TRUTH, TRAUMA AND TRANSFORMATION
Embracing the cracks AND the gold…

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Part One: Truth

Fragments from last November’s congregational border trip to Tijuana: President Trump threatening to and eventually closing the border, Fox News headlines braying about dangerous migrants in the bus station where brave people small of stature and grateful of nature, mostly parents with kids, begin Greyhound bus odysseys; two seconds of fame as Rev. Ranwa Hammamy and I lead a ceremonial wedding ceremony for LBGTQ couples who want not to be separated; the defiant weariness in their faces after walking thousands of miles to escape endangerment from gangs and attacks by their fellow migrants, the ceremony where the number of rainbow-hued items is exceeded only by the tears of joy and sorrow.
So much truth and none.

One of my sacred texts is Partridge’s etymological dictionary which reveals that the word essay is related to “assay” which means a chemical test. In the experimental spirit of my father, a biochemist, I continue what is said to be the longest running essay tradition in North America. In 2019, the possibility of any 7000 words containing much straight-up truth is slim. “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant,” Emily Dickinson wrote. Within rigid form of an essay, I will try to catch shapeshifting nature of truth with a few too many words and some pictures.

Despite more than a year of diligent preparation, I begin in a rather unimpressive place with this, that

Big T Truth is in pieces all around us. Truth, whatever it is, is no longer disguised as a single grand thing that can save us or even belong to all of us. The gig is up: we live among many conflicting truths.

Religion means to bind together and in our tradition and as colleagues we have placed great value in being bound to truth. Since movable type allowed our religious ancestors to read scriptures for themselves, we have tried to be on the side of right. Shunned, condemned, a few of us lost our lives for truth. Affirming what’s real in this false news world seems essential and totally dependent on what my colleague, Dr. Mark Hicks, calls our standpoint. And yet, what is true and for how long?
The word heretic means…”to question.” We are heretics on both sides of the family, in fact Dr. Meg Richardson enlightened me, this essay was an alternative to the more conservative and orthodox clergy gatherings in the early 1800s which no longer welcomed the self-proclaimed “liberal” views. Here is a question for these times, reclaiming our label: What do liberal truth-seekers do when the idea of truth is in transition, shattered and in shards?

Having just said that the essay form is too pronouncing for our evolving truths, I will now make some declarative statements about the promise and heartbreak of where we are, my slant:

Stating the obvious: we have many different and disparate realities among us in the big tent of Unitarian Universalism. Many of the communities we serve are founded on an outcome-based sort of Calvinism: that the world is essentially fair and equitable, that if you work hard and keep your nose clean, you will do okay and that people who have resources and opportunities are the people who have done this. Broken-open, the wreckage of the American dream is all around, the pieces still grabbed and grasped by many through crushed by the facts of our lives. The idea that some among us have lived better while others just have fallen short is what has let us sometimes be seen as holier-than-thou, smarter than you, exclusionary, and not-so-gifted in the hospitality area.

Truth: today our young families raising their black or brown babies in a world where 30 states spend more on incarceration than education smashes right up against the keening sorrow of the elder who thought racism was eradicated by the laws they worked so hard to pass when they were young radicals. The graduate raised with intruder drills as standard procedure mocks the scholar who speaks of hope at graduation. The retiree looks at the world and wonders what they worked for so hard all their life while youth wonder whether they have a future.

I try to minister to those losing bearings—truths which were beacons are now shattered, and to others for whom the shattering is liberating, breaking down structures which enthroned some realities while shunning others. Holding all of this can make me despair and I suspect some of you as well. James Freeman Clarke talked about things commonly believed among us. A half century later we stopped talking about theology and the mores of the dominant social location became our frame of acceptability. In this ministry today, we sift broken pieces sometimes believed among us. And the best we can do for structure is knock together a temporary frame, using the planks that once served us well. My experience says we need to talk to each other across difference, using our own lived experience as guide—and even that is hard.

