

Up from the Ashes
Kitsap Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Chalice Lighting

Charles A. Howe

As we light this chalice, may the light of its flame remind us that new truth and understanding are always available to minds that are open to them; and may the warmth of its flame remind us that new friendship and love are always available to hearts that are open to them.

May we be open to its light and to its warmth.

Reading:

from an essay by Rebecca Parker called "After the Apocalypse."

According to popular religion, we are living on the eve of the Apocalypse. A catastrophic cosmic struggle is coming, when God's forces will battle the forces of evil. Evil empires will be destroyed, and from their collapse will rise a new heaven and a new earth.

Religious liberalism has its own variations on the apocalyptic dream. Our version doesn't imagine that old worlds are destroyed and new ones created simply by the act of a transcendent god. We put ourselves in the drama. We assign ourselves the task of dismantling evil empires, and we go to work hammering together the New Jerusalem. Think of the evil empires whose ruin we have tried to orchestrate: patriarchy, racism, homophobia, militarism, economic injustice, environmental abuse....

I am grateful for the energy, commitment, and service liberal faith inspires, but I have begun to believe that this theological worldview may no longer be adequate for our times. If we can imagine that the Apocalypse is not ahead of us but already behind us, consider how we might regard our religious task differently....

We are living in a post-slavery, post-Holocaust, post-Vietnam, post-Hiroshima world. We are living in the aftermath of collective violence that has been severe, massive, and traumatic. The scars from slavery, genocide, and meaningless war mark our bodies. We are living in the midst of rain forest burning, the rapid death of species, the growing pollution of the air and water, and new mutations of racism and violence.

...We need to face more honestly the conditions of devastation that we are in the midst of, here and now. As we enter the new millennium, we need to see ourselves as people living in the aftermath of cataclysmic violence rather than as people awaiting the overthrow of the present world order and the birth of the new....We must notice the breakdown, sorrow, and legacies of injustice that characterize our current world order. From this place of honesty, we must discover how we can live among the ruins. (Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now, pp. 18-20)

2nd reading: Hope

It hovers in dark corners
before the lights are turned on,
it shakes sleep from its eyes
and drops from mushroom gills,
it explodes in the starry heads
of dandelions turned sages,
it sticks to the wings of green angels
that sail from the tops of maples.

It sprouts in each occluded eye
of the many-eyed potato,
it lives in each earthworm segment
surviving cruelty,
it is the motion that runs the tail of a dog,
it is the mouth that inflates the lungs
of the child that has just been born.

It is the singular gift
we cannot destroy in ourselves,
the argument that refutes death,
the genius that invents the future,
all we know of God.

~ Lisel Mueller ~

Sermon

Yom Ha'Shoah. Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Shoah, the Hebrew word for the holocaust, literally means "whirlwind."

In a whirlwind of senseless and incomprehensible violence,
six million Jews were killed in the years between 1938 and 1945.

How to face the truth of what happened
without flinching?

As a child, I read the diary of Anne Frank and became fascinated
with the holocaust.

I read book after book.

I had good relationships with the librarians at both the school
and the public library,
and they would set aside for me books about the holocaust.

My two favorites were
 Mischling, Second Degree by Ilse Koehn, and
 When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit by Judith Kerr.

The affinity I felt for the young heroines
 in these two stories
made the books compelling.

But I don't think it really hit me...the magnitude of what happened...
 until I was a freshman in high school
and watched the Frontline episode
 with footage from the liberation of the death camps.

The grainy, black-and-white images of skeletal corpses
 piled into pits like garbage
gave me nightmares for weeks.

How to watch without flinching?
 How to let the reality of what happened into our hearts and minds?
How to bear witness to the holocaust
 without scorching our souls to lifeless, gray landscapes
of despair and confusion?
 How to face death of this magnitude
and still believe in life?

I found one possible answer last summer
 in Rebecca Parker's book of essays, Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now.

