

This Stage of Our Learning

May 30th, 2021

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North Universalist Chapel Society

Lord, dear Lord above,
God almighty, God of love,
Please look down and see my people through.

I love these words. I deeply love poetry, the writing and the artistry. These words are from “Come Sunday.” They were written by Duke Ellington. They come from the first of his Sacred Concerts. They are part of a lovely body of music.

Good 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 here, at North Universalist Chapel Society (or North Chapel) in Woodstock, VT. Today is Sunday, May 30th and the title of this morning’s reflection is This Stage of Our Learning. It’s about the things that we must hold in balance—in healing and loving care—in order to the challenges of our time.

One hundred years ago tomorrow marks a time of riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma. In 1921, black lives were shattered and black-owned businesses were burned to the ground by a mob. As many as 300 lives were lost—taken by racially incited people who were rallied, deputized and weaponized by prominent leaders and city officials—some of whom, unfortunately, were members of All Souls, the local Unitarian church in Tulsa. They had a strong hand in that disaster and we need to face that squarely.

This centennial marker is national news. As you may have already heard [and I quote],

...a House Judiciary subcommittee convened in Washington, DC to address the ongoing impacts of the Tulsa massacre. One speaker was Viola Fletcher, an African American woman, who, proud and alert at the age of 107, is the oldest living survivor of the massacre.

Viola Fletcher is incredible—still so powerful and strong. Her testimony was moving. I am honored to share her words with you today. They were these:

I will never forget the violence of the white mob when we left our house. I still see Black men being shot, and Black bodies lying in the street. I still smell smoke and see fire. I still see Black businesses being burned. I still hear

airplanes flying overhead. I hear the screams. I live through the Massacre every day.

She was only seven when all of this happened. She was traumatized so early in life. Trauma stops time. For Viola Fletcher, the violence of 1921 has not yet ended.

Now, it is heart-breaking to share these memories but it is courageous of us to them dearly, prayerfully. It's brave to do so a full century after the events took place. Slowly, we are healing. Despite the continuing losses, so very much has happened over the last one hundred years.

And in the Tulsa church this Sunday, they are looking honestly at what took place one hundred years ago. They are looking lovingly and they are looking unflinchingly at the church's involvement in what transpired. This aspect of their healing—of our healing—began for more than a decade ago.

I visited the All Souls in Tulsa in the fall of 2013. My leg was broken when I was there but my first, healing steps—my first, dancing steps without crutches—took place in the sanctuary of All Souls in Tulsa. I'd spent a few days there, learning about what happened in 1921. Healing was taking place on many levels...and it continues. Broken bones are bound. Braver bridges are built...in the soul and heartland of our country. Today, we join our sister church in Tulsa as, together, we all move forward—reaching upward and digging deep...with both roots and wings. Hold me close and set me free. Make it so and let it be.

Lord, dear Lord above,
God almighty, God of love,
Please look down and see my people through.

All of my people. I love these words...the poetry, the writing, the artistry. They feel so right for the healing work that we must do...at this stage of our learning. To all souls, I say, "Good morning. It is good to be together."

Poets, writers, artists...and lovers of the arts... We're all trying to do the same thing. We're all trying to wash clean the slate of the human imagination. We're all looking for the key to happiness. Art is our guide.

Laura Dern is a guide. She is an actor. She starred in an episode of *The West Wing*. Aaron Sorkin was still writing and directing. They were a good team.

I love his writing...and I love her craft. They work well together. I love what the two of them have to say about life...and I love what Aaron Sorkin has to say about writing. It's helpful for people like me. He says, Writing, like any other art form... There are chunks of it that can be taught and there are chunks of it that can't be taught. So...there are teachers (you could be a playwriting major or a screenwriting major). There are books of varying qualities that that you can read. You can listen to [people] like me [but] every writer is different.