Because we don’t practice productive conflict, the nasty kinds fuels our conflict avoidance. This was evident when I co-wrote The Arc of the Universe in 2003-8. Conflict aversion is a part of our culture, a kind of not-in-my-backyard-ness rejection. At its worst, we speak to those who agree and dismiss others. Dominant culture tends to sense any new truth as a zero-sum game and the inability to hold multiple truths has led to deep divisions and lack of right relationship. When people cannot hear one another’s truth, then they go stealth or just move out of relationship. Sometimes we think that the moment when things get broken is when suppressed anger explodes—most times the relationship is already broken by then. If we deny people’s truths, then we become trapped in a hell of disconnection which limits rather than liberates us. And those of us denied develop our own dysfunctions.
When we talk about racism, transphobia, ableism, classism or other barriers to hospitality, we are accused of being creedal. I am sure that those who finally became abolitionists were also accused of not allowing dissent—and maybe some things, when measured against our faith values, aren’t okay. Freedom to express hate or demean others is not a religious value. Our dominant culture values integrationists who don’t rock the boat and labels those who rock the boat as angry and unwanted. Those loud, bold notes shatter more stuff and is condemned: To preserve the freedom of one to say things unmoored from our values (“Oh, that’s just Joe.”), we drive away others and what we call democracy might just be gussied-up scarcity mindset. If YOU are heard, no one will hear ME. And it sure doesn’t feel covenantal when we speak about one another and not with each other.

**True community saves us, faux-community breaks us.** Sometimes if I listen to the chatter among us, at parties or from pulpits, we seem to have all the answers. This lack of humility has left many ill-prepared to deal with the Post 2016 Devolution where we have very little certainty about anything. Poet Rainer Maria Rilke wrote, “Love consists in this: that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.” Too often we keep our solitudes isolated. We can’t trust one another with our stories or our truths and those marginalized can’t do their own healing work. And for many of us, when asked what is larger than we are, we say “community.” If community is now what we hold holy and sacred, it best be intentional, covenantal and real.

When we debated slavery in our congregations in the mid-1800s, slavery won. When we did let women be ministers, we stopped letting them lead for decades because we felt a need to be a more manly religion. If we had debated integration in the 1950s, segregationists would have won. If we had had a vote on whether being gay was okay in the 1960s, not being gay would have been most comfortable. In all those eras, those who wanted the status quo and to not be too far ahead of the pack did win, by denying the space for the truth and the trauma of the people most affected. If we are a religion, then we do have some timeless truths that call us to a higher plane if we give more of our shared life to following their call. Our various realities right now, the broken shards, injure and re-injure us and each other. How do we pick them up without being cut, to fit their jagged edges together? How does our obsession with congregational autonomy (I do not say polity because Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore taught me that term for us is inadequate) fit with the need to pool our resources to meet the challenges before our faith? How does the importance of excellence in things like preaching and administration and the other areas of ministry fit in with the idea that not being abusive is a foundation of excellence? How does a mastery culture work in a world that requires a beginner’s mind?

As Terry Tempest Williams puts it, “A mosaic is a conversation between what is broken.”

**Some realities are so hard to hear and we didn’t hear them for a long time so we might have to hear them again and again.** We’ve been having a loud conversation for more than two years now, so some are ready to move on. And yet we wouldn’t be having this conversation if we had finished the one in the 1960s or the 1980s. Our inability to embrace the truths that have been silenced for so long endangers us. We lose truths from generation to generation which means people have to tell and retell traumatic stories. We need to understand the gripping realities of climate change, the egregious income gap which keeps growing and growing in this country, the extent to which we have created a world in
which capital and those who have it can travel across the globe while we pen up labor and real human lives within borders. We need to listen and to hear that these traumatic truths are part of the reality of the actual world in which we live. All of them, including the fears of our elders and our youth.

**Truth: many people among us already practice deep resilience.** The grounded, raw day-to-day of people has as much to teach us as any textbook or intellectual treatise and, if met with humble appreciation, can be illuminating. People who know what it means to have a “survival faith” can be teachers. This back-of-the-envelope, saves-your-life-everyday discernment of what you need to hang on is the journey of the person wrestling with addiction a day at a time, the one with deep depression searching for meaning anew each morning, the bereaved who pull themselves up the mountain of life. If we can't come as we are and if we can't bring our “real” then we are not co-creators of this faith and the faith loses survival DNA. When our truth run up against other people's intolerance, a lot fractures. Vulnerability should be honored not dissected. Faith requires us to be wide open and it is hard to do that with shields up These times make us wrestle with what we believe, wrestle or allow the terror and despair to take over our minds and our hearts.