She proposes in her essay "After the Apocalypse"
 that we adopt a post-apocalyptic world view.
That is, she believes that the worst has come and gone,
 (or actually, the worst has come and then stuck around--
 we continue to live in the midst of violence and destruction)
and we must turn our attention to rebuilding.

I'm not sure I agree with her,
 but luckily, agreement isn't a pre-requisite for Unitarian Universalists.
I do find much about her proposal appealing,
 and wonder if it holds some answers to the questions
that haunt me when I turn my mind to remembering the Holocaust.

There is no shortage of post-apocalyptic literature.
 Tim LeHaye's "Left Behind" series is the most popular among Evangelical Christians,
but Isaac Asimov, David Brin, Margaret Atwood, Walter Miller, Sheri S. Tepper and other authors offer
 a less religion-based version.
"On the Beach" and even the "Mad Max" movies
 can be our entry point into the post-apocalyptic mindset.

Most recently, Oprah made the controversial selection

of Cormac McCarthy's The Road
for her book club.

Have any of you read it?

It's not a particularly easy read.

His portrayal of the future is particularly
unflinching.

Gray ash everywhere,

all the trees and plants dead,

almost all of the animals dead,

only a few humans left,

most of whom have either descended into barbarism and cannibalism
or fallen victim to those who have.

The central characters are a father and a son.

Their bond is the only thing that keeps them going

in the face of starvation,

desperate cold,

terrible danger,

and horrible experiences.

In the end, the Dad dies.

You may think, "wow, that's really depressing!"

The amazing thing, though,

is that it's not.

It's actually quite beautiful.

In the midst of the worst conditions imaginable,

McCarthy realistically and sensitively portrays

the survival of love and joy and life.

The father and son call themselves,

"the carriers of light,"

"the good guys,"

and that's what keeps them going.

Though they are terribly damaged by their experiences,

some sense of hope and purpose

and a commitment to kindness

shines like a beacon and leads them,

to a place where the boy is saved

and becomes part of a family

living high in the hills.

The last lines of the book are:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountain. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world

in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.¹

When you close the book and lay it down,
you feel comforted, and scared,
and immensely grateful all at once,
with a sense of holiness singing through you.

Rebecca Parker's essay made me feel the same way,
and she has her own version of post-apocalyptic life.

"How do we live in this world? What is our religious task?" she asks...and answers:

In the aftermath of the Apocalypse, the religious enterprise can be imagined as a kind of salvage work, recognizing the resources that sustain and restore life – resources that are ready at hand, not in some distant promised land. After the Apocalypse, we accept our dependence on sources of life greater than ourselves and open our hearts to receive survival knowledge from those who have already found restoration. We know ourselves to be living in a time of breakdown and breakthrough, chaos and creativity, fragmentation and resourcefulness, pain and grace. Our tasks include tending to injury in ourselves and others, collecting resources buried in the rubble, and constructing shelters for body and spirit, family and community.²

She gets very specific.

She calls liberal religious people to a practice of truth telling and witness.

We can't shy away any longer from the violence that rips apart our lives
and our worlds.

We can't bury our heads in the sand,
or let celebrity dramas
crowd out our awareness of the real problems
of real people in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Sudan,
people living with AIDS,
people struggling with poverty and oppression.

As much as I don't want to speak it,
and as much as you may not want to hear it,
we have to proclaim the tough stuff,
and resist the urge to gloss over it
with platitudes or what she calls
"quick-fix sentiments, like 'we are all one'."

Next, she calls us to a practice of 'salvaging.'
She writes:

We must become good stewards of history and tradition, identifying vital resources contained in the wisdom of the world's religions and making them available to people who have lost them, including ourselves. In the mix of beauty and injustice that marks any religious tradition, we must judge {ed note: or I would say "choose" because I don't like the connotations of "judge"} what gives life and what oppresses...We need the

¹ : The Road, pp. 286-287.

