

“What’s Next?”

Rev. Dawn Fortune

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

November 8, 2020

What’s Next?

Yesterday, at just after 11 am, our new reality was confirmed:

Americans, United States voters, to be more precise, have voted to elect a new president and vice president in the persons of Joe Biden and kamala Harris.

Expressions of relief and joy poured out of homes and into streets all around the country, and around the world. In Paris, church bells rang out in celebration. In the ancestral homes of Biden in Ireland, and Harris in India, spontaneous celebrations erupted in public spaces.

One pundit commented last night “people are responding like they’ve just overthrown a dictatorial regime.”

Indeed, the relief expressed in these public displays of joy was palpable.

For some US residents, the relief is more acute than it is for others.

For immigrants, the fear of deportation and family separation is a terrifying reality that yesterday was lessened.

For people of color, the fear of police violence is very real, and yesterday eased just the tiniest bit.

For people who hold LGBTQ identities, we have a less acute fear of what the government might do to us.

Oh, there is still work to do. But it feels like we can breathe now.

I was making a healthy lunch yesterday – a salad, actually, and had the television on mute when the news came in. I returned to the living room to sit down with my lunch and a book I was reading in preparation for this morning’s sermon, and I saw the images and the scroll across the bottom of the screen.

It was over. It was done. They called it.

I stared numbly at the screen, almost unable to believe it was real.

I felt the waves of relief wash over me, and I sat without speaking, staring at the screen. After four years of enthusiastic domestic terrorism visited upon the vulnerable by supporters of the current occupant, that perpetually hunched feeling in my shoulders began to subside.

I am as aware as I can be of the privilege I carry in this world: I am white, native-born, currently able-bodied, a native English speaker, a citizen. While I know my identity as trans and queer, those things are not always immediately visible, so people tend to assume I am also straight and male, which adds a TON of privilege to my experience as well.

I want to share with you a video reflection by a sex educator colleague of mine, someone who is a national leader in sexuality education, a performer, and a woman of color, who spoke brilliantly yesterday about her experience hearing the election results announced. The video was recorded live on Facebook and worship team member Jess Dunn Safonof edited out the profanity, so it is more appropriate for a worship space.

Semona Baston gave me permission to use her video (and to adjust for language), and if you want to see the original version, it is posted publicly on her Facebook page.

Please listen now to what she shares.

[link to unedited version:

<https://www.facebook.com/1406013646/videos/10224960412663310/>]

Semona Baston speaks truth in beautiful, brutal, vulnerable terms.

Four years of “what more will he do? What more will they take? Who else is going to die?”

This is the real lived experience of far too many in our communities.

And, as happy as many of us are at the results of the presidential election, we must also acknowledge that more than 70 million people – nearly half of the voting population – cast their ballots in support of a man whose policies and behaviors have been blatantly authoritarian, even leaning toward dictatorial.

Whatever it was that those voters wanted, blatant racism was the price worth paying to get it.

Whatever it was that they wanted, lifelong trauma inflicted on infants and families was the price worth paying to get it.

Whatever it was they wanted, obscene and dangerous foreign policy decisions were worth the price to get it.

Whatever it was they wanted, stripping half the population of the right to make decisions regarding our own reproductive choices was worth the price to get it.

Or, perhaps more disturbing, is the thought that those things were not the price worth paying, but the goals in the first place.

That the cruelty was the goal. Control of others was the point. Terrorism was the point. That empowering insecure people with big guns to threaten and terrorize their neighbors was the actual goal they were seeking. The tax cuts for the mega-wealthy were just a bonus.

Whatever the goals, the results were the same. People with marginalized identities have spent the last four years acutely frightened for our personal safety. And now, by a narrow margin, we have achieved some measure of implied relief.

But we are still aware that statistically, half of the people we encounter on the street voted for someone who supported our abuse and terrorization.

Those of us with privilege might find it easier to build bridges and reach out to those voters, but for people like Sermon Baston, who live in very real fear of lynching – by cop or by someone with a MAGA hat and a pickup truck – they get to take all the time they want and need to get to that point. After the American Civil War, formerly enslaved people were not eager to reconcile with their oppressors, and neither should we expect communities of color to be ready to hug and make up now. They have a long history of being lied to and betrayed; and we white people have a lot of work to do to make something like reparations a reality.

Our new reality is complex.

Life is not all better all at once, nor will it be.

We still live in communities that are deeply divided.

Some of us are learning for the first time that people lie to pollsters. They say they're going to do the thing they know to be right, but then vote their fears and prejudices once they're alone in that voting booth. I remember learning that the first time I worked on a campaign for an LGB anti-discrimination law. People said they supported us. The polls showed us with healthy leads. And then we lost. The people said one thing and did another. Not only did we learn that most of our neighbors thought it was ok for us to be fired for being gay, but we also learned that they were willing to lie about it when asked.

That is a wound that takes a long time to heal. It did then, and it will again after the dust from this election season finally settles.

Some are able to reach out and engage with those who have demonized and terrorized them, and some are not. And that's ok. Nobody gets to tell a person leaving an abusive relationship that they must reconcile with their abuser. And that's what we've got here.

This long national trauma is going to take time to heal, and healing takes whatever time it takes. It cannot be rushed.

I'd like to offer you a message of unencumbered hope today, but I cannot.

And like I said when we first met, I will not lie to you. I might make you uncomfortable, I might even make you angry, but it won't be because I lied. It might be because I told the truth.

We are in a complex reality. We have 73 days before the new administration is sworn in. A lot of harm can be done in that time. I have no doubt that there will be some degree of scorched earth behavior as the current occupant leaves the building. I have no doubt the White House shredding machines will be put to heavy use in an effort to cover up misdeeds and corruption.

For some this is a waiting game, for others it is a time to hunker down and survive, knowing that they systemic behavior is likely to remain even with new leaders.

We have a new reality.

We have done all we could, and we have made change.

We have done enough – for this moment.

Today we dance and celebrate.

Tomorrow we get back to work.

My prayer for us is that we have the strength and grace to listen to our better angels as we seek justice and accountability in the months ahead.

May it be so. Amen.