Every creative artist tries to convey the unconveyable, journeying bravely out into the great unknown. All of us try to express the inexpressible, try to capture that elusive spark—fleeting, unpredictable and quixotic. Each of us is fully aware of the risk of failure (which is commonplace), fully aware of the probability and even the certainty of failure. We make friends with it. Failure is a guide. It helps us on our way. Sorkin says,

My hope is that I am able to say something...that will be meaningful to some writer and will allow them to do what they want to do...and get better.

Failure is not a shortcoming. It is a signpost. It is as constant as the northern star, as constant as gravity. It is central to the praxis of moving forward. One should expect it when one is creating that which has never existed before.

Sure, Mozart could get the new thing right the first time but he was a genius...and that kind of genius is rare. Most of us fail our way forward—doing the best that we can, learning by trial and error, by experimentation. It's like buying new clothes in a second-hand store. We try on a lot of things until we end up with something that we like. That's how I experience the creative process...and I like hearing about how it is for others.

Aaron Sorkin wrote a *West Wing* episode that was all about an excellent poet. It was called "The U.S. Poet Laureate" and it was about a talented artist named Tabitha Fortis who was played by Laura Dern.

Tabitha Fortis was strong and rebellious...influenced by revolutionaries, influenced by the likes of Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton and Allen Ginsberg...Allen Ginsberg who wrote *Howl* in the 1950s. It's a famous poem.

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving,
hysterical, naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the
starry dynamo in the machinery of night

Like us, Allen Ginsberg was searching for something.

Howl is a brilliant poem, widely read—even by people who don't exist...like Tabitha Fortis who had committed that poem to memory. It flows like learned water over the banks of the New York Times, through the channels of Greenwich Village and into our hearts. It flows into mine. It's a Beat Generation classic. We hold on to this one and we use it to beat down, to ward off, to push back the climbing ivies...of store-bought education and the commercial media. We use it to recover and set free the wild-eyed wisdom of life in the here and now.

Howl is dangerous. That's why Tabitha Fortis was drawn to it. That's why she was taken by Allen Ginsberg and his way with words. She knew these lines by heart and she recited them frequently but one day, something within her changed. Something shifted deeply inside...too deeply. It broke her down a little. To a supportive friend, she said,

I know [Allen Ginsberg's poem] like [the back of my hand...like politicians]
know voting districts.

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving, hysterical, naked,
dragging themselves through..."

She was speaking in a public forum about the beauty and the value of poetry. She was reciting the Ginsberg poem and all of a sudden, she couldn't remember it anymore. So, she just stopped speaking and left the forum. They went on without her. Looking back on that experience, on that public failure, she said,

[Some people] think that an artist's job is to speak the truth. An artist's job is to captivate [the audience] for however long we've asked for [their] attention. If we stumble into truth, we got lucky, and I don't get to decide what truth is. [] I write poetry... That's how I enter the world.

What kind of an artist are you...and how to do you enter the world? If you were a writer, how would you enter? If you were a poet or a painter, how would you enter? How would your art lead you to enter to

world? I ask because we are in the habit of not entering. We are in the habit of expecting things to change without our efforts.

This is our common experience, especially if we are on the younger side of things. There's even a pop song about it now...by John Mayer. And it's actually a pretty good song. He sings,

Me and all my friends, we're all misunderstood
They say we stand for nothing
That there's no way we ever could
Now, we see everything that's going wrong
With the world and those who lead it
We just feel like we don't have the means
To rise above and beat it

So we keep waiting (waiting)
Waiting on the world to change
It's hard to beat the system
When we're standing at a distance
So we keep waiting on the world to change

...but it will not change without our effort. Like I said, it's a pretty good song but it's a far cry from Allen Ginsberg.

Sometimes, we find it hard to enter into the world. How will you do it? Through the written word? Through spoken ones? Through rhyme? Through rhythm? Through reason?

William Shakespeare entered the world by reaching beyond its limits, by reaching beyond its boundaries and touching our hearts. He described one of his most famous plays in an incredibly interesting way. The Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* might be somewhat familiar to us. It begins:

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.

The Prologue ends as follows:

The fearful passage of their [] love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage

Shakespeare described *Romeo and Juliet* as “the two-hours’ traffic of our stage.” He uses the words, “our stage” but really what does he mean

by them...and more importantly, how are they meaningful to us? Why are they useful at this stage of our learning?

