

A Blog on Our Souls

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

January 29, 2017

OPENING WORDS

“New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles.
From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

MEDITATION

let it go – the
smashed word broken
open vow or
the oath cracked length
wise – let it go it
was sworn to
go

let them go – the
truthful liars and
the false fair friends
and the boths and
neithers – you must let them go they

were born
to go

let all go – the
big small middling
tall bigger really
the biggest and all
things – let all go
dear

so comes love

~ e. e. cummings ~

READING

"It's difficult in times like these: ideals, dreams and cherished hopes rise within us, only to be crushed by grim reality . . . It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart."

- From the Diary of Anne Frank, 1944

SERMON

A Blog on Our Souls

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Well – I wanted to speak with you about the Fifth Estate this morning – about social media and how it is changing our world. I wanted to tell you about the other four estates: when they originated and in what forms they continue. And I kept coming back to a central refrain in my thinking . . .

SOMETHING IS EMERGING . . . something is emerging in our world, and we don't know what it is . . . yet.

And that, this morning, feels like the most important message. So I left the rest behind and started anew . . . this morning, at 7 o'clock.

SOMETHING IS EMERGING, something bigger than our politics. Something bigger than the internet. All these things are symptoms. They are symptoms of an evolution that is happening right in front of us.

The fact that we can turn on a dime because of this [iPad] or this [iPhone] – that within 24 hours of an Executive Order being signed, there are huge gatherings and plans for more in response – that statements are being made by leaders around the world, decisions about people’s lives and the perspectives of countries and how our relationships will shift – this speed is a fundamental change in human evolution.

It has been good to be here with all of you this morning and take a break, right? To sing together, to inhale and exhale together, to listen to the sounds of our sanctuary and each other; to hear our children making noises, to see the light reflected through our windows – to feel this somehow timeless peace if only for a bit; to take respite; to lay down our worries and simply be. ‘Tis a gift, as our Shaker friends remind us, as this has been.

Anil Dash is a blogger and activist for humane technology who calls this time we’re in a Genesis moment – and, by “this time” he’s not talking about politics – about last week or even the next four years. He’s talking about the need for moral imagination in the digital sphere. He’s talking about a tool that has become a part of our lives the way previously new technological tools, like fire and wheels, became part of our lives – the technology that is now so enmeshed that it is inextricable – that to think of real life and computers as separate entities is a false construct. He’s talking about the wealthiest and most powerful industry in the history of the world that is radically anti-historical and has zero ethical curriculum in its development.

Genesis – that’s the beginning, right?

Last weekend, I was with many of you at the Women’s March on the Boston Common. I never saw one printed invitation, one newspaper announcement, one poster – well, I saw a poster when I was there, but it was for the march in DC. It was all on social media.

Something is emerging out of this technology that is bigger than this moment. It always is, of course, life is always evolving and emerging, but this feels different.

One of the points I kept finding in my research was how segmented we have become, how disconnected from each other we can be as a result of social media, that we have actually – as a world culture – become more tribal than ever – that on the web we can find “our people” far beyond geography or bloodlines. And it is dividing us.

Let me ask: Do you watch MSNBC or Fox News?

Dana Boyd, blogger and founder of Data & Society, writes “Many in the tech world imagined that the Internet would connect people in unprecedented ways, allow for divisions to be bridged and wounds to heal. It was the kumbaya dream. Today, those same dreamers find it quite unsettling to watch as the tools that were designed to bring people together are used by people to magnify divisions and undermine social solidarity. These tools were built in a bubble, and that bubble has burst.”

(<http://www.zephorio.org/thoughts/archives/2017/01/10/why-america-is-self-segregating.html>)

Something is emerging, my friends.

Before Amanda and I settled on today’s story, “We Are All One,” we talked about bringing clear thread to the service, and somehow passing an invisible link around and among all of you, weaving unseen connections up and down the pews, and across the aisles. We worried that someone might get hurt so we opted not to do it, but the idea was to remind ourselves of how we are connected in unseen ways, like the unseen connections of the internet, in good ways, potentially – creating communities with people way on the other side of the church that we may never have met!

