

Sacred Conversation
November 13, 2022
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, November the 12th and the title of this reflection Sacred Conversations. It's about finding ways to connect with one another beyond our differences. Such conversations can be moving. It's so important to do them well. In Ancient Greece, they used to say, "Give me a place to stand and a lever long enough, and I will move the world." I think that they were talking about having sacred conversations.

Touching hands is like a precious gift on Christmas Eve
(like each and every day)
And we can stand on the corner of this world, if we believe,
and make our wish upon the rain

I feel a morning rising...rising up in me
and I feel some sun behind your smile
but it takes forgiveness and it takes a light
when stone cold is the road and long the mile.

Hold on, my friends, for the lifeline

—l. dunkley, Lifeline

There was a moment back in college that has stayed with me over the years. It happened in a philosophy class called The Modern Mind. I can't remember the name of the professor who taught but I do remember that we read (or we got in trouble for not reading) the writings of Freud, Nietzsche, Marx and Marcuse. Our professor was something of an intellectual provocateur. He had a way of surprising us or even shocking us into our own potential. It's hard to explain. His approach was often quirky and weird more than anything else but it was always insightful. We were always powerfully invited to explore and to expand into our higher selves.

One day, in the beginning of class, the professor asked us if we were knowledgeable about U.S. History. We boasted that we were fairly knowledgeable—collectively, at any rate. It varied from student to student. He was intrigued so he tested us. He asked us why we thought it was that women in the United States couldn't vote until the 1920s.

Our hands shot up right away. It was such an easy question. "Sexism," we said. We were confident in our response.

"Nope!" our teacher said immediately. Surprising us and shocking us...and challenging us in his way. We started guessing. We were in a state of quasi-disbelief. Where was our teacher leading us? We guessed and guessed until we started to get annoyed with being told repeatedly that we were wrong. When we were nearing

our limit, he let us in on why he was negating us. He said, “Women couldn’t vote back then because women weren’t smart enough.”

We were surprised. We were shocked. What our quirky teacher said was sexist. Instantly, he became a pariah, an awful person. He let his comment and our judgment just hang in the air, just hang there in still silence for a while and then, he explained himself. “I’m not saying that women in the United States weren’t smart enough to vote until the 1920s, I’m saying that this was the reason that we collectively believed, the reason we collectively accepted, the reason that we’ve been taught since the beginning of the American experiment, the one in which “all men are created equal.”

This false and commonly accepted cultural belief is built into the habits of language so deeply that we have lived within its assumptions and we have failed to address its inadequacy and we didn’t correct its errors until the victories of the Suffrage Movement, the 72-year-long battle through which women attained the right to vote.

Our provocative professor wanted us to learn to think freely and clearly, critically and independently. He wanted us to be able to laugh at ourselves and at one another and to challenge ourselves and at one another without injury, without cost, without a scapegoat and without there having to be a butt of the joke, someone at whose expense the rest of us could be joyful.

The Suffrage Movement began in 1848, 13 years before the Civil War. It began at the first women's rights convention in the United States, at the Seneca Falls Convention in upstate New York, just west of Cayuga Lake. That Convention—and the subsequent “state campaigns, court battles, and petitions to Congress, marches, demonstrations and protests—led to that passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1919 and its ratification in 1920.

The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.

Women did not suddenly get smarter in 1919 and 1920. But, at that time, we gave up on an illusion that was limiting us.

What illusions can we give up on today? What habits of language, what delusions, what sustained and false beliefs hold us back from what we can become in the world?

In 1792, 56 years before the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, a free-thinking, critically-thinking and independently-thinking woman wrote a really good book in England. The name of the book was *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and it is the cornerstone of modern feminism. It’s the foundational text, even though the word ‘feminism’—or *fémínisme*,” as it was first coined in France—would not exist in language for almost half a century. We grow up by inches.

The author was a woman named Mary Wollstonecraft and she was a member of a nonconformist church with strong ties to political radicalism. That church was called the Newington Green Unitarian Church in North London.

Did you know that we were so radical as this? ...that were on the cutting edge of things, even way back in the day? ...that it was part and parcel of our faith to stand on the corner of the world and to make a wish?

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Do you imagine how radical, how powerful can be even this humble sanctuary, made holy...made blessed...made dear and so deeply beloved by the best in us becoming possible?

It's always been this way in this particular tradition of faith. The best in us—whatever it is—is what makes our faith tradition real. The best in us becoming is the bridge that spans the treacherous chasms of the impossible. It is that sacred thing within us that loves beyond belief.