The challenges before us are great. Sometimes, they seem insurmountable—the ongoing problems of systemic racism, cultural divisiveness and increasing political hostility in the context of an international pandemic that triggered a global economic downturn...all in the context of climate crisis that should be at the core of our concern...and isn't. There are lots of reasons to disengage but we shouldn't do it. This isn't the time to check out. This is the time to go all in.

Shakespeare described Romeo and Juliet as “the two-hours’ traffic of our stage.” He uses the words, “our stage” and here’s how are they meaningful. Here’s why they are useful at this stage of our learning. These words are meaning and useful because they break through the fourth wall. They encourage our maturity. They foster disillusionment.

Do you know what “the fourth wall” is, “the fourth wall of performance practice”? It’s a theatrical convention. Actors are familiar with it. The fourth wall refers to...

...a performance **convention** in which an invisible, imagined wall separates actors from the audience. While the audience can see through this “wall”, the convention assumes, the actors act as if they cannot.

It’s a 16th century things. Something that we’ve inherited from Shakespeare’s time. The good thing is that the fourth wall allowed for much more intimate performance practices. The bad thing is that it taught us to disengage.

When Shakespeare says that Romeo and Juliet is the “the two-hours’ traffic of our stage,” I’d like to think that what he means by that is that the stage in live theater is shared and we can all become engaged.

It’s different, of course, with television where the fourth wall is impenetrable. No matter what you throw at the flatscreen, you can never distract the actors. Not so, of course, with live performance.

Shakespeare pushes against the fourth wall concept a little bit. He asks of us—his audience—he asks not only for our attention but also for our engagement. This stage of ours is shared. We have to show up. We can’t just zone out...at least, not without risk and consequence.

Clearly, we still use the fourth wall concept for so much of stage and screen. Aaron Sorkin uses it...and Laura Dern. It’s commonplace. Back in 1985, though, Whoopie Goldberg started messing with things. She had a show on Broadway. It was a solo thing, a one-woman show.

Stand-up comedy, much of it improvised. She offers monologues from the perspectives of five, fascinating characters—a Valley Girl in southern California, a six-year-old, black girl-child, an elderly woman in the Caribbean, a middle-aged woman who struggles with Cerebral Palsy and her favorite character, a young, black man who goes by the name of Fontaine.

Fontaine is fantastic. He's quick on his feet and this works for him. It works out just fine. He explains, he says,
I got the kind of gig that allows me the freedom to cruise because I am a thief. It's the all-American traditional gig. People always got stuff. People always want stuff. I provide the service.

Before allow this character to reveal details of his illegal vocation, Whoopie Goldberg does something that is quite lovely...and liberating. She teaches the Broadway way audience how to breakdown the imaginary wall.

Whoopie has Fontaine walk across a dimly-lit stage, singing to himself—singing a song called “Around the world in 80 days...” He sang the Nat King Cole version of the song but in a cooler way—far more rhythmic and laden with expletives. Perfect for Fontaine. As the lights come up on stage, they spill over flood the house. Impossibly, Fontaine becomes aware of the audience. He looks through the fourth wall and he sees them in real time. He says, “Hello,” but the audience stiffens. They do not respond. They don't know how. He asks again. Still nothing. Finally, Fontaine has to take the reigns. He says,

Look, y'all. There ain't no fourth wall. So, probably, if I'm talking to somebody, I'm talking to you... 'cause there ain't but the two of us here. So, I say, 'What's happening?' and y'all say, “Everything is everything or what ever you say.” Ok? So, we're gonna try this again.

And lights go down and sound goes up...with cheers, applause and laughter...and then, the whole things starts again with the dimly lit stage and the “80 Days” song.

I find this performance to be truly beautiful. It was perfect back in the day, perfect for when we were at that stage of our learning. It woke us up a lot but that was 36 years ago...and 36 years is a really long time. You can grow an American President in that amount of time. I still find this performance beautiful but I ask myself the question: What art form wakes us all as well today? What washes us clean? What provides us with a breath of fresh air in this era of “I can't breathe!”?

