

ARE WE HOPELESSLY OPTIMISTIC?

A Sermon by Rev. Fritz Hudson
November 13, 2016

"It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon," Can't really say that this week, can we?

Last Sunday we recalled the Indian myth of Shiva's monster, who ate himself up, leaving only his face staring at us from the temple's doorway: The Face of Glory. It reminds us that life thrives only by consuming itself. We can only find a meaningful place in this world if we are willing to look at life full in the face. Creativity necessarily involves destruction. And by the same token, destruction, if managed wisely, can engender even greater creativity.

I said, then, that "in a week, God willing, we will have survived this year's presidential election." And then I said, "However it is resolved, I look forward to finding, and feel well able to find, our faith looking straight at whichever "face of glory" it places above our nation's temples of power.

O Shiva, O God - you WILL test me, won't you?

Last Friday, in case it passed you by, was Veteran's Day. In this month of Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Light, I had planned today to raise up another Indian myth, Arjuna on the battlefield, as told in the Bhagavad Gita. I planned to use it as a lens through which to examine military service as an expression of UU faith. I won't do that now. But I do want to ask: Are there here among us any who are now serving or who have at one time served in our nation's armed services? Would you rise, or stand, or wave as you're able? We all thank you for your service.

I will sacrifice saying more about military service in our faith today, because our election's results on Tuesday have made a broader call - a call into service by us all - as citizens. Karl Barth, the neo-orthodox theologian, is credited in Nazi Germany with exhorting ministers to "Preach with the Bible in one hand and the morning newspaper in the other." My holy scripture is more multi-cultural than Barth's was, and my morning news comes through a screen more often than on paper. But his exhortation has always been my call to answer, in the pulpit. The face of President-Elect Donald Trump in our White House, in Friday morning's news, needs some "looking at, straight on" this morning. Some looking at, through the lens of our faith. And the music we'd planned for our Veterans Day service, serves just as well for this Post-Election Day call as well.

So I published three possible titles for this service on Thursday. They speak from three chambers through which my soul has passed since early, VERY early, Wednesday morning. The first? #Apocalypse. It returned to my mind after entering there just a week before, on another VERY early morning, in a VERY different spirit. A newscast brought it to me. It told of a Tweet dated November 4, 2014. That was just after Joe Maddon resigned as manager of the Tampa Bay Rays baseball team to become manager of the Chicago Cubs. On that day two years ago, @RaysFanGio tweeted this prophecy: "2016 World Series. Cubs vs Indians. . . . The world will end with the score tied in game seven in extra innings. #apocalypse. Late on election night, as the returns' direction became undeniable, I texted our daughter in

Virginia to ask about "The mood" (at her gathering) "in a word or two?" She texted back "There are no words." I had none either. Perhaps the prophet @RaysFanGio had just been a week off.

My second title arose in a place where my soul paused perhaps 36 hours and two fitful night's sleep thereafter. "What's the matter with . . . US, capital U, capital S?" It came to me as perhaps a fitting update to a book's title from a decade ago: *What's the Matter with Kansas?* by Thomas Frank. As we approached the Bush-Kerry presidential election, Frank, a native Kansan, tried to understand how the working people of his state had come to be such strong supporters of the "trickle-down-economics" gospel of the political leadership of the time, both in that state and in the nation. That political leadership had won the heart of America by focusing its electoral campaigns on social and cultural issues like gun ownership, stopping abortion, and returning Christian religion to education. They managed to obscure any attention to the devastation then being wreaked on the working people's lives by unregulated capitalism.

The genius of Donald Trump's campaign this year has been to marry those social positions to a xenophobic nostalgia for an earlier era of relative economic prosperity for working people. So "What's the matter with . . . US?" Why are we who promote reproductive freedom, multi-religious education, and gun control unable to mount a credible plan of economic investment to share prosperity with all those whose work contributes to it?

Garrison Keillor, in fact, did not have a quiet week these past few days in Lake Wobegon. In Wednesday's *Washington Post*, he captured my point in his inimitable way. His title was "Trump Voters will not like What Happens Next."

He says in part, "The Trumpers had a whale of a good time, waving their signs, jeering at the media, beating up protesters, chanting 'Lock her up' . . . (They) never expected their guy to actually win the thing . . . It was pleasure enough for them just to know that they were driving us wild with dismay — by 'us,' I mean librarians, children's authors, yoga practitioners, Unitarians, bird-watchers, people who make their own pasta, opera-goers, the grammar police, people who keep books on their shelves, that bunch. Alas for the Trump voters, the disasters he will bring on this country will fall more heavily on them than anyone else."

Keillor's point is Frank's point. Social liberalism is linked directly to economic liberalism. Freedom, as Franklin Roosevelt cast it--freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear--is freedom made possible by economic productivity rewarded widely, fairly, compassionately. But Keillor's first response to this insight is our greatest temptation.

