

## **Really? Really. (Part 2)**

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

November 11, 2018

The sermon “**Really? Really.**” was preached following the 2016 presidential election. This sermon was preached on the Sunday following the 2018 mid-terms.

### OPENING WORDS

#### **Here We Re-member Ourselves**

*Rev. Gretchen Haley*

Give up the fight  
for some other moment  
some other life  
than here, and now  
give up the longing  
for some other world  
the wishing  
for other choices to make  
other songs to sing  
other bodies, other ages,  
other countries, other stakes.  
Purge the past; forgive the future –  
for each come too soon.  
Surrender only to this life,  
this day, this hour,  
not because it does not constantly break your heart  
but because it also beckons with beauty  
startles with delight  
if only we keep waking up.  
This is the gift  
we have been given:  
these “body-clothes,”  
this heart-break, this pulse  
this breath,  
this light,  
these friends,  
this hope.

Here we re-member ourselves  
All a part of it all –  
giving thanks, and centering joy.  
Come, let us worship. Together.

#### STORY FOR ALL AGES

The story was about Katy Carpman’s experience in the aftermath of Storm Harvey. Katy lives in Houston. Her house was flooded by the rains and a nearby river, and had to be rebuilt after the storm ended. Her yards were mud. After fixing their home and the front yard, she was too tired and discouraged by the backyard. Weeks later, she noticed buds appearing all over the muddy property, green shoots, followed not long after with small white flowers. As it happens, they were gifts of the same flood, brought into her yard by the river that had destroyed her home – an unexpected and miraculous gift.

#### READING **Of Heirloom Apples and Veterans Day** (aka – Matt McCaffrey’s Orchard)

*The author, Toby Dills, describes finding an orchard in the midst of wilderness in Vermont on a Veterans Day hike years back. (A small warning that part of the reading is graphic and disturbing.)*

. . . As I stared into it I wondered as to who were these folks who lived and farmed here. I would soon find out. That knowledge would forge in me the now-indelible connection between heirloom apples and veteran’s affairs.

Matt McCaffrey and many other Irishmen came to Vermont from famine-wracked Ireland sometime in the 1850’s, perhaps as much as refugees as immigrants. He volunteered to serve his new country during the Civil War, and in 1864 he joined Company A of the 6th Vermont Volunteer Infantry. As a raw recruit, he with others replenished a unit that had already seen heavy losses during the fighting and would see much more violence during the final campaigns of that war in Virginia.

Afterwards he returned to Vermont, married and began a family, two boys followed by five girls, and to farm high on an eastward ridge of Bolton Mountain above Cotton Brook, where he supported his family with the orchard and his abundant timber holdings. In those days, immigrant soldiers were given an opportunity to apply for citizenship and Matt McCaffrey’s citizenship papers, dated September 2, 1870, can be found on Ancestry.

But all was not well. What we know recognize as PTSD was then called “Soldier’s Heart.” Clinicians of the time had recognized that not all injuries were visible. Many “soldier’s homes” sprang up in both north and south and were populated by soldiers who struggled to fit back into a peaceful society. Matt McCaffrey never found one of these. He did spend several months in the state hospital at Waterbury for the voices in his head but was released as “cured.” He was not, and had a relapse where he heard voices and cries of wild animals. On one awful night in March of 1882 he sent his two boys upstairs to take care of their sisters as he took an axe and murdered both his wife and his mother who had been

living with them. One or both boys, apparently witnessing the carnage, ran for help and neighbors found the two bodies, wrapped in blankets, in that self-same cellar I had stared into so peacefully a few days before. Matt McCaffrey would spend the last 29 years of his life in the state hospital.

Afterwards I found I could no longer think of our returning veterans in the same absent-minded way I did in the past. So now in this apple season I sometimes find myself saying an extra prayer for those who come home broken in body, mind or spirit, and occasionally stopping and handing a dollar to a homeless vet with a cardboard sign. I find I get upset when I hear of non-citizen veterans threatened with deportation. I get angry with politicians who never served attempt to dismantle what is left of the financial and medical safety nets for these folks. And I give thanks for those, including those in my family, who have survived and returned whole.

Before I die I hope to walk the Cotton Brook Road at least one more time in the fall, to gaze again on Matt McCaffrey's orchard. I will bite into a Vermont heirloom apple again, wonder at the expansive view the McCaffreys must have had from their doorstep, but pray and weep for those who return but will never be whole again.

