“The Spiritual State of the Union”

Sunday, January 22, 2017
Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

Last Thursday evening, I met up with some of my family for the “100 Days of Resistance” rally spearheaded by filmmaker and activist Michael Moore with Mayor De Blasio, Alec Baldwin, Rosie Perez, Cher, and others.

It was at Columbus Circle in front of the Trump International Hotel. Maybe some of you were there?

We were among thousands, and thus, with such a crowd, we ended up five blocks north of the speakers’ platform, with a large video screen enabling us to see if not hear clearly. Some I heard were as far back as W. 69th Street.

A hint: despite all the challenges, the Spiritual State of the Union is showing strength.

There was a warm energy in the crowd, common purpose to witness for human and civil rights, civil society, environmental protection, democratic values, and for basic spiritual values affirming the worth dignity for all persons, integrity, honesty, justice for all, and public policies in their service.

Among the chants: “We are the majority.” And “No Walls.”

Among the signs were those expressing fear that fascism was at hand. And one that said, “Putin’s Puppet is not my President.”

Several had variations of Trump acronyms.

TRUMP… T for Tyrant; R for Racist; U for Unfit; M for Misogynist; and P for Puppet (with others, e.g. … different conclusions, P for Pathetic; or Pig-headed).

Regarding the curious choices for Cabinet positions, many of them with little experience in government management, or with personal or policy views antithetical to the core mission of the Department they are to lead… in response to these Cabinet choices was a sign that announced: “The circus is closing because Trump has hired all the scary clowns.”

Similarly, on Saturday in Washington, DC, there was a record-breaking number at the Women’s March affirming women’s rights, and progressive values and expressing opposition to Trump’s misogyny and xenophobia, with more than half a
million attending, more than doubling estimates…. And we can add millions more at rallies in every state across the country, with at least 616 sister marches in 57 countries.

Here in New York, 400,000 marched to Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue (five times the number expected) with a goodly number of Unitarian Universalists, including fellow church members.

This new season, which I hope lasts four/for years, is one of witness to our common humanity, to solidarity, and to resistance to so many of the espoused values, bigotry, hate-speech, and policies of our new President.

Can we make a difference? Yes, we can!

One other image of protest came to mind last week, even as I reduce my consumption of TV cable news, which covers the Presidential twitter statements as if they are more than emotional outbursts. I am trying to tune out… and in doing that I thought of a possible protest/challenge:

Do you remember the display of life-size, nude Donald Trump statues in five cities last August? One was placed here in Manhattan at Union Square and was on view for a few hours before being removed. A month later, a new one was placed alongside the entrance to the Holland Tunnel to stay there through the election.

I had not thought much about Trump’s obesity well depicted in these statues (and technically, apparently by claiming to be an inch taller than he used to describe himself, he is not obese, just a borderline BMI – body mass index).

Back to the statue: What if one of these were clothed in a toga? Rather than suggesting an emperor with no clothes, Trump might like that although there would be no collar for his droopy, extra-long, dress ties, made in China, hanging well below his belt, increasingly mocked by those like Stephen Colbert.

So, let’s imagine a Trump statue, now modestly adorned with a toga…. A toga, let’s imagine, with a hammer-and-sickle, a symbol of communism, the Soviet Union, and still prevalent in Russia.

… so what to do with a Trump statue in a white toga, with bright red hammer-and-sickle, to symbolize his bromance with Russia’s President Putin, which is both sad and scary?

Is there a Fifth Avenue shop across from or next to the Trump Tower? A shop with a merchandise window, where such a fine statue could welcome and greet Mr. Trump and fellow Americans every day: a 24-hour reminder of their chummy relationship? Is such a street level window available for rent for a toga-covered, Putin-loving Trump?
His affection for Vladimir Putin seems inexplicable, and only gives credence to theories that he is in some way beholden to Putin, or blackmailed by him.

John Lewis, Congressman from Georgia, who last week reported he was not going to attend the Inauguration, gave Russian meddling in our elections as his reason. He described Trump as delegitimizing himself – his Presidency – by his inability to acknowledge Russia was involved in hacking the US.

That reason has gotten lost in the cavalcade of legislators who joined the boycott... no doubt pleasing the President. To go or not to go? And who will and who won't? And add Trump’s outrageous, lie-based personal attack on Lewis, all of which effectively deflected attention from the President’s “Russian problem.”

This is an excellent example of the tactical tweets: change the subject.

This morning, as I note in the newsletter,

The signs of the times are chaotic... surreal... and challenging. Contradictions and illusion blend with grandiosity and ignorance in our new President’s tweets, announcements, attacks, appointments, and behavior.

