

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

**“America: The Minority Report”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 4, 2018

**Meditation**

Deaths at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, a Krogers Grocery Store, and the children killed and injured at bus stops in five separate incidents in three days. These are all deaths that shouldn't have happened.

One way to do that honors the Jewish tradition of grieving by saying the Mourner's Kaddish for the dead. I found more modern language by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer that is more widely inclusive and has opportunities for participation. Please respond to each line, “L'chaim” which means, “to life!”

MODERN KADDISH / GLORY OF LIFE by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

May the glory of life be extolled. L'chaim.

May the world be blessed with peace,

all life hallowed by love and respect. L'chaim.

Let life be blessed, and glorified, exalted and honored. L'chaim.

Though beyond praises, songs,

and adorations we may utter, let life be celebrated. L'chaim.

For us, for all Israel, for all people,

may the promise and the gift of life come true. L'chaim.

May peace embrace all of us, all Israel, and all the world. L'chaim.

May peace be granted us, we who mourn,

and be a comfort to all who are bereaved, and let us say, L'chaim.

**Reading**

This reading comes from a plaque at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice next to the sculpture I took a picture of that is on the cover of the Order of Service. The National Memorial is in Montgomery, Alabama. Hear these words from that plaque:

From 1877 to 1950, millions of black Americans were targeted by racial terror lynchings. Over 4,400 lynchings of African Americans by groups of two to over 10,000 white people have been documented. These lynchings, often conducted in broad daylight and sometimes "on the courthouse lawn," were vicious acts of murder and their perpetrators acted with impunity. Black people were lynched by hanging, burning, shooting, drowning, stabbing and beating. Some were falsely accused of rape and murder, presumed guilty, and killed without trial or investigation;

others were lynched for political activism or economic success, slaughtered in widespread attacks on black communities, killed in place of a friend or relative whom the mob could not locate, or targeted for violating social rules of racial hierarchy.

Racial terror lynchings were directly tied to the history of enslavement and the re-establishment of white supremacy after the Civil War. These lynchings were distinct from hangings and mob violence committed against white people and other groups because they were intended to terrorize black Americans and enforce racial hierarchy. Unlike frontier justice in the West, racial terror lynchings generally took place for African Americans; despite its lawlessness and terrifying unpredictability, lynching was sanctioned by law enforcement and elected officials. Racial terror lynching was characterized by extreme violence: victims were tortured for hours before their brutalized bodies were left out on display to traumatize other black people. Members of the mob frequently documented their atrocities by posing for photographs with a dangling bloodied or burnt corpse.

## Sermon

How many of us cringe when we hear the expression “Make America great again?” The first three words *by themselves* I’d be fine with. The problem is that last word: **again**. Again makes the assumption that things were great in the past and now they aren’t.

That depends on *who you mean*.

The white middle-class got an economic boost after World War Two. Good socialist programs like the G.I. bill that allowed veterans to go to college and get good jobs; Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid were boons to working people climbing out of poverty. FHA housing programs, highway expansion, infrastructure programs for water and sewers all contributed to our quality of life.

But if you weren’t white, you didn’t benefit in the same ways or were not able to take advantage of all these programs. Discrimination based on race, gender and sexual orientation didn’t begin to be dismantled *until after* the golden days celebrated by MAGA enthusiasts.

Philomena and I had a chance to visit Montgomery, Alabama two weeks ago and see for ourselves evidence of the history of slavery, Jim Crow and racial terror. We visited the new Legacy Museum that documents the oppression of Africans transported in large numbers to provide a slave labor force that generated a good deal of American prosperity before the Civil War.

The Legacy museum is paired with the national Memorial for Peace and Justice, both in Montgomery which is also the Capital of Alabama. Jefferson Davis took his oath of office to lead the Confederacy outside the Alabama state capital. There is a statue there to document the spot.

