“What Next? Living in Interesting Times”

Sunday, November 13, 2016
Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

Reading

Among the lines from Langston Hughes’ poems that came to mind this week were these:

America is a dream.
The poet says it was promises.
The people say it is promises – that will come true…

A long time ago,
An enslaved people heading toward freedom
Made up a song:

*Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!*  
The plow plowed a new furrow
Across the field of history.
Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped.
From that seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.
That tree is for everybody,
For all America, for all the world.
May its branches spread and it shelter grow
Until all races and all people know its shade.

*Keep Your Hand On The Plow! Hold On!*

“What Next? Living in Interesting Times”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

For many of us, perhaps most, it has been a week from Hell. (For those, who wish, let’s meet in the Chapel after Fellowship Hour at 12:45 p.m.)

Hillary Rodham Clinton won the Presidential election in terms of popular vote. But not in the archaic Electoral College.

Donald Trump is our President-Elect. His campaign statements and proposed policies for many of us were/are incredible and offensive:
o disgusting as pervasively misogynist, racist, fascist, xenophobic and anti-
democratic, as well as
o filled with hate-speech, lies, and narcissism,
o favoring economic elites, and
o ignorant about government’s process and procedures.

Why do those upset feel so upset? Core values are violated:
o respect for each person, and for democracy itself,
o truthfulness,
o equal opportunity and equitable treatment for everyone, and
o the vision to help build the Beloved Community….

Throughout the week, I kept thinking about a somewhat annoying, yet
illuminating story, an old story of challenge, expectations, hopes, and uncertainties.

You may recall it: A farmer awoke one morning to find a wild horse had
wandered onto his farm looking for food. He put the horse in with his own horses, and
his neighbors exclaimed how lucky it was that such a fine specimen had come to him.
The farmer replied, “Maybe it is; maybe it isn’t.”

The next evening the new horse broke the fence, and all his horses ran away.
“What an awful thing,” his neighbors sympathized.

“Maybe it is; maybe it isn’t,” the farmer replied.

Then the government came through to tax all the property and the domestic
animals, but his tax was low because of the lack of horses. Later his horses returned,
including the wild one! “Wasn’t this a good thing?”

“Maybe it is; maybe it isn’t.”

The farmer’s son then decided that he should tame this wild horse, so it wouldn’t
run away again – and in the process, he was thrown and broke his arm and was laid up
in bed and couldn’t farm.

“Was this bad?” “Maybe….”

But then the army came through the village and conscripted all able young men
in the village, but left the farmer’s son laid up in bed.

Was this good or bad?

“Maybe it is, and maybe it isn’t.” And so the story continues.
This election result… so clearly a bad thing in my mind….

And one of the deep spiritual lessons, from Howard Thurman, and others, that challenges and invites, is that “Everything is sustenance.” Everything….

Life is tricky in its blessings and challenges…. Bad things….

The KKK is marching again in North Carolina.

Wall Street workers on Wednesday, the day after the election, on the trading floor shouted out, “Lock her up” referring to Hillary Clinton and to Trump’s embrace of such chants.

There are reports that some white high school as well as college students are insulting fellow non-white students… ugly graffiti, signs, and more than 200 incidents of hateful harassment or intimidation over the past few days.

Immigrants fear for their families and themselves. The threats are real personally, and also universally if Climate Change policies are repudiated. Extreme conservatives, if they gain control on the Supreme Court, will likely restrict civil liberties, women’s freedom, and voting rights, to name just a few areas of contention.

Among those upset is Jenan A. Matari, who wrote this letter to the NY Times (11-11-16):


As an American Muslim woman who has so much hope for progress and true equality in her country, I’ve been experiencing these feelings for the last 48 hours since Donald Trump became our president-elect.

Betrayal by my fellow citizens for electing the candidate who made a conscious effort to divide us. Sadness because hatred and fear won. Heartbreak when I think of the possible future state of my beloved America – my birthplace and my home.