And mistakes—I make them everyday. Don’t you? About 30 people are here from the congregation I serve, they can each tell you about one and each will have their own slant.

Tell the truth but tell it slant. The Japanese art of kintsugi takes broken things and binds them back together with glue and gold. In other words, the breaking of absolutes allows for a new kind of beauty to be created.

A haiku for our fleeting, fleeing friend, truth:

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Truth is what we live
Everyday. The rest is
Just pretty pipedreams.
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My slant is this: theology is the gold and covenantal community the glue to create our new mosaic. The theology by an actual theologian, my beloved colleague the Reverend Sofia Betancourt in the response, will be exquisite. Yet those of us who have the post-traumatic experience practice survival faith and I have that middle-of-the-night, tossing-and-searching cred as well as a deep studied sense that theology is a needed raft.

In both precious heritages, Universalist and Unitarian, we come from lines of heretics, questioners, defined and named by theological and political adversaries. And we are “this worldly” on both sides of our theological family tree, focused on building heaven on this earth, as our Universalist ancestors put it. Bound by covenants not creeds, our defined relationships bind us together more than any statement of (ever evolving) Living Tradition beliefs reinterpreted to meet the challenges of each age. We are deeply aspirational--perhaps even pathologically aspirational-- and we have such deep beliefs in the possibility of transformation and ever-positive evolution.

Our greatest strength is also our greatest weakness. Our heretical tendencies make us the ones to raise deep questions, especially in transformational times such as these. And being focused on this world,
many among us are asking: How can we get along when digital exposure makes us know so much about others’ lives without knowing much about the realities? How can we resist making people and their stories into commodities in toxic consumerism? How can we find together the courage to face the overwhelming truths of climate change and acts of great inhumanity which myths about racial superiority divert us from? How can we embrace that authenticity and real struggle opens a path to joy and exuberance. Don’t look skeptical, y’all.

The fact that we are “this worldly” requires that we address these things. We need to avoid spiritual bypasses. Author Resmaa Manakem talks about clean and dirty pain in the healing of trauma: “clean” is what is left when you have gone through and done the work and “dirty” is what spews everywhere when you can’t or haven’t. Spirituality out of relationship with the truths of our time does not elevate or cleanse the spirit. Yes, rest and respite and care of the soul is critical, and yet many do not have that luxury. How do resourced communities share the burden of today’s deep work a bit more so others aren’t left to labor nonstop?

Covenant is at our core, yet so many know it as a fighting word, often because of past wounds, a topic I will revisit. How have we, a covenental people, lost that idea that we agree how we will be together? Many more astute than I have spoken about this: we need to pay attention and then to bring it back into the communities we serve. One reason we need covenant is so we can engage in productive disagreements. A willingness to stay in respectful, boundaried relationship allows us to ask the deep commitments of one another required to live together in a way in a way that makes all residents and not guests. Without a sense of living into a shared faith commitment, we may not feel as if we have the fortitude to make the transformations needed to truly create something new together or to heal what is broken together. We may forget that together we are more, to have the faith because of uncertainty, as Rev. Paul Rasor advises.

And a caution about our aspirations: The monumental hubris on our Unitarian side about “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever” is surpassed only on the Universalist side with a part of the Washington Avowal where we say that we believe that “the power of men of good will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively established the kingdom of God.” These are so far-horizon they are not that useful today. Perhaps once we made that language of those goals inclusive, they became less possible.

How can we get back to some basic stuff, like the Universalism I was taught mean that each of us has the potential to return to the wholeness that missteps and mistakes make us despair of ever recovering. Most days, I need that hope, And Universalism also gives us the idea, as Rev. David MacPherson puts it, that all of us in this world are part of one human family and the idea the kingdom of God on earth, also called Beloved Community, as one of the great goals on the far horizon.

