sure, others—who, in the light of today's outrage, have withdrawn their objections [to election results]. For any who remain insistent on an audit in order to satisfy the many people who believe that the election was stolen, I offer this perspective. No

congressional audit is ever going to convince these voters, particularly when the President will continue to say that the election was stolen. The best way we can show respect for the voters who are upset is by telling them the truth. That is the burden. That is the duty of leadership.

Telling the truth. This is the burden, this is the duty of leadership. This is the pathway back to the common good.

My hope is that we not become too chiseled, too hardened in our ways. My hope is that we not become too polished and too smooth-stoned, so perfected in our arguments of righteous opposition, that we begin to think that we don't still deeply need one another, beyond our differences. We do. We need the rock-hard tension between the brutal process of life and its final product. In the face of this tumultuousness, new things are possible. It will take some time but we will learn to strike the balance that we need. We will balance all the energies that we find within ourselves—and within American society.

After the rush, after the shock and violence, through the grief about what has been broken, what has been shattered in American life, we lift our hearts to that which is highest in us...and higher than us. We will preserve this time in history...in our heart and minds...in our bones...in our soul...and we will move forward from it—compassionately determined, steadfast and in strength. Echoes of Howard Thurman on the wind still resound, “Keep fresh before [us] the moments of [our] high resolve.” These words held true for him. May they also hold true for us.

And in closing, I share the final prayer that was offered on the floor of the Congress, after it had reconvened in the aftermath of the rally-gone-mad. Rear Admiral Barry C. Black, the 62<sup>nd</sup> Chaplain of the United States Senate, offered these words at 3:46am and I quote him in full:

Lord of our lives and sovereign of our beloved nation,

We deplore the desecration to the United States Capitol Building, the shedding of innocent blood, the loss of life and the quagmire of dysfunction that threaten our democracy. These tragedies have reminded us that words matter and that the power of life and death is in the tongue. We have been warned that eternal vigilance continues to be freedom's price. Lord, you have helped us remember that we need to see in each other a common humanity that reflects your image. You have strengthened our resolve to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies—domestic as well as foreign. Use us to bring healing and unity to our hurting and divided nation and world. Thank you for what you have blessed our law-makers to accomplish in spite of threats to liberty. Bless and keep us. Drive far from us all wrong desires. Incline our hearts to do your will and guide our feet on the path of peace. And, God, [] bless America. We pray in your sovereign name. Amen.

May we all move forward in gentleness and grace, in good times and tempest, conflict and consensus. Held, whole and honored by a love that knows no bounds.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.