He says . . . "Let (the winners) build the wall and carry on the trade war with China and deport the undocumented and deal with opioids. . . . We liberal elitists are now completely in the clear. (We) can spend four years raising heirloom tomatoes, meditating, reading Jane Austen, traveling around the country, tasting artisan beers."

And the truth is we, in this room, the vast majority of us probably can do just that. Who here has done something in the last three days to simply take your mind off your feelings about the election? Keillor knows us all too well. He writes "We are so exhausted from thinking about this election, millions of people will take up leaf-raking and garage cleaning with intense

pleasure." And that's because, in many of our daily economic and social lives, and particularly in our spiritual lives, we don't have any significant contact with the economic distress that underlies much of the support that carried Donald Trump into the White House.

A month ago, perhaps 30 of us gathered for a Saturday with UUA workshop leaders to engage in "Conversations about Class." Preparing to open that Conversation, I retrieved an article Doug Muder wrote for our *UU World* magazine almost a decade ago (September 2007). Doug himself moved from a working-class childhood into a middle-class adulthood, so he could say baldly, "Unitarian Universalism has a class problem. . . . We try to stand for all people, but when we look around, we're usually standing with people like ourselves."

I also read the book my colleague Mark Harris wrote half a decade ago: *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*. In it I found pioneering Unitarian feminist Margaret Fuller's admonition to her Boston Brahmin Unitarian father, way back in the 1840s: "Your reluctance to go 'among strangers' cannot be too soon overcome; (And) the way to overcome it, is not to remain at home, but to go among them and (to) resolve to deserve & obtain the love & esteem of those who have never before known you. With them you have a fair opportunity to begin the world anew."

Wednesday night, we held a special service here in the front area of our Sanctuary entitled "A Time to Breathe." Supported by song and silence, we took time to reflect and to share feelings

- first those that drew us to the service
- then those we struggled with: our feelings of pain or loss
- then those, however we could muster them, of aspiration of hope.

There were perhaps 60 or 70 of us here. In each segment I think perhaps 20 or more of us voiced a feeling. Many of us came that night in pain and in fear, and we said so. No one said whom we'd voted for. Indeed neither Clinton's name nor Trump's name, nor their parties, Democrat or Republican, were voiced by anyone. I suspect that most of us had entered the election with a hope for a Hillary Clinton led government. Most of us were struggling, stretching to grasp any whisper of hope still possible in a Donald Trump led nation. I'm not certain that anyone here had voted for Donald Trump, but I did my best to welcome their feelings among us; I believe their hopes, if really understood, could also be shared by those who voted otherwise.

Both before and after our gathering, I learned that some of us who count ourselves Republican shied away from joining our gathering from fear that they'd be unwelcome. Perhaps I should remind us all that the last U.S. President who was a Unitarian, William Howard Taft, was a Republican. None of the other three Unitarian U.S. Presidents were Democrats. In the 1980s, the Southern Baptist Church was widely called "the Republican Party at Prayer." They have yet to recover spiritually. We Unitarian Universalists have never been, and we should struggle mightily never to become, any Political Party at Prayer (or in Meditation). Our strength increases only as our diversity increases. We can only learn the truth if we consider all perspectives.

In our gathering, in our breathing together, out of all the feelings with which we filled this sacred space, for me one word said, one aspiration claimed, still rings in this air: "Curiosity." I hope for "Curiosity" one of us said.

Do you know this scene in T.H. White's *The Sword and the Stone* (Chapter 21)? Wart, the boy who would become King Arthur, comes to Merlyn the Magician to say "Sir Ector sent me to see if you can't cheer me up."

Merlyn says to Wart: "The best thing for disturbances of the spirit is to learn something. . . . (Y)ou may miss your only love, and lose your monies to a monster, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then - to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the poor mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. . . . That is the only thing that never fails."

And, though he's just told us (we're) "now completely in the clear - to spend four years . . . tasting artisan beers," that's not what Garrison Keillor did this week. Instead, "I went up to my home town the other day and ran into my gym teacher, Stan Nelson, looking good at 96. He commanded a landing craft at Normandy on June 6, 1944, and never said a word about it back then, just made us do chin-ups whether we wanted to or not. I saw my biology teacher Lyle Bradley, a Marine pilot in the Korean War, still going bird-watching in his 90s. I was not a good student then, but I am studying both of them now. They have seen it all and are still optimistic. . . .The future is scary. Let the uneducated have their day. I am now going to pay more attention to teachers."

