

The Story We Are Called To Be¹

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Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Opening Words

I welcome you, those who hold grief in your hearts.

I welcome you, those with a powerful and passionate hope.

I welcome you, those who are weary and overwhelmed.

I welcome you, those who offer thanks in each new dawn.

This is a time when words feel so inadequate.

Adrienne Rich writes: My heart is moved by all I cannot save. So much has been destroyed.

I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.

And so we come into this place of peace; may its silence heal our spirits.

We come into this place of memory; may its history warm our souls.

We come into this place of prophecy and power; may its vision renew our hearts.

We come into this place of compassion, may its kindness restore our hope.

Reading: Excerpt from *Ceremony*

Leslie Marmon Silko²

I will tell you something about stories,

[he said]

They aren't just entertainment.

Don't be fooled.

They are all we have, you see,

all we have to fight off

illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.

So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten.

They would like that

They would be happy

Because we would be defenseless then.

Sermon

The word “story” can be used to describe the way we understand the reality in which we live. A story is what we tell ourselves about our lives, the meanings we attach to reality. This past week we saw that people in America are holding vastly divergent stories about what it means to be American, that we hold vastly divergent understandings of the reality of our times.

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2 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, (Penguin Books, 1977) p. 2.

One thing about stories is that even vastly divergent stories can exist in the same space, and in a sense they can all be true—because people live out their lives based on their particular understandings of reality. Stories are a way to understand reality, but stories also shape reality. In this way, stories have incredible power: to harm or to heal, to destroy or to protect, to create the future and even the past.

One story I heard a lot during the last several weeks was the story of a woman who would finally break the ultimate glass ceiling and hold the highest office in the country. This story identified its beginnings in the sacrifices of the suffragists to win the vote for women. But it also included a vision of a multicultural nation that honored all of its people, and welcomed the immigrants who came into our midst. There were many people who believed in this story, who were deeply inspired by this story. In fact, the popular vote of our country would have elevated Hilary Clinton to the presidency. When the electoral votes were all in, and Clinton had lost, the people who were holding this story in their hearts were crushed and heartbroken. And you are still grieving.

There was another story that took more effort for me to discover, a story of those who supported the other major candidate, now president-elect Donald Trump. I was able to get some insights into this story by looking at Facebook posts from more conservative members of my own extended family. In the *best* versions—and I emphasize that—in the *best* versions of this story, there was a hope that a very imperfect outsider would bring the jobs back; that he would shake things up and pay attention to people in the middle of the country, the working Joes whose lives had been upended by free trade deals. There was a lot of pain in the heartlands that no one was paying attention to. Some also sincerely hoped he might be the better choice to protect their religious freedom from changes they saw as troubling such as abortion and gay marriage. These folks were not oblivious to the problems he represented, but they saw the other candidate as much worse. I respect those folks who wrestled with their values searching for the best way forward.

But there has been a much more troubling story in the support shown for Mr. Trump. It is a very old story, an ideology of white supremacy in this nation that originated in the destruction of Indigenous nations who lived in this land, and in the capture and enslavement of African people. White supremacy has morphed and changed through the centuries, but it has never gone away. Some hoped that the election of Barack Obama signaled a transformation had been achieved. But that was never the case, and during this election season, we saw the flames of hatred stirred up and given more oxygen. Mr. Trump played on the real pain of people in our country, and through scapegoating, channeled that pain into hatred. Hatred against people of color, immigrants, Muslims, women, queer people, people with disabilities.

Since Tuesday, I have been hearing stories about people already experiencing violence from blatant white supremacists emboldened by the Trump election. Muslim women whose hijab scarves have been ripped from their heads, Latino children beaten up in school, Swastikas painted on the door to a Jewish community center, rainbow flags being burned, and heartbreaking fears about what will happen next.³

A story is what we tell ourselves about our lives, the meanings we attach to reality. Vastly divergent stories can exist in the same space, and in a sense they can all be true—because people live out their lives based on their particular understandings of reality.

3 <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/11/over-200-incidents-hateful-harassment-and-intimidation-election-day>

Some of the stories we tell about our lives are so ingrained that they are almost invisible to us. We think of them as just “the way things are.” But we do not have a shared reality as a nation, a shared sense of “the way things are.” That may not be a bad thing, if it helps us to wake up, to ask questions about what story we are telling ourselves.

There are some people saying that now is the time for our country to come back together, now is the time for us to unite as Americans and let go of the hostilities of the election season. One person named it something like this: We've had a big family fight and we have to get back to the table, we have to sit together again at one big table of our country. They speak about how an important marker of American democracy is the peaceful transition of power.

I would agree that letting go of hostility is a good thing. Letting go of blame and hate. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said: “If we could read the secret history of our enemies we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.” It is important to understand the suffering in each other's lives, to understand how we come to the choices we make. It doesn't help us to hate each other.

