

“Backward and Forward in the New Reality”

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
Sunday, Nov. 13, 2016

The reading was a shortened excerpt from Richard Rorty's book "Achieving Our Country." The full excerpt can be read [here](#).

A few weeks ago, I had the chance to sneak out of town with my partner for a getaway weekend. Ready to relax and just read a magazine for a change, I sat down with the one copy of the New Yorker that I had managed to grab while rushing out the door. Then I opened the magazine. The Politics Issue. The whole magazine was about the election. I briefly considered a ritual burning. The presidential race was wearing me out even then, before any of us knew what we know now.

I did not set the magazine on fire, nor, to my surprise, did I set it aside. Instead, I found myself drawn into a [photo essay](#). It was about first-time voters from around the country. Each voter, ranging in age from 18 to 72, was pictured next to a quote about the presidential candidate they had decided on. And I found myself most interested in the stories of three young voters, two 20-year-olds and an 18-year-old. They lived in Kentucky, Colorado, and Missouri, and they were all planning to vote for the candidate who, as it turned out, won the election.

I have a lot of hard-right relatives in my extended family. So while I didn't know these Trump voters personally, they were not totally unfamiliar. I found the minister part of me wanting to reach out to them with care, and the former journalist part of me wanting to share some information with them. And so I started writing imaginary letters to the three of them.

The 20-year-old guy in Kentucky was a coal miner. He was voting for the pro-carbon candidate to try to save his job and his town. In my letter to him, I explained that my uncles had worked in iron mines and paper mills, and that whenever I go back to where my mom grew up, there's always another empty storefront; it's so different from the community I used to visit as a kid. But I also wrote that coal was never going to be great again, and praised his decision to take college courses, because the global market has collapsed. I mentioned that one of the other candidates actually had a plan to help Coal Country make a transition, and I asked him to give it some thought.

The 20-year-old in Colorado was a welder who was working on a bridge. He was voting for the pro-gun candidate because he and people he knew hunted elk and deer for food; they were able to get enough meat in their freezer to skip buying beef at the store for a year. In my letter, I told him about the many hunters in my family, how it was not unusual to find a deer hanging in my grandpa's garage in November, and how none of the meat went to waste. And I told him that no one running for president had any interest in taking away guns for hunting wildlife; that those of us who are concerned about urban violence and mass shootings had other kinds of guns in mind, to keep people from hunting each other. I also pointed out that, if his future employment as a welder was a concern, some political parties tended to be more open to public-works spending than others, and I hoped he would give it some thought.

The 18-year-old in Missouri voted as she did because 1) she was opposed to abortion and 2) she felt lied to by Hillary Clinton, and, she said, "I hate being lied to." In my letter, I explained, with kindness, that, if reducing the number of abortions was important to her, health care and family planning access work very well toward that goal, and that she should research which candidate would do best in that area. And I directed her to a couple of websites that kept close track of the number of lies each candidate had told during the campaign. I hoped she would take a look and give it some thought.

I really did type out these letters on my laptop, to these young adults who probably got most of their information from political ads on TV, who didn't have conversations with liberals in their daily lives, whose main reasons for voting the way they did had nothing to do with building a wall or excluding Muslims. These three should not in any way be given a pass for their disregard for the lives of so many other people. But their reasoning does help explain how we got to where we are.

We cannot blame the outcome of this election solely on blue-collar white people who voted for Trump any more than we can blame it solely on the white-collar white people who voted for him, or on the millions of left-leaning people who stayed home. This national tragedy was complex and multifaceted, with voter suppression, voter apathy, and the complacency of the comfortable playing major roles.

I must count myself among the comfortable and complacent. These letters I wrote before the election, I was thinking that I might post them on my blog, just to see what would happen – maybe they'd go viral and change a mind or two. But they didn't seem essential, so they stayed in my computer. Just like I stayed in my house instead of door-knocking. The polling was looking pretty good. How many people would really vote for someone like that?

