

## **“Forgive Me”**

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It was in this congregation that I first heard the Taoist tale of the farmer: you know the one, the farmer’s best horse runs away and all the neighbors say, “that’s awful, how unfortunate”, to which the farmer replies, “maybe”. The next day the horse returns with 6 other horses and the neighbors say “how wonderful” and the farmer says “maybe.” Then when breaking in one of the new horses the farmer’s son is thrown and breaks his leg: and the neighbors say “how unfortunate”, “maybe”, replies the farmer. The next day the military shows up looking for sons to fight in their war, and the son can’t go because of his leg...you get the idea. Like the Taoist symbol of yin and yang, representing opposites with a little bit of each in the other, Male/female, good/evil, professes that really there is no such thing as good and bad, things just are.

Well, the way things have been this past year, maybe “things just are”, but sometimes, they seem pretty bad. But applying the Taoist principle, you can see that virus may be bad, but it has brought some families to reconcile, it has taught us how to protect ourselves. in

countries that went thru the SARS outbreak of 2003, the spread COVID-19 was brought under control quickly. Who knows when the next, more deadly virus strikes, more may survive, and it will strike. As this pandemic is brought to heal, there will be many global changes, good or bad will be in the eye of the beholder.

Then, let's look at our President, my guess is most would see him as bad, certainly he has done some hurtful things. His handling of the pandemic, his eroding of our institutions by appealing to tribalism has wounded our democracy. Not just at home but by the example we have always set globally. But now more people are registered than ever before. The usually splintered Democrats found something they could unite behind that may actually lead to some social justice reform.

As Max Ehrmann's Desiderata stays: "You are a child of the Universe no less than the trees and the stars: you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should..."

I know it doesn't always seem that way, if you look closely at calamities of the past, you usually see some positive result, even if it takes several generations.

So when I agreed to do this service, I was told the month's theme was Forgiveness, I now realize its Healing. I think the universe unfolding as

it should, is a good start. I also take comfort, when I'm feeling wronged, that Taoist principle of not good, not bad it just is (well, that and the notion that I can only control myself), helpful.

In the Economist this week I read: *"Identity politics, boosted by social media and partisan television and radio, has re-engaged voters. But in solving one of democracy's problems, identity politics has created others.*

*That is because a politics that reinforces immutable identities leads away from the **tolerance and forbearance a democracy needs** to solve social conflicts. In arguments about who gets what, people can split the difference and feel content. In arguments about who they are—over religion, race and anti-elitism, say—compromise can seem like betrayal. When ways of life are at stake the other lot are not just mistaken, they are dangerous. Having not mattered enough, elections now matter too much."*

Sure, Joe Biden won by 6 million votes, roughly the **total** population of 5 or 6 small states. But Trump garnered almost 74 million votes, and increase of over 10 million votes from 2016 with an increase in both Black and Hispanic voters. Identity politics, tribalism, confirmation bias

have split our country more than in the Vietnam era, on par with that of the civil and revolutionary war.

If our faith wants the kind of social justice we hear on Sundays and in our publications, what are we doing to bring half our country to the table? **If** you balance your news consumption you undoubtedly hear a messages of socialism, porous borders and breakdown of law and order. For white, noncollege educated, hardworking, religious, middle America this is the end of a way of life. They have already seen a decrease in their standard of living and worse they do not see a brighter future for their children.

People so entrenched against their own interests, that even when it's clear a pandemic is raging, they demand church services are held, attend large rallies without masks, and demand businesses be kept open. Somewhere between 70 to 80 % believe the election was rigged. As our senators, our deliberative body, says nothing. Trump is a symptom, but we give him too much credit when we say he is the problem.

So back to the question, if our UU faith wants social justice, how do we bring about change when we aliginate half our country . I grew up hearing the UU bumper sticker Deed not Creed, but I wonder with all the Blaming and Shaming I hear coming from our faith's leaders, with

few deeds, how are we helping? Now I know that blaming and shaming are the stock and trade of all major religions, but at least with them, there is a path to redemption, even if only in the next life, all you have to do is say: Forgive me. Guilt and shame can be powerful motivators, but only work if they hit their mark. And I say of little value without a path to healing. As an example let look at the much used phrase in our congregations of White Privilege.

When I talk to Trump supporters about our differences, I can usually explain and get some acceptance of Black Lives Matter, using the example Michael Cluff presented to our congregation of homes. All homes matter but if yours is on fire where do you want the fire department to aim the hose. This analogy works well with many I have talked to. But we are told **words matter** by both side of the divide, why are we not more careful with ours?

White supremacy is another term that many, even many Trump supporters can understand is hurtful and untrue. I think the term is over applied to institutional racism and the people I've seen embracing white supremacy usually have nothing superior about them and in fact seem distrust the educated. I think the term anti-black is probably more accurate.

But nothing rises the ire of even middle right voters than the term White privilege. This term of blaming and shaming thrown about by our faith leaders like some Devine revelation has done more to push people away from social justice than even the term socialism. Also, let us not confuse the term white privilege with wealth privilege, the type that benefitted Donald J, George W. and most recently, Actresses Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin who tried to buy their way to the front of the line and is increasingly a problem in this country as wealth inequalities continue to grow for all Americans. No, I'm talking about the much used term white privilege that has replaced the more accurate term disenfranchisement.

Why? Because a dusk till dawn hardworking, god fearing, law abiding white person who has seen their standard of living decrease and is told that their privilege is the cause of others suffering, is unfathomable. There is no path to redemption, just blame. They work hard, they donate to charitable cause, they volunteer in their communities and they are told they are the problem. I think we have lost some of our own beloved members because of this rhetoric.