But our analogy fell short when we realized that, aside from the danger of literally tripping over each other, the connections that are made possible on the internet are not nearly so random; that, in fact, an environment that **could** function to connect us to people with different perspectives and life experiences and outlooks is actually functioning very differently. Boyd suggests, “Any company whose business model is based on advertising revenue and attention is incentivized to engage you by giving you what you want. And what you want in theory is different than what you want in practice.”

(<https://points.datasociety.net/why-america-is-self-segregating-d881a39273ab#.5attbkpgo>) Diversity is hard, she reminds us, so on the whole, we end up choosing what feels comfortable, what is like us, what shares our perspective, what agrees with our point of view.

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I want to be clear . . . these are not times when we can afford despair. These are times when we must be vigilant against our own isolation, our own segmenting by invisible threads to those we know and trust, and ignoring “them,” whoever “them” is. AND these are times that ask us, that beg us, for intellectually creative and morally grounded engagement.

Something IS emerging, and I believe it is an invitation.

The Sunday after the election I talked about the fact that right now, in this time, we are on a global journey. We ARE on a global journey, despite what our new administration seems to think, and despite the actions being taken to isolate our country. These motions are pushbacks to an emerging reality.

Ivan Sigal is executive director of Global Voices, an international community of bloggers who report on blogs and citizen media from around the world. (<http://www.takepart.com/article/2013/10/16/what-is-the-fifth-estate>) “The effects of networked society are playing out across the world. Crowds are not just threatening, amorphous mobs. They are aware, connected, self-monitoring, and constantly evolving communities seeking expression, rights, and new paths to power.” Again – consider last week’s Women’s Marches around the globe. “Their effects are complex, and can be both positive and negative. The Fifth Estate,” Sigal writes, “is not to be feared, coddled, praised, or banned. It is to be considered. Because it’s here, it’s powerful, and it’s not going away.”

The invitation that is emerging is asking us to look beyond the immediate – beyond the week we just experienced, beyond each and every order or proclamation, however much it might rankle. We are being invited to think forward with grounded values and hopefulness.

My friend Rali always talks about “God’s time” . . . I’m never sure exactly what she means. Is it fast? Is it especially slow? I suspect it has more to do with being unknown; when we can’t really be sure how long something will take, Rali says, with a smile, “God’s time.”

But if this time in our lives is truly a Genesis moment, then we are being invited to co-create. We are being invited to step INTO the emerging reality – to stop fighting with it, or against it, to stop leaving it to someone else, and start creating it.

For one thing, this time – like the sign at the march said last week – let’s stop blaming Eve!

I am not suggesting that we play God – whatever that means. But I am suggesting that we must consider the bigger picture in front of us: that we not be discouraged or defeated by the daily doses of concern, but commit ourselves to the long haul; that we answer the invitation of this EMERGING world with defiant love and steadfastness.

Robin Colgrove posted a photo on Facebook of a sign outside a Baptist church: kNOw THEM.

We have to start using this Fifth Estate in new ways – we need to be creative, intentional, forward thinking, and forward loving, so that what EMERGES will be worthy of our one world.

Anil Dash – the blogger I mentioned earlier – describes his five-year-old son’s relationship with the computer as a tool to CREATE rather than CONSUME.

AH, YES – may the children lead us.

Our closing hymn is familiar to us this morning – Comfort Me, Oh, My Soul. (#1002/teal hymnal) I encourage us to sing it with this amorphous estate, this Fifth Estate, somehow in mind – to imagine how we might find and offer comfort for all our souls during this Genesis, this emerging moment in the history of the world – to break out of our segmented arenas and offer out for others what we yearn for ourselves, to comfort, to sing, to speak, to dance, oh my soul – that every e-mail, every tweet, every message that comes from us might be assurance, and invitation to do the same. While we sing, let us accept the invitation to co-create our emerging world with all the love we can muster.