

Welcome back! I hope you all had a break this summer, if only for a few days. I did not want to give this type of sermon. I wanted to celebrate everyone having had a restful summer so that we could gladly begin a new FUSW year together. This is a sweet place, we are considerate people, and I am hopeful for our future. However, you should buckle up; this sermon gets a little turbulent before the weather clears.

Sarita and I have--for thirty years--vacationed at Provincetown, on the tip of Cape Cod. Our vacation this year was good for me, even if it did not turn out as I hoped. Over the years on vacation in Provincetown, I have happily taken all the canoe trips and hikes offered by the National Seashore, a national park which covers a good part of Cape Cod. Ranger Rick knew me by name. This summer, my grief, anger, and fear went with me as I ran down Commercial Street in Provincetown, past quaint houses, some of them centuries old, hunkered down against storms that lash them with floods and winds. I run past the marshes absorbing and releasing tides daily and through the brightly reflective tan sand dunes with little grass clumps, past shrub rose bushes dotted with little orange rose hips, and under stunted, gnarled trees that have hung on for decades neither growing much nor dying. Once, a coyote trotted across the road in front of me. At Herring Cove, where the soft sand is firm close to the water stretching to an infinite horizon, I ran along the water's edge. I might meet a person or two, but otherwise I was alone with sand, wind, and waves. I was alone with my thoughts, which weren't always pretty.

I went this summer to where America's easternmost point took in refugees from political and religious intolerance. Pilgrims felt compelled to reach that same shore in order to worship in peace. I went to Provincetown, where generations of free-thinkers, literary, sexual and cultural rebels have retreated to energize their lives. I enjoy the many art galleries and theater presentations. The Universalists, our spiritual siblings, stood their ground there against American intolerance for many years--and still do—in a charming, artful sanctuary on Commercial Street. During the worst years of HIV/AIDS, the Universalist Meeting House was jammed every Sunday. I looked for healing from the grim news of book banning, voter restrictions, and demeaning rhetoric when I took my hurt to the shore, where

crisp wind and repeated waves on cool waters daily advance and then retreat upon fine sand. The tidal waters reach toward the moon, which moves on, and the tide gives up and flows inland, soothing swimmers. The waves rhythmically washing ashore with a shwoosh . . . shwoosh . . . shwoosh sound remind me of heartbeats slowly continuing life. I am usually soothed there, as if the waves resemble a slow, comforting heartbeat--inviting my heart to slow--much the way a cat or dog's presence in the arms of their owner lowers the human's heartrate. Usually that happens at the shore, and sometimes it did.

Despite a lot of pleasure and visits from friends and family, I was occasionally affected with some profound, underlying hurt, fear, and anger that broke through my fun which I couldn't easily define. I took leaden anxiety and sadness about the state of America to the farthest eastern reach of America, believing that the wind and waves would sweep me into peace, as they have before, but heaviness plagued me at times. Some of you are going to think that this is a political sermon. I want you all to listen very carefully to this. I am not going to recommend that you vote for one person over another. Instead, I am disheartened with how all of the national candidates are campaigning. I am disheartened by the way that lies about a candidate are not disowned publicly by the opposition candidate that stands to benefit from those lies being believed, just as I am sad about the lies that candidates tell that damage reasonable discussion. This is not about candidates particularly—it is about the body politic descending into dishonesty and mud-throwing. Pay close attention. I am going to name names and yet it is not about the candidates, it is about vast swatches of people who deliberately and consciously speak and write nonsense.

Donald Trump's deliberate lies feeding the poorly informed, unstable, and resentful parts of the country had shocked me. For one example (on June 27), Trump claimed about funding for Ukraine, "The European nations together have spent \$100 billion, or maybe more than that, less than us." In truth, according to the New York Times, the European nations spent \$188 billion to support Ukraine, steadily ramping the amount up over time, while Congress stalled funding bills from January to June 2024. America's contribution eventually will total \$107 billion. So, despite the European nations contributing \$188 billion and America

spending \$107 billion, Trump claims that America spent more. Ukraine suffered terrible losses due to Trump's underhanded meddling; the contributions from Americans to medical nonprofits that rehabilitate wounded Ukrainian soldiers can't compensate for Congressional representatives starving Ukraine's army for munitions. On July 18, 2024, in another disheartening example, Trump stated, "Americans are being squeezed out of the labor force and their jobs are taken . . . by illegal aliens." In truth, according to "The New York Times," America has had a shortage of two million workers since 2020, due to retirements of Baby Boomers. (The New York Times, 7-28-24, page 12) Luckily, Blanca—our young, traumatized, undocumented, homeless Guatemalan girl that Sarita and I took into our home—has her green card, a good job, and her own car.