Yet, resistance and renewed vision are emerging, as with the Women’s March on Washington (and so many other cities). In such times, our prophetic voices and faithful deeds are part of the spiritual armor and weapons that shall make a difference. How goes it for you?

The State of the Union? It is unsettled, divided... With a record-breaking low 37% approval rating, (and extraordinary 54% unfavorable rating), President Trump, who thrives on being liked seems not to care; (well, but, he does care, predictably declaring the surveys of unlikabiity are rigged).

On a couple of occasions in the last year, I have made observations on the spiritual model that Trump embodies, which is fundamentally at odds with the values of people of faith around the world and of those values we hold dear in our democracy.

Briefly, once again, who is this guy? A lamentation....

He likes fake props, like the table full of manila folders that were on display during his news conference a week before this past one. Reporters were not allowed to see what was in them when they asked to do so in order to verify that they had to do with transferring management of his companies to his two sons.

He is also delusional, claiming 1.5 million people attended the inaugural....
He also promotes inexperienced and/or compromised leadership. Most of the cabinet figures he has selected have a troubled history in their chosen realms: Senator Sessions (Attorney General nominee) and civil rights; (for Education) DeVos' commitment to privatized education over public schools; Mnuchin (for Treasury) with his failure to report $100 million of his assets.

Despite recent efforts not to follow too much of the shenanigans reported on TV, I saw a bit of the inaugural concert in front of the Lincoln Memorial on Thursday. I did see the President’s bizarre entrance with music so weird: the Rolling Stones' song “Heart of Stone.” Some will recall that the lyrics describe a womanizer:

There’ve been so many girls that I’ve known
I’ve made so many cry and still I wonder why
Here comes the little girl
I see her walking down the street
She’s all by herself
I try and knock her off her feet

What’s different about her? I don’t really know
No matter how I try I just can’t make her cry

For me, Trump delights in his misogyny, and of course, empathy, and respect for others seem truly alien emotions.

Who is he? I haven’t changed my mind since I spoke about him before:

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

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

Upon additional reflection, I am concerned about his limited attention span and cognitive simplicity and confusion; his forgetfulness about his own statements at times; his emotional outbursts and lack of empathy and regard for truth-telling – an inability to do so: these seem pathological in a clinical sense. And he remains seriously uninformed about most policy issues, and ethically without moral compass.
For some of us, he seems vicious, mean, immature, and damaged goods.

Michael Moore in layman’s terms a week ago encouraged acts of resistance, rallies, and the like and observed, “It’s important that everybody go there. This will have an effect. We have to throw everything at this. This man is slightly unhinged, if I can say that, and he’s a malignant narcissist. He’s going to be very upset if there’s a lot of people there.” (Salon 1-9-17)

Paul Krugman in the NY Times writes that Trump is an “insecure-short-attention span egomaniac”, as well as “incompetent”, and refers to “the Putin-Trump administration.” (1-20-17)

Returning to my primary theme, the Spiritual State of the Union: There are many ways to look at spiritual health and integrity.

One of my guiding aspirations comes from the prophet Micah. “O Mortal, o human, what is required of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly…”

From one of the Christian epistles, Galatians: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

… the “fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Buddhism affirms Mindfulness and Compassion…

Islam, like other traditions, invokes the Golden Rule, “to do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

Little, perhaps none of these appear in Mr. Trump.

Yet, blessings of spirit appear again, and again, and again:

A couple of weeks ago, as some Republicans sought to eliminate the Office of Congressional Ethics, an enormous public outcry caused the House to reverse itself.


The book concludes with a vignette. In 2007, an autistic teenager on a bus in New Jersey began to be harassed by two men. “What’s your
problem, man?” one asked, referring to the teenager’s repetitive movements.

Just as the atmosphere was growing more tense, a passenger confronted the bullies. “What’s his problem?” he said to them. “He’s got autism. So what’s your problem? How about you shut up?”

Understanding … [autism in this case] Understanding moves us to silence cruelty. “It happened on a bus in New Jersey,” the authors write. “It can be that way anywhere.”

Anywhere,… when we step up!

Yes, we can!

Not surprisingly, President Obama in his farewell speech last week to the White House press corps concluded with grace and wisdom:

"At my core, I think we’re going to be OK. We just have to fight for it, we have to work for it and not take it for granted," he told reporters who gathered in the White House briefing room for his final press conference on Wednesday, adding, "This is not just a matter of 'no-drama Obama,' this is what I believe."

And, in his letter to the American people on Thursday:

I’ve seen you, the American people, in all your decency, determination, good humor, and kindness. And in your daily acts of citizenship, I’ve seen our future unfolding.

