

"Failure to Quit:" Rallying Our Consciences
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Beacon UU Congregation
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On February 15, 2003, way back before the launch of our initial military involvement in Iraq, a Unitarian Universalist from Haverhill, MA named Kristen joined thousands of others in New York City (and millions around the world) for a peaceful demonstration against possible U.S. military actions there. Yes, Deja Vu all over again....2003!

She explains her participation this way: " In my soul," she writes, " I feel that the actions of this administration are wrong. I also feel there is nothing I can do to stop the impending horror. When my alarm clock rang at 5 a.m. on Saturday morning, I told myself that no one would notice if I didn't go, that one person of thousands would not be missed. But then I realized this was not about others - it was more about my feeling of helplessness. I needed to do something, and there was one small action left to me, one small thing I could do to express my disagreement. So I left my warm cozy bed to do that one thing - show up."

Woody Allen once said that 80% of life is simply "showing up." Ministry is mostly about "showing up." And rallying your conscience, especially in this time of crisis, is most definitely about "showing up." And showing up and showing up, and showing up again, whether it's in Heritage Square, at the U.N. conference table, on the Washington Mall, on an internet activism site, or in the voting booth.

The poet Jane Flanders writes in the poem, "A House Built By Fear,"

The crowd, of which I am each part, moves on

beneath my window, for I am the crone too

who shakes her sheets

over every street in the world

muttering

What's this? What's this?

We live here in America, not in Warsaw. It is 2020, not 1943. Yet, we find ourselves in a bewildered and demoralizing crowd, muttering: "What's this? What's this?" I'm concerned that we Americans live increasingly in what Flanders calls a " house built by fear." A house in which we're encouraged to stock up on ammo, spew hatred on twitter, name-call and bully with impunity, suspect people based on their ethnicity, and keep to our warm, cozy beds. Our leaders tell us we're in danger, but that they aren't going to listen to us; that they know better, and that patriotism is synonymous with obedience and tribal loyalty to the

Administration, not the country. Americans on many fronts are calling for impeachment of the President. There is an intense showdown looming in Congress over nearly every issue that we value in a democracy.

Howard Zinn, who died in 2010, was a progressive thinker, a renowned University history professor and a veteran of numerous nonviolent protests, including many on Boston Common. He has been among the most respected voices reminding us over the years that we need to show up! Years ago, Zinn was arrested at one protest and charged with "Failure to Quit." He wore this charge like a badge of honor and later wrote a book by the same name. In it, he offered these words (and notice how fresh they sound in light of our current situation):

"Civil disobedience is not our problem," Zinn noted. "Our problem is civil obedience. Our problem is that numbers of people all over the world have obeyed the dictates of the leaders of their government and have gone to war, and millions have been killed because of this obedience. Our problem is that people are obedient all over the world in the face of poverty and starvation and stupidity, and war, and cruelty. Our problem is that people are obedient while the jails are full of petty thieves, and all the while the grand thieves are running and robbing the country. That's our problem."

As I mentioned earlier, a major cause of our obedience may be fear. We want our leaders to make thoughtful, diplomatic decisions and to protect us. We want safety and security and prosperity. Especially since September 11, we can't pretend that living in America grants us some magical shield against senseless acts of violence. The Office of Homeland Security still bombards us with color-coded alerts. The President tosses around platitudes about "evildoers" and calls himself "a stable genius." We are understandably afraid and anxious. Here are the key questions that remain and the central "call to action" in this sermon: "How do we act, how will we act, even though we are afraid? Will we "fail to quit"? Or will we keep to our safe refuge?"

As always, I acknowledge that we UUs don't necessarily speak with one unified voice on matters of politics or civil disobedience. And yet, our religious tradition promotes the worth and dignity of all, it affirms global cooperation, it prefers peace over war and dialogue over scorched earth, and it holds out hope for salvation and beloved community in the here-and-now. It's a bit of an oxymoron to be a hawkish UU.

Since the merger in 1961, the UUA Commission for Social Witness has drafted numerous resolutions for peace. Year after year, delegates at our General Assembly reaffirm our collective zeal for peaceful solutions. Our current UUA President Susan Frederick-Grey has joined hundreds of UUs around the country in peace vigils and demonstrations for racial justice, climate justice, reproductive justice, immigration justice. She has signed on to interfaith letters, making our UU presence felt, by asking for careful consideration of policies that impact our nation and our planet.

This morning, I join my voice with hers and with former UUA President Bill Sinkford in asking: "What can you do? I hope you will discuss these matters with your families and your fellow congregants. I hope you will call or visit your elected representatives at the national level, to discuss your questions with them and share your concerns. And I hope you will reflect on what we all can do in the face of conflict. Our role is not merely to advocate for a position - although many of us might wish to do so - but rather, to ask the difficult questions and try, as best we can, to "contribute to a richer imagination that can lead to peace and justice."

