

"Questioning Commitment"

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti, Assistant Minister
First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis
Sunday, March 28, 2021

The reading was "Keep Fresh Before Me the Moments of My High Resolve," from Howard Thurman's "The Inward Journey."

Throughout my life, I have had a generally favorable view of human beings.

There are a number of reasons for this. I was raised by a kind family. I went to college with friendly and helpful people. I've had a lot of nice coworkers. And now I spend my days serving congregants whose lives are filled with meaning and compassion. All of this contributes to my positive impression of my fellow earthlings. But sometimes I think the biggest factor propping up my love for humanity is this: I hardly ever drive.

Much of the year, I'm able to walk or bike to most of the places I want to go, and I can usually avoid major roads. But on the rare days that I get behind the wheel, I immediately notice that my various circles of kindness are no longer protecting me, and I'm reminded of what people can really be like.

Much has been [written and studied](#) about how people behave when they are granted immense power and near-anonymity as drivers, how quickly the average person can devolve to reptilian-brain behavior. There are of course many very polite motorists who follow rules, obey red lights, don't look at their phones, and let you in when traffic is tight. But the reality is that enough drivers engage in risky behaviors that every one of us is in danger whenever we're in a car.

One of the things I learned back when I was a journalist is that officials in Minnesota don't use the word "accident" to describe what happens on our highways; they use the word "crash." "Accident" carries connotations of blamelessness or inevitability, but most traffic fatalities are not inevitable; they're frequently the result of decisions that don't prioritize the safety and lives of everyone else on the road.

Of course, it's not just drivers who don't prioritize the safety of others or test our love for humanity. Members of the pro-gun crowd have long put their right to shoot far above your right not to be shot. And a few weeks into our second year of the pandemic, we know this for certain: We live in a country where significant portions of the population do not care if you die.

It can be a hard thing to accept, but it's something I've heard from many of you. We may long have been aware of this kind of disregard when we drive, as speeders fly past and cut us off, or we may have been aware as we read about the latest mass shooting; it's been another thing to be aware of it every time we see an unmasked face breathing on everyone in the checkout line.

For anyone of any theology trying to live a life of generosity and compassion, the callousness, and really the malice, that we continue to witness have been breathtaking – and have literally robbed hundreds of thousands of people of their breath.

Over the past year, a number writers and observers have used the phrase “death cult” to describe large swaths of Americans ([here are three](#), just for starters), and it's not hard to see their point. There are fatal threads of reckless disregard woven through the fraying fabric of our country. It makes it complicated to love, or sometimes even live among, our fellow humans.

Our theme this month at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis has been the concept of commitment. And today I want to look at our human commitments to those who do or would do harm. What are our ethical obligations to rivals and oppressors? How do we coexist with or overcome the death-cult factions? The stakes have been and continue to be very high, and none of these problems will easily disappear.

Now, a few of you may be thinking, Rev. Jim, do we really have to talk about this? The negative sides of human behavior, haven't we had enough of that? After all, it's springtime, vaccinations are blossoming, and federal leadership is no longer terrifying. Can't we just ignore the death-cultists and move on?

Believe me, I get that. Even as I take in all that's going on, I'm still getting out there and enjoying spring.

But “Can't we just move on?” is a frequent and significant question in American life. And my current answer is that I agree with those who say that we can move forward, but we shouldn't move on.

Moving on, to me, sounds like leaving some important matters on the table for the sake of expedience or comfort. And as we all know, when you leave a mess on the table, it doesn't get any less messy if you ignore it.

Moving *forward*, rather than moving *on*, is different. Moving forward might mean that we do indeed move, but we bring the events of the past with us and integrate that knowledge of reality, so that long-festering problems don't keep flaring up again and again.

A wide range of thinkers whom I admire have been talking about the importance of continuing to look at hard things, even after a year, or after four years or 400 years of hard things.

