

Repair as Life Work

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"If you do not agree with the phases of the moon, get a ladder and fix it."

– Hausa (West Africa) Proverb

*"The greatness of America lies not in being more enlightened
than any other nation,
but rather in her ability to repair her faults."*

– Alexis de Tocqueville

Sermon

We bear many emotions this morning in response to the election results. And yet, strange as it may seem, life goes on. In endless song. It was a divisive campaign season in which both parties manipulated fear in the hope of gaining votes. The stakes were high and the positions of the candidates clearly different on issues that are important to many of us.

More of us were engaged in the political process than ever before, and many for the first time. Probably none of us found any candidate whose positions we could fully endorse or whose leadership felt ideal for our country at this time in its history. But many of us were passionate about our choice. So of course many of us feel our grief acutely and are anxious about the future. Some of us are in despair. Some of us are angry and some sad, while others are celebrating victory.

Let us remember that being a religious liberal does not imply being politically liberal. You can certainly be a faithful Unitarian Universalist and a political conservative. We are a religious body, not a political party. Our purpose calls us to transform lives and to change the world. You can't do that without being political, in the sense of working to influence public conversation, decisions, and governance toward the values we espouse — justice, equity, and compassion, embrace of diversity and protection of liberty not so that the powerful can hoard power but so that every person will have access to the same level playing field in the game of life.

But our purpose is not to elect particular candidates, rather it is to transform lives and repair the world.

While a few of us relish being an iconoclast, most of us find it hard to remain in community when we are out of step with the majority. It takes a mature community to appreciate diversity and to hold all of its members in a broadly inclusive embrace that welcomes those who stand at the margins.

Let us never fail to be guided by our espoused broad tolerance of difference and by our embrace of individual authority. We don't all march to the same drummer and our diversity is a part of our strength. At

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the same time, diversity thrives when we each embrace the things that matter most to us, give them voice, and stand for them in the spirit of true democracy while we recognize and support the rights of others to hold opposing views just as vigorously.

I doubt that many of us would agree with the guy who was getting his hair cut in the chair next to me this week, who said he didn't really care who was elected and had not paid much attention to the candidates. He said, "Just give me my TV back!"

I can't imagine that you're apathetic, though I, too, am happy that the divisive campaign is over, even though I'm not at all happy with the outcome — out of all the races on the ballot, only one of the candidates I voted for was elected.

When I chose the topic of today's service in August and when I prepared the announcement for the Newsletter in the middle of last month, I knew that no matter which candidate won the election we would still face tremendous problems in our nation and in the world — problems that call for deep commitment and compassionate action to repair the world.

I had planned to talk about repair as our life work, drawing from an engaging recent Beacon Press book that makes a case that the work of repairing objects and relationships is a central human characteristic. I still like that idea, and I certainly think we face an abundance of opportunities to do the work of repair.

But it feels more appropriate to acknowledge our feelings and to begin to process them before we start to build an agenda for action. Otherwise our decisions and our actions are likely to be driven by raw emotion and thus to be less effective in the long run.

Like Thoreau, I'm looking for the bedrock that lies buried deep underneath the thick alluvium of mud and slush. The solid *point d'appui*, the foundation and leverage point that will support construction of a progressive and compassionate platform that honors the vision of an America that guarantees, protects, and promotes the inalienable rights claimed in the Declaration of Independence and moral values that are grounded in love rather than division, fear, and hatred.

Until we've processed our grief and found that foundation, I fear we'll be useless to the cause of repair, more likely to make things worse rather than better.

It may be helpful to remember that we experience grief in a progression of stages. It's seldom as neat and orderly as the model implies, but the widely accepted general framework for grieving suggests a succession of stages that begins with denial and progresses to the experience of anger and then to bargaining. Next we feel despair and finally, if we successfully navigate the grief process, we move to acceptance of the loss and only then are we able to rebuild our lives in the context of the new reality.