Now I played White Privilege mother-may-I as part of a workshop also lead by Michael Cluff. And it did enlighten me to some of the advantages I had. I also want to acknowledge that since 12 years old in

1968, amid the racial tensions of that decade, I realized being born male, white, in the US in 1956 was incredibly lucky. But as someone who went to Pleasantville High School, what my college, Rutgers, classified as an academically deprived high school, as someone who worked 7 days a week during the summer as well as some side-hustle to pay for college, and as early as last week crawled thru the mud, dodging nails, glass, animal feces, pushing ten years of spider webs out of my way to inspect someone's home, it doesn't always feel like privilege. My academic and extra circular twin and friend in high school, who like me was very active in sports, band, etc. went on a full scholarship to an HBC and is now a medical doctor, doesn't reenforce a feeling of privilege to me. Now, I'm being somewhat factious, because in truth, I do feel blessed, but mostly because hard work and discipline has paid off. I have another friend from high school, white, but if he were to play "white privilege mother may I" would have taken mostly steps back, but was successful, again thru hard work and perseverance.

One of the reasons my parents insisted we pay for our own college was the sense of pride wrought from accomplishing something thru hard work and perseverance. Something I probably should have been more cognoscente of with my own children.

So as a faith community I ask you, what are we to become? Do we write off the half of America by telling them they are the problem? Do we blame and shame while that half of America also sees their standard of living decline? Do we continue to push people to right-wing media and wealthy interest, and allow them to control the messaging? Oh yea, and how we doing on that whole “deed” not creed thing, do we have social justice projects lined up post pandemic other than a sign out front?

I’m no longer sure our faith leaders are presenting a message of hope, but instead trading in blame and shame. Not unlike my parents insisting that their children pay for their own college, what actual work are we asked to do other than the occasional march? Don’t get me wrong, I know there are people in our congregation doing good work. Allies in Caring is an example, and I applaud anyone who uses their unpaid, discretionary time, tithing some of that precious time to a worthy cause. The suspended soup kitchen is another worthy project made even more so because it combines good social justice work while working with another faith community. But, what actual work are we and our leaders doing? If it’s just spouting confirmation biased, then surely we have strayed from the path of the moral high ground. Chants of “No Justice **No Peace**” and Defund the police, while giving rioters

and looters are given a pass is also a way to alienate many of our neighbors and is, quite frankly, anathema to our 6<sup>th</sup> principle.

I know the antiracism work is important, critical in fact, and because of recent events an opportune time to make some real progress.

Unitarian Universalist are once again focusing their efforts on the right side of history. But we don't want a revolution, we want a revelation.

We want the majority seeking equality. When the UUA commissioned "Widen the circle," I'm not sure how wide they are trying for. Half the country is fired up in the wrong direction. Sure some percentage of them are racist thugs and we just have to wait for them to age out.

But, Partly because of popular media, each generation shows increased signs of not just tolerance, but acceptance, on both side of the racial divide. I think a large percentage of Trump supporters could be brought into a fusions coalition if they felt invited. Most of them want equality in housing, affordable health care, a fair wage and quality education for their children. These are social justice issues that unite rather than divide and may be helped along with the pendulum current trajectory.

But the pendulum swings both ways, and the harder its pushed the wider it swings. If a rising tide lifts ALL boats, than lets focus on a country that is fair to all people. Learn from the past, continue to grow

from the past, don't live there. Let's look for a message that brings hope to everyone.

We ignore the half of the country rowing in the opposite direction at our own peril, we should be focused on really creating, and **actually working** toward a more fair and peaceful world. I feel, when our country is so divided, that instead of pushing people further into their tribalism because we hold a mirror up only to them with words of blame, that we turn that mirror upon ourselves and ask are we truly part of the solution. There is so much we all have in common. The right messaging can help bring everyone to the table. However, the converse is also true, push too hard, and we may delay progress, and worse foment violence.

Ok, that's enough of **my** blaming and shaming, but I will say the path to redemption is by truly hearing ALL voices and working, actually working toward social justice for all. And if I raised your ire, Forgive me.

Now for something completely different:

As this month's theme is healing, forgiveness can often be a first step to healing, but the practice of gratitude can also be **very healing**.

Regardless of our Thanksgiving holiday's origin story, having a holiday celebrating the practice of gratitude, is well, worth celebrating. Sure

this year feels a little different, but thanks to the pandemic, Helen and I now have a Zoom meeting with all of our siblings one time a month. Otherwise time just slips away without contact. I am very grateful for this monthly contact.

Also this past week, Helen and I sold our business, RID Pest Control. I joined RID in 1984, then a minority owned company. I thought I would do it for 5 years and go back to school, but after the death of a partner, the bankruptcy of another and several other near cataclysmic events along the way, Helen and I acquired 100% interest in 1996. And so after 36 years, I now work for someone else. We are very grateful to our employees and the customers who have supported us thru the years.

I am grateful for much of the outcome of the last election, though it looks like we are in for more deadlock and rancor. At least we will now hear a message of hope and perhaps work toward common ground. In my own town, the Dems lost control and so now as a council person, not unlike my employment, I have little say in what committee assignments I will have. But I am grateful and I think I can work with my fellow council people and improve life in my town.

What are you grateful for? What unexpected result of this pandemic or election cycle actually provided you with meaningful insight to yourself or our world? Max Ehrmann's Desiderata goes on to say:

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be.  
And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life,  
keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken  
dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.<sup>1</sup>

Amen