One of these thinkers is Timothy Snyder, the Yale professor and authoritarianism expert who wrote ["On Tyranny: 20 Lessons from the 20th century."](#) This past January, after the insurrection, [Snyder candidly spoke](#) of what he called "dumb talk about healing and unity." If you're like me, you may find it both astounding and predictable that violent, destructive people, from domestic abusers to insurrectionists, seek out healing and unity immediately *after* they've been violent and destructive.

Timothy Snyder isn't having it, and he issued this warning: "Moving on without speaking the truth about what happened is dangerous. It enables the people who did it the first time to do it again, but worse, and it means the history of your country gets rewritten."

Another voice I've been listening to is that of Leslie Mac, one of the founders of Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism, who offered [this thought](#) last fall: "Calls for 'Unity' without accountability are abusive," she says. "Calls for 'Coming Together' without addressing harms are abusive. Calls for 'Healing' without addressing the damage done and continuing to be done are abusive."

So I find that there are multiple reasons, from multiple perspectives, for not rushing toward superficial concepts of unity, healing, coming together, and the like. What's tricky, then, is balancing any wish for true reconciliation with a desire to avoid conflict, to minimize what happened, to put on a happy face, and all the other messages many of us have received our whole lives about prioritizing harmony.

It's not that harmony is bad, of course. It's just that the cost is sometimes is too high – the cost of things not changing, the cost of repeated horrors, horrors that get

repeated because their root causes were swept under the rug rather than addressed. And the cost of these horrors is never distributed fairly.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, in his famous ["Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"](#) warned of this kind of thing. In particular he warned of it coming from white moderates who prefer order to justice, who prefer what he called "a negative peace with an absence of tension," rather than working through tension toward justice and a "positive peace."

I think many if not most of us have personally experienced the difference between an uncomfortable silence that comes about because things are unresolved (a negative peace), and a comfortable silence that comes about because a conflict has been addressed (a positive peace). Sometimes the cost of keeping the peace is too high.

So what might we owe to those who would harm us, hold us back? What responsibility, if any, do the marginalized have toward their oppressors? What are our human commitments across enormous divides?

Unitarian Universalism has some high aspirations in this regard. Our First Principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Every person. Even the ones who do horrible things. That's a tall order and has been a topic of much reflection ever since the [Seven Principles](#) came about in the 1980s.

Like the First Principle, our Universalist heritage makes similarly bold demands. We here at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis don't talk very much about our Universalist heritage, perhaps because our congregation wasn't born into Universalism; we came to through marriage, in 1961, when the Unitarians and the Universalists merged.

Radical when it first emerged and still rejected by many Christians today, Universalism was originally the belief that every single human being, regardless of behavior, would be saved by Jesus the Redeemer and go on to the afterlife. Every person was worthy of God's love and would go to heaven. This was a truly iconoclastic idea in a country colonized by pilgrims who thought they were among the chosen few on the planet.

Universalism expects a lot from a very loving God, while the First Principle asks a lot of *us*. Both point to the idea of a commitment to every human being.

So there's a lot to grapple with, this idea of making commitments to all others. It's not easy stuff.

As Howard Thurman says in our reading, how do we keep fresh before us our moments of high resolve? How do we not forget that to which our lives are committed?

An answer I have arrived at is that, when we commit to our fellow humans, we do so realistically. We do so knowing that there are limits, and remembering that we humble beings are not the God described in universalism, however wonderful it would be if we mortals could be so loving. We are fallible humans navigating a world with too many death-dealing fellow humans.

And so one way to define what we are committed to is to reflect on our limits, on what we are not committing to.

[Marchaé Grair](#) is the communications director for Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism. I once attended a workshop she led, so I've had the privilege of experiencing her brilliance firsthand. Marchaé had this to say [in a speech this past January](#):

Many people are calling for unity in our country in response to the blatant white supremacy on display, everywhere from our neighborhoods to the Capitol building. Some are saying if we can just agree to disagree, even with people who seek to kill us, that all will be well.

I've learned that people who want you to sacrifice your humanity for unity don't actually care about unity; they care about ensuring your servitude.

As writer Robert Jones Jr. said, "We can disagree and still love each other, unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist."

You don't owe anyone an unconditional commitment to unity, and neither do I.

