

"The Space Between Stories,"  
Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
November 13, 2016

*A sermon is meant to be heard rather than read. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

Readings

selection from "How to Heal the Spiritual Pain of America," by Serene Jones  
selection from "The Small Work in the Great Work," by Victoria Safford

Sermon

My almost three year-old son surprised me one night several weeks ago now during his normal bedtime routine of reading story books. He insisted that I read the book in reverse starting with the end and continuing on back to the beginning. Well, I obliged his curious request. And, I had a strange feeling as I read not really knowing whether each additional piece of the story was going to make sense with the ending that had already been revealed.

This is how it has felt over the last few days, having reached the conclusion of this long and painstaking election season, and reaching back trying to fill in the story of how we arrived here.

On Tuesday night, I like many of you, I imagine, went home and turned on the news to watch the election returns. It was getting very late and the election still hadn't been called for either candidate, though the results were looking increasingly clear. I went to bed and woke up very early in the morning to the news that Donald Trump had been elected president of the United States.

It can be a strange feeling when you receive any bit of news that seems to change everything. In a very abstract way, since July, I had already begun creating the story in my head of what the world might be like if Clinton were elected or if Trump were elected. But, I don't think I had really allowed myself to feel the potential impact of either outcome. And, on Election Day itself, I felt strangely dissociated from the

outcome of the election. But with the news of the final result, I returned to my body once again and felt the full impact and weight of this new reality.

Our political life is one vital way that we, as a people, live out our values. While it may be difficult to discuss politics in a religious context, it becomes necessary when the political world threatens certain moral foundations. After all, the word politics comes from the root word for “city” and the word religion comes from Latin roots that literally mean “to bind” or “obligation.” As individuals, we must not leave basic morality at the edge of the public square. Politics is the very firm and real place that we as a faith community find ourselves with a minimal obligation to be bound together around certain values. For us, as Unitarian Universalists, one such value is articulated in our first principle, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” I feel called to speak of politics from the pulpit today because that very foundational principle is under threat right now.

It is a basic moral issue, not just a political one, when we struggle how to even explain to our children how someone that so many witnessed as running a campaign of hate, intolerance, and disrespect — against people of color, women, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities — is now the leader of our nation. This is not a normal state of affairs. Today politics is encroaching onto more personal ground, affecting who can even feel physically safe.

Over the past several days, I imagine that each of us has been going through our own process of taking in, responding to, and trying to make sense of the shifting American landscape we woke up to on November 9th.

Some of you have expressed your sympathies to me for having to get into the pulpit today, naming the difficulty of the task. And, it’s true. It’s not easy to be up here.

It’s not easy because I am struggling, as well, to make sense of where we are now. I’ve been trying to understand and comprehend how things turned out as they did.

Already there are many narratives out there trying to explain the outcome of the election. From the moment the election results were announced, pundits, politicians, and some of us, I imagine, began the election post-mortem trying to dissect and

understand exactly what had transpired. There are no easy answers, and any analysis is sure to fall short of capturing the whole truth, the full story.

If we didn't know it already, the results of this election show that the present story of America is complex. We are a big, diverse country, and we are experiencing the forces of societal and planetary change each in our own particular ways. We are living in a tumultuous time of simultaneous conflicting and opposed stories. A time of both increasing pluralism and its attendant intolerance and bigotry. A time of rapid technological change. A time of social and economic displacement. A time of planetary crisis.

Amidst, this complex reality and in light of this historic time in our political life, part of our spiritual work is to try to understand the story we are in.

To understand the present story of America, we must understand our past. And, the present story of America is complex, in part, because the history we tell of America is also complex.

In the first reading I shared this morning, Rev. Dr. Serene Jones points out that our central and primary national story is relentlessly positive.<sup>1</sup> It is a story of people who fled persecution, banded together to defy a monarchy, crafted a system of governance for all people to pursue liberty and happiness, built the country up from nothing, and continued to make progress and prosperity for all.

This narrative doesn't reckon with the violence and slavery upon which our country was founded, nor with the pains and failures and hard fought battles we as a country have faced along the way.

Without those pieces of the narratives, it may be especially difficult for us to make sense of the outcome of this election.

Some of us here this morning may have felt shock and disbelief at the results. "This doesn't seem like the America I know or believe in," you may have thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Serene Jones, "How to Heal the Spiritual Pain of America," September 7, 2016, <http://time.com/4477582/heal-the-spiritual-pain-of-america/>

Perhaps it is surprising that race played as big of a role in the election results as they did with a large majority of white voters, across gender, age, and education level, voting for Donald Trump.

In the days to come, as we seek to understand where and who we are now as a country, and to piece together once again our national story, we need to be able to take on some difficult questions.

What does it mean about who we are that intolerance and bigotry are now embodied in our highest office?

Why do our differences feel so entrenched?

