

Resist: One Year Later
November 12, 2017
Rev. Otto O'Connor

"If You Could Go Back" by Danny Bryck, adapted

*I know, I know
If you could go back you
would walk with Jesus
You would march with King
Maybe assassinate Hitler
At least hide Jews in your basement
It would all be clear to you
But people then, just like you
were baffled, had bills
to pay and children they didn't
understand and they too
were so desperate for normalcy
they made anything normal
Even turning everything inside out
Even killing, and killing, and it's easy
for turning the other cheek
to be looking the other way, for walking
to be talking, and they hid
in their houses
and watched it on television, when they had television,
and wrung their hands
or didn't, and your hands
are just like theirs. Lined, permeable,
small, and you
would follow Caesar, and quote McCarthy, and Hoover, and you would want
to make Germany great again
Because you are afraid, and your
parents are sick, and your
job pays poorly and where's your
dignity? Just a little dignity and those kids sitting down in the highway,
and chaining themselves to
buildings, what's their problem? And that kid
That's King. And this is Selma. And Berlin. And Jerusalem. And now
is when they need you to be brave.
Now
is when we need you to go back
and forget everything you know
and give up the things you're chained to
and make it look so easy in your
grandkids' history books (they should still have them)*

*Now
is when it will all be clear to them.*

Have you heard or read this poem before?

I remember it. I remember seeing it pop up around the inauguration of our current President on Facebook pages and websites and in news articles. It's striking to me the way it balances that sense the past seems so clear when we look back. It seems so clear to those of us with the privilege to look back and say "If I was there, I would have marched alongside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. If I'd be there I would have hid Jews in my basement. If I'd be there, I would have worked alongside the abolitionists to end slavery."

This is, of course, easy for those of us, like me, who would have had a choice. A white person like me, of Irish and English descent, who wouldn't have been personally getting turned away at the polls, who wouldn't have had my own body sold because of the color of my skin, who wouldn't have had to deal with the threat of death because of my ethnicity. Who, in many ways, would have been on the side of the oppressor. Who would have had the luxury of gliding by.

It's easy for people like me, like many of us in this room, to look back at those moments in time and see, with such clarity, what was the right thing to do. It's easy to see how we would be called. To see how we would have risked so much, maybe even our own lives, to be on the right side of history.

Now, I know this church is no stranger to discussing politics from the pulpit - particularly this past year since our current president was elected. Many have come through these doors, and the doors of many churches and houses of worship, looking for meaning, looking for hope in a time that felt hopeless.

And I can tell you that my memories of that day, of that election last November, and week following the are as clear as if it happened yesterday. From the moments of hope scattered throughout the morning as my Facebook feed filled with women walking into their polling places proudly in their pantsuits to elect the first woman president. To that night, watching the races on television, quietly holding onto hope, slowly realizing the truth of what was happening. When I woke up to the final news at 3am that morning, I, like many here, felt that I was waking up in a nightmare. And, for many, it truly was waking up to a nightmare, as the threat of deportation and the rise of hate crimes spread across our nation.

But I have to admit that it feels a little strange for me, your new Minister, to be standing here at the pulpit telling you my feelings about the election. We hear all the time of the separation of church and state, after all. Shouldn't the church be free of politics and political talk?

But I have to tell you - as I've said before if I'm going to be your Minister, I need to be honest with you - I have to tell you that I disagree. The separation of church and state is

important - the church should be free of state influence - but my faith, my Unitarian Universalist religious values - they deeply impact how I feel about how we are to be with each other in the world and how we govern ourselves. In short, they impact my politics.

And, what's more, politics are only "politics" if these policies don't impact you directly. Let me say it again, politics are only "politics" if these policies don't impact you directly. The personal is political.

I know that for me, sometimes, watching political races can feel a little like watching sports. I've never been much of a sports fan, but the cheering, the excitement, can feel sort of similar.

Yet, when someone like our current President gets elected, someone whose language and actions violate the human dignity of so many, it's not just "politics." And I believe we as Unitarian Universalist are called to act. Not because it's partisan. But because the stakes are too high to sit it out in the name of "separation of church and state."

Even before the election, it was clear from the way he talked that our current President didn't believe in protecting the safety of many who call this country home. He attacked Muslims, stating there should be a Muslim ban. On video he was recorded bragging about sexually assaulting women. And there is so much more that I hesitate to name it all because we'd be here all day. And this behavior, these kinds of beliefs and actions are not ok. They are not in line with our beliefs and our values as Unitarian Universalists for we are a people who believe in peace, who believe in justice, who believe in compassion. And yet here is a man who has threatened war, obstructed justice, and shows little signs of compassion.

I found myself feeling such a mix of emotions after the election. Fear. Anger. Defiance.

That Sunday, at the church where I was a student minister, a bunch of new people showed up needing support, a place for grief and a place for hope. I'm told the same thing happened here, at this church.

We talk of church and state yet when the state upsets us we go to the church. The church is where we find solace, where we are fortified to do the work of love and justice in the world.

