

## **“A Shift in the Wind”**

Sermon delivered by Verdis L. Robinson  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
September 27, 2020

### **Reading**

Excerpts from “Let America Be America Again” by Langston Hughes (1902-1967)<sup>1</sup>

### **Sermon**

As Liza reminded us in her Time for All Ages, this Wednesday marks the 250-year anniversary of John Murray’s first sermon in North America due to a change in the weather. This “Shift in the wind” prevented him from moving on. He was forced to hang tight in New Jersey (you know everything’s legal in New Jersey- sorry Hamilton reference).

But he remained in New Jersey until the wind allowed his small boat to travail the waves. Since John Murray had no more excuses, he delivered a message. It encouraged him. It lifted his spirits. After delivering his message and being Heard and well- received, he moved on when the winds allowed.

But the Shift in the Wind and the message that was received became the foundations of universalism in America of which our church became a product of. You see, he just didn’t move on... he came back and finished what he started. Just think about that that... he came back and finished what he started.

However, this sermon is not about John Murray. I’m sorry. Rev. Joan delivered a wonderful sermon this past July entitled Love with No Exceptions: in which she preached about the origins of Universalism and we are grateful that it has been archived on our website.

You see, the opening prelude, showed images of movements due to shifts in the wind. The abolitionist movement, women’s suffrage, civil rights movement, woman’s march on Washington just a few years ago.

These shifts in the winds powerful. They commanded attention, spoke truth to power, and changed our world.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://poets.org/poem/let-america-be-america-again>

Well, the Wind has shifted yet again. I am sure that you can all agree with me that the pandemic was a shift in the wind. It caused us to halt our travels, paused our movements, we had to sit still, watch, wait,

We feared together and alone, we worried together and alone, and we are constantly adjusting to a new normal. I am delivering my first sermon in Vermont and I am in the sanctuary delivering it to empty pews but loaded with bandwidth on zoom.

This pause opened the world up to pay attention- not just to our own lives which we did,

I don't know about you, but when I was in Boston and there were over 200 deaths a day in Mass, I was constantly taking self-inventory- do I have a fever, no, is this cough productive or non-productive, are these allergies or COVID?

When before, we were moving so fast, on to the next, not really taking stock or even caring for overserves and each other en masse.

But we also became worried about the lives of those around us and beyond. Especially the irresponsible ones who were putting us all at risk without wearing their masks and not socially distancing and you know who you are.

However, this pause also opened the world up to pay attention to black lives.

People began to question why marginalized communities were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Why we never learned the truth about slavery. Why we never learned about Juneteenth in school, or about the Tulsa Massacre, not riot. What else haven't we learn about our history due to the prevalence of white supremacy in our culture and society. Revising our history and even battling right now to continue that practice. Sore spot for me.

Harvard even asked why are there a disproportioned number of black and brown prisoners in MA? Their findings after exploring family backgrounds., single family homes, mental health, education, social/economic factors, was conclusively systemic racism. That was their finding. Systemic racism.

As a black life who spent a career decolonizing American history, lifting up Black voices, stories, experiences, struggles, and triumphs. (And I was not first to do so, we have been doing this since even before the 1960s but especially after) I became weary when the news of George Floyd rang out in my quarantined neighborhood of Dorchester, MA.

Why was I weary? I taught for 10 years about the origins of systemic racism in this country dating back to the 1600s. I even wrote a role-playing game about it. I taught about slavery existing in this country even after Lincoln's emancipation proclamation and let me tell you, most of my students were black and brown. And most of them were learning this decolonized history for the very first time in their lives. And right now, I will admit that I believe that I did not go far or deep enough for fear of upsetting some of my colleagues and the risk of losing my job for being "anti-white" because I saw it happen. 10 years of that, I was weary. I am weary.

Watching the video....In fact, for a week, I was numb. I couldn't think, I couldn't feel, I didn't know what to do.

