

## **When Words Do Not Do Justice**

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington-Va.

On Friday morning I knew I couldn't preach the sermon I had been planning to preach. On Friday morning I felt gutted and despairing. On Friday morning I knew I needed to find some hope. On Friday morning I knew I had to reach out - to you, to our Muslim siblings that worship here every Friday. On Friday morning I knew I needed to dig deeper into the oft-repeated question that always arises at times like these: why? Why?

I felt like I did a little over seven years ago when a gunman strode into the Sandy Hook elementary school and shot 27 people, mostly little children. That week I was supposed to preach for a ceremonial occasion: the retirement of a minister. I had a nice, cheerful, congratulatory message all ready that also had to go out the window.

Of course I felt, and still feel, that no words can do justice to the moment. But words I must speak. I came across this quote from Irving Greenstein: "Say nothing of God and humanity that cannot be said in the presence of burning children." This nearly brought me to my knees then and now. Say nothing of God and humanity that cannot be said in the presence of bullet riddled children, men and women of all ages. What can possibly be said that can make meaning of this massacre? Words are so wildly inadequate. And yet, and yet. We must stay in the presence of these dead and wounded, for this time, and hard as it is, fumble for words about God and humanity.

We turn to our tradition for help. There we find the principles that undergird our faith. A list of words which most of the time we take for granted as relatively straight forward: worth, dignity, equity, compassion, acceptance, freedom and responsibility, peace, liberty, interdependence. All words we skip blithely past most days. But today, say them in the presence of those dead and dying. Every one of them feels like a mountain of steel to climb: worth, dignity, compassion, freedom, peace, liberty. Each of them reminders of that for which we strive, yet now feeling vast and unfathomable.

We need to return to these principles over and over again to give us guidance, but principles are hard-edged things; there is little of comfort to be found there. The sources of our faith are of more help: the ground upon which we walk, the wisdom from which we draw. We all probably have particular strands of our traditions to which we

turn, but it is the Hebrew poets that speak to me when my heart is broken.

Like these words of Psalm 121: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. ...The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day nor the moon by night. The lord shall preserve thee from all evil; he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."

At a time of crisis these words speak to me beyond all rational thought. I don't quibble with the theology; I don't parse interpretations. These words don't tell me that tragedy is the fault of God, nor that prayer to God can save us from tragedy. They tell me that God is present in all things, in the terror and in the hope, in the love and even in the hate; present as a pulse in the heart that tells us we are alive. You may find other messages from our traditions to which you cling. They all point to a common theme: we are all interconnected by love even when that love is hard to feel.

From David Whyte's "Self Portrait":

It doesn't interest me if there is one God or many gods. I want to know you belong, or feel abandoned. If you know despair or can see it in others. I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change you. If you can look back with firm eyes saying, this is where I stand. I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living, falling toward the center of your longing. I want to know if you are willing to live, day by day, with the consequence of love and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat. I have been told, in that fierce embrace, even the gods talk of God.

Even when we have different words to describe the manifestation of this feeling, our traditions teach us that what binds us all together as a people is covenant – a covenant which reminds us we are not alone, a covenant which calls upon us to reach out to one another, a covenant that holds us together as faithful people, a covenant that asks us every day how we will live with the consequence of both love and sure defeat, a covenant that requires us to reach out to those who are suffering and offer a supportive hand.

This gives us our holding place. And still we must stand in the presence of these dead and wounded and ask deeper questions. It makes me sad to say that when I first heard about the shooting I wasn't shocked. Mass shootings seem almost commonplace now. Even as we mourn each one and rail against the people and policies and mistakes that allowed them to happen, we always move on. Those dead are not forgotten, but we move on.

What has arrested my heart and mind and soul this time is the clarity of purpose that this shooter brought: to coldly and calculatedly and cynically set out to destroy the lives of people he did not know, that had done nothing to him, but only because they worshipped differently and came from a different homeland. And he came to his decision to kill inspired by others, including those who have massacred at churches, synagogues and mosques here in the US, those who shared his belief in white supremacy and acted just as coldly and mercilessly as he has now. White supremacy, the fantasy and the lie that leads us to preference one so-called race above all others. And I use the word 'us' deliberately.

As tempting as it is to see this man's behavior as an aberration, I think we have to recognize it as something on the extreme of a continuum of reflexive feelings that is about us always. Let me tell you something of the journey I have been on for the last month to make it clearer where I'm coming from.

Last month I attended a gathering of the ministers of large UU congregations. The program at that meeting has brought me to a dramatically new understanding of our racialized culture. It was led by a healer and therapist named Resmaa Menakem who works with people around racialized trauma.

What's different about Resmaa's approach is that it doesn't start with teaching us something intellectual about race. He starts by asking us to pay attention to our bodies. Because it is in our bodies that we feel and hold the trauma of racism. All of us, no matter our skin color, carry that trauma.

In his book, ***My Grandmother's Hands***, Resmaa writes this:

For the past three decades, we've earnestly tried to address white-body supremacy in America with reason, principles, and ideas—using dialogue,

forums, discussions, education, and mental training. But the widespread destruction of Black bodies continues....