Worse than Trump's effect on millions who can't see through his deceptions — he merely represents a wave of resentment and unthinking demands significantly dividing the body politic. Trump's lying is not terribly important because if it were not him it would be someone else demagogically claiming false facts; Tim Walz misstated his Army service to falsely imply he served in combat and the Harris campaign spread false rumors about Trump's cognition. J.D. Vance was accused of a rude and gross relationship with upholstery. The truth is also being butchered by Hamas' antisemitism and the Israeli military's disregard for Palestinian rights and lives. It was Aeschylus, the "father of Greek tragedy," who said, "In war, truth is the first casualty." Sides, for Trump or Biden or Harris, Israel or Hamas or Gaza, have become rigidly devoted to propaganda. The cohesion of our democracy is being challenged by resentful people on all sides demanding that ill-informed policies should be pursued regardless of the general health of the body politic. My ministerial colleague, pastor Kevin O'Hara at the Pleasantville Lutheran Church, recently "cautioned people about egocentric public figures who proclaim, 'that they're the solution to everything.'" (Michael Gold, "Lutheran Church in Pleasantville Offers a God-Based Home for Everybody," "The Examiner News," page 11) Was he being coy or was he simply trying to help people be realistic?

Here's this from Stuart Thompson and Tiffany Hsu:

Researchers believe the whiplash of the current campaign season helped create the ideal conditions for voters of all political persuasions to feel distrustful and bewildered. Conspiracy theories tend to take hold in moments of distress and upheaval, research has shown.

. . . Social media have become a major source of news for many Americans, allowing voters to nestle into their own ideological silos, which prize virality—and exaggeration—over nuance. (Stuart A Thompson and Tiffany Hsu, “Left Sows Misinformation of Its Own,” “The New York Times, 9-3-2024, pgs B1-B2)

A year ago, I and other UU ministers warned from this pulpit of a rising tide of fascism based on social isolation, ultranationalism, anxiety about sexual and gender variety, vilifying “other” ethnic populations, and deifying a demagogic leader. As Robert Putnam, author of Bowling Alone, was quoted on July 21:

We’ve become more socially isolated. Social isolation leads to lots of bad things. It’s bad for your health, but it’s really bad for the country, because people who are isolated, and especially young men who are isolated, are vulnerable to the appeals of some false community. It’s not an accident that the people who are attracted today to white nationalist groups are lonely young white people. (“Robert Putnam Knows Why You’re Lonely,” The New York Times, 7-21-24, pg. 12)

I tried adjusting to the tides, the waves and winds, and accepting a view that takes a broadly rhythmic perspective of back-and-forth social dynamics, a social dialectic of angry thesis, loving antithesis, and tolerant synthesis ultimately beneficial to society. Society generally oscillates back and forth between poles of frightened and frightening constriction and then loosens up into a more peaceful inclusiveness and tolerance. I usually relax into a soft peacefulness as I am warmed by the sun and the waves lap rhythmically on the shore. And, of course, if rebellious generations before me have here staked a claim to thriving despite ethnic prejudice, religious persecution, cultural discrimination, and sexual oppression, then I can likewise uphold acceptance. An acquaintance in Provincetown, who traced her lineage to fishermen who settled there from the Azores, claimed that the tolerance of heterogeneity was established by the Azoreans who prized acceptance of everyone on their little islands in the Atlantic,

and the Portugese just continued it. As a cis-gendered White, married, heterosexual male, I am unlike many who historically were driven to Cape Cod, except in my wish to thrive simply as I am meant to be and appreciate those who wish also to simply be themselves. Provincetown's famous sexual heterogeneity is but one example of its free-thinking acceptance. The Provincetown "Pop and Dutch" deli advertises three things in print: "Sandwiches. Salads. Lube." The Provincetown Universalist Meeting House provides free condoms in their bathrooms. The Provincetown Theatre men's bathroom, next to the washbasins, provides a little basket of menstrual pads and tampons because transitioning is not instantaneous. I was not a Pilgrim; I am not an artist, LGBTQ+, Communist, Portugese, Azorean, or a sailor. But I appreciate all of those who celebrate their identity with tenacity and joy. I have friends and acquaintances in Provincetown and each year I return there are exclamations of "You came back!" and "How was your year?" When I entered the harbormaster's office this year, the ancient Azorean lady I have talked with over the years was there, visiting her assistant harbormaster daughter, and we discussed the old times from ten and twenty years before.