It triggered the memories of how almost every time I would drive in a rural area, I would get pulled over by the police. It happened to me in outside of Chicago, it happened to me in rural Virginia on my way to DC from James Madison University the day after Trump was elected, the reasons were the same. I was driving too close behind other cars.

Yet I am still here. I smiled, I apologized for whatever I did wrong, I giggled, I made a joke about winding up in someone's trunk, the same joke every time, to show them that I was not a threat to our productive society,

I had already made a habit of dressing "professional" while on the road for this reason, and every time- they let me go. They let me go every time with just a warning. While in the back of my head, I wondered, why was I pulled over in the first place.

One of my employers after hearing about my ordeal jokingly relayed my story to my colleagues laughing saying, Verdis was "DWB," -Driving While Black. I didn't find it funny and my colleagues-friends didn't either. People, this is about life and death.

And the news of Breonna Taylor...Life and death. YET there was a shift in the wind.

The resurgence and global support of BLM has been a phenomenon that I did not foresee nor know what would really come out of it. Is this just trendy now, will this go away when the winds shift again?

I am here right now because of the shift in the wind. And with the fall foliage, fellow Vermonters, I am thankful to God for it. Let me tell you! Simply beautiful.

But when evidence came back showing the death of a man in a mental health crisis in my home city of Rochester, NY, my weariness came back. It made national news. Especially of the daily protests and powerful demonstrations.

People are hearing a message: That black lives do not matter in this country. And it seems like every week, there's something new in this new normal which has yet to normalize.

I don't have to tell you everything of what is really going on, but we are living it, we have been living it, we are breathing it, but we cannot breathe, we have been preaching and teaching for generations and have been repeating ourselves to deaf ears and now with the appearance of movement and the spirit of movement rolling through the streets, rolling through the airways, rolling through homes/.

But we press on, yet we prayer on, but we preach on, yet we hang on to the world for dear life as it spins around and tries to spin us off. Weary.

As a genealogist, ancestry worship has become a big part of my spiritual practice. And as you know, our ancestors were weary too. They were weary And Yet they kept their lamps trimmed and burning.

They lit the pathway forward and have yet to make it to the promise land, where justice rolls down like waters and peace like a every flowing stream.

We have come to the pathway that was lit by their blood, their sweat, their tears, their sermons, their sacrifices, and their marches. But as the songs says, children don't get weary until your work is done, so keep your lamps trimmed and burning because the time is drawing nigh.

I believe my ancestors sang that and that's why I am here. I am the manifestation of their prayers so as I channel their spirit of survival not resilience, survival, and their fighting spirit and their sprit of love.

*Children don't get weary. Till your work is done.  
Keep your lamps trimmed and burning. The time is drawing nigh.<sup>2</sup>*

I have entered in this space because you have kept your lamps trimmed and **burning**.

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<sup>2</sup> "Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning," a traditional gospel blues song attributed to Blind Willie Johnson who recorded it in 1928

I really do believe that We CAN dismantle white supremacy, I **believe** it, because our ancestors believed it first. **I believe** that we will reach that dream of glorious freedom that we carry within our hearts, that blessed inheritance that has haunted us for many generations.

But I have one question for you all: What kind of ancestor will you be? What kind of ancestors will WE be? Could you say, Let the life I've lived speak for me?

The message has been delivered- Are we really hearing it? Because the wind is going to shift again, and we will move on...but are we going to be like John Murray? Because he did move on, but he came back to finish what he started.

While the world is waking up right now and when the winds shift, what will you do? Move on or finish the work?

This election is crucial- we need all hands on deck on this one. My life depends on it. Our lives depend on it and believe it or not you will never be free until we are all free.

We ARE standing up, we ARE rising up, our strength is coming back to us, our help is coming ON us, our ancestors are rising with us, our descendants are rising with us, too.

We Rise, We Stand, AND We get weary. Take a moment or two to breathe it's okay, to reach out it's okay, to care for you it's okay, to grieve breath, it's okay, to care for each other, and then **stand up, rise up,** and Wake Up!

Our very lives depend on it.

May it be so, Ashe and Amen and blessed be.