All of us, regardless of party, should throw ourselves into that work – the joyous work of citizenship. Not just when there’s an election, not just when our own narrow interest is at stake, but over the full span of a lifetime.

I’ll be right there with you every step of the way.

And when the arc of progress seems slow, remember: America is not the project of any one person. The single most powerful word in our democracy is the word ‘We.’ ‘We the People.’ ‘We shall overcome.’

Yes, we can.

I see spirit, and vision, and health in the continuing witness of John Lewis.

I recall Helen Keller, a woman of great vision, who reminds us:

“Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature,… Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run…. Life is either a daring
adventure, or nothing…. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits… is strength undefeatable…. The fearful are caught as often as the bold.”

We have such extraordinary power in the ordinary…. Things like kindness, caring, beauty, and justice, and in companions of the spirit… in a community such as this…. in rallies, marches, pushing ahead… mobilizing the democratic process…

The best within us… the true spirit of America is now surging, glowing….

I also return to Jenan A. Matari, who wrote a post-election letter to the NY Times (11-11-16) about:


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….

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….

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.

So, think of the State of our Union with the hope these voices offer. And while it is not unimportant who President Trump is and how he behaves, (and he is a role model of how not to behave), you and I know the more important matter: Who are we and how shall we behave?

… to make “America, America again.” (L. Hughes)

For everyone… And Yes, we can.

Out of our spiritual health, in addition to
there are four disciplines of co-creativity that help create a Life Abundant.

As Taquiena Boston offered attendees at a UU conference last spring, these wellsprings of Spirit and Life are Generosity, Hospitality, Gratitude, and Solidarity.

Surrounded by the seductions of consumerism, materialism, tribalism, and now the blood sport of political insults, with heightened misogyny, xenophobia, racism, and narcissism, I am strengthened by her and by Howard Thurman, the preacher, mystic, teacher, and mentor to Dr. King, and friend of our church, who would affirm, “Everything is sustenance.”

How so? His grounding was powerful: “Life is alive.” New Life always awaits us.

These days have been hard and will likely remain challenging. I do believe that as we embrace disciplines of Generosity, Hospitality, Gratitude, and Solidarity, we remain “prisoners of hope.”

Yes, we can….

Reading – From an open letter to Unitarian Universalists from

The Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and Hon. Thomas Andrews, president and CEO of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee


Dear Friends of Faith and Conscience,

We have undertaken an unprecedented degree of coordination between the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. There is a sense of urgency, and a need for vigilance. And there is clarity that we must act, not alone, but together. We need everyone—including you, your congregation, your friends, and your colleagues….

We will be vigilant of administration actions, policies, and verbal assaults that undermine the principles of our declaration or disparage, threaten or attack innocent people. We will respond by speaking truth to power and mobilizing support for those who are under siege. To be successful, your support and that of your congregants will
be critical.

This is not about partisan politics. It is a principled response to the potential targeting of people not for what they have done, but for who they are. It is a commitment to speak out and to act in support of basic human rights. We will keep you informed of the progress of this effort and of further opportunities to advance our cause together in the coming weeks and months…

Join us in transforming faith into action, sign the Declaration of Conscience today, share it with your own networks, and please encourage others to sign as well.

Thank you for your concern, vigilance, and willingness to act.

In Faith and Solidarity,

The Rev. Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and Hon. Thomas Andrews, president and CEO of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee invite you to affirm

DECLARATION OF CONSCIENCE

At this extraordinary time in our nation’s history, we are called to affirm our profound commitment to the fundamental principles of justice, equity, and compassion, to truth and core values of American society.

In the face of looming threats to immigrants, Muslims, people of color, and the LGBTQ community and the rise of hate speech, harassment and hate crimes, we affirm our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

In opposition to any steps to undermine the right of every citizen to vote or to turn back advances in access to health care and reproductive rights, we affirm our commitment to justice and compassion in human relations.

And against actions to weaken or eliminate initiatives to address the threat of climate change – actions that would threaten not only our country but the entire planet – we affirm our unyielding commitment to protect the interdependent web of all existence.

We will oppose any and all unjust government actions to deport, register, discriminate, or despoil.

As people of conscience, we declare our commitment to translate our values into action as we stand on the side of love with the most vulnerable among us.

We welcome and invite all to join in this commitment for justice.

The time is now.

(Sign your name to the Declaration of Conscience to commit to putting Unitarian Universalist values into action to resist hate, fear, and bigotry. Get regular email updates, opportunities, and stories from this joint initiative of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. On-line at uua.org & uusc.org)