The shock of a significant loss creates a cognitive dissidence when experience doesn't match our expectations, even when the expectations are irrational. In an effort to realign experience and expectancy, we deny the reality of the loss and ignore reality. This isn't something we decide to do, but rather a reaction.

When reality finally breaks through our denial, we become angry, attempt to assign blame, and wonder why bad things happen to us. That leads us to bargain for a different outcome, perhaps offering a 'deal' to God to undo the event in return for our good behavior.

The stage of despair is marked by a sense of hopelessness and feeling sad. This is the familiar stage of isolation, sobbing, and feeling guilty about actions you have made or, perhaps even more strongly, feeling guilty about the actions you might have taken but didn't.

Finally comes acceptance that things have indeed changed and the commitment to go on.

John Kerry's gracious concession helped many of us move through denial. It will be interesting to watch the unfolding charges of election fraud and problems with vote counts over the next few days, but the

likelihood of changing the outcome is nil. Even though the votes have not yet been certified and the electors have not yet cast their ballots, clinging to the hope that a recount or court challenge will change the outcome is another form of denial. The decision on the part of the Kerry/Edwards campaign not to contest the election helps us move through the bargaining stage.

So that leaves many of us angry and in despair. Raw anger causes most of us to make bad decisions and to waste our energy lashing out in the wrong directions. It's OK to rail for a while, but only while it helps us vent and doesn't hurt anyone else. Long-term raw anger isn't good for us – it keeps us from productive and effective action and it has negative impacts on our physical well being.

Appropriate and directed anger on the other hand, can provide the energy to galvanize effective action. But it is the gentle anger, the non-violent Gandhian anger espoused by Martin Luther King, Jr., that is a source of transforming power. And it only matures when we have accepted that things are different now.

It's OK, too, to experience despair. To cry, to withdraw, to feel helplessly alone. It's normal to feel down, but this is also the most dangerous stage of grieving. It can be hard to find a way out of hopelessness, particularly if it is exacerbated by an underlying depression and the seasonal impact of darker days. It helps to talk about it, and your presence here with other caring people is a healthy step. Give voice to your own feelings. Consider what you had hoped would be different after the election and begin to ponder other ways to accomplish it. You are not powerless. On the contrary, each of us has the power to change the world, starting with small steps perhaps, but you do have influence.

One way to do that is to make an extra effort to reach out to others you think may be suffering. Listen, help them give voice to their feelings, validate their emotions, and offer support without amplifying their feelings of despair. Help yourself and the other person to find grounding in reality and some hope for the future.

Psychologists who were interviewed after the election by the Associated Press said that people typically recover from post-election grief fairly quickly and faster than they predict. In a week, they say, you'll probably already start to feel better. If you feel yourself sliding into a funk that seems unusually serious, makes you uncomfortable, or lasts longer than seems reasonable, seek help for it. Talk to us. Don't hesitate to seek a skilled therapist who can help you find a path back to mental health.

The goal is to move to acceptance of the fact that the political scene has changed. Because it is only from a place of healthy acceptance that you can fashion an agenda for action and implement it. Acceptance does not mean that you give up disappointment or outrage. It doesn't mean that you grant approval or support the changes. It doesn't mean that you become resigned to the status quo. It does mean that you have a realist's rather than a nihilist's view of the world.

It may be helpful to place the defeat in context. As significant as the election results are, they don't change everything. Look for the things that have not changed. Look for the things that make you happy – family and friends, the fall sunshine, food on the table, music, visual arts, a good book – and be thankful for them.

This community is still here, and in fact it may grow stronger by an increased recognition of the need for it to be a locus of personal transformation and for efforts to heal the broken parts of our world.

Put this election into the context of world history as Ellis suggested. Sure it's significant and many of the actions our government will make in the next four years will have long-term effects on relationships, natural resources, and the health of the planet. It is frightening when a nation as powerful as ours believes it has a mandate to act. But in the long sweep of human history, one US president is not all that significant. Even with a majority in both houses of Congress, and despite his bravado, many pundits are saying that this president has already passed his peak of power. The realities of the cost of war and the deficit will slow down his ambitious social agenda, and more moderate voices will block radical legislation and appointments.