Our living tradition, an ever-learning tradition, needs more ways to articulate what we believe together. How would conversations about what is not commonly believed among us be different if they were grounded in our shared pool of meaning? What if we talked less about hating anyone to tell us what to believe and actually talk about what saves our souls when we can’t sleep from fear and anxiety? What if
part of the glue is risk-taking and letting go of shame and the fear of being wrong? What if we are liberated into messiness and imperfection?

Debates among us sometimes misinterpret our first principle as being not about ultimate worth but about absolute rights to comfort for some. We have as rich a theological treasure chest as any faith and yet we have kept it locked away when we need to melt and mix that gold and let it fill in the cracks in today’s broken world. And faith? Faith moves us into engagement even when it is not at all clear how the parts will fit together.
Part Two: Trauma

This spring, my family travelled to Poston, Arizona, to visit the ruins of the internment camp where my father was incarcerated as a small child. The camps were never spoke of within the family until I was in my twenties and Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 that offered an apology and limited financial reparations to those incarcerated. After that it
seemed we talked of little else for a decade. Two images stay with me. One is of the tiles from the showers which started the phrase the “banality of evil” echoing again and again in my head. Hannah Arendt’s phrase refers to the bureaucratic compliance which enabled the Holocaust, acquiescence and turning away not to look. Those ordinary, everyday tiles remain, in that land taken from the Colorado River Indian Nation for incarceration. This other image is of the carving outside the library that the community built, an example of defiant art which has saved the spirits of abused people separated from beauty. Do we turn towards or away from this week’s news that children are again being sent to Oklahoma’s Fort Sills which was formerly incarcerated Japanese-Americans. The multi-generational damage from my father’s experience was huge and he was with his family for only a few years. Are we paying attention to the national conversation about reparations and slavery?

The National Institutes of Health writes, “The human response to psychological trauma is one of the most important public health problems in the world.” And these words from the American Psychological Association: “When traumatization is due to experiences of racism it is sometimes called racial trauma.
Racial trauma can result from…workplace discrimination or hate crimes, or it can be the result of an accumulation of many small occurrences, such as everyday discrimination and microaggressions.”

Trauma is suffering amplified beyond endurance, or that is how I understand it as a minister and as a person who has been forced to take a multi-year personal dive into understanding it. If our faith calls us to truly welcome all people, and to offer them a path back to their birthright wholeness, then we need to understand what trauma does and how it affects our communities and how we sometimes make it worse. Trauma is hard to hear about and worse to experience, so in this part of the essay it might help to remember, this is about healing, healing ourselves and the world. Really.

As human beings, we have a window of what we can tolerate. People—or animals—who have experienced trauma tend to respond with either fight or flight and they are more likely to go into hypoarousal or hyperarousal outside what they can bear. [These two slides from From Understanding Trauma: A Survivor’s Guide by Colleen West, LMFT and Rachel Walker, LMFT] Take them out of their “window of tolerance” and they will leave, physically or spiritually, or fight or slide into inactivity and depression. And so much—and so many—are lost. My truth now that I have this lens: we ignore many forms of trauma among us in our communities. War time experience, family violence, religious violations, discrimination are among the forms of trauma among us. We do not talk of these or of addiction, domestic violence, mental illness or predatory practices among us—or, tragically, do our community members view this as appropriate to share with one another. Those who do speak of these things are likely to be ignored—or given platitudes or advice. And when we don’t believe one another’s truths or we pronounce them confusing or too hard to bear, we magnify the trauma.
In his book, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, Rasmaa Manekem delineates how the deep trauma that was slavery was imported from white Europe where landed and propertied white people abused poor white people. Today the group of people most likely to take their own lives are white men who expect themselves and their lives to be “better than.” The myth of racial superiority endangers all and covers a pathological greed by an increasingly shrinking few. And as some call for resegregating, others demand financial reparations for slavery. Gretchen Schmelzer, a trauma counselor writes, “Trauma may have happened in the past, but until it is integrated, the trauma tends to exist in an ever-happening present.” Those of us with trauma have our own work and it requires places that are worthy of our trust and space for healing and integration.