Years ago, I preached in our nation's Capitol. I preached at All Souls Church—Unitarian in Washington, D.C. They boast membership numbers that waver between 12 and 13 hundred. The Rev. Bill Sinkford is serving there now. Bill Sinkford was formerly the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association (2001-09). He's a good man and he serves a good church. They're not as cool as we are but, according to their website, [and this, I quote]

All Souls was founded in 1821 as First Unitarian Church by some of Washington's most prominent White men, including Secretary of State and future President John Quincy Adams; Secretary of War and future Vice President John C. Calhoun; Architect of the Capitol Charles Bulfinch; and newspaper publisher, city alderman, and future mayor Joseph Gales.

In the words of Rev. Rob Hardies, the minister who served All Souls before Bill Sinkford,

Our ancestors dreamed of a special kind of church of the free spirit, unfettered by dogma; a church of the free mind pursuing all truth, a church of the free person, resisting all bonds of oppression. For 200 years, since 1821, All Souls has served as a shelter of those dreams.¹

I believe that Rob's words fairly describe the reality and the aspirations of our faith in a general sense, however hard it is (and has been) for us to live into that ideal.

It's hard to be bold and radical all of the time. It's hard to think freely and clearly, critically and independently. It's a pain in the neck...and it's a pain in other places. It is a tiring job and it's relentless. It can be thankless and it's unending, never finished. As the theologians say, "God is still speaking." Ours is a living tradition and this is a plus, believe it or not, because it means that the sacred is near to us...not far away, remote by distance or removed from us by time. This is a gift, as heavy as it is, but we need to care for the lever and we need to position the fulcrum and we need to take care of ourselves in order to use the lever well.

¹ <https://all-souls.org/about-us/>

All Souls Church in D.C. was founded by a Secretary of State and also a Secretary of War. It was founded by a future President and also by a future Vice President who served together. It was founded by a slave owner and also by a staunch abolitionist. Unbridled opposition is implied in all of these circumstances...and yet, out of them, a noble church was born. How does that happen? How is it that we can stand, shoulder to shoulder, with outward differences that do not go away, differences that we cannot overcome?

These days, this faith is not divided by the issue of slavery...not like it was in 1821. We are not divided with respect to voting...not like we were before the 1920s. Yet, we do face divisive issues and we do struggle and argue about things we cannot resolve.

Archimedes once said, "Give me a place to stand and a lever long enough, and I will move the world." What lever is strong enough to move us in the world today? And when we use it, how shall we ground ourselves?

A couple of months ago, President Biden was interviewed on 60 Minutes. To the surprise and to the shock of many, he declared that the COVID-19 pandemic was over. It wasn't the wisest thing he's ever done. Even his own staffers were caught off guard. They began walking his statement back almost immediately.

His statement was medically false. The pandemic is not over. It's still quite dangerous, even though we are in a different place than where we were before. Biden's statement was medically false but it was animated by something that is socially real. We miss what we once were. We miss how we used to be...how we used to casually relate, incidentally relate and risklessly relate to one another on a regular basis. For some of us, the masks that have hidden so much of our faces for the last two years now have also hidden so much of our souls. What are your feelings?

How can I invite us into conversation? How can I invite us into a sacred conversation about our feelings on the issue of public masking? It is not yet possible to know what this will mean for us as we move forward together but moving forward together requires a sacred conversation. We need to process what we are feeling with one another.

Benediction

Hands (by Ric Msten)

i think of my poems and songs
as hands
if i don't hold them out to you
i find i won't be touched

if i keep them
in my pocket

i would never get to see you
seeing me
seeing you

and thought i know from experience
many of you
for a myriad of reasons
will laugh
and spit
and walk away unmoved
still
to meet those of you
who do reach out
is well worth the risk

and pain

so here are my hands
do what you will

We may need to

harmed

→most vulnerable
choice

All Souls. Not a title, but a practice

Always navigating
Oppression does not ask for our names...it doesn't matter how kind we are. Our
kindness can't stem to flow of violence

Zizek, normal violence
Casual brutality

Recently relieved with a mundane rebuke of ... violence and insurrectionary
politics...still ever mindful of those of us who felt ennobled by it. Untriumphant and
profound

Oath Keepers testimony
J6 Oath Keepers guy
Whitmer in MI

I've been keeping something from you

masks