Numbness while remembering how the country lit up … [with] red [states] while counting votes. Disbelief that our country is still plagued by the dangers of racism and fear of “the other.” I refuse to believe it.
The America I was raised to know and love builds bridges – not walls. It welcomes the tired, poor, and huddled masses with open arms of hope and the promise of a better tomorrow; it doesn't shut them out and deny them a fair chance at life. The America I love is so much better than what we showed the world in this election. It is better to minorities. It is better to children. It is better to women. It is just better.

Then she speaks like a patriot, and a person of faith.

Despite these feelings of pain, my spirits have not been crushed. My passion for equality is still strong. My fight for my America – my peaceful, accepting, prosperous America – will never end.

We will overcome the hate, the fear, the racism, the sexism, the bigotry. One day my children will be living in an Islamophobia-free America – all of ours will.

Distress about the election results has led to shared grief and to witnessing for fairness and dignity for all … in the streets and in cities across the country.

Hillary Clinton has responded magnanimously,

... Last night, I congratulated Donald Trump and offered to work with him on behalf of our country. I hope that he will be a successful president for all Americans.

We have seen that our nation is more deeply divided than we thought. But I still believe in America – and I always will. And if you do, too, then we must accept this result – and then look to the future.

Donald Trump is going to be our president. We owe him an open mind and the chance to lead....

This loss hurts. But please, please never stop believing that fighting for what’s right is worth it. It’s always worth it.

And we need you to keep up these fights now and for the rest of your lives.

My friends, let us have faith in each other. Let us not grow weary. Let us not lose heart. For there are more seasons to come and there is more work to do.
Mr. Trump was equally gracious about her in his response and again toward President Obama on Thursday when they met for the first time, at the White House.

However, who is he really? He began to tweet in familiar fashion on Thursday night, in response to citizens taking to the streets. He called them “professional protesters, incited by the media.” I imagine that is what he truly believes.

Then, perhaps with advice of those near him, the next morning at 6:14 a.m., he announced:

“Love the fact that the small groups of protestors last night have passion for our great country. We will all come together and be proud!”

Who is he really?

Like Hillary Clinton, in principle and in my heart, I believe, “We owe him an open mind and the chance to lead. …”

To be sure, past behavior on his part counsels extreme caution, vigilance, and reasonable skepticism. In this election season, perhaps you too have read about similarities between Mr. Trump and the main character of Sinclair Lewis’ 1935 novel It Can’t Happen Here.

Published during the rise of fascism in Europe, the novel describes the rise of Berzelius “Buzz” Windrip, a populist United States Senator who is elected to the presidency after fomenting fear and promising drastic economic and social reforms... while promoting a return to patriotism...

...In 1936... Windrip, a charismatic and power-hungry politician, wins the election as President of the United States on a populist platform, promising to restore the country to prosperity and greatness.... Portraying himself as a champion of traditional American values... (Wikipedia plot summary)

Sinclair Lewis’ story does not end well: Dissent is outlawed, political enemies are incarcerated, the power of Congress is curtailed, and corporations effectively rule the nation. Fascism ultimately leads to armed resistance, and civil war.

Lewis apparently was writing about the rise of Louisiana’s Senator Huey Long, who was assassinated in 1935 as he prepared to run for the Presidency. The novelist provocatively raises the question if fascism can arise here.
Like so many of you and millions across the nation, the questions remain: How did this happen? Answers abound:

- The pollsters were wrong in undercounting rural America and the desire for change.
- It’s the economy, and too many are barely getting by, or are not getting by… and it does not matter that a Republican Congress stymied job growth initiatives, such as those that accompany rebuilding our infrastructure.
- Racism and xenophobia run more deeply than we might have thought, and Trump’s rhetoric has normalized bigotry with white backlash.
- And/or/plus, old-fashioned patriarchy and sexism triumphs again to denigrate and exclude competent, accomplished women, who would dare to break the glass ceiling.
- Or is it his bombastic, iconoclastic personality that seduced some? As one commentator observed, Many Democrats took Trump literally, but not seriously, while many Republicans took him seriously – the message for change, but not literally in statements that were at odds with core American values…. All this energized the Republican base and brought newcomers to it.