² : Blessing the World, p. 22.

Sabbath candles, the house of study, the bread of communion, the silence of sitting, the teachings of Jesus, the dance of Sufis, the body-rhythm of gospel singing, the word of prayer, the narratives of the soul's dark night, the cross, and the ox-herding pictures.³

She's not advocating cultural appropriation,
but a deep engagement with different religious traditions and practices,
and an authentic claiming of the things within that tradition that are life-giving and love-affirming.
She continues:

We must resist stealing from one another and learn what gives us the right in any religious tradition to embrace its gifts. We must stop behaving like spiritual consumers who take for selfish reasons and give nothing back. We must see that the work of salvaging involves creating communities that shelter and protect religious tradition and, with generous hospitality, make these resources available to a world in ruins.⁴

It's not always easy, this salvage work.
The characters in The Road continually run into problems
as they sift through the rubble and search through houses and stores
for food or other things that might sustain life.

Father and son stumble upon horrible sights,
including piles of bodies and piles of boiled bones.
Even a baby roasting on a spit
and a pit full of people waiting to be eaten.

But they also find unexpected treasure troves...
cisterns filled with sweet water,
orchards with dried apples hidden in the grass,
even a fully stocked and unused bomb shelter
and a boat with food and a first aid kit.

It's clear in these cases what is worth saving
and when they must choke down their gorge and run.

But there are more of another flavor of moments,
moments of rejection and then a change of heart,
moments of worry about contamination in home-canned vegetables
put to rest with a single taste.
Often things aren't clear cut.
Sometimes they're scared and it turns out they have no reason to be.
Sometimes they reject something,
And then change their mind and go back to get it.
Sometimes they inadvertently lose things they need,
And just have to make do without it.

Religious salvage work is a little like that.

Some things are clear right away...
theologies of discrimination or hatred

³ : *ibid*, p. 23.

⁴ : *ibid*.

should make us run as fast as we can in the other direction.
But other ideas might come in handy in some way down the road.
Some ideas work for a while,
And then don't anymore.
Some ideas don't make any sense at all the first time we encounter them,
But we wind up circling back sometime later
Some things we desperately want and think we need to be true
We simply can't hang on to...
And somehow we find a way to keep going without them.

Lastly, Rebecca calls us to choose our guides carefully.
She points us toward those William James names the "twice born,"
people who have really grappled with loss and grief and pain.
Survivors of torture and oppression,
refugees from war-torn nations...
and not just any survivors,
but those who find in their suffering
the strength or the inspiration or SOMETHING indefinable
that gives them the courage to go on
and to live lives of honesty, integrity, and dignity...
activists, story-tellers, resisters, artists and poets.
Adrienne Rich. Alice Walker. Victor Frankl.

In our search, we must follow the lead of people
who have lived through the things we fear the most.
We must learn from them how they got through,
where they found hope and strength and courage.
Their example can ease our fears.

So, then, these are the three tasks of liberal religion in the post apocalyptic world:
Truth telling, salvaging, and choosing our guides.

One of the interesting things Rebecca mentions is that she often has
post-apocalyptic dreams.
I suppose I found it particularly interesting because I do, too.

In my dreams,
the tasks before me are clear, just as they are for Rebecca.
I am gathering people, and sheltering children,
finding sources of food and water,
and helping people work together
rather than seeing one another as competition.

One of the most fascinating post-apocalyptic dreams I've ever had
came to me a few nights after
I got into an argument with a doctoral student
in one of my classes.

He was a gay, Hispanic activist,
and our argument had to do with identity.
He kept insisting that the only way for oppressed people

to mobilize and fight against discrimination
is to band together into affinity groups...a la Black Panthers and the Black Power movement of the 60's.

I kept pointing out that identifying ourselves solely by these kinds of labels
was the root cause of racism to begin with,
and so, in a way, he was trying to solve a problem
by perpetuating the same misguided thinking
that caused it in the first place.