Many of the people I talked with in Provincetown were very anxious about a rising tide of intolerance, and I felt for them. They see recent anti-LGBTQ+ and sexist anti-abortion laws in many states as threateningly intolerant. Hundreds of libraries and librarians have come under attack based on false rumors. I became angry for my friends and acquaintances—and for myself--that our final years might be spent fighting for tolerance on the most basic of issues, because the leading edge of discovery in Provincetown is also the leading edge for many Unitarian Universalists. Instead of celebrating gains made and pushing for more consideration for the food insecure poor and continued lessening of intolerance for racial, ethnic and sexual minorities, I may again spend years standing against unthinking resentments and irrational beliefs that wash too quickly and too often over this country, threatening to swamp democracy. Perhaps this grief, anger, and fear are selfish on my part, a fatigue grueling enough that I crave compensatory comfort. But we must once again decide what we want to leave as a legacy for generations to come.

I know that some of you may feel great pain for other reasons right now. You have every right to respect that pain. Some of you are deeply conflicted, traumatized, and struggle against compulsions. Some of you are deeply worried about your health and right now feel pain in your body. Of course, we need to take care of ourselves. As well, some of you feel confident and affirmed that you can move forward from an achievement into further explorations and affirmations of who you are and what you believe. I celebrate those strengths. I suspect that some of you are uneasy and wonder how I am holding up. I thought I might be overly sensitive but then I received this message from the Rev. Leslie Takahashi, minister to the UU Oakland, CA congregation and president of the UU Ministers Association:

This year we enter (once again) into a time when we are offering our leadership and our care to people facing enhanced anxiety.

The news offers regular commentary on the divided state of our nation, even sometimes noting the divisions among the progressive community. Yet too often we do not have ways to discuss the different life views and passions among us under the large tent of Unitarian Universalism. This week as many are celebrating a surge of renewed possibility, others are stunned that issues critical to them, such as the US role in Gaza, are not addressed. Some are holding both. Few of us think this particular Fall will be easy or peaceful. (Leslie Takahashi, UUMA Newsletter, August 26, 2024, page 2)

I will persevere but neither you nor I should have to face this extraordinarily conflictual era.

I am not asking you to favor one party over another or one candidate over another so much as asking you to favor one set of social attitudes over another. I recently met with the Rev. Lane Cobb, minister at our Mohegan Lake congregation, to see how ministers and congregations in Northern Westchester can collaborate for social and climate justice. We are trying to figure out ways we can do even little acts that help heal a divided, conflictual society.

Think about the kind of society you want your children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and neighbor's children to live in. Think about the kind of society

you will invest your hopes in. And while you are thinking about our legacy think about our Unitarian Universalist values of:

- The free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all

Unitarians have long worked to move society toward greater social inclusion. The Rev. Dr. Earl Morse Wilbur, a long-time professor at Harvard Divinity School, summed up Unitarian reference points as “freedom, reason, and tolerance.” Freedom, as Wilbur described it, has been freedom of individual religious belief. This freedom is both the freedom from political persecution for congregations and the freedom of individuals to pursue the search for truth and meaning. That “freedom to” has been under attack. For example, one question asked of citizenship applicants concerned religious freedom. The proper answer Homeland Security had provided those studying for the exam said that Americans have the freedom to believe in any religion they choose—or none at all. At around 2018, federal bureaucrats attempted to narrow that answer to citizens have “the right to believe in any religion.” You heard it right; the citizenship process was literally slanted toward “any religion.” Depending on your definition of God or gods, there are agnostics and atheists who rightly consider themselves to be loyal citizens.

Earl Morse Wilbur also described Unitarians as using reason in pursuing religious truth. Unitarian Universalist use of reason puts UU’s at odds with those religions who simply will not allow a humanistic view in debates about women’s rights, abortion, same-sex relationships, the worship of God, ethics, or a host of other subjects because they require adherence to particular sacred scriptures, they claim provide a divine, unquestionable answer.

When Wilbur described tolerance toward different views and practices, it was mostly about wanting Unitarian Universalists to be tolerated by others. And if we are going to ask for tolerance, then by rights we need to be tolerant of others or we are hypocrites. A lot of clergy (such as myself and the Rev. Bob Smudski)

took issue with the word “tolerance” as a pretty flabby expectation. “Acceptance” or “inclusion” of a variety of people who may hold different views and have different practices is a lot more energetically proactive. Let’s continue to celebrate an inclusive diversity whereby we can learn from those who are a little different.

“Freedom, reason and inclusion” are the behavioral guides we need to use going forward. We will be tested, and we will lose our balance occasionally, as I did. But as we persevere and continue to treat each other with the consideration that is now too often lacking, let us give thanks that we have each other, we have our community, and we have the legacy of loving consideration built into our history. Do what you can to concretely make this a kinder society, a society more connected and inclusive.