



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Brokenness and Self-Care”

© by the Rev. Donald A. Randall, Jr.

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at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal.—*1st Cor.13:1, NIV*

And, in a kind of paradoxical way, it is how we face all of the things that seem to be negative in our lives that determines the kind of person we become. If we regard all of this as frustrating, we’re going to come out squeezed and tight and just angry and wishing to smash everything.—*Archbishop Desmond Tutu*

All the way to the hospital, I was thinking about this man and felt his suffering, and I completely forgot about my own pain. . . . This is how compassion works even at the physical level.—*The Dalai Lama*

Reflection:

Our topic today is brokenness and self-care. Many of us feel torn apart by the chaos in our nation and by the fear of an unknown future. Many of the hard-won progressive agenda items important to so many of us are now in jeopardy. And it’s not just a game show. Lives are at stake; immigrant families face separation; millions may lose their health insurance. Even scarier is the threat to our lives and our children’s lives because of the potential rollback of environmental protections. The safe-guards in place for our planet are threatened: air quality, water purity, carbon reduction. Also at risk is US leadership in world-wide temperature control and sea-level maintenance—all may fall to those who see only short-term dollars.

It’s not an exaggeration to say we are traumatized by the chaos in Washington and the uncertainty of our future. However, it does not stop there. We know from recent studies on trauma that it is cumulative. That is, if a person has experienced a trauma, undergoing another trauma is not just another one. The second trauma reignites the feelings of the original trauma and the two together are greater than either alone, even if the traumas are of a different nature. For example, military veterans who have battle trauma can easily be re-traumatized by traffic, suspicious people or just noises. Those who respond to accidents or violence, such as police, EMTs, and emergency room personnel, over time, all lose the resiliency needed for the next episode. They may be irritable at home and short tempered in traffic and more likely to drink or use drugs.

For a little relief, let’s try an exercise. I’d like to divide the room. We have a center aisle (nice for weddings), so you folks on my left can be one group and those on my right the other. I would like to give you a little information about the group you represent. Those of you on my left have more than your share of money, go to all the best schools, and have trouble understanding why the other group complains about things. It is clear that you have worked hard for what you have (or, at least someone in your family worked hard and left you a nice inheritance). Now, you folks in the other group, over here on my right, have less money, cannot afford the best schools

and do not understand why those on my left are so selfish. You also work hard but often at lower-paying jobs and often you don't inherit much, if anything. You may have been out of work for several years and have a hard time seeing a better future for your children. Resentment often exists between both of you.

Who are these people? Well, if you said Republicans and Democrats, you would be wrong. They are Unitarians and Universalists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The Unitarians had a long European history of denying the Trinity on scriptural and intellectual grounds. The Unitarian preachers went to Harvard Divinity School and many of the laymen went to Harvard College. They were educators, doctors, and businessmen. At that particular time one of the main businesses was New England shipping, and cotton from the South needed to be shipped around the world. There was good money to be made shipping cotton, but only if the world market could afford it. The Southern cotton producers had an answer for affordability: slave labor. Because of shipping the Unitarians were far from united in condemning slavery. The Unitarians came out of Congregational churches, which came from Puritan stock; in other words, they were the establishment!

The Universalists were often common folks, laborers and farmers, who mainly came out of Baptist churches. They took their religion seriously and read their bibles with care. Jesus said love your neighbor as yourself. He did not say anything about sending anyone to hell, so they believed in universal salvation. To them religion was less intellectual and more personal. To them god was exceptional rather than they, themselves, being exceptional.

I have read that it was not uncommon for clergy of the two denominations to have churches only blocks apart and never speak to each other. The social differences were more powerful than their increasing overlap of heresies. It seems amazing that the two groups managed a consolidation in 1961. But by then each denomination had become increasingly liberal and easily adopted each other's heresy.

What seems so important is that the larger group of Unitarians became more like Universalists. Concern for minorities, the poor, and the marginalized became the hallmark of the consolidated denomination. Adoption of civil rights, LBGTQ rights, and all human rights gradually became the focus of UUism. Clean air, clean water, and a sustainable planet have leapt to the forefront of our beliefs and our activism. So, is it any wonder that our recent election and the resulting changes in these areas have caused consternation and depression among many of our members? Before anyone starts yelling about separation of church and state, let me assure you this is all issue based. I am aware that there are some of us who have clear and good reasons for voting contrary to the way many others might have wished.