Unconditional unity won't get us free.

When unity is used as a tool to silence pain, it makes a mockery of the most vulnerable among us....

Dear ones, I want you to know that when harm or abuse happens, it is not the responsibility of the survivors of the harm to pretend as if the harm didn't happen for the sake of moving forward.

We are not required to build bridges for people when those bridges will be destroyed before we can cross them.

In a similar vein, [the cultural writer Tonya Russell points out](#) that there is a level of privilege among Americans who call for us to simply love each other and seek unity:

These sentiments are clearly coming from people whose ability to live comfortably in the United States doesn't hinge on the outcome. So please spare me your toxic positivity.

There is of course room for dialogue and listening and understanding, and groups like [Braver Angels](#), which brings together red and blue voters, are doing that kind of long-haul work.

At the same time, we are currently in the midst of an epic power struggle for the very soul of our country and whether it has a future as an actual democracy.

The powerful white men who just returned Georgia to the era of Jim Crow voting laws are not playing nice, and they have accomplices across the country, including in the Minnesota Legislature.

The powerful white men wanting to keep weapons of war freely available to any would-be mass shooter are not playing nice.

The powerful white men (and a few white women) who happen to be governors who don't like mask mandates are not playing nice.

And the consequences for democracy and individual lives are dire.

Very little in the way of solutions to these monstrous problems can be found in reason and negotiation. The desire to wield an assault rifle is not based on any reasonable need, nor is the desire not to wear a mask - in fact, studies [in the U.S.](#) and [Brazil](#) have found a correlation between refusing to wear a mask and psychopathic tendencies.

The outcome of this current high-stakes chapter we find ourselves in will be determined by raw political power and who wields it most effectively, inside the halls of government, in the courts, and out in the streets.

It's a staggering tragedy that a country with so many resources and so much alleged freedom has produced so many damaged and damaging people.

That's a whole other talk I need to give, but it's where we are right now. And our individual and collective commitments are as important as ever.

So for me, my bottom line is that I will continue to treat individuals with kindness whenever possible, not based on how deserving they are, but rather because that's who I want to be, how I want to show up in the world, how I want to embody my values. However, [as MLK said](#), "If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don't want it." (It's worth mentioning that "peace" is not the same as nonviolence - you can disrupt the peace and bring about change without violence or even the threat of it.)

And while our First Principle calls for us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and our Third Principle calls for acceptance of one another, we should never confuse these things with accepting every behavior. Respect and dignity can be granted to a person without affirming their every action.

And our commitments to our fellow humans must be passed through the fire of our commitments to our core values, core values such as truth, equity, generosity. Peace and unity may be lesser values right now if they are stumbling blocks to goals that we hold highest.

As the activist [Melissa DePino recently said](#):

There can be no unity without acknowledgment, understanding, and intentional action to remake our systems that were built on white supremacy. That's a foundational human concept: In personal relationships and in society, no problems are ever corrected without doing the work to repair the wrongs.

There's that messy table again, failing to clean itself up. And I'm in the camp that believes that the United States should be seriously considering at least two South

Africa-style Truth and Reconciliation processes – one around racial justice, and one around the election and insurrection.

As the author bell hooks has said: “The heart of justice is truth telling, seeing ourselves and the world the way it is rather than the way we want it to be. More than ever before we, as a society, need to renew a commitment to truth telling.”

So, it’s a lot – a lot to do, a lot to think about, a lot to decide, after a year that’s been a lot.

But there is also quite a lot of hope to be found, from having a non-authoritarian president to the impressive work that’s been done on the grass-roots level in so many states. And when we do this work, we must remember to do so in community and to keep one eye on joy, to sing and dance and laugh our way to collective liberation.

So as we go forward into the promise of spring, amid the complications of this particular spring – the hope and peril of the pandemic, the police trial taking place in Minneapolis, the resurgence of Jim Crow – may each of us take stock of our commitments. May we discern what it is that we truly treasure. And may we bring our full hearts and full selves to the work of creating a more Beloved Community for all.