

“Protectors of Sanctuary”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

October 7, 2018

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.

All sermons are property of Rev. Joan Javier-Duval and shall not be reproduced.

Readings

“Protest” by Ella Wheeler Wilcox

To sin by silence, when we should protest,
Makes cowards out of men. The human race
Has climbed on protest. Had no voice been raised
Against injustice, ignorance, and lust,
The inquisition yet would serve the law,
And guillotines decide our least disputes.
The few who dare, must speak and speak again
To right the wrongs of many. Speech, thank God,
No vested power in this great day and land
Can gag or throttle. Press and voice may cry
Loud disapproval of existing ills;
May criticise oppression and condemn
The lawlessness of wealth-protecting laws
That let the children and childbearers toil
To purchase ease for idle millionaires.

Therefore I do protest against the boast
Of independence in this mighty land.
Call no chain strong, which holds one rusted link.
Call no land free, that holds one fettered slave.
Until the manacled slim wrists of babes
Are loosed to toss in childish sport and glee,
Until the mother bears no burden, save
The precious one beneath her heart, until
God’s soil is rescued from the clutch of greed

And given back to labor, let no man
Call this the land of freedom.

from "Natural Resources" Adrienne Rich

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

Sermon

For the last week or so, as I have tried to take in and respond to the events surrounding the confirmation hearings for the the Supreme Court of the United States, I have been thinking about female warriors.

There have been many notable ones throughout human history. For example, my own namesake, Joan of Arc, who is also a Roman Catholic saint. She is said to have had visions as a girl which inspired her to approach France's King Charles VII and offer to assist his efforts to expel the English from the country during the latter part of the Hundred Years' War. By the time she was 17 years old, she played a key role in commanding France's army.

Another example is Triệu Thị Trinh, sometimes referred to as the "Vietnamese Joan of Arc," even though Triệu predates Joan by about 1200 years. It is said that by 20 years old, Triệu had raised a following of 1,000 people strong and urged her people to rebel against the Chinese forces that were seeking to conquer her homeland in the 3rd century. She apparently was a grand figure on the field carrying two swords and wearing bright yellow robes as she rode high atop a war-elephant. She apparently also had a gift for words and is quoted as saying: "I'd like to ride storms, kill sharks in the open sea, drive out the aggressors, reconquer the country, undo the ties of serfdom, and never bend my back to be the concubine of whatever man."¹

¹ <http://mentalfloss.com/article/59287/9-female-warriors-who-made-their-mark-history>

Fast forwarding to more contemporary examples, I can't help but think of two of the fiercest characters to grace the big screen in recent months, from the movie "The Black Panther," Nakia and Okoye. Both women are from the fictional African nation of Wakanda. Nakia serves as an underground spy for Wakanda going on different kinds of missions to help bring about justice in the world. In one scene early on in the movie, she is undercover as part of a group of women who have been captured by an army of men in Nigeria and she takes part in freeing them from their captors. Okoye is the head of the Dora Milaje, Wakanda's all-female unit of special forces. Okoye just looks like someone you don't want to mess with, with her shaven, tattooed head, red body suit, and metal armor. Throughout the film, Nakia and Okoye fight alongside the movie's main protagonist, L'Challa, or as he is also known, the Black Panther.

Now, I recognize that it is a bit of fantastic escapism that has led my imagination to recall these and other fierce women warriors. (That, and perhaps also my four year-old's current obsession with super heroes who battle the forces of evil.)

In myth and in reality, women - gender transgressing women among them - have fought fiercely to protect themselves and their people.

The fierceness of Joan of Arc or Triệu Thị Trinh or Nakia and Okoye is a fierceness that runs throughout history.

It is often loud and bold.

It is sometimes quiet and trembling.

It is a claiming of female power often in the face of patriarchal and misogynistic forces.

It is a loyalty to living with integrity despite the costs.

I don't want to suggest that taking up arms is the only or even the primary way that this fierceness - this warrior spirit - has shown up throughout history. (It is also certainly true that a fierce warrior spirit has been embodied by people of all genders and allies of women throughout the ages.)

And, the events of the past two weeks on the national stage remind us that there are women warriors in our midst today.

I am not speaking of the ones on the battlefield of military combat but of those who put themselves out there in the often dangerous terrain of our public square to tenaciously tell the truth and seek justice.

Over the last year, we have witnessed many of these warriors for truth come into the public square as part of the #MeToo movement, bravely sharing their stories of sexual assault and harassment.

