

## TBA

Anxiety has been high over the last week. We have seen how one campaign incited anxiety on the way to raising a billion dollars for its campaign fund, and the other claimed that very sneaky, illegal things were going on, so contribute! Although I am usually ignored by most UU organizations, I started getting frantic emails from the UU Minister's Association and Standing on the Side of Love with scheduled community forums to mitigate anxiety. I also received this email from the ACLU: "Election anxiety? I got you. Open this email. . . .I'm here to provide a few assurances about our free and fair elections." And there was this in the business section of last Sunday's The New York Times: "The U.S. Election is a nail-biter, and the world is anything but calm. Yet the stock market has been remarkably tranquil." Even Rick Steeves, who usually presents travel shows as sweetly exciting as vanilla pudding, last Sunday produced a TV special for an hour and a half entitled "Fascism in Europe." I noticed that people seemed unusually "on edge," as if they could not find an island of calm to offset angry talk about a comedian's "floating island of garbage."

Speaking of garbage, one presidential campaign violently demeaned and disparaged whole classes of people. And while I would wish that this was an aberration, this is something embedded in our history. I will look more closely at how our history has been shaped by demeaning rhetoric, and what are the spiritual consequences of those labels.

Hillary Clinton spoke badly some eight years ago when, in her campaign against Trump, she spoke of his supporters as "a basket of deplorables." Trump's warm-up comedian act in Manhattan spoke badly when he described Puerto Rico as "a floating island of garbage." That comedian was rude and crude but certainly in tune with the campaign. Trump himself had frequently spoken very negatively and violently about various "foreigners and despised minorities." President Biden then demeaned Trump's followers as "garbage," which enabled Trump to double-down and ostentatiously try to climb into a MAGA-labeled garbage truck. This is totally American, and not just American, as Nancy Isenberg claims in her long,

extensively foot-noted book, White Trash. She claims that, for centuries, the unemployed and unhoused were given trashy labels and consigned to territory seen as trash, such as North America, Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Ireland. Britain, among other countries, wished to get rid of unwanted “excess” people. Isenberg states that economic tumult and war have periodically created vast populations of the unemployed and rootless. These left-out, oppressed people could not find a job that provided a good living. Such populations then have become resentful of the prevailing order and push for change. Failing to elicit orderly change, they may revolt and riot. Does this sound familiar, like the Proud Boys extremist militias and January 6? The resentment of limited opportunity flows through generations of rural families. I know these oppressed people; I was raised with these folks. These people knew they were despised. Their parents and grandparents and great grandparents were desperately, hopelessly angry and usually felt defeated by circumstance. A multi-generational attitude of discontent has ironically fed both rebellion and passivity in the oppressed, who then look for soothing in impulsive eruptions of rage, booze, drugs, simplistic politics, and judgmental religions. Trump was supported strongly in rural, as opposed to urban counties, because that is where generations of “trash” have been trapped.

Trump effectively capitalized on discontent with increasing income inequality, inflation, elitism by the well-moneyed and federal bureaucrats, and the resentment of many that the deck is stacked against them if they do not have a (very expensive) college education. The historian Robert Paxton has observed that Trumpism is coming “from below as a mass phenomenon, and the leaders are running to keep ahead of it.” (Elizabeth Zerofsky, “Robert Paxton, A Leading Historian of Fascism, Long Resisted Applying the Label to Trumpism. Then He Changed His Mind. It’s the Real Thing.” Sunday New York Times Magazine, 10/27/2024, pg.47) Paxton observed that “fascism,” a label frequently leveled at Trump and his followers is:

propelled more by feelings than ideas and values action above thought, the instincts of the blood above reason, duty to the community above intellectual freedom, and national particularism above any kind of universal value. . . Fascism does not rest explicitly upon an elaborated philosophical

system, but rather upon popular feelings about master races, their unjust lot, and their rightful predominance over inferior peoples.” (Zerofsky, op. cit., pg.47-49.)

Trump effectively made use of discontent he had not created but could use as a lever for his kind of change.

I, and others, have from this pulpit described the dangers of “fascism” in past years, long before the election campaigns really began. We must pay attention to the widespread discontent as a spiritual phenomenon, not too simply and easily as a pejorative label. Fascism can be a useful diagnosis, but it is not a useful political tool. Everybody knows fascism is bad, but to call Trump a fascist merely demeans him and does not deal with popular dissatisfaction.

There is a spiritual reason we must pay attention to in this season of great discontent. Paxton explicitly spoke of how fascists are dismissive of thought, reason, intellectual freedom, and universal values. That’s threatening to us, folks, because that’s what we are all about: Freedom, Reason and Tolerance. During her campaign, Vice President Harris spoke of inclusion, forward-thinking, and hope. Nevertheless, there has been a world-wide discontent in democracies with measured, thoughtful policies. Although America rebounded from Covid better than other advanced economies, Americans with low incomes suffered. Yes, the unemployment rate was 4.1%, but if you have to work two or three jobs to get by, that is no comfort. Ms. Harris:

Embodied the multifaith and increasingly secular America she hoped to lead, with a personal faith in which Christianity and liberal feminism do not conflict. In her speech on the Elipse in Washington, Ms. Harris recalled her parents taking her to civil rights marches where “people of all races, faiths and walks of life came together to fight for the ideals of freedom and opportunity.” (pg. A21)

We need to take this social movement seriously as a religious turning point away from thoughtfulness toward emotional simplicity.

Religion, which comes from the linguistic roots for “binding together,” has been in trouble for decades. Everybody knows how Bowling Alone by Robert

Putnam describes the gradual decline of all kinds of volunteer organizations and religious congregations for the past forty years. But binding together is a human phenomenon that will not be denied. Humans are social beings. We want to be together. Covid's isolation nearly ruined a great many adults; many teenagers are still struggling to survive an interrupted socializing phase of development. Covid made the reference points of other people's opinions, identities, and responses impossible for teens to access, thus leaving an unusually large percentage with suicidal thoughts. Support for change at Trump rallies met a need for clear identity formation and togetherness for adults and teens alike.