And consider some of the positive impacts. Perhaps this will impel more young adults to remain active in the political scene. Perhaps it will inspire a new progressive politics. Maybe it will lure us into the much-needed conversation about language and what we mean by terms like moral values with opportunities to help frame and shape the conversation so that our moral values are articulated in the public arena.

One of the results of the election is that so many here now feel that we are on the margins. We have the opportunity to understand losing and feeling out of step and of developing empathy for those who stand at the fringe.

Being on the fringe can be a place of power, and I think we need to discover how to be effective in our opposition and resistance. We must exercise our rights of dissent when it is appropriate.

I have been particularly impressed by the resilience of young adults I have heard from, either first hand or in e-mail messages that have been forwarded to me in the last three days. One wrote, "I'm starting to feel like voting alone isn't going to do anything, and if we want change we're going to have to unite and take real action."

Another wrote a long impassioned message that suggested specific responses to the lies the other side has perpetrated and made a strong argument that we should not change the progressive agenda, but work to articulate it more effectively and get the Truth out there.

In the weeks and months ahead we will continue the conversation about issues that matter to us as religious people, grounded in our strong faith tradition and the moral values we lift up – we are a justice seeking people. The voice for human rights, diversity, care for the interdependent web of existence, and compassion will be heard. Watch for a discussion forum in early December that the Social Action Committee is planning to further the conversation.

With one exception, I'm going to defer talking about the issues.

But one issue has impacted so many of us so deeply that I can't defer it. In 11 states measures were passed to ban gay marriage and some of them also banned or restricted benefits to same-sex couples in the workplace. I feel deep empathy for the men and women who are gay and lesbian and are feeling rejected. The backlash against their love and their inherent right to form families of affection and commitment is horrific. In declaring their love to be an abomination, the radical right has stirred up hatred and moved against the value of all committed relationships.

I feel deeply proud of our congregation when I hear men and women say that this is one of the very few places where their homosexuality is accepted and where consequently they can fully express who they are as loving people without deep concern for enmity against them. And I feel deeply sad that they must search for such a place and in so many cases remain closeted in our communities.

At the same time, I am amazed at the progress toward recognition of same gender unions that has accelerated over the last two or three years and is manifest in the very existence of the ballot measures and in the fact that more than 40% of voters in Oregon and Michigan opposed the bans. On average 1/3 of voters were opposed to the bans. Court tests will perhaps lead to some of them being overturned. Even though these issues should never have been on the ballot, and even though they all passed, the opposition to them is strong. Not strong enough, and I know that is not consoling when you are faced with the fact of passage of these discriminatory laws and threats from the radical right of reintroducing a federal constitutional amendment.

The votes are a form of terrorism and an invitation to further discrimination and even violence. This is not a moral value, but the opposite – an immoral effort to codify discrimination. I am deeply sorry, sad, and angry that these measures have impacted so many of us with such power.

The fight for equal rights must continue. Civil marriage is a right that should extend to every couple. The existence of same-gender unions does not weaken any heterosexual marriage, but strengthens the institution of marriage and family. Allies must continue to support the cause. We cannot rest until justice is served.

You might remember the story in the Gospel of John about Jesus finding a man who had been ill for 38 years and was lying near the pool of Beth-zatha. When the waters of the pool were stirred up, they had healing properties. But the sick man complained that he was unable to get up and into the pool when the waters were disturbed. There were too many others crowding ahead of him. Jesus told him to get up, pick up his mat, and walk. He did and he was cured.

We can decide to lie near the pool, complain that we are helpless victims of our inability to get into the healing waters quickly enough, cowed by the crowds that push ahead of us. Or we can get up, recover our energy, and get on with the work of healing the world around us.

In Dostoyevsky's story, Jesus listened to the Grand Inquisitor's rant about the flaws of the church without becoming defensive, then kissed him. We can rant a bit, but when the kiss comes, let it empower us to action – to begin to repair the world.

Amen.