

Oberlin Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Sunday Service Readings and Reflection, February 9, 2009

Racial Justice Candle from Jan Willis & Amiri Baraka

Jan Willis is a professor and teacher of Tibetan Buddhism. She was also the first western woman to become a Tibetan Buddhist nun, about fifty years ago. Willis is also an African American woman and is frequently asked about race and racism in American Buddhism. She writes, “the question of what Buddhism has to offer African Americans and other people of color may not be as important as what such people have to offer Buddhism in America. For even when African Americans deny, out of shame and embarrassment, the horrors of slavery, they carry the deep knowledge of that experience in their very bones.

Amiri Baraka, in his classic text on African American blues and jazz, *Blues People*, expressed it well when he wrote: “The poor Negro always remembered himself as an ex-slave and used this as the basis of any dealings with mainstream American society. The middle-class black man bases his whole existence on the hopeless hypothesis that no one is supposed to remember that for almost three hundred years there was slavery in America, that the white man was a master, the black man a slave. This knowledge, however, is at the root of the legitimate black culture of this country. It is this knowledge, with its [self-division, self-hatred, stoicism, and finally quixotic optimism, that informs the most meaningful of Afro-American music.”

Willis continues, “This deep knowledge of trying to hold on to humanness in a world committed to destroying it adds a kind of spiritual reservoir of strength at the same time it is so burdensome. The spiritual resilience of black folk has something to offer us all.

Reading: “Radical Hope,” by Rev. Meg Riley (Senior Minister, CLF: Church of the Larger Fellowship) - written right after the Senate’s vote this past week:

Dear Friends,

I don’t know about you, but I’m angry. I’m not surprised that the US Senate has disregarded the need for a fair trial or to consider key evidence or witnesses. Their leaders were clear before the ‘trial’ began that they already knew the outcome. I’m not surprised, but I’m angry. I am guessing that many of you are angry, too.

What helps you, in such times, to come back to center?

I hope that you are doing those things that give you joy and connect you to earth and her people.

It's easy to numb out, to leave our bodies, to drink or over eat or do the other things we do to stay disconnected. It's much harder to stay with our feelings. And yet, I think that courage demands we do so. Even if we're furiously angry. Even if we are enraged. Even if the anger is tied up with profound fear or anxiety on behalf of specific people or communities we love (or ourselves), or the future of our nation and planet.

So, do what you can to call yourself home. Watch something funny. Pet a beloved animal. Engage in calming tasks—clean the house, wash the dishes, change the sheets, sort papers.

But that's all short term. Long term, how do we stay hopeful? Always, always, hope is grounded in taking action. Moving out of helplessness demands doing what we can for ourselves and for the common good.

I've been inspired by an article called *Radical Hope in Revolting Times: Proposing a Culturally Relevant Psychological Framework*. Written by a team of psychologists* who are people of color, from a variety of racial and ethnic identities. They lay out four pathways to staying hopeful. Each of the pathways is grounded in both individual and collective consciousness. Here's what they suggest (and research supports):

First, learn about the **history of resistance to oppression**. For instance, I find this helpful for perspective right now. Anyone who has studied US history knows how many “trials” related to people of color, indigenous people, and other vulnerable communities were foregone conclusions, where those in power refused to acknowledge key evidence or witnesses. They were designed only to reinforce the power of those already in power. That historical reality doesn't make what's happening easier—but it does put it into perspective.

Knowledge of historical resistance offers keys to how communities survived in the wake of such radical injustice. We have so much to learn! Learning this history builds resilience.

Second, call on the strength of the **ancestors**. For people of color this is a call to honor the resistance and survival of their ancestors. For those of us who are white, it can be a call to acknowledge both the strength and tenacity of those who lived long ago and the legacy of deplorable actions they took to protect and defend white supremacy. Getting honest about this builds resilience.

Third, identify your own meaning and **purpose** on this planet. Each of us has unique contributions for difficult times. What are the gifts you bring and how do you align those gifts with creating the kind of world we all need? Perhaps you love working with small

children, or working with numbers, or growing food, or creating visual art. All of these, and everything you might love to do, is needed for these times. What is yours to provide?

Finally, **envision positive movement forward**. It can be hard to think creatively right after being walloped, but being able to liberate our imaginations is essential.

