

“A Light Through the Cracks”

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Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Reading from *The Cure at Troy* by Seamus Heaney

...History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme...

Sermon

A pottery kiln must be fired to extremely hot temperatures for molded clay to turn into a stable pot. On the low end, temperatures need to reach at least 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit and on the high end up to 2,400 degrees. I visited a friend's studio once where they had built a massive wood-fired kiln. They needed an awful lot of wood to keep that kiln hot for the once a year firing.

Clay can be sensitive in the firing process and attention must be given to a slow cooling process so the pots don't crack. As strong as that pottery gets under such immense heat, it can also break. Under the right amount and kind of pressure, even the strongest pottery can crack open.

The broken pot up on the chancel here suffered through an entire winter left outside (I plead guilty to that offense) with soil contained within it expanding and contracting forcing the hardened clay apart.

One winter season, a drop in the sink or on the floor proves that even the strongest pot can break.

Right now, we are witnessing many cracks and fissures in our shared public life and in our democracy. There are the cracks of distrust, disinformation, belligerence, and even political violence.

The pressures have been mounting and the chipping away at fundamental rights and freedoms has gone on and on as we have felt acutely in the past year. And, truth be told, the very foundations of our democracy have always been imperfect and vulnerable. Built upon unrealized proclamations of equality and the untreated wounds of founding myths, genocide, and slavery.

The chipping away at the imperfect systems of representation and governance by the people has been going on for decades upon decades. And, the weakening of these foundations has not been by accident. Instead, the attempts to both keep the founders' democratic ideals unrealized and also to diminish the hard won rights of many have been intentional.

In the latest iteration of adding fuel to the fire, White Christian nationalism and authoritarianism have converged in an attempt to solidify minority rule in a complete rejection of a pluralistic democracy grounded in the constitutional rule of law.

Across the United States, neighbors and family members are living in diverging realities fed by polarized media, much of which has no regard for factual truth. Friends and co-workers find it impossible to communicate with one another about our genuine hopes and dreams for the future.

The cracks are many.

As we approach a momentous Election Day for our country and our state, I do not wish to dwell on what is broken. We have been feeling the weight of that brokenness for a long time.

Instead, in this waiting time, we might consider how we stay attuned to the light between the cracks and even how to be that light for one another.

A couple weeks ago I traveled home to Chicago and took the opportunity to do some door-knocking in Wisconsin. My mother and a family friend joined me. In suburban Kenosha, an area of razor thin electoral margins, we spoke with one young woman who was undecided about the presidential election. She said, "I'm Catholic and the whole reproductive thing..." She left it to us to fill in the blanks.

We ended up talking for several minutes finding common ground in our desire for our leaders to respect all people and to look out for the most vulnerable in our society. My mother spoke of her religious convictions as a Catholic and how that was influencing her choices this election. The young woman listened intently and nodded.

As we talked, something in my own heart was pieced back together despite the fact that the woman was still undecided at the end of our conversation. There we were, this group of four standing in a parking lot in the ex-urbs of Wisconsin, a group of four very different people: a veteran in his 80s, a first-generation immigrant from the Philippines in her late 60s, the daughter of immigrants who is now a UU minister, and a millennial Catholic woman having a heartfelt conversation about our democracy.

The experience of sharing genuinely our concerns and values and listening intently to one another made me feel that not all is broken, that perhaps a great sea-change is possible.

I needed the witness of that moment. The witness that there are still places where the gaps between us have not gotten so wide that they cannot be bridged, where our hopes and our histories need not be dissonant, that there are yet cracks between us that can be filled with understanding, goodwill, and common dreams.

Leonard Cohen sings:

“Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in”

As we wait with bated breath for the outcome of Tuesday’s election, let us also pay attention to where there is light trying to find its way through the cracks.

There is the light of generosity shining through the cracks of housing and food insecurity as people offer financial help and meals to neighbors unable to meet their basic needs.

There is the light of compassion shining through the cracks of loneliness and isolation as hospitality is created in public spaces and in church basements.

There is the light of reasoned engagement shining through the cracks of vitriolic rallying cries as local candidates debate issues of consequence and public leaders wrestle with difficult decisions.

There is the light of humor shining through the cracks of cynicism and despair on late night news shows and stand up comedy routines.

There is the light that gets in.

It is also true that possibility opens when something cracks open. The hardened systems that lead to war, genocide, death by poverty, racialized and gendered injustice are systems that need to be broken apart. And, we are continually remaking these systems with our questions, with our protest, with our prayer.

As the potter's wheel spins, the clay is open to change. Gentle pressure in one spot draws the center wider. A firm hand brings out the pot's roundness. And clay that didn't quite take the desired shape can be recycled, reclaimed, and thrown on the wheel again.

We are in a continuous process of molding, making, breaking, repairing.

This is also where the light lives for me - in this ever unfolding process of making and remaking, of cracking open and looking for what's there, and for fixing what can and must be repaired.

The writer and public thinker Bayo Akomolafe describes cracks as “intercessory sites of what is to come and what is not quite done-with.” Which is to say that it is at the cracks that reshaping, reimagining, and re-creating take place.

As people who seek spiritual growth through active engagement with the world and all its brokenness, this is always the work whether it's election time or not: We are called to intercede at the cracks - to notice what is not quite done and to invite something new to fill the gap.

Can we imagine that this time of breaking apart could also be a time of re-creation? There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

The uncertainty in the days ahead will be challenging to navigate. It will not be easy for most of us to remain calm and grounded, compassionate and hopeful. And so, being a light for one another is how we will make our way through.

So, here is some practical advice for the days ahead:

- Limit your consumption of news and social media to what is essential.
- Dedicate time to spiritual practices that ground you in your body, calm your nervous system, and connect you in positive ways to others.
- Make a plan for who you want to be with, or who you can reach out to, as the results of the election become clear, or in the waiting if the results are not clear.

- Go easy on yourself over the next week or two so that you have ample space to feel, to think, to respond rather than react.
- And, remember that anger can be a powerful motivator for change and also none of us is served by hatred, retribution, or violence of any kind.

My loves, there is much we do not know. Take heart in what is surest - that you are not alone, that we make it through together, that no single election, no single vote, no single law, no single court ruling, no single bomb, no single flood determines all that will come.

The contingency and uncertainty of it all can be the light through the crack. There is light in accepting what we don't yet know and trusting that how we choose to act and how we choose to love can change everything in time.

Let us move forward into the uncertainty holding the fragile pieces of our shared lives with gentleness and with care.

So may it be.