But the call to unity covers up something very important—the call to unity relies on our going back to a story that Joanna Macy called “Business as Usual.” I've talked before about the Business as Usual story. This is the foundational story of our Industrial Growth Society. In this story, our economic and political systems depend on ever increasing extraction and consumption of resources. They require the generation of ever more rapidly increasing profits. In this story, human lives are valued only insofar as they can be used in the generation of profits and the consumption of products. In this story, the Earth is seen as a resource bank for the generation of profits, and also the septic tank for human waste.

This story lies underneath almost every conversation that takes place in the public sphere, from the White House to Wall Street. Business and political leaders all assume that we must grow the economy, they just offer different solutions toward that goal. It is the story that sometimes we think of as basic reality, we don't really think of it as a story at all. This story wouldn't have changed based on whether Trump or Clinton won the white house. Oh yes, there would be some important differences for human and environmental rights. But the underlying power in this story belongs to the multi-national corporations and elite business-owning families.

The call to unity goes something like this: “Let's put aside our differences to get the economy growing again, create more jobs, and so on.” And this call to unity pretends that white supremacy is only a fringe movement, and not an integral part of business as usual in America.

So I cannot answer a call to unity like that. I keep hearing in my heart a different call, a call to a whole new story, or a story that is so old it seems new. That call is sometimes just a whisper, but more and more it echoes like a great shout—a call that demands that we look beyond the superficial unity of the realm of the status-quo, and look deeper into a more essential unity that we are beginning to awaken to.

For the “business as usual” story is actually a story built on separation. Business as usual is a story that says that human beings are separate from each other, that one can build a wall between different races and religions. It is a story that says that human beings are separate from the earth, as if the environment were a special interest and has nothing to do with our food and water and life itself.

My teacher Joanna Macy talked about three foundational stories. The first story is this “Business as Usual” story. But Macy suggests that if we keep trying to follow business as usual, we will end up in another story she calls “The Great Unraveling.” This story calls attention to the disasters that the Industrial Growth Society is causing. This story is the stuff of our nightmares of the past week. Race hatred, violence in the streets, the people torn apart fighting over scraps to survive. This story is about the environmental disasters of global warming and rising sea levels and mass extinctions. It foretells a future of destruction, hunger, disease, and war, and the likely extinction of human society as we have known it.

But there is a third story. Macy calls it the story of “The Great Turning.” In this story, people choose to create a transition away from the Industrial Growth Society toward a Life-Sustaining Society. In this story, people come to understand their profound interconnection with each other, and with all of the natural world. People join together to make the changes that can heal and defend life on earth. The name of this third story, “The Great Turning,” grew from imagining how future beings might look back on our own time. If humanity survives, it will be because we've made a transition to a Life-Sustaining Society. Those who help to make that transition will be seen as heroes to future generations. The Great Turning will be as significant to them as in our time we regard great transitions of the past. The future generations will tell the stories of the Great Turning to their children and grandchildren.

Human beings have the capacity to meet our needs without destroying our life-support system. We could generate the energy we need through renewable forms such as solar, wind, tides and algae. We could grow food through organic permaculture methods in thousands of small farms and gardens in every yard. We have birth control methods that could bring human population under control. We have developed social structures to mediate conflict, and give people a voice in democracy. When we realize how profoundly interconnected we are to all beings, we know that we need each other, that no one is outside of the circle of worth and dignity.

Business as usual. A great unraveling. A great turning. If we understand the stories we realize that each of us can make a choice about what story we want to tell about our lives, what version of reality to which we want to give our energy. And there is power in that. We don't have to sit back and observe with horror the increasing violence and destruction that have been unleashed. Instead, we must remember the story we are called to be. We must recommit ourselves to live out our deepest values. Now, more than ever.

In the contest between business as usual and the possibility of a great turning toward life-sustaining society, the front lines are perhaps most starkly drawn right now on the plains of North Dakota. We see it in the struggle of water protectors against the Dakota Access Pipeline. Robin Wall Kimmerer and Kathleen Dean Moore talk about it in *Yes Magazine*, in a story called “The White Horse and the Humvees.”⁴ I want to read it to you:

Two lines, facing each other on a North Dakota highway. On one side, concrete barriers protect a row of armored vehicles and helmeted police with assault rifles. On the other, a young man rides a white horse whose legs are stained with blood. A woman, wearing a scarf to protect her lungs from tear gas, wafts sage smoke over a boy to give him strength, wash away hate, and remind him of his sacred purpose.

4 <http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/the-humvees-and-the-white-horse2014two-futures-20161105>

Here, on a highway stretching across trampled prairie grass, the fundamental contest of our time is playing out.