I was interested in the date 1877 mentioned on the plaque. I wondered why that date begins the period of terror in the South against black Americans. I’d forgotten from my American history that the 1876 presidential election between Rutherford Hayes, Republican Governor of Ohio, and

Samuel Tilden, Democratic Governor of New York was very close 185 Electoral College votes to 184. But 20 votes were disputed and one Elector from Oregon was disqualified. Tilden got 2 million more popular votes than Hayes most of them in Southern states. The Southern Democrats wouldn't consent to Hayes' election until they were offered a compromise. The Compromise of 1877 ordered the end of reconstruction and the withdrawal of federal troops from the South.

(Notice any contemporary parallels? I'll have more to say and a few slides and some video from our trip in a service I'm planning for February.)

Indigenous people of the Americas haven't got much to look back on to celebrate. If they wanted to make America great again for their people, they'd have to look back to before the arrival of Columbus, the Spanish, the French, the Dutch and the English. Every expansion west of European settlers has meant the loss of land, trees, and game. It has meant the introduction of invasive species of plants and animals that have disrupted the ecosystem. There is nothing great about driving species to extinction, erosion, depleting the soil of nutrients and health, destroying mountains in the search for coal and minerals, poisoning water fracking for oil and gas, damming rivers to make reservoirs and turning valleys into landfills for trash.

Not sure where Indigenous people are on immigration policy but they might have been very interested in restricting Immigration in the 1600's. We didn't really have much in the way of legal restriction until after the United States was founded. There was a lot of unhappiness about Irish and German Catholic immigration as Protestant white Americans feared the Pope meddling in American politics similar in some ways to our fear of the Russians today. What got the first federal immigration restrictions passed in 1882 was stopping labor immigration for Chinese who previously came to look for gold in the Sierras and work on building the railroads. The 1924 Immigration act further barred Asian Immigration and set quotas for each country. It wasn't until the immigration reform of 1965 that immigration from Asia opened up.

The door wasn't exactly open to Southern Europeans either. After World War I, there were many displaced people, many poor and illiterate that wanted to come to the new world. Congress passed a literacy requirement to only allow in those that could read and write.

There is one group that might want to go back to a better time in the past. Those would be Muslims and immigrants from the Middle-East – at least to before September 11, 2001. Yet I suspect they still experienced discrimination and suspicion if they were not Protestant Christians.

Many if not most immigrants to this country can recall a time in their country of origin when they were not persecuted; a time when they enjoyed a status of inclusion in the society. One special category of immigrants to this nation who have dealt with oppression for most of their history is the Jewish diaspora. Even before the time when Jesus walked the earth, the monotheism of Judaism had been at odds with the polytheism of the ancient world. Hanukkah is a December holiday that remembers a war against oppressive Greek occupation interfering with Jewish religious beliefs and practices. Jews rejection of Jesus as the Messiah has been a source of oppression until this day. The

attack in Pittsburgh against the Tree of Life Synagogue is just the latest example of the hatred that Jews have endured.

I recently read a fascinating article in the Wall Street Journal (thank you Google) titled, “The Paradox of American anti-Semitism.” It points out that though there has always been anti-Semitism in this country, this is the only place in the world that upheld a vision of pluralism that would include them.

George Washington eloquently defined this value in his 1790 letter to the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island: “For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.” ([Link](#))

The article goes on to say that anti-Semitism can be considered a bell-weather of our commitment to pluralism in this nation. When that commitment weakens, violence against Jews increases.

I witnessed just the opposite sentiment on Monday night attending the Schenectady Clergy Against Hate memorial service. The community-wide service of remembrance, solidarity and peace was held at Gates of Heaven Synagogue in Schenectady. Over a thousand people turned out for the event. Their Rabbi, Matt Cutler, led the service which included two Imams, Rabbis from other congregations, ministers, priests, the two Schenectady UU ministers Lynn Gardner and Wendy Bartel, and a representative from the Sikh community. The service ended with the traditional Mourner’s Kaddish in Hebrew.