For example, this morning I have been fantasizing that the children or grandchildren of the Senators who refused to hear key evidence look at them over dinner and confront them with the immorality of their actions. (That's a tiny example; grander ones lead to much bolder collective imagining, which in turn results in action. Right now I'm just sitting at home alone stewing, though.)

All of these pathways lead to collective action for the common good.

I hope that you are connected with others with whom to take action.

The UUA is very actively engaged; stay connected to their **Love Resists** campaign and to **#UUTheVote**.

Meanwhile, know that you're not alone, and that our faith can strengthen us in these times. Do your spiritual practice, **come to worship**, connect with others!

Reflection: Resilience in an Age of Anxiety, by Rev. Mary Grigolia

This month our worship theme is Resilience, the power to bounce back, to resist assault, to sustain integrity; resilience for us as individuals, families, congregations, cultures. And today's service explores resilience in times of anxiety.

The greatest challenge to our individual and collective resilience today is coming from our political reality, where one faction is intentionally stirring up anxiety, to gain and hold political power for personal gain, for factions who privilege immediate gain at the expense of the long-term well-being of people and planet; exacerbating a cultural crisis of warring world-views, denial of science and legal precedent, attacking the common good, and our collective need and willingness to listen to one another and to come to a collective decisions.

This political reality we face is a form of oppression.

Resilience makes resistance toward oppression possible.

The psychologists presenting Radical Hope lift up four dimensions or practices that both cultivate personal resilience and collective resistance to these attacks on democracy:

- Learn the history of resistance to oppression

- Draw on the strength of your ancestors
- Know your purpose and meaning
- Envision positive movement forward

Learning the History of Resistance to Oppression:

Amiri Baraka and Jan Willis call us to know the history of our struggle for racial justice. Amiri Baraka described the middle-class Black man who wants to deny the legacy of cruelty, hatred, dehumanization, within a culture that has not yet acknowledged, taken responsibility, or learned to release trauma and heal. That person of color carries in the body the internalized self-hatred, self-division, stoicism, which is to say denial and suppression of the body's need to validate its feelings, and finally a quixotic optimism. Baraka refers to these as his muses. I think of them as shadows that will not be quiet. Fueling the creation of soul wrenching music and literature. Trying to wake us all up.

And Willis's response to this suffering is the observation that those who have endured this trauma have developed a resilience that has much to teach us, especially now, as we face a sophisticated onslaught on a life style of rights and freedom we have taken for granted, especially those of us who are white and educated.

For all of human history people have resisted oppression and abuse of power as we do today. We need to grow beyond American Exceptionalism and learn how others cultivated resilience to stay the course. And show up in their lives, living from Love, Hope, Peace, and Joy - even in the midst of oppression.

Draw on the Strength of Your Ancestors

Next, the authors of Radical Hope ask us to draw on the strength of our ancestors who have cultivated resilience in hard times: Those who faced war. The Great Depression. Those who immigrated against terrible odds and situations. As well as to own the complicity of white ancestors in benefitting from the system of slavery. And in uprooting and slaughtering native peoples.

Having brutality behind us has been an illusion, made possible by global capitalism benefiting from the rule of law in our country. And by market forces and global political power dynamics set in motion especially after World War II.

An illusion, yet a beautiful illusion. A powerful vision. Taking root in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The rights of the planet. The rights of diverse cultures and religions. The vision of an interconnected, interdependent human family, beyond scarcity, beyond fear, with no need to fuel growth through fear, no need for warfare and slavery for profit.

Our ancestors are here in us. Fallible and flawed. Limited by the visions of their times. Showing us, by our presence, that collectively we can survive oppression. Hoping we embrace a positive vision of the future, drawing us forward.

My father, an immigrant who lost home, family and country in war, used to say, “Life is struggle.” I resisted accepting his worldview. Because I needed to learn to relax, to trust life, even in the midst of the struggle. Now, turning to my father as an ancestor who showed me survival through difficult times, I challenge myself to accept the struggle of resistance, while digging deep for that tap root of love that sings in the darkest of times.

Purpose: Their third admonition is for each of us to recognize the unique purpose that brings us to life, or that we bring to life. That which brings us joy, brings others joy when we share it, that which supports others in living from their purpose.

For me, it is writing songs and serving as a catalyst for others, for waking up to what matters. What is your purpose? What brings you joy? Your resilience flows from there.

And the last need is to envision positive movement forward.

Meg imagined the moral voices of the children and grandchildren of senators who refused to call witnesses in the Senate trial or to acknowledge the threat to our rule of law. What is your positive vision?