It's a confrontation not only between two groups of people, but between two world views. The space between the lines vibrates with tensions of race, historical trauma, broken treaties, money and politics, love and fear. But the underlying issue that charges the air, mixing with the smells of tear gas and sage, is the global contest between two deeply different ideas about the true meaning of land.

On one side is the unquestioned assumption that land is merely a warehouse of lifeless materials that have been given to (some of) us by God or conquest, to use without constraint. On this view, human happiness is best served by whatever economy most efficiently transforms water, soils, minerals, wild lives, and human yearning into corporate wealth. And so it is possible to love the bottom line on a quarterly report so fiercely that you will call out the National Guard to protect it.

On the other side of the concrete barriers is a story that is so ancient it seems revolutionary. On this view, the land is a great and nourishing gift to all beings. The fertile soil, the fresh water, the clear air, the creatures, swift or rooted: they require gratitude and veneration. These gifts are not commodities, like scrap iron and sneakers. The land is sacred, a living breathing entity, for whom we must care, as she cares for us. And so it is possible to love land and water so fiercely you will live in a tent in a North Dakota winter to protect them.

It may turn out that the cracks in that stretch of two-lane highway mark a giant crack in time, when one set of assumptions about reality snaps and is replaced by another. This, like all times of paradigm shift, is an unsettled time, a time of shouting and police truncheons, as privileged people defend the assumptions that have served them royally.

What are they so afraid of out there in North Dakota, that they arrest journalists, set dogs on women and children, send prayerful protectors to jail and align para-military force against indigenous people on their own homelands?

Maybe they are afraid of the truth-telling power of the people at Standing Rock and their busloads of allies, who are making clear that we live in an era of profound error that we mistakenly believe is the only way we *can* live, an era of insanity that we believe is the only way we can *think*. But once people accept with heart and mind that land is our teacher, our mother, our garden, our pharmacy, our church, our cradle and our grave, it becomes unthinkable to destroy it. This vision threatens the industrial worldview more than anything else.

Indigenous people are saying, there are honorable and enduring lifeways that beckon to people who are weary of destruction.

Everyone can join the people of Standing Rock and say *No*. No more wrecked land. No more oil spills. No more poisoned wells. We don't have to surrender the well-being of communities to the profit of a few. We can say *Yes*. Yes, we are all in this together. Yes,

we can all stand on moral ground. Yes, we can all be protectors of the water and protectors of the silently watching future. The blockade on the highway is an invitation to remember and reclaim who we might be — just and joyous humans on a bountiful Earth. Right here, between the barricades, we are offered a choice.

Leslie Marmon Silko says, “You don't have anything if you don't have the stories.” Here in our faith community, we are not meant to be doing the work of “business as usual.” We are called to the work of old stories and new dreams, of deep values and courageous ideals. Rev. Jacqui Lewis says, “We are in the work of change management. We are in the work of healing the world with the help of all that is holy.”⁵ Our worship together, our congregation itself, are tools we have for creating change in our culture, for bringing about a new way of being—as Charles Eisenstein says, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*.⁶

I know so many are feeling discouraged right now about the change to our elected government. We can see that it bodes suffering and hard times. But here is the thing. A change in stories, a change in world view, has never happened because of the people in power, the people at the top. This kind of fundamental change always happens from people on the margins, people on the bottom, people in unexpected places.

We never know if our own acts of love and kindness might tip the balance. We never know if our willingness to welcome an immigrant to our community or visit a neighbor's house of worship might tip the balance. We never know if our planting a garden, or living more simply, might tip the balance. We never know if reminding each other of the interconnections between all beings, might tip the balance.

There is one more part to the story of the White Horse and the Humvees, the story at the concrete barrier between water protector warriors and police officers. It ends like this:

On the highway, a warrior steps around the concrete barrier, offering a sage bundle that trails white smoke. Approaching a figure in riot gear, he extends the blessing to the officer, letting the smoke wash over him. To give him strength. To wash away hate. To remind him of his purpose.

This is not going to be an easy time ahead of us. But it never was going to be easy. If you were hoping it would be easy, it may be that you have to grieve that old story. Let yourself take time to weep and mourn. We are all being called upon to make a choice. We have our work cut out for us. Our job is to keep track of the story we are called to be: to remember our values and our connections with all people and all beings of the earth, and to live in such a way to further those values. We are called to this as individuals, and we are called to this as a congregation. May we find strength and courage. May we always remember our purpose.

May it be so.

Closing Words

Rebecca Solnit says: “To be hopeful means to be uncertain about the future, to be tender toward possibilities, to be dedicated to change all the way down to the bottom of your heart.”

⁵ From a workshop for New England UU Ministers November 1-3, 2016.

⁶ Charles Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*. Available online at <http://charleseisenstein.net/project/the-more-beautiful-world-our-hearts-know-is-possible/>