I gave you the quick historical synopsis of the Unitarians and the Universalists as a lesson we should remember for our own political situation. If the Unitarians and the Universalists could overcome their differences and become one, there must be hope for our country.

My concern, and the focus of the rest of my remarks, is on our hope, our healing. I am concerned about healing the pain inside of us as I see life-long dreams shattered by an executive order; I am concerned with healing the loss of civility in our daily lives and among our neighbors; I am concerned with healing our country whose course is so uncertain that our foes and allies alike are left with mouths hanging open.

It is easy to think that my concern affects only the losing side. But I am convinced that it also impacts those who voted hoping for drastic change. We now have a wedge between us and them; between neighbors, between co-workers, between fellow church members, all who used to have an ease of communication and a sharing of ideas and feelings. We are broken internally as individuals and we are broken externally in terms of relationships. For example, we must take seriously the needs of the coal miner who worries about feeding his family today, even as we push for cleaner energy, for cleaner air. For generations we have been happy to use cheap coal to provide our electricity and warm our homes. Now we must help those with black lung disease and

those who need new job skills and new opportunity. The toxic waste that our coal use created is our responsibility as much or more than it is that of the coal industry.

So, how do we begin to mend? I believe healing comes in three phases that are actually interdependent. The first phase is going inward. I must tend to my feelings, just you must tend to yours. Second, we must reach out to each other. And third, we must reach out to those from whom we are alienated. We must recognize we have some new scabs; maybe the bleeding has not even stopped. There are likely more wounds to come. Loss must be accepted and attended to. The day after the election I was at a meeting of UU ministers; the shock, pain and fear were palpable. So initially, I felt cradled by like-minded colleagues. But soon I had to get away by myself. I had to pull myself together, like a dog licking its wounds.

Getting away has not always been easy. My clients continue to come into my office expressing their pain and fear. The evening news keeps me involved in the fear and pain of others: Immigrants, whether they have papers or not, are afraid to go out, even for needed services like tutoring to learn English or for health care. Immigrant children are being kept home from school by fearful parents.

So, I find I must withdraw into myself to find myself. I need self-reflection, meditation, and prayer. I need to follow the examples of Jesus, Muhamad, and the Buddha who each went off in an inner search for meaning when faced with the special challenges of their time. Jesus went into the wilderness for 40 days to overcome temptation; Muhamad went alone to his cave until he received the message for his people; and Buddha went alone from place to place until he finally sat down and waited for enlightenment. I, too, need to dig deep into myself and rediscover core values like the worth and dignity of every person. Only then do I really have something to offer to others beyond complaining. So, I offer to you today this hope of healing. Just as that early opportunity I had with the UU ministers was supportive and healing, people who think and feel alike need to gather to support one another. Like-minded people need to develop strategies for effecting change and for taking care of one another.

However, it is hard to honor the worth and dignity of every person if we don't try to understand them. And this final step is harder. To take it we must make ourselves vulnerable. It is the step of actualizing my respect for the worth and dignity of all. Buddhists call it compassion for all sentient beings; Christians call it loving those who are hardest to love. But it is clear that the hallmark of all three of the great spiritual leaders is that they went back out into the world. They took what they had learned from their personal struggles and led others to healing. If they had not gone back into the world to heal others, they would not have completed their own healing. The same is true for us. If I remain stuck with licking my own wounds, or if each side remains self-congratulatory or indignant, we are nothing but the tinkling brass and clanging cymbals.

When we come to our time of meditation, I will suggest a way to formally open our hearts to those with whom we disagree. But right now I ask that you simply take a moment to identify someone you know that you feel separated from by their politics, actions or beliefs. Do that now, and keep him or her, or them in mind; and, in a moment I will ring the chime to close this part of our worship and move into more purposeful meditation. So picture the other.

Pause.....Ring chime

Meditation Instructions:

Tonglin: Buddhist Meditation of Compassion

Breathe in the feelings, the fears and the needs of the other (pictured a moment ago).
Breathe out to them your love, compassion and understanding.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. How do I best heal myself?
2. Am I open to others helping me?
3. Can I reach out with love to others with whom I disagree?