*More of us know we live in a trauma culture now.* In the Summers of 2014, 2016 and 2016, the killing of young black men at the hands of police in others seemed an almost a weekly occurrence; the Black Lives Matter movement came into focus; white nationalists stormed Charlottesville; the hottest summer on record seemed a harbinger of climate change; and something broke open in our nation. The nomination and subsequent election of a candidate for president who unabashedly demanded we turn back the efforts to ameliorate centuries of dehumanization once again convinced many, especially struggling, people of European descent that the problem is people of color and “identity politics.” This oldie-but-goodie sleight-of-hand worked in a world where shame researcher Brene Brown has documented a new phenomenon: that many people, especially older workers, feel shame because the pace of change is leaving them feeling irrelevant. Summers 2017 and 2018 were hot and full of killer storms. And 2019 brings the news that because of opioid deaths and prescription medicine abuse, the median life expectancy in the US is declining.
For those of us that had believed in that unmediated onward-and-upward-forever kind of progress, these last years have shocked. Others of us who live looking over one shoulder already knew that life was uncertain and scary, so surprise was less yet fear was more because the lack of safety was so much more potent. Those most targeted by the new politics of hate were met with this will pass, our democracy will correct itself, and checks and balances, though many have come to be a little less sanguine as the years have passed. And this societal-level trauma affects us more because of our theology compels us to work towards inclusion. Some believe this is just a bad patch while others of us can’t unknow the hatred that is now undeniable.

You can’t unring a bell, as they say.

**Though Many Are Shocked, the Trauma Isn’t New.** Of slavery, of suppression, of economic oppression, people sometimes ask why we can’t get over it. Yet what we have learned about trauma in the last ten years explains the long half-life. For when societal stress came, a pressure-cooker chain of events opened up unhealed places within the traumatized and abused among us. One word from trauma theory is “disintegration” which is when all the pieces that you’ve been holding together kind of fall apart, broken like the shards before the kintsugi magic. Because we don’t focus on healing, we keep reinjuring one another.

One of the particularly pernicious parts of a traumatic past is that it isolates and perpetuates more trauma. When people are “othered,” those in power can divide and conquer, so that, for example, around the issues of race, white people who are also exploited in the system buy the glittery package of resentment cloaked in American Dream clothing while, the actual level of resources—and disparity of income— grows and grows. In this way, trauma is transmitted from generation to generation. And for those among us who have experienced the worst forms of dehumanization, we know passing laws doesn’t change hearts. Trauma leaves us scarred, scared and dependent on one another to know ourselves whole because dulling perception is a survival skill.

Gretchen Schmeltzer on traumatic loss: “There is the loss of things that often defy description: safety, innocence, trust, hope, agency, identity and worldview.” All of this occurs with trauma. A toxic triangle is created when our far-horizon aspiration is combined with oppression and conflict aversion. The transformation of faith goes better if you can be open and vulnerable so the level of betrayal from religious wounding is extreme. We get erasure, avoidance, secrecy, systemic oppression and very, very uncovenental behaviors when what we need is healing and transformation.

**Most painful to face is the legacy of the religious wounding WE have imposed.** Over the last years, we have had to wrestle with deep religious wounding within our communities. Some of us still bear the
scars of the seventies sexual revolution, remember the pain and anguish of our transracial adopted young adults when they tried to confront our Association with their truth in the early 1990s, suffer at our hands as leaders, supervisors or mentors, or bear the erasure of those who are nonbinary or transgender, living with disabilities or poor among us experience today.

Amid the peals of the bell we cannot unring is a gleaning that we are not as willing to look at what we may need to fix within our own house as we are to cast stones at the abodes of others. Religious wounding is particularly difficult because to be engaged in religious exploration is to be open to have your heart and your mind and your spirit open and to enter into that spirit with all trust, expectation and excitement and then to have those violated is deeply wounding. And trying to look the other way, my colleagues, is like wound on wound, especially when so many among us replace God with community. If community isn’t safe, then you are left berest.