That Sunday, Rev. Nathan our Senior Minister, gave a sermon in which he asked everyone to stand up and speak aloud the names of people they were going to stand with. He started with saying he would stand with his wife and daughter in the face of the sexism this campaign had brought, he continued by saying he would stand with a friend of his who is an undocumented immigrant. Others in the congregation began saying names and standing up, just sort of popping one at a time and then I heard it. Someone faintly said my name, Otto.

And I assume this person said this because I'm a transgender man. And at this point it felt like there was no group that was safe from the tyranny of this man.

Yet, the fear that I felt because of this part of my identity was balanced by many other areas in which I felt safe. Because I live in Massachusetts. Because I'm a white man and a legal citizen. And because, honestly, I'm a dual citizen with Canada so I can leave if things get really bad.

And for the most part, that's been the case for me, and I imagine many of you. I have not been personally impacted by anything that's happened in this administration.

But that is far from the case for so, so many in this country.

His narrow view of immigration, and which immigrants are acceptable immigrants, has divided families. The administration has ended DACA, or Delayed Action for Childhood Arrivals, forcing people away from the only home they have known. He has instituted unconstitutional travel bans on people from certain countries that he sees as "Muslim." And all of his anti-immigrant, anti-Latinx, and anti-Muslim rhetoric has emboldened people in their hate speech.

And it's all connected because, as we saw in Charlottesville this past summer, actual White Supremacists, people who claim to be Nazis, and do so proudly, came out and demonstrated. And when a woman was killed, our President wasn't even able to condemn the beliefs of these white supremacists. And of course, these are just a few of the things he has done and said. I'm not sure you need another litany of his and this administration's misdeeds.

So as we are sitting here wondering what to do, I wonder, will it be clear to our grandchildren?

In the days after the election, and after the inauguration I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. It was part grief, part terror. I wondered if I was overreacting. Could it really get so bad as I was imagining. Were we entering another fascist state?

And there was also an energy, something harnessed that came out in the Women's Marches. It felt like we were waking up to these realities of our country. Perhaps this was the last kicking of the beast before he dies. Perhaps the forces of justice and compassion would prevail again. I'm sure you felt that too.

But, honestly? Then life just kind of... continued. I had a job to look for (this one!) and a degree program to finish, and you, you had kids and homes, and jobs, and life. And for me, for me, slowly, it wasn't the first thing that hit me in the morning, it wasn't the thing that grabbed my gut anymore.

And I could stand here and tell you that that's not ok, that we can't close our eyes to the violence and oppression being doled out by this regime on a daily basis.

But that's not realistic. Living with that kind of depression, that kind of anxiety, that kind of anger day in and day out is unsustainable. And this fight needs you to be sustained.

But it's hard, isn't it? Because we don't know the moments when things happen slowly and we don't speak up. Because one slight doesn't seem so bad. Because maybe we don't personally know anyone who is being denied their Temporary Protected Status and being deported, it's not urgent for us.

And as we are swimming in all this, trying to live our lives, and trying to resist, resist these forces that would turn our country into one that is even less safe than it is, it's not easy for us to know what our grandkids will think is so obvious.

As folks gathered for the Fight Supremacy rally in Boston this past summer, in response to what happened in Charlottesville, I struggled thinking about whether or not I should go because I was going to a wedding that night and it was going to make for a busy day.

But I thought to myself, if this is where it all goes down, what do I want to tell my grandchildren?

Now, my preaching professor from seminary used to say "give them something to do," at the end of sermons. And so, as much as I want to leave you hanging and tell you to figure it out yourself, because I certainly haven't, I can tell you this:

"It's far too late, and things are far too bad for pessimism." Those are the words of author Dee Hock.

Friends, you are here this morning because this is a church of hope and church where we bring our love beyond walls, our human, imperfect love. And we take care of each other as we do.

Because we know that among the terrible and beautiful things in the world, there are terrible and beautiful things in our lives right alongside it.

So consider what will be clear to your grandchildren (your actual grandchildren, of your spiritual grandchildren, or if you already grandchildren, what will they say about you to their children and their children's children). And consider how you can resist in your own ways in your life. And consider what times you need to be louder about it. And what times it's truly worth the risk of it. Because I guarantee you, sometimes it's worth the risk to march with King, or Jesus, or to hide the Jews in your basement. Sometimes it's worth the risk of granting sanctuary to undocumented immigrants, and marching because Black Lives Matter, and rising up in solidarity with our Muslim siblings. Because it is who we are called to be.

And if your gut is telling you that it's one of those moments, embrace that fear. Do your grandchildren proud. The stakes are too high and our faith calls us to be those people. And we as a church can be those people. And we can support each other in that call.

And so I leave you with this:

*Now
is when we need you to go back
and forget everything you know
and give up the things you're chained to
and make it look so easy in your
grandkids' history books (they should still have them)
Now
is when it will all be clear to them.*

Let us say together Amen. Amen.