The two speakers that connected strongly with those gathered for the service were Paul Uppal the executive secretary at the gurdwara of Albany and the Rev. Horace Sanders, minister of Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church in Schenectady. Uppal reminded us Sikhs too have a long history of worldwide discrimination and oppression, escalating after September 11<sup>th</sup>. In Wisconsin in 2012 they also experienced a mass shooting in one of their worship centers. The real terrorists in this country we need to be concerned about are lone white men with high powered guns. Rev. Sanders identified racism as the key problem in our society. Hate can never be normalized, nor can the pain we experience immobilize us. We must disarm hate with love by passionately speaking up, speaking loud and staying united in solidarity.

While sitting in this multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-religious gathering, it was very clear to me that the people in that room shared a common vision of what makes America great. What we were doing was a prime example of what makes America great. And as you look into the past, this isn’t what is being pointed to by the expression “Make America great again.”

The MAGA past that the current occupier of the White House celebrates is white, male, heterosexual, and Evangelically Christian. It is a fundamentally racist, sexist, homophobic projection of who we have been that he would like to reestablish as the dominant norm again, a rough approximation of the era of Joseph McCarthy striving to purify our nation.

I would go further to say that there isn't any better America to return to in the past except maybe before the current President was elected. Nor did God anoint the framers of the Constitution with a sanctified document. The 27 amendments that have been added prove its lack of perfection. Current Supreme Court decisions like Citizen's United and elimination of safeguards to protect people's right to vote suggest more improvements are needed.

What I love about Unitarian Universalism is that it is a forward looking faith rather than a backward looking one. We do not lift up one historical religious revelation as the authoritative one. The Bible is the foundational text from which our liberal religious tradition emerged, but we are no longer limited to that text. Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions are honored here among others. And we do not limit our thinking to revealed sacred texts or divinely appointed prophets. The truths that come from science, from philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, mathematics and physics are also fully welcome here as sources for guidance in how we live our lives. We celebrate the power of the human mind and the integrity of the human body and the value of community to infuse our lives with meaning.

Rather than looking backward, we imagine creating an America and a world community *unlike any* we've ever seen before in the past. In this vision of the future, we've put an end to systematic oppression that is sanctioned by the state. We envision a state committed to equal justice and peaceful resolution of conflict. This state desires peace and justice not just for Americans but for all people around the world. And going beyond people, our seventh principle demands that we must live in balance with the world ecosystem respecting biodiversity and managing the climate for the benefit of all beings on land, sea, and in the air.

These are the values I hope you'll be taking to your polling place when you vote on Tuesday. There are very clear choices to be made between the candidates. There are very clear choices when we look at the agendas of the political parties and who leads those parties.

We live in a very difficult time around the world as the first effects of climate change begin to be felt. Immigration is a sign of that change as agricultural lands that formerly were used for growing food can no longer support plant life; as sea level begins to rise and flood communities at high tide. The stresses that are driving nations toward authoritarian governments are strong. The tensions are causing a rise in hate.

We collectively need to develop another path to meet these challenges. At this point, those answers are not coming from the people leading government in Washington who want to fuel that hate rather than seek peaceful resolution. The answers need to come up from the bottom.

Let us be grateful that we live in a democracy. Here a counter response can come from the bottom up, from the voters. That's you and me. That's our votes that say no to the agenda of hate, of punishing the marginalized and the victims.

Let us make America greater than it is has ever been by the votes we cast on Tuesday.

## **Benediction**

I close with a few quotes on voting

The first one to fire you up is from Ann Coulter:

It would be a much better country if women did not vote. That is simply a fact. In fact, in every presidential election since 1950 - except Goldwater in '64 - the Republican would have won, if only the men had voted.

The second more affirmative quote comes from Father Luis Guitierrez

Too many people fought too hard to make sure all citizens of all colors, races, ethnicities, genders, and abilities can vote to think that not voting somehow sends a message.

This one from FDR:

Nobody will ever deprive the American people of the right to vote except the American people themselves and the only way they could do this is by not voting.

Finally, we'll close with a song by Woody Guthrie who said, "Most folks don't realize that your vote is about the best thing you got in the world because it is the best thing you can use to change the world and make it better."