I finish my reflection with the words of a Republican president, a president whose words will always be more eloquent than mine:

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Peace and Amen

SERMON

**Really? Really. (Part 2)**

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Oh, my friends . . . what a difficult week or two we have had. It seems like only yesterday we were standing out front with our friends from Temple Hillel B'nai Torah, singing over and over, Olam Chesed Yibaneh ya da dai da da dai da da dai di . . . remember? (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHp-jcPIKIY>) Right out front, holding up our signs, “No to hate,” and “Yes to Love.” We will build a world of love . . . .

That was only two weeks ago. Our hearts broke for our Jewish families and friends who suffered the hate of antisemitism yet again. We hardly had the names of those who had been killed – though by the afternoon we knew them.

And now there are even more – a younger crowd, a more random violence, but an equal loss – not least among them – and this I am asking you to consider – the loss of a human soul to the tragedy of

war. We can only imagine that the perpetrator of this horrific event was as absent his sanity as our sad Matt McCaffrey. We pray that someday sooner than later we humans might turn all our swords into ploughshares so that more lives than we can count do not continue to be lost.

I do want to acknowledge, on this Veterans Day Weekend, gratitude for all of those who have served in our armed forces, for those who have served over the many years, even as we grieve for those who did not come home, or who have not come home whole.

So . . . these past two weeks . . . we have suffered more of the ugly rhetoric that has tragically become the standard fare; we have voted our way through the mid-term elections, and watched the aftermaths – very happy with some, like the success of Yes on 3, and the number of legislators of varied color and gender who have been voted into office. We are less happy with others, no doubt. We have heard the exceptional news that our sanctuary guest has returned home – beyond wonderful, even as we will miss not just the person, but the gift of a place for many of us to put our hopes and yearnings for a better world. As mentioned, another mass shooting has ravaged a small community, and we watch helplessly as our friends in California suffer the rages of fire we can hardly imagine.

All of this, all of this . . . is exhausting, isn't it? All of this, and the rest of our lives, which for many of us is the routine challenge – and for others of us is so much more. This heightened state of restlessness and anxiety appears to be our new normal.

We ask, Really? Really.

Forget just the two weeks. It has been two years or more of this added stress. It's the sermon title I used in 2016 because I wasn't sure what the outcome of the election would be, and it seemed like an especially flexible one. At the time, I suggested that the election result that surprised many of us was likely a form of pushback in response to our changing world: a world with more people and fewer resources, a world strained by the need to take care of each other differently than we have ever had to. I spoke then about this time as our wandering, like Moses . . . do you remember? Freed from the known existence of slavery, they were not yet arrived in the promised land and wandering, complaining, and whining to the leader they counted on to get them to the new place.

Like Moses and his followers, *"We are being asked,"* I said, *"... by the circumstances of our numbers and proximity on this earth, to evolve into a new way of being. We are in that desert, that wandering land. ... The pushback is a sure sign of that. And the new reality is already requiring us to experience what all change requires: what sociologist, Marty Linsky refers to as a 'distribution of loss.' We are all having to give up something, because becoming something new and sustaining means things will not stay the same."* (<http://www.tparkerchurch.org/services/really-really/>)

We have been experiencing an **increased** pushback, if anything, these two years, led (theoretically) by someone who has no intention of sharing any of the “loss,” someone who has no capacity to help us understand the impact of our global climate challenges, who – in fact – appears to have no sense that they are real, or that we – as a country – have any responsibility to anyone other than ourselves. These last two years have felt to many of us like the flood I mentioned in the story earlier, right? The rain of hubris has been steadily pouring down, the drains are clogged with two years plus of detritus, so the waters are rising and we’re struggling to keep our chins up and our hearts open.

For many if not most of us, it is simply exhausting. Really. Those of us who find ourselves on the progressive end of the spectrum – whether politics or theology – who believe in our interdependence as a world community, who serve a vision of care and compassion – we are all made weary by our current malaise. How are we faring? Somewhat poorly on any given day. How are our hearts? If they’re anything like mine, challenged!