I find myself turning to the opening passage of the Hebrew Bible. In the Book of Genesis, it is written:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

A wind from God swept over the face of the waters... This is beautiful. The Hebrew word for this wind (this breath) that swept over waters is *ruakh*. *Ruakh* is the divine energy that brings earth and heaven into being...out from chaos. It is the energy that brings life from lifelessness.

I'm trying on a thought. I'm trying this on like new clothes in a second-hand store. It may not fit. It may not match. This may not work out well...but what if *ruakh* could be understood as laughter? What if the Bible is suggesting that everything there is was brought into being by way of the joy of the Holy? What if we are all children of life's rejoicing?

Oliver Wendell Holmes—the Supreme Court Justice and the Unitarian—he once said,

Love is the master key that opens the gates of happiness, [the gates] of hatred, [the gates] of jealousy, and, most easily of all, the gates of fear.

Most often, the first, best marker of these opening gates is the sound of laughter...the singing of birds, the peeping of frogs, the swaying of the tree, the wind on the water. We can enter the world through joyful gates like these.

How will you enter the world today—in song, by wind, through laughter? Spoken word artists from Shakespeare to Ginsberg enter the world through poetry. Actors and playwrights enter the world through stages and studios. Painters use their eyes to show us what they see. Singers use their songs but love is the key. Love is the key.

Whoopie Goldberg enters the world through laughter...and not through her own laughter. She enters through the laughter of others. She enters through opening gates within each of us...gates that spring wide open—burst open—when laughter rises enough to bubble forth into the morning...breaking the morning with the speech of the blackbird and laughter of the newborn child.

As we turn to face the great challenges that are before us, we can lighten our load. We can start to heal...at this stage of our learning...and we can start to laugh and get over ourselves a bit...by taking down the

walls—real or imagined—that stand between us...by taking down the walls within ourselves.

Lord, dear Lord above,
God almighty, God of love,
Please look down and see my people through.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

...and we unlock them...with our willingness not to take ourselves too seriously.

This is what I learn from Whoopie Goldberg. This is what Fontaine is teaching me.

The New Interpreter's Study Bible, the Bible that many of us used in seminary at Starr King, further explains this occurrence of the word *ruakh* in this way:

Wind translates the Hebrew *ruakh*, whose basic meaning is air; depending on the context, it may also be translated either "wind" or "breath." Here both meanings may be intended.

So, it was considerably more colorful.

Ruakh is laughter and release for disengagement

A set of themes with variations. The first time I saw the show, it made me laugh and it blew my mind. It made me laugh because the characters that she had created were so colorful and hilarious...and it blew my mind because she stripped away an illusion.

Whoopie Goldberg enters the world through laughter and she did so so profoundly back in 1985...in her one-woman show on Broadway. She took the stage so powerfully. She stole the stage actually. Over the course of her performance, Goldberg played the part of five different characters. Her first character was a thief. So, Whoopie didn't take the stage, she stole it. She played the part of a man named Fontaine—a street pirate on the prowl and a man on the make—and he had integrity. He was open and honest. He didn't lie or keep any secrets. He didn't hide his objectives or anything. His thieving wasn't under the table. It was all above boards and obvious.

In fact, right off the bat, he made his treacherous intentions quite clear. He introduced himself to a beautiful woman who was seated in the front row. She was truly lovely and Fontaine noticed her obvious charms and approached her immediately. He was direct and concise as he made his play. He sought her affection and he made himself clear...even as the man that she came with was sitting right there. Fontaine didn't mind. He was undaunted. He liked the challenge. He was all in and he said,

Hey, hey, hey!!
What's happnin', cutay?

The language sounds dated now but you've got to remember, this was 1985. It was 36 years ago...and 36 years is a really long time. You can grow an American President in that amount of time. It's been a minute. So, our man on the make continued, he said,

Girl, you looking good
My name is Fontaine
And love is my game
And when I kiss the girls,
Hey, they all aflame
Come on and let me kiss your hand.