I began my study for God's test earlier this fall. I read then Speaker Paul Ryan's 2014 book *The Way Forward*. Ryan's vision is of an America whose justice and compassion is largely supported (even guaranteed) not by government, but by what he calls our civil society. Religious communities are a major component of this society. In a government driven by this vision, our religious community will be challenged to join with as many others as we can to see justice and compassion practiced in our land. We may fight as we can to pull our government into a stronger partnership than Speaker Ryan wishes to lead, but win or lose that fight--as we said with the reading by Dorothy Day a moment ago--we have our own work to do.

And we still have our own vision. It is embedded in our covenant with one another, with all people of our faith, throughout this nation and beyond it.

We have a vision of every person affirmed in his or her worth and dignity. It is the first calling of our faith. Central to it is a vision of an economy that offers an avenue to reward investment of our time and talent. In our hymnal at number 567, the poet Marge Piercy speaks for the yearning of all "To Be of Use,"

The pitcher cries for water to carry
And a person for work that is real.

Our vision emphasizes, though, as Candidate Donald Trump's did not, that this affirmation of human dignity and worth be made to EVERY person - of every gender or gender expression, of every ability, of every race, of every culture and of every national origin.

Our vision is also much broader than Candidate Donald Trump's has been. It affirms, as the

sixth calling of our faith, "the goal of a world community, of liberty, justice and peace for all." It is not a vision of America withdrawn in petulance. It is a vision of America extended in partnership.

And our vision is also much deeper than Candidate Donald Trump's has been. It affirms, as the seventh calling of our faith, a respect for our interdependence with the web of all existence. It does not obscure hard truth with easy scapegoating such as "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive" (@realDonaldTrump, 6 Nov 2012).

Our vision, in fact, is a vision even for Candidate Donald Trump as he becomes President Donald Trump. The fifth calling of our faith is to affirm the democratic process in society at large. We will affirm that he has been fairly chosen to lead us through the system of federated representative democracy our national constitution provides. In our congregations, the third calling of our faith is to affirm acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. I call us to fulfill our mission, to be a welcoming community. I call us to extend our spirit beyond our congregation, to accept Donald Trump, the person, so that we may encourage his spiritual growth as a person.

In my soul's journey this past week, into the chamber of #apocalypse, and beyond it, into the chamber of "What's the matter with . . . US" and beyond it, I finally arrived in the chamber in which you find me - under the title I gave to this message in your bulletin. I'm here asking "Are We Hopeless Optimists?"

My colleague David Maynard, minister in Portland, Oregon, named himself a Hopeless Optimist, as we talked in the afternoon of Election Day. That was still when all we "liberal elitists" could only believe that Candidate Hillary Clinton would surely be elected President Hillary Clinton. By the end of the week, the delicious oxymoronic madness of this mental state was growing on me. As a nation, as a world, we are now saying good-bye to the governmental leadership of the couple, Bill & Hillary, whom many of us first embraced as the people from "A Place Called Hope" Arkansas. In two months we will be saying good-bye to the governmental leadership of the couple, Barack & Michelle, whom many of us became deeply inspired by through a book Barack authored with the title *The Audacity of Hope*. In a way, we must be "hopeless."

The ancient Greeks, who put Hope in Pandora's Box of calamities, knew one thing better than we do. Hope can be a curse.

Hope is a curse, not a blessing, if it paints for us a future which no reality can fulfill, if it robs us of learning how to appreciate, to savor, the life that is, or will be, ours.

And Hope is a curse, not a blessing, if it prevents us from facing and finding our way through the vicissitudes of that life, if denial robs us of the time and strength to work well within intractable limits – be they of illness, or talent, geology, or genes.

Who remembers the Y2K scare of 1999 - when we worried that computers that had not been programmed to cross into the new millennium would somehow bring civilization itself to a crashing, crushing halt as our clocks ticked past midnight on December 31? The next December 31, with George W. Bush then elected President, with the Man from Hope, Bill

Clinton, leaving as President, but Hillary coming as Senator, December 31, 2000, happened to be a Sunday.

I preached a sermon that day titled "Apocalypse How?" I reviewed the multiple likelihoods that catastrophe awaited us just around the corner. I asked how our faith calls us to act in their face. My colleague Ed Frost helped me to see that, in any situation, even in an apocalypse, we are called to be, ever, who we are. We are called, if we can't prevent a catastrophe, not to contribute to it. We are ever called to live out our essence, our essence as Unitarian Universalists, is to be optimists.

We are hopeless optimists. Like Garrison Keillor's teachers, Stan Nelson, at 96, and Lyle Bradley, bird-watching in his 90s, we have seen it all. And our faith is still in the power of human beings to find truth and to do good, as our prophet Jesus so well modeled. Our faith still is our faith in the power of cosmos creativity ever to reach out, to embrace, and to save all life, as a God of Love. So let us stand on that God's side, and move forward in that God's spirit.