

“Mend and Repair”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
November 8, 2020

Readings

Selection From *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World* by Elizabeth V. Spelman (Beacon Press, 2002, pp. 1-6)

“The Human Being is a repairing animal. Repair is ubiquitous, something we engage in every day and in almost every dimension of our lives. *Homo sapiens* is also *Homo reparans*...

From apologies and other informal attempts at patching things up to law courts, conflict mediation, and truth and reconciliation commissions, we try to reweave what we revealingly call the social fabric. No wonder, then, that *H. reparans* is always and everywhere on call: we, the world we live in, and the objects and relationships we create are by their very nature things that can break, decay, unravel, fall to pieces...

To repair is to acknowledge and respond to the fracturability of the world in which we live in a very particular way--not by simply throwing our hands up in despair at the damage, or otherwise accepting without question that there is no possibility of or point in trying to put the pieces back together, but by employing skills of mind, hand, and heart to recapture an earlier moment in the history of an object or a relationship in order to allow it to keep existing.”

Adrienne Rich from *The Dream of a Common Language*

“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

I have been remembering back to four years ago, the Sunday after the 2016 Election. The sanctuary where I stand today was packed that morning. Over 300 people gathered into the pews and standing in the back and in the side aisles. Our need to be together overcame the concern for abiding by fire code for that hour of worship.

So many people - some of you who are joining in for worship this morning and others who have now gone their own way - were compelled to come to church by fear, shock, confusion, desperation.

The outcome of that election, indeed, came as a shock to many. And it felt like a moment of reckoning and soul-searching.

Many of us wondered - How could it have been that someone who had campaigned with such racist ideas and rhetoric, who had demeaned women and people with disabilities, who stoked fear of immigrants could be elected to the highest office of this country?

I don't think the need for that reckoning and soul-searching has gone away, nor will it go away anytime soon, even with the projected change in national political leadership.

These last four years for many people have proven to be as harmful as they had imagined it might be. For too many people, the last four years have not only felt like an assault on their dignity and sense of safety but have come with policies that have torn apart families, endangered access to health care, and put at risk basic rights.

Especially for these individuals, the projected change in the White House brings a sense of relief. And for anyone who has lamented a lack of decency and empathy from the highest office, the outcome of the election also brings a sense of relief.

If this is true for you, I invite you to let some of that tension out of your body right now. Unclench your jaw or let out a big sigh. If you feel like you've been holding your breath the last four years (or even longer), let out a big exhale.

Today, regardless of your political viewpoints, I think we can all hope for a peaceful transfer of power and with it the door of possibility opened to an easing of at least some of pain caused by the brokenness within our social fabric.

In his victory speech last night, President-Elect Joe Biden paraphrased the Book of Ecclesiastes in the Hebrew Bible. He said, “The Bible tells us that to everything there is a season — a time to build, a time to reap, a time to sow. And a time to heal.” And then he said, “This is the time to heal in America.”¹

This is the time to heal in America.

Of course, no single election result fixes anything. No single leader can bring about healing or end strife alone. There is no magic wand or spell that can end generations of systemic racism or eradicate poverty or bring us out of the climate crisis or completely restore our faith and trust in one another.

That which divides us and polarizes us and keeps us from living in true communion with one another is persistent and tenacious in its grip.

In our own community here in central Vermont, these divisions may not appear as stark. We benefit from an ethos of communitarianism in which people come together to support one another and to seek solutions to the issues and challenges that arise in our shared public life.

Yet, we, too, live in this fragmented world. While the bonds amongst those we call neighbor may be stronger and more resilient in some respects, we are not immune to the spread of white nationalistic extremism or the insidiousness of white supremacy. We, too, grapple with how to move forward in a world with a rapidly destabilizing climate. We, too, are at a loss for words at times when confronted with ideas and rhetoric that are anathema to our own world views.

It is time to heal in America, but where do we even begin?

As Adrienne Rich writes, “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.”

To reconstitute the world, we have to start with repairing what we can, wherever we can.

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-11-07/joe-biden-victory-speech-2020-election-transcript>

In my house, we tend to hang on to broken things. The bowl accidentally pushed off the dining room table. The broken door knob. We have quite a collection in our basement.

I imagine many of you also feel this need to fix broken things, or at least, not to discard broken items right away. To repurpose or mend whenever possible. To extend the life of things that might otherwise be judged to be unrecoverable.

As Elizabeth Spelman writes, to repair is to acknowledge how easily fractured the world can be and to respond not by throwing one's hands up in despair but by putting to use the skills of mind, hand, and heart to restore something of what was.

The story that Liza and Verdis shared with us earlier speaks to this idea. The story from the Jewish tradition of the "Shattering of the Vessels" teaches us about the meaning of *tikkun olam*, or repair of the world.

I think there is something incredibly powerful in the images of this story. One can imagine and sense the fragility of the vessels holding the Divine Light. The light that we know is at our core - that sense of wholeness - exists yet it can feel scattered and hidden. Our work, the story says, is to seek out and find that light.

Healing the world means recognizing the brokenness in the world and within ourselves and bringing back together those broken and fragmented pieces.

To task of "healing the world" may sound daunting, yet it is not any of ours to do alone. This is a collective task, and we each have our role to play.

The doctor and writer, Rachel Naomi Remen, reflects on this story and the idea of "tikkun olam." She says, "this is, of course, a collective task. It involves all people who have ever been born, all people presently alive, all people yet to be born. We are all healers of the world. And that story opens a sense of possibility. It's not about healing the world by making a huge difference. It's about healing the world that touches you, that's around you."²

And, she asks, "How would you live if you were exactly what is needed to heal the world?"

² On Being Interview with Rachel Naomi Remen, "Listening Generously," July 29, 2010, <http://onbeing.org/programs/rachel-naomi-remen-listening-generously/>

You ARE what is needed to heal the world, and first, I would say, take some time to heal your own heart. If you have been heart-broken again and again, especially in the past several years, allow some joy into your life.

To bring healing into this moment, let's remember that yes, there is work to do, AND joy exists alongside it.

It is joy that can give us the fuel to keep on going through the uncertainty that still lies ahead, through the unrest that may yet come.

There is the joy of seeing even more diverse representation in our elected officials with trans men and women winning office across the country including here in Vermont. There is the joy of little girls and children everywhere seeing a Vice-President-Elect that looks like them and tells them to follow their dreams.

There is the joy of pouring your heart into calling voters and writing post cards and letters and seeing the swelling of the electorate to historic numbers.

There is the joy of music and spontaneous dance parties filling the streets with people of different ages, races, abilities, and gender identities feeling a collective sense of possibility.

Dear ones, cry the tears that must be shed.

Laugh and sing and dance.

And know that it is our minds, hands, and hearts that will do the mending

That can restore that which seems to be destroyed,

That can heal and reconstitute the world one broken shard at a time.

So may it be.