I saw an image of Venice the other day . . . the city always close to the edge of water, and yet now overrun by four or five feet . . . people walking around the city like salmon fishermen with waders up to their thighs. Storekeepers dumping water by the bucketful out of their shops, over the half door that has become kind of a seal (like the bathtubs with the doors that open sideways), but you know it’s just a matter of time. Their efforts looked so futile!

It reminded me of my raking yesterday in a veritable windstorm – my neighbor laughed and called me Sisyphus as more leaves swirled down around me.

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Many of you know I was away last weekend at a conference for religious professionals – actually, for religious educators and the colleagues who chose to join them. For many of my years of service to Unitarian Universalism, these were my people – educators. I believe so strongly in the learning that is implicit in our faith, the “becoming” that we sang about today. It’s why I’m here. It’s why I raised my children in this tradition. I believe in the learned and lived faith – the faith that encourages growth in each one of us, a constant and attended evolving towards spiritual maturity. I believe in the faith that requires our engagement all day, every day . . . not just when we come to church, or make time for a practice; and not just when we’re doing some particular something that expresses our values in the world like buying cans of soup for a food drive, or showing up at a rally – although any of those things certainly count – but also when we’re making our beds, or folding our clothes, tending our garden, or paying our bills. Like the simple and relentless drip of water that softens the edge of the stone, I believe everything we do and are can be an expression of our faith in this life – everything a song, a

hope, and a prayer. If it's not, sit down and think about why not, because it *could* be, without label or creed – a faith in our presence and our capacity for repair. And we need that. We all need that for ourselves . . . .

And, more.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and Unitarian minister James Luther Adams suggested, “The faith of a church . . . is an adequate faith only when it inspires and enables people to give of their time and energy to shape . . . [the] institutions . . . of the common life,” be they social, economic, or political. As much as our faith must be about our own well-being, it is inadequate when it does not extend to the care of our shared living.

Those seeds that we heard about in the story this morning, the seeds that brought something beautiful to a damaged land, are the possibility that exist all around us, on behalf of each of us and on behalf of all of us. They are the same idea as the promised land to the Israelites who first must wander. And like the wandering, we may not know when we'll see something bloom, but we can imagine that it will, the seed not separate from the flood but carried within it; a gift of what was once tragedy.

SO . . . in our shared life, are we seeing any seeds yet? I think we are. It's not fixed . . . but there are signs . . . and we can have faith in the slowly hopeful soil. Not one, but two 29-year old women have shown up as leaders and were elected to Congress. The fact that they ran is a seed of hope – the fact that they won, even more so. How great is that?! Native American and Muslim voices have been elected, as well. Massachusetts is sending its first black woman to Congress, for goodness' sake. Diversity alone – the diversity that our faith aspires to represent in its radical welcome – will change the conversation. These are seeds of hope, carried in by the flood, right?

I hope we are seeing similar seeds in our own lives . . . signs of hope, even if carried in by a flood.

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So . . . small humor break here: Why doesn't the Buddha vacuum under his bed? He doesn't have any attachments. (Described in this YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHdH40ZCc80>)

For better or worse, we have attachments, right? We are invested in outcomes. Try as we might to allow for whatever life has to offer, we find ourselves attached to the direction the arc is bending, for one thing!

This is a time out of time, friends. We haven't been here before. We are reminded occasionally that our country has experienced worse, and survived . . . yes. I think climate change alters things significantly but the truth is things have been worse, AND we still need to remember – to hold tight in our hearts and memories – the reality that a flood can also carry seeds . . . that things can improve . . . that there is the possibility of primroses to startle us awake.

This faith asks us to step up every minute, every hour, every day to whatever challenges us: to find the holy in every moment and be refreshed by it; at the very least, sustained by it, by the idea that we are endlessly “becoming,” growing into a maturity of understanding. It calls us to our own journeys, and as importantly, to those we share.

*Surrender only to this life,  
this day, this hour,  
not because it does not constantly break your heart but because it also beckons with beauty  
startles with delight  
if only we keep waking up.  
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we have been given:  
these “body-clothes,”  
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this hope.*

**Re-member** yourself in the cause to which we are committed: a free faith, and a boundless hope that we are each and ever moving forward toward a bigger love. Don't despair, friends – neither in your own life or in our collective one, as tempting as it might feel. There are seeds to be noticing – signs of hope and growth even in the depth of the flood. Let them refresh us as we trust in their very existence.

Really.

May it be so.