Surely, I insisted,
there must be a better way!
In my (albeit limited) experience,
the best antidote to racism was relationship.
As you get to know a person as a person
rather than as a member of a particular "group"
you realize the common humanity that lies underneath
the labels,
and so the labels lose their power to dehumanize—
Dehumanization being the necessary preamble
to violence of any kind.
That is to say,
when we see people as people
rather than Jews or blacks or children or old people or gay or lesbian or transgender
it makes it harder (I want to believe impossible) to deliberately cause them to suffer.

In class, I argued for cross-cultural relationship
while he argued for solidarity.
In my dream, I was trying to convince the people
to stick together as people
rather than breaking up into racially determined tribes.

I felt and feel incredibly passionate about this.
At the same time, I can see that we were looking at
two sides of the same coin.

Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen,
writes in Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny

The sense of identity can make an important contribution to the strength and warmth of our relations with others, such as neighbors, or members of the same community, or fellow citizens, or followers of the same religion. Our focus on particular identity can enrich our bonds and make us do many things for each other that can help take us beyond our self-centered lives. The recent literature on 'social capital'...has brought out clearly enough how an identity with others in the same social community can make the lives of all go much better in that community; a sense of belonging...is seen as a resource
That understanding is important, but it has to be supplemented by a further recognition that a sense of identity can firmly exclude many people even as it warmly embraces others. The well-integrated community in which residents instinctively do absolutely wonderful things for each other with great immediacy and solidarity can be the very same community in which bricks are thrown through the windows of immigrants who move into the region from elsewhere....

The cultivated violence associated with identity conflicts seems to repeat itself around the world with increasing persistence..."

In Rwanda and the Congo and Sudan,
In the middle East, between Israelis and Palestinians
and in the terrorist movements,
And in Abu Ghraib and elsewhere,

"Unrestrained power over the lives of {others} sharply bifurcates...across a hardened line of divisive identities ('they are a separate breed from us'). It seems to crowd out...any consideration of other, less confrontational features of the people on the opposite side of the breach, including, among other things, their shared membership in the human race. ⁵

What made those images from the concentration camp
so hard to absorb for me
was an awareness that each body,
treated like a piece of garbage and dumped into pits with thousands of other bodies,
had once been a human being
with friends and family,
toothaches and favorite foods,
fears and hopes and dreams and love to offer the world.

What made it possible in the first place
was the ability of the Nazis to see those people as Jews and only as Jews,
not as mothers and daughters and brothers and fathers,
painters and writers and shopkeepers
and beloved children of God.

I would like to believe that we're through the worst,
that we're in the process of rebuilding and renewing
and have weathered the destruction and the dying.
Some days, I can see the world that way,
as on the mend.

What makes it hard is the speed with which
a button is pushed...
a life or even millions or lives can be snuffed out in a single moment.
We know that.

Because we live in decades rather than eons,
sometimes we don't have the ability to see
the larger arc that is firmly
and inexorably in favor of life.
The progress toward peace can feel painfully slow.

The gift of facing down our worst fears,
of reading stories of the holocaust ,
stories of apocalypse like The Road
is that we are reminded that while progress is slow,

⁵ : Identity and Violence, p. 2.

and set-backs happen quickly,
even in the darkest hours,
the spirit of life can never be entirely snuffed out.

The place from which to face the truth...
of the holocaust or any other terrible event...
is from a deep seated faith in life,
and the ultimate goodness of people and the universe.
Then we can grieve, and we can vow "never again,"
and we can also wonder at the capacity of the spirit
to shine through.

Shoah, the Hebrew word for the holocaust, literally means "whirlwind."
Our fears can drive our hearts into a whirlwind.
To remember,
we must calm our fears,
still the wind,
and listen, in the silence,
for the quiet and fragile
but ultimately indestructible
song of love, and life, and peace.

So be it, and blessed be.