Delighted, the beautiful woman reached out with her right hand, offering, but wrongly. Fontaine corrected her, interrupting. He said, "No, not that one. Let me kiss the hand with the diamonds on it."

Charmed and swept up in the moment, the woman offered Fontaine her left hand—immediately and without thinking, with a great-big smile on her face. Wide eyes. As she realized what was unfolding, she laughed...as did the rest of the audience in that lovely theater and suddenly, Whoopie Goldberg entered the world. Prophets like Whoopie Goldberg enter the world through laughter, through our laughter. They ride upon a joyous breath.

Now, some may say—and not incorrectly or falsely—that Whoopie Goldberg is not a prophet. She's an actor. She's an author. She's a comedian. She's a television personality. And, narrowly speaking, this is true. It is absolutely right...but there's a much deeper meaning here.

The translation spirit [which occurs in the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version] rests on the later Greek division between spirit and matter...

A division that shouldn't always be assumed. It's not always useful. In fact, sometimes this division of meaning disserves us. Spirit and matter are sometimes one in the same. Just ask the artists. Ask the musicians. Those are the artists that I know best. Ask a pianist like Cecil Taylor if there's a division between spirit and matter when it comes down to the instrument that he plays. Cecil Taylor kind of eerily chanted, "Music, always larger than the instruments that spirits engulf blood to make." I'll share that again. "Music, always larger than the instruments that spirits engulf blood to make." The Greeks made divisions between spirit and matter but that doesn't mean that we have to...not all of the time.

People like Cecil Taylor enter the world through the piano. people like Whoopie Goldberg enter the world through laughter, through our laughter. We are her great instrument and as she plays us, a wind sweeps over the face of the waters is a sacred way.

We may recognize it casually but it's a truly sacred thing...to laugh...to send a joyous breath into the world. Wouldn't it be nice if this were our project—exploring the power of laughter at this stage of learning? Wouldn't it be nice if our project was to explore the power of the laughter brought forth by Whoopie Goldberg in her performance on that Broadway stage in 1985?

Before flattering the beautiful woman who was sitting in the front row of the theater, Whoopie Goldberg did a powerful thing. She decided to break the fourth wall of the theater. As we learned earlier, the fourth wall is “an imagined wall separates actors from the audience.” This wall is transparent for the audience but not for the actors. Whoopie Goldberg violates this convention. She breaks through the fourth wall, the false wall of separation and she demands we take an active part in life.

This is why Whoopie Goldberg seems like a prophet...and why you and I do, too—perhaps, in the very same way. In his book entitled The Prophethood of All Believers, a Unitarian theologian named James Luther Adams. Adams writes,

We have long held to the idea of the priesthood of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life... [We] also need a firm belief in the prophethood of all believers. [] The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share to common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequence of human behavior..., with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it.

Oliver Wendell Holmes is right. Love is the key that unlocks the gates of hatred, jealousy, and fear. James Luther Adams is right. Prophethood resides within each of us. And Whoopie Goldberg is right...to enter into life by way of laughter, by way of the opening gates that lead to love and happiness. She is right to call upon us to do the same. By breaking through the fourth walls that falsely divide our society, it becomes easier to remember that we are one and the same.

Unimagined the divisions between oneself and therest of the world connection to earth

Borken bones...we have been broken from one another...broken from the earth without our knowing

JLA, preisthood

What does this mean for Whoopie Goldberg and how she enters the world?
What odoes it mean for those of us who strive to save the world the she enters

Aaron Sorkin enters the world through writing.

Prophethood of all believers

Around the world in 80 [**!!] day

Na_doobie-doo

Na_doobie-doo

Na_doobie-doo, doobie, doobie

Thank you disillusionment

Shakespeare pushed against it by “our” stage...translting the stage direction that actors would recognized, he looked into the camera.

shared...Ellington same muse

In the bginning God

ratio

Everywhere you touch the earth she's sore

107 year old on Tulsa/100 years

cultural turning...reat turning

Miles ...if I get one note right.