People living with trauma need trustworthiness, direct address and ethical relationships to survive. In a trauma-rich age, figuring out how to do these things may be as important as figuring out how to incorporate movement into worship, how to preach from a device or how to increase stewardship. Breaking open authenticity could be excellence.

And individual and interpersonal trauma becomes excruciating when combined with institutional and cultural forms of trauma. So here is the thing: all of us have challenging times, loss, grief and hurt and many of us of all races, abilities, genders, sexual orientations and resource levels experience personal traumatic loss. Some of us have all that PLUS live in systems which discount our personhood and our faith communities should not be those places.

In 2016-17, we Unitarian Universalists were in the streets, loud, strong, articulate about that far horizon and our welcome to those in need, and they came into our doors seeking something that is not casual faith, as our president Susan Frederick-Gray says, more like sanctuary and sustenance. And some found our systems and culture didn’t honor them or their experiences, that dominant cultural expression of our faith make them feel excluded and outside. Many exited.

Here is the joy though, here is the exuberance: one of the broken bits were the walls which kept us from speaking to one another. All of a sudden, we weren’t in our rarified spaces, we were talking to—or maybe at—one another. Feminista Jones, a black feminist author, observes, “The power of people sharing their own stories is really one of the greatest things we are witnessing now and for people to act like that is not a form of activism is ridiculous, particularly when you are a marginalized person. You
being bold and saying this is my story, and this is why I matter and you join in with hundred of thousands of people telling the same story, that is a form of collective activism.”

Those who treat trauma know now is that while telling a story may be helpful, retelling and retelling a story that has caused you trauma doesn't help, especially if the telling is used to no end. Storytelling may heal some and hurt others for choice is essential for trauma survivors. And our dominant cultural way of educating ourselves about stuff we could learn about in many ways is to make people who are marginalized in our communities tell their stories over and over. [For the two slides used here, please go to socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html]. In our connected world, technologies and teaching tools can allow us access. While this person might not be from your congregation, their experience is probably happening in your congregation. We can use the internet, and social media, which we understand is not the place to negotiate relationships and yet which Feminista Jones reminds us has done so much to bring together people who otherwise were isolated and disempowered. We can use resources from outside of our small frame to educate us because unfortunately the experience of being othered is pretty universal and examples are pretty easy to find. And we don’t want to be consumers of what is now called “trauma porn”—consumption of stories for titillation purposes which is what it is if we hear, weep and then ignore the need for change.

**We need to not to look away from the pain around us.** The unspeakable courage of those we met at the border last fall haunted and inspired me all year. I couldn’t forget all they risked to answer the call of wholeness. This spring, I heard the testimony of another transwoman who related in the flat emotionless tones of the severe traumatized how she and her fellow travelers were treated on OUR side of the border. Asking for the drugs her friend needed to treat AIDs caused the authorities to lower the temperatures to freezer levels and restrict food. The friend died. The story was horrific and the speaker was there to tell it. How can we turn away? These are two drawings by a transgender child who

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

was part of the re-naming ceremony in the congregation I serve, inspired by Mr. Barb Greve. One before she came out as a trans-girl and the other after. At 6, she knows more about survival than most.

Today most of us at some level are suffering from traumatic exposure, even those who have stopped watching the news. The fear of being
overwhelmed butts up against those who already were carrying generations of trauma with them. So living, as we are, in Trauma World, requires ministry which allows people to name their pain for without this healing, we all will not be whole. My definition of the holy is what happens when truths come together—and my crude definition of evil is those things that keep us from that transformative connection. Because the ones of us that need to be sheltered also know most about the arts of lived resilience we all now need.

Deep emotional intelligence and salvific spiritual sobriety could serve us well because no quick solutions are possible, no easy paths are out there. That deep inner journey into understanding our own truth is the one that is before us and it shows us the way to healing. We need practices that keep us spiritually sober—within the window of tolerance as much as possible so that we stop the cycle of crisis and destruction. The unsavory truth is many among us have particular intelligences of how to survive with trauma because we have been doing it for all our lives and our parents did it before us and their grandparents before them and so on and so on. Some of us lose our keys, forget appointments, are reactive to triggering events, some of us mask by overachieving and yet we are still here.