How do we begin to seek understanding and heal the wounds amongst us?

To begin to answer these questions, we need a national story that is robust and complex and honest. As Jones writes, we need to weave together our pains, our failures, and our violence along with our progress and goodness in order to tell a spiritually whole American story.

It is not yet clear how, or whether our country will come together with a unified story of what we want our country to be.

But, as people who have found community within Unitarian Universalism, our story continues on. As I said last Sunday before the Election, regardless of who would win, our story of putting conviction into action must be told and must be lived.

In your own time, I hope that you will be ready to move beyond your grief, if that is what you are feeling, to a place of action.

The task of bringing our truth into the world will require sustained commitment over time. As Billie Holiday sang, "The difficult I'll do right now. The impossible will take a little while."

Let us find the resolve and courage to do the difficult things right now knowing that those dreams that seem impossible will take a little while longer to fulfill.

And, friends, if it wasn't clear before the election what our calling as a religious community is, I think it ought to be clear now.

We must respond to the fact that we elected someone to be President of the United States who has insulted people with disabilities, who has called Mexicans rapists, who speaks hatefully about women and who has put forward policies that would discriminate based on religion and tear apart families.

In light of this reality, we, as individuals and as a faith community need to be clearer about our vision of beloved and interdependent community and more resolute in fulfilling that vision.

We are called in this moment to be beacons of love and to defy hate in whatever ways we witness it.

The hatred that surfaced during the presidential campaign has only become emboldened in the days after the election.

As of the end of the day this past Friday, the Souther Poverty Law Center had documented over 200 incidents of election-related harassment and intimidation against women, Muslims, people of color, people with disabilities, and LGBT people across the country.<sup>2</sup>

I personally know people who have been living with a heightened sense of insecurity since election day because they are married to someone of the same sex or who have children who fear that because of the color of their skin they might be targeted for violence or deported and taken from their families.

We, as a community, must be a place of resistance to this hatred, and a beacon of love in the face of fear.

One small act you can take that has been spreading across the country is to wear a safety pin in a visible place to identify yourself as someone who can be of support to anyone feeling fearful or facing actual harassment in public. This movement

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/11/over-200-incidents-hateful-harassment-and-intimidation-election-day>

began in Great Britain as a response to the increase in hate crimes in the wake of Brexit, the vote to leave the European Union. The idea is that a safety pin could signal that one was ready and willing to respond and help someone who might be harassed or threatened. The idea started on social media and caught on and has now caught on here in the U.S.

The safety pin is part symbol. It tells others that you welcome all and that you answer the call of love. It is also a call to action. If you are wearing a safety pin, and you witness someone being harassed or intimidated or even assaulted because of their race or gender or disability, you are committing to responding to help keep that person safe.

Today, after the service, I will have safety pins available for anyone who might want to show their solidarity in this way. While I am making these available, I also want us to guard against reaching for this symbol just because it makes us feel a little bit better. That is certainly one important aspect of this particular act of solidarity, but there are also those amongst us who have very real fears and are facing actual threats who might need you. Please know that you are not obligated to take a pin. It is simply an invitation. And, one that if you accept, I hope you do with full commitment.

If you are feeling unsafe or more anxious now because of your identity, you can also take a pin to simply keep in your pocket or somewhere close as a reminder that there are people around you who have your back.

Beyond this small act, in the days to come, it will become clearer how we are called to respond to our present reality - what it is we will need to do and how it is we will need to be in order to live fully into the story of who we want to become as a nation.

In that process, we will need to nurture ourselves along the way.

So, find comfort here. Let music and community and silence heal your spirit. Feel yourself surrounded by this loving community. Share your sorrows and your hopes with me and with one another. Laugh together. Break bread together. And, in so doing, find solace and communion.

But, find here also strength and courage for the work at hand.

The world needs you and it needs us more than ever.

It needs your love. It needs your courageous truth-telling. It needs your resistance. And, it needs your hope.

As Victoria Safford writes, we must plant ourselves in this sometimes lonely place, “the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be.”

In this space between stories we find ourselves, we must be the truth-tellers. We must take the time and space to know the truth about our own souls. From there, we must plant ourselves in the place of resisting those forces that enact hatred and divide us from one another.

And, we must continue to call people towards the world as it should be, a world transformed by love until the planet and its people are made whole.

We are writing the story of our country, of our world, with every courageous act, however big or small. Our acts of kindness, our acts of defiance, our acts of truth-telling, are our letters on the page. Woven together, they tell a story not yet made real, but longed for in the deepest part of our souls.

And when we do that, when we tell our truth and story our vision, then someday in our future, we will be able to feel the goodness and wholeness we are still imagining today. We will be able to look back through the chapters as they have unfolded to the beginning, a beginning made possible by the courage we can draw from each other, the love and solidarity we can lift up, and the innumerable actions that we will we take to build the world we dream of.