The movement has been so ground-breaking that in December of 2017, Time magazine's "Person of the Year" was The Silence Breakers, the voices that launched the #MeToo movement.² On the cover, the magazine pictured five of these women, the actress, Ashley Judd, the singer-songwriter, Taylor Swift, and three lesser known women, Adama Iwu, a lobbyist, Isabel Pascual, a strawberry picker, and Susan Fowler, a former engineer with Uber.

Many more women and also some men have come forward to share their stories in more private settings without fanfare or recognition.

Now, ten months later, Time magazine is again featuring the image of a woman who has spoken up about her experience of sexual assault, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford. The stylized image of Ford, which appears on the issue dated October 15th, uses words from her testimony to before the Senate Judiciary Committee on September 27th to create a graphic depiction of her with her right hand raised high - a symbol of her pledge to tell the truth - as terrified as she was to do so.³

Amidst all that appears to be bleak, I am taking solace in the ferocity of women who have resisted, persisted, and carried on.

To defend who and what we love takes a warrior spirit. A spirit of courageous commitment and the dedication to develop the habits and skills necessary to face our own pain and the pain of others. This is a spirit that each of us can embody regardless of gender, age, economic background, or ability.

In Tibetan Buddhism, the term "spiritual warrior" refers to someone who is on a spiritual path to combat ignorance in order to become liberated from suffering. The term is connected to an ancient prophecy that is said to be coming true in our lifetimes. It is a prophecy about the rise of the kingdom of Shambhala. The writer and activist, Joanna

² <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>

³ <http://time.com/magazine/us/5415016/october-15th-2018-vol-192-no-15-u-s/>

Macy shares the prophecy as it was told to her by a friend and Buddhist teacher, and it goes like this:

"There comes a time when all life on Earth is in danger. Barbarian powers have arisen. Although they waste their wealth in preparations to annihilate each other, they have much in common: weapons of unfathomable devastation and technologies that lay waste the world. It is now, when the future of all beings hangs by the frailest of threads, that the kingdom of Shambhala emerges.

"You cannot go there, for it is not a place. It exists in the hearts and minds of the Shambhala warriors. But you cannot recognize a Shambhala warrior by sight, for there is no uniform or insignia, there are no banners...

"Now comes the time when great courage is required of the Shambhala warriors, moral and physical courage. For they must go into the very heart of the barbarian power and dismantle the weapons. To remove these weapons, in every sense of the word, they must go into the corridors of power where the decisions are made.

"The Shambhala warriors know they can do this because the weapons are...made by the human mind. So they can be unmade by the human mind! The Shambhala warriors know that the dangers that threaten life on Earth do not come from evil deities or extraterrestrial powers. They arise from our own choices and relationships."⁴

And, the "weapons" of these Shambhala warriors according to Buddhist teaching are not swords or guns but compassion and insight. Compassion is the fuel to move us to act on behalf of other beings. Insight is the wisdom to see the interdependence of all things. Both are necessary to the Shambhala warrior and to dismantling the weapons of barbarian powers.

To train in the way of the Shambhala warrior is a particular spiritual path. One that I know some of you are familiar with and grounds your own spiritual practice.

Some say that the Shambhala warrior is a metaphor for the bodhisattva, anyone who sets upon the path of becoming a buddha. The path is open to anyone.

What I find useful in these teachings is that two of the primary tools we have to undo the destruction being wrought in the world are compassion and insight, which you can also

⁴ <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=236> and <https://vimeo.com/191169785>

describe as love guided by wisdom. These tools require cultivation, but they aren't beyond our grasp.

To be warriors for justice, we don't need supernatural powers, or metal armor, and certainly not weapons or guns.

We do need the clarity of our truth,
the strength of our conviction,
the courage of our voices, and
the persistence of our love.

Besides the courageous testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford before the Senate Judiciary Committee, one image from the past week or so that cut through all the clamor was of two women who confronted Senator Jeff Flake of Arizona as he got onto an elevator on his way to the committee meeting at which they would vote on Judge Kavanaugh's nomination. With trembling voices, the women, Ana Maria Archila and Maria Gallagher, spoke to him sharing their own experiences of sexual assault and admonishing him not to look away. One of them spoke emotionally saying, "Don't look away from me. Tell me that it doesn't matter what happened to me." And referring to Judge Kavanaugh the other asked "Do you think he can hold the pain of this country and repair it? That is the work of justice."

These women and many others went into the corridors of power to speak their truth vulnerably wielding their compassion and insight, their courage and persistence.

Regardless of the outcome of the Supreme Court justice nomination process, the voices of these women, of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, and of Professor Anita Hill before her, ring out loud and clear creating ripple upon ripple to make change.