**We need to be the places where trauma is held and healed, ritually and in real-time.** “The road from sick A to well B is not straight or paved. It winds; there are obstacles; you will fall on the path,” writes womanist theologian Monica A. Coleman. “Are you willing to get back up again? And again? You will feel as if you are groping in the dark. Will you trust that there is light at the end? Until you get there, can you work with the shadows? You will need community. Can you trust those who love you? Can you hold tight with one hand and release with the other? You will have to trust in the process. You will need faith. Do you want to be made well?”

Naming our own trauma liberates us. Liberation and transformation have to be our business for today because otherwise going through all of this is just simply not worth it.

This is Ferdinand the double bull, part bulldog and part pitbull. Most likely he was a bait dog used to test the aggression level of fighting dogs. When I adopted him last October, his eyes were almost constantly dilated in terror. For me, some days, he embodies the trust possible even after trauma, and when he wags his home-cropped tail because I am his therapy-person, I remember the power of wholeness …..A haiku:

> We grab faith’s thread
> To bind what we must keep close
> In this world of hurt.
Part Three: Transformation

I am a born-again Unitarian Universalist who would have been fourth-generation Unitarian if my grandfather’s Presbyterianism hadn’t displaced my grandmother’s Universalism. I’m so grateful for this faith and Revs. Arvid Straube and Til Evans, all saving the life of my young adult self wounded by intergenerational trauma and struggling towards the meaning of life. The salvation was not only telling my truth, the community and the theology—it was conversations about race restarting when I first joined which, along with Dr. Leon Spencer, and Revs Mel Hoover and Danielle DiBona helped me find my standpoint. My home community welcomed me in and told me I could lead. The larger faith brought me friends, loving friends and raised up my children until their truths were too hard to bear. This faith found a way to fit my broken pieces together and fuse them with gold AND also to drop them from the heights of ideals onto the hard floor of reality numerous times. I am multiracial with white-skin privilege in some settings. Interestingly it’s mostly in UU spaces that people reassure me that “I don’t look Japanese.” In co-ministry with a white male, I experienced erasure as standard practice. Perceptive in other areas, I was uncomprehending about the costs of these experiences over time. My own mistakes are enormous as a result.

In 2016, my youngest child, 16 at the time, almost died of alcohol poisoning on the last night of this national gathering. Eight months later after more life-threatening incidents, we faced the horrific choice known as residential treatment where he began facing his despair. As part of therapy, he wrote a letter about his dad because and asked that it be sent to the UUA the gap between the public and private is traumatic when we hurt people. His sister wrote her own statement to support the brother she almost lost, about what happened to her. These personal truths were sent into our accountability systems. My children did not ask for this, neither did I. I was still wrestling with the life-changing enormity of my
mistake which is that because of my own trauma, I overlooked and enabled. Despite good intentions by many especially Rev. Kate Walker, we were all hurt. At one point, a surreal discussion ensued about whether child abuse was “conduct unbecoming a minister.” When decisions were made public, because my daughter insisted, she was devastated at how few expressed support; how many expressed disbelief or disapproved that this “dirty laundry” was aired. That antiquated treatment of victims as well as technical responses to excruciating pain, led my daughter, who some remember as a teenage leader on our Right Relationship Team, to take a break from any contact with Unitarian Universalism. When I say we need better systems to hold our truths and our traumas, believe me, my body and those I most love know the costs of inauthenticity and denial. I am not about revenge, punishment or not tolerating dissent, just healing and trust. And those who feel this is kind of personal story has no place in this distinguished essay: real truths are just the creative good created by many real, ordinary stories.

Transformation? Something to do with the many/and, with believing those brave enough to speak out, to be willing to be learners, to find a truer humility with which to bow before the enormous challenges before us. To honor the wisdom of those for whom hard times are no new thing. To be people who “stay in the car” as activist Claudia Rankin put it in the On Being podcast, to be the trustworthy who cradled the truths of abused lives, to be alongside those who have no choice but to live with hard things and who are loud because if they aren’t nobody listens, to continue unfolding this journey of being human, to operate from a lived theology of abundance.