It's not that we've been lazy or insincere. But we've focused our efforts in the wrong direction. We've tried to teach our brains to think better about race. But white-body supremacy doesn't live in our thinking brains. It lives and breathes in our bodies. Our bodies have a form of knowledge that is different from our cognitive brains....

The body is where we fear, hope, and react; where we constrict and release; and where we reflexively fight, flee, or freeze. If we are to upend the status quo of white-body supremacy, we have to start with our bodies.

And in our bodies we don't just carry the trauma of our own individual experience, we carry the trauma of our ancestors — literally. We now know that trauma experienced actually alters our DNA and gets passed down from generation to generation. And even more weirdly, we even carry memories from our ancestors, studies have shown. And we end up reacting to others as if it was we who were traumatized.

Resmaa does not just focus on the trauma of black people. All of us, white, black and everything in between, if we go back far enough, have experienced racialized trauma. For example my German Lutheran ancestors were literally burned out of their homes by Catholic Germans. They fled with the image of one of their family members strung up on the front porch of their burned out home. My Irish and even my British ancestors came to America because of trauma that they experienced in their homelands.

In her book, ***Possessing the Secret of Joy***, Alice Walker tells the story of Tashi, an immigrant from Africa, who fled from the threat of female genital mutilation. Tashi returns to Africa as an adult and when her African family asks her to describe Americans, Tashi struggles and then says, "Americans are people with hidden histories of fled-from pain. Americans are just like me."

The trauma that we or our ancestors have experienced come out of different contexts and experiences and it leads us into different reactions and behaviors, but inside all of our bodies it takes the same toll of making us fearful of the 'other,' whatever

that might be. The myth of white supremacy arose out of the fear of white people who at some level must have understood that their cruelty to black people would at some point come back to exact a price. As Resmaa says, “trauma is ... a wordless story our body tells itself about what is safe and what is a threat. Our rational brain can’t stop it from occurring, and it can’t talk our body out of it.” And that wordless story makes us act out a story of supremacy that isn’t truly real.

So what are we to do with these traumatized bodies? If we can’t rationalize our way out of it, what hope is there? Resmaa makes clear that we will all experience the pain of the trauma, but there are two kinds of pain: clean pain and dirty pain. “Clean pain is pain that mends and can build your capacity for growth,... the pain you experience when you have no idea what to do; when you’re scared or worried about what might happen; and when you step forward into the unknown anyway, with honesty and vulnerability.” In other words its the pain we have to face head on, without flinching, and carry on.

“Dirty pain is the pain of avoidance, blame, and denial. When people respond from their most wounded parts, become cruel or violent, or physically or emotionally run away, they experience dirty pain. They also create more of it for themselves and others.” Resmaa talks about how we blow our dirty pain through other people, as the shooter in New Zealand was clearly doing. Who knows what trauma he was acting out. But instead of facing it honestly he twisted it into justification for annihilation of others.

While all this may not sound soothing or like good news to many of you, to me it felt liberating. It gave me something to do, instead of just feeling guilty or shamed or hopeless. I still feel those things at times, but I’ve developed a new strategy that I try to employ, even as I don’t always do it perfectly. I’ve tried to face the pain. I’ve talked with my family about our stories and have paid attention to how my body reacts to them. I’ve been making myself face the trauma of others much more severe than my own. I spent a day at the Museum of African American History which clearly and cogently lays out the case that America was built, culturally and economically, on the backs of black people. I’ve been reading a book about South Africa which developed its policies of apartheid by assiduously studying the Jim Crow South and copying its techniques of oppression. I’ve

started a book about white slaveholding women, often cast as innocent victims of a system, but who in fact could be just as brutal in their enforcement of it.

None of this is easy and I have many times wanted to turn away and go back to my safe and oblivious life. As Resmaa says, clean pain hurts like hell. But nevertheless it is the pain that heals. And perhaps this is why this latest travesty has felt so devastating to me. I'm finally letting myself feel the pain.

And this is where this congregation comes in. Because Resmaa teaches that we can only do this work in community. We can only face the pain when we have ways of holding our bodies in compassion and one another in love. This can be the work of this congregation; as Resmaa says, "If we do this, both as individuals and as a nation, America may become a country in which human possibilities are freed and we discover each other." And in that discovery, we can be made free.

Think of those stones we have created as the bodies that we hold in compassion, the creativity we placed on them as the freedom to move through and past pain, and passing them on to others in acts of love and peace.

We cannot undo the acts of hateful people but we need not be helpless in the face of them. We can dedicate ourselves to the work of honest reflection, of healing ourselves, and offering love to others. Let us do so now, as we move through our worlds of hurt, clinging to love and hope.

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## **Meditation**

"waning" by Adrienne Brown

slowly i collapse

lose light lose warmth

forget everything i ever knew about bright

it is time again to know nothing

to be still and silent

to wait and wonder

to notice exactly what i need so completely

that it pulls me through shadow

pulls me through the cold of my own isolation  
back, slower than a dream  
faster than a season  
i hear everyone whispering:  
plant everything now  
plant love the shape of gods  
the handprints of children allowed to say no  
plant quiet contemplation of miracles  
plant the undulation, the pulse, the fusion  
plant even the idea of a wave  
and let the ocean flood you by morning