Well, now we know. And I can hardly look back at the pictures from Tuesday afternoon, photos of smiling friends with their “I voted” stickers, photos of [100-year-old women in pantsuits](#) casting their vote for the first woman president. Photos that are now somewhat heartbreaking. Photos that now feel so distant that they may as well be black and white. That’s one of the things that grief does to our minds. Grief warps time, and it fuels our regrets; it makes us furious and steals our sleep. The grieving people I minister to usually have experienced the death of a loved one, but the symptoms of grief are similar regardless of the source of the sense of loss. The strong feeling of there being a “before” and an “after” is the same. I have been recognizing my own deep grief this week, and I see it in many of the people I know here in this deep blue city and in this deep blue congregation.

The things being grieved are real. They go beyond feelings of safety or a sense of having lost the country we thought we knew, and losing the world we hoped to see. I like to be reassuring and positive whenever I can – hope is part of my job. But I cannot stand up here today and assure you that everything is going to be OK, that everyone will be fine, that love always wins. We are evidence-based around here, and the evidence is not looking good right now. There’s been a spike in hate crimes and hate speech in just these past five days. People of color and immigrants and our LGBTQ neighbors are living with new levels of fear, fear of citizens and government alike. Women and girls, never truly safe to begin with, are on heightened alert, with an unrepentant sexual predator on his way to the highest office in the land. The very functioning of our democracy and the functioning of our press are at risk. And I can barely talk about what’s going to happen to the earth. Most of the coastal counties from Corpus Christi all the way around Florida to the Virginia state line voted to put a climate denier in the White House. They voted to let their own communities drown.

We as a country, as a whole, have never been here before, nothing even close in modern times. But other nations, many other nations, have been where we are right now. And there are groups within our own country that are less shocked than others. Groups that have had justifiably low expectations from white-dominated America for a very long time.

I want to share with you a series of posts by an African-American writer who goes by [5’7 Black Male](#) on Twitter. Here’s what he has to say:

“This feeling you have right now. Amazement that the country could be so short-sighted, that it could embrace hate so tightly? Welcome. This despair and dread you feel. The indignation, the bewilderment, the hurt, powerlessness, the fear for family

and livelihood? Welcome. That knot in your stomach, that feeling of heartache? That uncertainty about your safety? The deep sense of fundamental injustice? Welcome. I do not say this to diminish what you feel today. What you feel is real and valid. I'm giving you an opportunity to truly empathize. For it is the lack of that empathy that allowed America to shrug as the marginalized shouted warnings."

I've read similar thoughts from Native Americans. And Alice Walker, the African-American novelist and humanist, [wrote this the other day](#): "How to survive dictatorship: That is what much of the rest of the world has had to learn. Our country has imposed this condition on so many places and peoples around the globe it is naive to imagine we would avoid it. Besides, do Native Americans and African American descendants of enslaved people not realize they have never lived in anything but a dictatorship?"

So there are plenty of people in America who have felt powerlessness, who have had to learn resilience and survival, who have planted a beautiful garden in the backyard when it wasn't safe to sit on the front porch. What has just happened in America has never happened here before, except since the beginning, it has always been happening to some of our people. American authoritarianism was not invented on Nov. 8; it was revealed anew.

So there are people to learn from and things to learn, be they strategies for bringing about change, or tactics for preserving one's dignity and human spirit. A blog post with the title ["I Know What to Do"](#) was written in response to the election by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones, a United Church of Christ minister. "I know what to do..." he writes. "I know, because I've done it before. I lived as a very public gay man in the state of Oklahoma during a time when a state legislator said we were worse than terrorists, and the Aryan Brotherhood murdered a gay man in a horrific hate crime." Rev. Jones says he and his partner received death threats and were denounced by name in the state Republican Platform, yet they still chose to get married in a public park with 200 guests for all to see. "Every day I lived with hope, courage, and integrity, refusing to let others define me or rob me of my power and my voice," he writes. "I insisted upon my right to be equal and free and worked tirelessly on behalf of my community, in the face of overwhelming opposition and a climate of terror and violence."

So, there are some strong people out there. And there are strong people in here. Some know it; some don't realize that they have always been strong; some have not had much chance to prove it. We are now going to have plenty of chances, opportunities we didn't want but opportunities that are arriving. Opportunities to show up and support people we know and people we don't; to stand up for ourselves; to speak up

for institutions that have never been perfect or fair for everyone, but that are so much better than some of the options we are facing.