The conversations about racism we have had and stopped multiple times are about race AND also about our faith’s authenticity and bravery for the betterment of all. Sofia Betancourt and I, in preparation for today, talked about how the goal is not to replicate the centering of white people with the centering of people of color, because that would be a betrayal of our faith. The goal is to center all, to include all, to embrace all while also still honoring our tradition’s gold.

Trauma-informed ministry is collaborative work: we ask the people who have suffered what they need and we give choices because one size does not fit all. We make being as reliable as we can a part of our standard for ministry. The conversation about oppression is a proxy for all we do not hold well together. I pray we will step into this complexity or my slant is that we will slide into obscurity, mediocrity and eventual dissolution—every day we debate whether we have bias or harm among us tilts us towards extinction in a world where, as my son says, every 13 year old on the internet knows better. Our covenant is to journey together, to not silence the voices which cannot be heard, nor require that we all believe the same thing. We remember that we belong to one another and practice restoration and patience and clean forgiveness. We are not a dinner club for the outcasts of mainstream religion—we inherit tradition for which people died and as their guardians, we are make them live in the intermediate focus, in this unsavory day-to-day.

I cut a lot of words out of this essay over the last weeks, not because I know so much but because I know so little: a fleeting view of a peripheral truth, a front row seat in the trauma arena, and a glimpse of the possibility of transformation. What I do know are the questions [SLIDE 21]:

How do we articulate what calls us to restore the collective wholeness which is our birthright? How do we reclaim the gold that is our theology and center that? How do we make a real, not tokenized, space
for the God some of us need to survive day-to-day AND for beliefs in humankind’s ability to be agents of change and betterment?

How do we meet one another’s truths without rushing to smother them in “solutions”? Or worse yet to hear them, have vicarious pain and then move to the next stimulation?

How do we tap the power of being covenantal and not just weaponize the idea that we are not creedal? How do we make direct address a mark of excellence among us?

How might we transform from communities focused primarily on comfort and conformity to communities deeply covenantal in pursuit of what Henry Nelson Weiman called the ultimate commitment? Or what ethicist Dr. Sharon Welch calls communities of liberation and resistance? How do we value a culture of authenticity rather than acceptability?

How can we develop new rituals of lament which allow us to name together and to truly hold that our institutions were built on the lands of dispossessed indigenous people and often the resources among us amassed through the labor of people of color especially black bodies? How do we address the institutional and cultural practices which devalue some and elevate others?

How do we face hard truths about our inhumanity to one another? How do we develop practices and rituals around reconciliation, reparations and restoration? How do we equip our ministries to be trauma-informed?

How do we honor intelligences which come from the dignified and difficult work of survival rather than exclusively from book learning and intellect? How do we credential that in leadership?

How might we renew ourselves not through spiritual bypass, rather by designing rituals to release guilt and shame, to name and honor pain, to bring us into the embodiment that recognizes that we carry trauma within our physical being not just within our minds and our emotions?

How do we lead in places of unknowing? How do we cultivate humility and “liberatory acceptance,” as Buddhist teacher Tara Brach says? How do we, through acknowledging our mistakes, model openness, hospitality and learning?

How do we help more of us overcome fear and find the joy and exuberance that comes from living with authenticity, even in the face of trauma?

And how can we, a relatively small band of affirmational, aspirational heretics, take on these questions?

Who knows? Not me. Maybe with bravery and conviction, with humor and playfulness, with frankness and knowledge that much has been broken and yet the brokenness is its own gold. May we, as religious people, moving together, create the new wholeness that is our faith’s promise. May we be the ones to make it so.
Selected Works Cited or Consulted


Podcasts

On Being with Krista Tippett, especially interviews with Claudia Rankin, Parker Palmer’s writing

Pod to the People (https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/16l3VNNV7ALFKo5j88tyg-d4bcglUgY75kzlZWmjuWqk/edit#gid=1217029173)

I, Survivor

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