However, religion is not just about thinking, it is mostly about feelings. Trump appealed strongly to people who wanted change, regardless of his personal misogynist, racist, and felonious actions. He promised to take choice out of our lives. He told women that he would protect them (which, considering everything he has done to individual women, would be laughable if he weren't criminal). But Trump cast himself as strong, as a protective, vigilant Daddy for many. Kamala Harris came off as a concerned older sister, which may inspire more—or less—trust given your family history. Harris appealed to a lot of educated women who were repulsed by Trump's misogynistic behavior, but Ms. Harris fell flat with women resentful that they struggle to pay the rent or cope with choices they didn't want. This underlying emotional stratum of electoral politics is both very real and ineffable.

Further, Trump adopted an evangelical cadence and references to Evangelical Christianity for his rallies, opening them with prayers by local clergy and sprinkling references to Christian symbols throughout. Imagine that you live in rural or small-town America, where Christianity and the Elks Club inform your sense of identity and you respond to those sources of information, but a former President claims they are under vicious attack. You haven't felt treasured and encouraged by the folks in Washington D.C. anyway, so how are you going to react? That highly specialized form of Christianity is a vociferous and judgmental minority from which Unitarian Universalists have always differed.

Some of you voted for Trump because you approved of some of his policies. He promised stronger support for Israel, thus simplifying an incredibly complex situation. Politically, people chose a side to ally with or vote against, as a lot of supporters of Israel—some Jews concerned about the survival of Israel and some Evangelical Christians who see Israel's existence as a harbinger of a predicted apocalypse--and some Arab-Americans resentful about Biden's waffling. Or perhaps Trump's promise of change resonated with your discontent. If the status quo seems stuck or the government seems overly concerned with climate change at the expense of living well now or with bringing down inflation while you are stuck in a place you don't like, Trump looked good. At least he promised change.

A dozen people from this congregation gathered with me on Zoom the day after the election. There was considerable anxiety expressed. Many despaired that our children and grandchildren will suffer from a degraded healthcare system, debased education, and the example of a flagrantly immoral president. There was anguish that we are not part of what this election would say is normal for America, that we are isolated, unappealing to ordinary Americans. Sarita, my wife, wanted to attend the meeting but was teaching a citizenship class to immigrants. I have two responses to our anguish: 1) Life goes on and 2) We need to take our stand with compassion.

First: As Orson Wells said, "If you want a happy ending, it depends on where you stop the story." We survived McCarthy's Red Scare, the Vietnam war's corruption, lies, and brutality, and Nixon's corruption. Yes, in those crises some people were badly hurt, Truth took a beating, and it was a terribly draining, dismaying struggle. But the forces of reason, freedom, and acceptance also made gains. Unitarian Universalism made gains as people understood our loving values. I hate the idea of four more years of desperate struggle. I mourn what could have been done for the environment, for other countries' poor people, and for our own impoverished people. I mourn for Ukraine. I have put myself on the line to protect immigrants and I fear deeply that our Blanca may be at risk. But I will not pull back from deeply held values of equality and acceptance.

Second: We are not helpless. We are not hopeless. Compassion for ourselves in this dark time, and for those who feel so very sad and hopeless, is our way forward. We are feeling anxious, perhaps angry. We are in mourning for what might have been if fascism had not prevailed, hurt and sad for ourselves and our loved ones--but we are not helpless. Compassion for ourselves in this dark time, and for those who feel so very sad and hopeless, is our way toward endurance. The letters and messages that have gone out from many organizations I belong to fall into two categories. Most simply affirm the central values that inform their mission of pursuing justice, equality and truth. Some simply suggest ways to maintain inner peace under dire circumstances: meditate, commiserate with friends, grieve, love, and don't give up. That is all good and unobjectionable, but insufficient. We have a track record of compassion which we can affirm and extend to those who feel misunderstood, disparaged, and impoverished emotionally and financially. Our compassion for ourselves means that we can dismiss our self-blame for not doing enough to help others or to support freedom and justice before the election. Our compassion for others means we can listen to those who feel so hurt, stretched, and overlooked that they voted for the only candidate that promised sweeping change. We can listen to their needs and communicate our own fears, hurts and empathy. We can empathize with their hurt and sadness and resentment without giving up our commitment to love, because we are--there and then--demonstrating an accepting love that perhaps they can only dimly feel. You may find general acceptance and tolerance for immigrants objectionable but let yourself consider other viewpoints. You may find the prospect of mass deportations of immigrants an emotional and moral travesty but listen to the feelings of hurt and fear underlying those attitudes. You may find the conservation of forest and watersheds a wasteful loss of economic resources or you may find the extraction of coal and oil to be reprehensible but listen to the yearning for a better life under both of those attitudes. You may find America's economic inequality merely the byproduct of a dynamic society or you may see gross economic inequality as an oppressive limit to women and people of color but hear the fear under both of those attitudes.

A viewpoint we find objectionable, hostile to the best interests of humanity may arise from deep feelings deserving of respect. We can gather together to encourage each other toward a compassion that is sometimes hard to feel but holds the promise of real change. By demonstrating through peaceful communication that we will not pejoratively label each other we will represent love alive in the world. Like the Quakers of old England, who would not take off their hats to the aristocracy, we can witness to equality. When we do not cruelly accuse each other of crimes against humanity we open a space for dialogue. When we do not cut off from each other due to a difference of opinion, we both demonstrate how we wish to live and invite each other to join us in pursuing equality and justice. So be it.