What else? Perhaps, FBI Director Comey’s actions made a difference, though pollsters debate that.

Or, for many years, at least since 2004, our nation has been split 50/50 with various trends showing increasing disaffection among some of the traditional Democratic constituencies, which Obama overcame, but Clinton did not.

Some blame Bernie Sanders for weakening her while others see her own personality, or campaign strategy, as not engaging voters on the margins and part of the base.

And, notwithstanding all these, she won the popular vote. She won! The people elected her. But the electoral votes do not.

There is also a traditional answer; a systemic perspective. A month ago, I had occasion to hear a professional pollster of highest caliber. For him, and his colleagues, two years ago, perhaps four years ago, this election cycle was foreordained. After eight years with one Party in the Presidency, the Democrats with President Obama, the people would then want a change; most likely someone like Jeb Bush beating the establishment Democrat Hillary Clinton. It’s a long-standing pattern.
A couple of years ago, President Obama realistically, if a bit light-heartedly described this cyclical change as the love of the “new car smell” – with a different party every eight years.

All this is likely to be debated for a long time to come, and we are left, not only in curiosity, if not also fear about our President-elect, but also with choices.

There is an old Unitarian hymn that goes,

Since what we choose is what we are and what we love we yet shall be,
The goal may ever shine afar – The will to win it makes us free.
(William De Witt Hyde)

“What we choose is what we are and what we love we yet shall be…”

In a different moment of history, 25 years ago, cultural critic bell hooks in her volume Yearning wrote, “I choose familiar... language, old codes, words like ‘struggle, marginality, resistance.’ I choose these words knowing that they are no longer popular or ‘cool’ – [I] hold onto them and the political legacies they evoke and affirm, even as I work to change what they say, to give them renewed and different meaning.” (pp. 152-3)

In these past few days, many religious, social justice, and human rights groups, journals, and coalitions are expressing their fears about potential abdication of our country’s cherished values. Different messages, but in essence the same:

**Mourn. Resist. Organize.... Mourn. Resist. Organize.**

Stay true to your mission, your values, and keep your faith in the work of those you embrace. I also think of Obama’s battle cry: “Fired up? Ready to go! Let’s go change the world.”

“Let’s go change the world!” How audacious, bold…

Among the lines from Langston Hughes’ poems that leap to mind were these:

America is a dream.
The poet says it was promises.
The people say it is promises – that will come true…

All week I have been up and down … anger, grief, curiosity and regrouping for struggles ahead… thinking about our Vision here to help build the Beloved Community… always awaiting the work of our hands and hearts.
If you are the losing side, we know that, across our lives, loss accompanies the beauty and heartbreak of our days, not only more often than we would like, but also seldom more often than we can bear.

On those occasions and those situations of defeat or loss, we have much experience to draw upon:

- Faith in our ability to band together and work together in community to make a difference;
- Courage that arises deep in our souls that unites those of common spirit;
- Powerful, empowering moral values to energize and sustain us;
- Even an openness of heart to honor those with whom we disagree and whom we can touch and bless by the power of our own prophetic, loving spirits, and
- Conviction that there is salvation in the struggle for a better world, even when immediate outcomes would seduce us into despair.

Everything is sustenance….

With faith in ourselves and in each other, with courageous and bold hearts, and with wisdom that sustains, we can not only be patriots honoring our nation’s ideals and their promise, but also remain “prisoners of hope”.

I close this morning with a poem by Abiodun Oyewole titled "Another Mountain."

Sometimes there's a mountain that I must climb even after I've climbed one already But my legs are tired now and my arms need a rest my mind is too weary right now But I must climb before the storm comes before the earth rocks and the avalanche of clouds buries me and smothers my soul And so I prepare myself for another climb

Another Mountain and I tell myself it is nothing it is just some more dirt and stone and every now and then I should reach another plateau and enjoy the view of the trees and the flowers below And I am young enough to climb

© 2016 Rev. Bruce Southworth
and strong enough to make it to any top
You see the wind has warned me
about settling too long
about peace without struggle
The wind has warned me
and taught me how to fly
But my wings only work
After I’ve climbed a mountain.