I like that phrase- "contributing to a richer imagination that can lead to peace and justice." Or, in other words, to examine very closely the outdated paradigms of domination, arrogance and violence that thrive on

fear and revenge. To ask ourselves and others whether armed aggression and drone bombings are mostly a boost for the military industrial complex, a power play for oil, or a diversion from other important national matters like education, employment, health care, corruption, and the climate crisis.

Commentators keep pointing to these gargantuan pink elephants on the table and more and more of us are taking notice. Zinn himself mused about the thousands of possibilities that exist between war and retreat. He asks: "Is human ingenuity so defunct, is our intelligence so lacking that we cannot devise ways of dealing with tyranny and injustice without killing huge numbers of people?"

Zeroing in specifically on US history, Zinn doesn't pull any punches. He reminds us that the record of America's naked aggression in the world is so shocking, so abysmal, that anyone with any sense of history could not possibly accept the argument that we have attacked other countries because we're morally outraged by *their* aggression or *their* invasion of another country!"

If Zinn was here, I believe he'd reaffirm that rallying your conscience, failing to quit, and speaking out for peace are never easy. Yet, there are many individual, small acts of faith that allow us to witness to our UU principles and exercise the virtue held in highest esteem by the early Unitarians - the conscience. Don't duck under the covers. Don't give up hope of being heard. Activate!

Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau wrote extensively about civil disobedience and spent time in jail for refusing to pay his poll tax. He reminds us that civil disobedience (or what he sometimes called "practical agitation") is not passive. Its immediate end is to clog the machinery of the State. It is counter-friction. This is not to say that Thoreau repudiated government, but that he would serve it only when its ends were truly moral. A student of Emerson's "self-reliance" mindset, Thoreau wrote that "if you wish to serve the State with your conscience, you must eventually rely on the vitality and force of a single living person...yourself!"

No doubt, showing up and bearing witness can make us uncomfortable. We feel exposed and vulnerable to derision from those who disagree with us, especially now that we are at the mercy of internet trolls. In some cases (and more and more these trigger-happy times), we may even put ourselves in harm's way and risk arrest or injury, like Zinn and so many others, simply canvassing door to door. A willingness to risk these things used to be called "idealism." Maybe it still is. I think of it more as sheer survival of the planet at this point. What do you think, friends? The train has left the station. Can we remain neutral on that moving train and decline to be idealistic when peace and democracy hang in the balance?

I'm reminded of Pete Seeger's, anti-war classic "Where have all the flowers gone?" Seeger stood faithfully for peace through the Vietnam conflict. He showed up at countless rallies and led people in protest songs. He was arrested, injured, for a time he was blacklisted and labeled un-American. But he kept on singing and inspired generations of peace workers and idealists of all stripes. His words ring so chillingly true for us today - "When will they ever learn? When will they ever learn?"

Seeger was a conscientious and courageous dissenter. As we've witnessed, though, especially since 9/11, one of the cherished civil liberties that tends to go out the window at a time of national crisis is dissent, even in the form of nonviolent civil disobedience or harmonious protest anthems. The first amendment is surely under duress.

Pete Seeger has probably sung Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" more than anyone else. Guthrie wrote the song in 1940 and recorded it in 1944 (one year after the setting of Jane Flanders poem).

Some have called "This Land Is Your Land" an alternative national anthem. Others say it's a Marxist response to "God Bless America." Guthrie was also labeled "un-American." The two final verses are often omitted, but they are the ones Guthrie was most passionate about.* When we sing this iconic folk song after the sermon, consider both the timeliness and import of those words as an ageless rallying cry for change.

In a recent NYT article entitled, "How to Turn Anger and Fear into Political Power," the journalist Alejandra Gomez lifts up Arizona as a model of what can happen when people learn to work with one another, build deep connections and create something bigger than themselves. She lifts up several groups such as Mi Familia Vota, Arizona Dreams Acts Coalition, and Living United for Change, as exemplars, as she notes that "civic groups and political parties used to do more of this work, but they have become disconnected from real people, and too focused on donors and elite influence."

The antidote is cooperative, intersectional, community-based activism. The UUA is boots on the ground in this effort. On January 12th, I joined more than 400 other UU representatives on a live launch web call for "UU The Vote," a national campaign that moves our faith communities into new or deeper action around the 2020 election. The energy on the call was palpable.

"UU The Vote" is our springboard to Activate at Beacon UU Congregation in these ways:

- Mobilizing voters
- Challenging voter suppression
- Holding values-based conversations to engage others on issues that matter
- Opening the doors of our congregation to the activities of frontline communities and justice partners.
- Providing the spiritual sustenance and movement chaplaincy to ground our faith and respond to the injustices we confront.