Musical Resilience

For me, it’s music.

Several weeks ago, speaking about Martin Luther King, Jr., I shared a question raised by Cornell West, wondering over how King resisted hatred and bitterness after his home was fire-bombed, after nonviolent marchers were attacked with water hoses and police dogs, after fatal beatings, and the deaths of those three little girls in the church bombing. West concluded that King was not primarily a political activist. He was a moral man. A spiritual activist.

I lived with his question. And those three dead little girls. And what emerged was King’s favorite song, *Precious Lord*, which we sang for our offertory.

King cultivated resilience by reaching out to something deeper than his everyday self. The song calls it Precious Lord. The Recovery movement calls it the Higher Power. I call it the deeper wiser self or the Beautiful Heart.

It doesn’t matter what we call it. Each of us needs to reach out beyond narrow self to something wiser, stronger, kinder, more resilient.

We need to open the door beyond the imperious ego, stepping into the vulnerability of interdependence, inter-being, interconnection.

Many of us have lived in the luxury of first world democracy, and may not have experienced firsthand the cruelty of oppression. Yet all of us here have turned our hearts toward injustice, growing in compassion and feeling compelled to act. And yet all of us have experienced despair and fear, anxiety and denial; all of us have experienced the need to reach out for help finding our way home to ourselves, whatever words we might use.

Our political crisis is testing the limits of our rational expression of faith, exposing and exploding illusions of privilege and protection. To move resiliently through this time, we need access to the Love we sang about in our opening song. We need to know how to reach out for the help, the support, the wisdom that is always and already there for us, within us, between us and all around us.

We Have the Love

In 1996, I went to a UU urban church conference in Chicago. Don Robinson, the keynote speaker, was so inspiring, we were all fired up. Everything he said were song lyrics: “We have the will, we have the energy to put our will to work in the world. We have the skill, we have the craft and art to put our skill to work in the world. We have a dream, we have these healing hands to put our dream to work in the world. The song came effortlessly to live. Yet I always felt there was something missing.

Sometimes conditions come together to support our will, our skills, our dreams, lifting us all, creating something new, or recreating something ready for transformation. And sometimes the conditions do not.

And especially in those times, like this time, we need resilience to resist oppression and stay true to our dreams.

We need resilience to continue to value and develop and share our skills.

We need resilience to find our will and discern how to channel it.

What was missing in the song is Precious Lord.

I invite you to join me in adding it to our closing song, “We Have the Love,” by including the chorus of Precious Lord between the first two verses, and again between the second and third verses. May it remind us to reach out for the guidance that is always within us, between us and among us, always singing us to resilience.

Singing: “We Have the Love, Precious Lord”

We have the will, we have the energy to put our will to work in the world. We have the will, we have the energy, we have the love.

Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

We have the skill, we have the craft and art to put our skill to work in the world. We have the skill, we have the craft and art, we have the love. [Precious Lord, chorus]

We have a dream, we have these healing hands to put our dream to work in the world. We have a dream, we have these healing hands, we have the love. We have the love. We have the love.

Discussion / Reflection Questions:

Meg Riley divided our response to anxious time into short term and long term considerations.

Short-term, what helps you to come back to center? To call yourself home?

What helps you stay with your feelings?

What habits of numbing out or distracting yourself are you working on?

Where are you having success with?

For the long-term, she lists four dimensions for personal resilience and collective action:

- Learn the history of resistance to oppression
- Draw on the strength of your ancestors
- Know your purpose and meaning
- Envision positive movement forward

4 Dimensions for Resilience for Resisting Oppression, from “Radical Hope,”

by psychologists, Della Mosley, Helen A. Neville, Nayela Y. Chavez-Dueñas, Hector Y. Adames, Jioni A. Lewis, Bryana, H. French

How are you learning the history of resistance to oppression?

What stands out for you as particularly important?

How does it ‘fit’ into your own life? How does it make you feel?

How are you drawing on the strength of your ancestors?

Is there a relationship or story you have to up-date, understand differently?

How are you holding the complexity of your ancestors?

What is your purpose? What meanings are emerging for you from these anxious times?

How has your purpose been changing?

How do you engage or integrate meaning in your life?

What positive movement forward are you envisioning for the common good?

What small positive shifts do you imagine - for yourself, for your family, for a friendship?

What positive movement do you envision that our congregation might do for the common good?