Not all of us will feel called to bring our warrior spirits out to confront power so directly this way.

Perhaps the fiercest thing we can do in this moment is to offer safety to those right around us - to keep others safe from physical and emotional harm. To offer sanctuary of mind, spirit, and maybe even body to those being harmed by policies and a social and political climate of increased animosity and hate.

The organizer Marisa Franco, a co-founder of Mijente, a movement of Latinx and Chicana people working towards justice and liberation, has said: “Sanctuary is a spiritual stance. Sanctuary says: oppression is trying to fill our lives with fear and blood and daily numbing horror. But not in here. Not in my home. Not in my bed. Not in my movement. Sanctuary makes a ring of fire around our people. Sanctuary grants us a taste of reprieve and protection so they can gather strength to go out there again and fight.”

Over the last two years or so, a recurring comment that I have heard from many different people in our church community, is that this place and our worship time together, offers them a much needed refuge and respite from the incessant bad news of the day. This place for many serves a great need to find solace for the soul.

I certainly feel this need as well. A need to set down the worries of the world and my own worries for just a little while. To feel a sense of peace and comfort and safety amidst the tumultuous times - times in which some people I know intimately and others who are strangers to me are being harmed over and over again.

Indeed, this place of sanctuary and this time of worship is meant to offer you shelter. It is a place and a time to “come and rest.”

But, this is just one side of why we come together each week.

This sanctuary is a place that whispers “come and rest” and also “be filled and go!”

So, my encouragement to you is to find sanctuary for yourself and to offer it to others - to “come and rest” and when you are ready to “be filled and go!” because the world needs you.

In just over 30 days, our nation will hold an historic election with so much feeling like it is at stake. Many people’s lives hang in the balance as we look to our lawmakers to protect the rights of women, immigrants, LGBT people, and people with disabilities, to protect our right to health care, to stop the rollbacks on environmental protections, and to take action to address climate change in a meaningful way.

The march towards justice is long, and it is punctuated by significant events like the upcoming election.

My place, and the place of this church, is not to tell you who to vote for. But as our Unitarian Universalist principles affirm and promote “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large,” I will say that your participation in this upcoming election is crucial. Make your voice heard through your vote. Make your voice heard by mobilizing others to vote.

If you are looking for a way to have a more national impact, you can join the efforts of Unitarian Universalists in Florida to support a proposed amendment to the state constitution, Amendment 4, which seeks to restore voting rights to 1.5 million people currently disenfranchised because of felony convictions. The current prohibition on felons voting means that 1 in 5 black people in Florida cannot vote. (You may know that Vermont and Maine are the only states that allow people convicted of felonies to vote even if incarcerated.) This Tuesday, October 9th, Unitarian Universalists around the country are being invited to join in a “Faith Day Phone Bank.”⁵ You can contact me if you’d like more information about that.

Of course, locally, we have the opportunity to each put our values into action by participating in our own elections.

Beyond the elections, you can also join together with others in this church community and our broader community to learn more about important issues facing us right here in Vermont. Next Saturday, there is a Bridges Out of Poverty Training being held across the street at Trinity United Methodist Church, and also that day Vermont Interfaith Power and Light will hold their annual convention in South Burlington. Information about both events are in the e-newsletter. And right here at UCM, there are upcoming opportunities to learn more about how to interrupt and dismantle hate and racism when we encounter it. You can visit the Lifespan Spiritual Exploration table for more information about that.

As we move forward, let us remember that we are not just defending what and who we love, we are also part of the greater work of building something new. Something, perhaps, that is still beyond our imagination.

In the process, much of what we know or thought we knew to be reliable and dependable may collapse.

⁵ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/2018-election-efforts>

Our future may be defined by the question, what will remain? What can we salvage amidst those ruins?⁶

To confront and answer these questions requires a warrior spirit, a warrior spirit that each of us - men and women, young and old - can cultivate, embody, and bring into the world.

With that spirit, what I hope will remain in the sanctuary of our hearts is our love for one another, our delight in each other's company, and our awe and reverence for the beautiful earth that is our home. What I hope we will salvage, if we band together, are practices of care and kindness as we cultivate our tools of compassion and insight, love and wisdom.

And as we set our intentions to be warriors for love and keepers of sanctuary, let us remember the words of the writer, Arundhati Roy, "Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."

⁶ Credit is due to Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker who, in her book, Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now, names "salvaging" as one of the three religious tasks of living in a "postapocalyptic world." (pp. 21-23)