I have already previewed this program with our Social Justice Allies and I have asked the Board of Trustees for their approval to open our doors in just this way, enabling us to intersect with groups like Swing left, Indivisible, Vote Forward, The LWV, the Citizens Climate Lobby, and others. Going forward, UU the Vote will be providing tools, trainings and support to equip us with the skills to amplify our activism and unleash our potential for impact. If you would like to be part of this effort, please email me.

Many of us were unnerved after the election of 2016 and the spike in Google inquiries on how to emigrate to Canada skyrocketed. One pundit quipped that there were essentially three reactions in this vein: *1. If Trump wins, I'm leaving the country; 2. If Hillary wins, I'm leaving the country, and 3. I don't care who wins, I just enjoy travelling.* As amusing as this is, we MUST care who wins. Voting matters; the outcome matters.

Americans seem to be getting bolder and speaking out, marching and organizing for candidates and for causes more and more. Just yesterday, millions participated in women's marches throughout the world, the week prior they gathered for climate change, and just before that, in response to the most recent bombings in the Middle East. Protest signs have become more creative and often, more blunt. Even something as seemingly innocuous as lawn signs for candidates have become fraught with peril. The signs in the last election cycle were the nastiest ever. But Americans also find room for humor, as a safety valve and as a unifier. Here are some I've seen:

- *I'd Rather Vote for my Cat*
- *Vote my cousin Ricky for President – he's the life of the party*

- *The Joker for Congress – he'd fit right in*

And these hometown signs that every Pittsburgher like myself would appreciate:

- *Trump Uses Hunt's ketchup, Trump hates peirogies, and Trump moved my parking chair!*

Sometimes we shout and sing, and at other times, we raise our voices in a kind of mute-witness that speaks volumes. My colleague Lynn Strauss relates one scene in which 6,000 life-sized papier mache statues with open mouths and raised palms served at one demonstration as mute witnesses to the truth of oppression by the powerful. Strauss writes: "Imagine if all of our public squares and urban plazas were filled with mute-witnesses, silent witnesses to the violence of our economic system...to the knee-jerk, law and order call for pre-emptive military strike.

There are many who have been afraid of speaking out, but our legislators are beginning to receive a barrage of postcards, letters, and emails; people are finding their voices. Still, many are cynical and don't believe they can make a difference. Imagine if all those who oppose US policies, all who challenge the lack of faith in the democratic process, stood in public spaces around the country, simply stood as mute witnesses.

If we really believe in our seven UU principles, especially the interconnected web of all existence, we will see ourselves reflected in Jane Flander's poem - in the eyes of the boy with his hands raised over his head, in the shiny rifle butt of the soldier. We will see as sister the woman with the lowered gaze and as brother the stranger with the camera. We will rebuild the house of fear as a temple of compassionate civility.

May we be mindful of the words spoken by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr, as the Ware Lecturer at our UUA General Assembly in 1966. "Don't sleep through the revolution," he admonished the assembly. He likened America to Rip Van Winkle who slept for 20 years and failed to meet the moment of change rested and ready (especially in the realm of racial justice).

He reminded us that the church must remain awake during the revolution by engaging in the truth and not exaggerating progress. Because, in his words, "no lie can live forever." He tells the crowd of UUs – "With this faith, we will be able to hew out the mountain of despair a stone of hope. In his spirit and in the glow of his legacy, may we fail to quit, speak out, and demand a globalization of peace and human rights, despite our leaders arrogant refusal to listen. Like the birds in our story earlier, we must fly up all together. Surely, with all of our collective energy, intelligence, and good will, America can elect leaders who exemplify grounded optimism, we can create national unity and cultivate a sense of national purpose without destruction. God help us if we can't.

In The Progressive magazine, Howard Zinn stood his ground when he wrote: "We are not politicians, but citizens. We have no office to hold on to, only our consciences, which insist on telling the truth. That, history suggests, is the most realistic thing a citizen can do."

And, as Bill Sinkford reminds us, "We will not all stand in the same place on this issue. But we can all stand in the same faith. Above all, that is my hope. In these troubling days and all those that lie ahead, my deepest prayer is that we stand in this faith together."

Daylight is burning, friends. May we step lively.

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen.

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*This Land Is Your Land (final 2 verses), Woody Guthrie

As I was walkin' I saw a sign there
And that sign said "No tress passin"
But on the other side, it didn't say nothin!
Now that side was made for you and me!

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California, to the New York Island
From the redwood forest, to the gulf stream waters
This land was made for you and me

In the squares of the city, in the shadow of the steeple
Near the relief office, I see my people
And some are grumblin' and some are wonderin'
If this land is made for you and me.