From afar Americans had witnessed the Prague Spring and the Arab Spring, and now we here at home are looking at something that's going in the opposite direction, something of an American Winter. A freezing or reversing of freedoms, a chilling of free speech, a time when new things do not grow, a time when our reserves of energy and hope may become depleted. A hard frost that few saw coming has suddenly plunged us into a different season.

But here's the thing about winter. We here in Minnesota know how to survive a winter. We know that winter is not a season of growth, but we know how to keep living things safe until the warmth returns. We know to keep an eye on our neighbors, to make sure they have what they need, to offer them a jump-start or a push when they get stuck, and to accept their help when we ourselves are digging out. We know the importance of not letting the harsh reality outside dim our inner light. And we know that beauty and joy can always be found and celebrated, even on the coldest days.

So we know winter, and we know what to do. But there are some things we can't afford to do as this American winter settles in. We simply can't hunker down and stay home and wait this out. Yes, we need to grieve and heal and take care of ourselves, but those of us with the option to retreat cannot do so for the next two or four years. The stakes are too high.

If we choose passivity, we will contribute to the normalizing of this situation, to the idea that this is just another president, another transition. The Nigerian-American writer and photographer Teju Cole, writing in this weekend's New York Times, pointed out that People magazine is already running photo spreads of the Trumps in the White House, with headlines describing the pictures as "[way too cute.](#)" We are already being asked to cuddle up to the family of a demagogue. [Cole writes:](#)

"Evil settles into everyday life when people are unable or unwilling to recognize it. It makes its home among us when we are keen to minimize it or describe it as something else. This is not a process that began a week or month or year ago. It did not begin with drone assassinations, or with the war on Iraq. Evil has always been here. But now it has taken on a totalitarian tone."

America does have a long history of normalizing evil. It's normal to restrict black people to one part of town and to fill our prisons with them. It's normal for misery to prevail on native reservations, normal for Americans to fill their closets with clothes made by

modern-day slaves on other shores, normal to pump untold tons of carbon into the air. We must resist this latest attempt to normalize evil.

And while I know we need to grieve and take care of ourselves, we can only resist and bring about change by getting out of the house. The safety pin telling others that you are a safe person for immigrants to interact with won't work in your living room. The Kentucky coal miner and the Colorado bridge welder, as well as the Wisconsin factory worker and the Minnesota farmer, felt seen and heard by Donald Trump because so many other Americans stopped coming by or looked away. The kinds of one-on-one conversations across political divides that helped stop Minnesota's marriage amendment four years ago did not happen on any kind of scale this time. They were replaced, with great futility, by angry Facebook exchanges and family members blocking each other's pages. We have to find new ways, or go back to old ways, of acknowledging and understanding one another's realities, rather than reinforcing the limited realities we each live in. Relationships need to happen. And we somehow have to get across the idea that it's a small group of people at the top who are responsible for the false scarcity and destructive infighting among all the rest of us.

So we need to show up. Not just virtually by pushing the "like" button, but really show up in our physical bodies – at a fund-raiser for Syrian refugees, at a rally to preserve reproductive freedom, at a gathering to celebrate trans lives, at a protest to stop private prisons. Showing up has been the work of the few. In an America where the ways of governing have been upended, showing up needs to be the work of the many. As we continue to grieve, it would be best if we grieved in motion.

Before I close, I want to talk a bit about hope. It's a hard feeling to come by right now, for reasons that are very real. But I was reminded in recent days of the work of Joanna Macy, who wrote a book that some of you have read, called "[Active Hope](#)." She defines hope not as something you feel, but as something you do.

"Active Hope is a practice," she writes. "Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we do rather than have. It is a process we can apply to any situation, and it involves three key steps.

"First, we take a clear view of reality; second, we identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we'd like things to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed; and third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction.

"Since Active Hope doesn't require our optimism, we can apply it even in areas where we feel hopeless. The guiding impetus is intention; we choose what we aim to bring

about, act for, or express. Rather than weighing our chances and proceeding only when we feel hopeful, we focus on our intention and let it be our guide.”

As we head forward into this uncharted new reality, may our intentions be our guide. May love be our guide. May we stay at each other's sides, and be with those in greatest need. May we grieve in motion and in solidarity. Together, courageously, is the only way.