

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Crossing the Line
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MEDITATION (excerpt)

Muriel Ruckeyser

Yes, it is there, the city full of music,
Flute music, sounds of children, voices of poets,
the unknown bird in his long call. The bells of peace.
Essential peace, it sounds across the water
In the long parks where the lovers are walking.
Along the lake with its island and pagoda.

Buddha still under the Bo tree in scorching heat,
 Adonai, Allah. Raise your arms to Mary
 that she may lay her palm on our brows,
 to Shekinhah, Queen of Heaven and Earth,
 to Inanna in her stripped descent.

Hawk or Wolf, or the Great Whale, Record Keeper
 of time before, time now, time ahead, pray. Bow down
 to terriers and shepherds and Siamese cats.
 Fields of artichokes and elegant strawberries.

Pray to the bus driver who takes you to work,
 pray on the bus, pray for everyone riding that bus
 and for everyone riding buses all over the world.
 If you haven't been on a bus in a long time,
 climb the few steps, drop some silver, and pray.

Waiting in line for the movies, for the ATM,
 for your latte and croissant, offer your plea.
 Make your eating and drinking a supplication.
 Make your slicing of carrots a holy act,..
 each translucent layer of the onion, a deeper prayer.

...

Making love, of course, is already a prayer.
 Skin and open mouths worshipping that skin,
 the fragile case we are poured into,
 each caress a season of peace.

If you're hungry, pray. If you're tired.
 Pray to Gandhi and Dorothy Day.
 Shakespeare. Sappho. Sojourner Truth.
 Pray to the angels and the ghost of your grandfather.

... if you are riding on a bicycle
 or a skateboard, in a wheel chair, each revolution
 of the wheels a prayer that as the earth revolves
 we will do less harm, less harm, less harm.

...With each breath in, take in the faith of those who have believed when belief seemed foolish, who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.

Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace, feed the birds for peace, each shiny seed that spills onto the earth, another second of peace. Wash your dishes, call your mother, drink wine.

Shovel leaves or snow or trash from your sidewalk. Make a path. Fold a photo of a dead child around your VISA card. Gnaw your crust of prayer, scoop your prayer water from the gutter. Mumble along like a crazy person, stumbling your prayer through the streets.

CROSSING THE LINE

It is hard to believe (and it is pointless any more to waste time complaining, “I can hardly believe...”) the wounds that have been inflicted upon our democracy in the past four years. It is hard to believe it and therefore hard to comprehend what might be required of good citizens in such a darkening time – not of radicals or utopian dreamers or anarchists, but just plain good citizens in a time of crisis. It’s

hard to know what responsible citizenship requires just now, what decency demands.

Four years ago began our catastrophic occupation of Iraq, continuing a decade of devastating economic sanctions before that, and I say “our” occupation because the tax forms we all sign this month are a kind of invoice we approve, whether we approve or not. It’s ours. Ours as well are the unbelievable but undeniable abuses which have come surging with the war out of dark imagination into stark reality. Earlier this month *The New York Times* ran an editorial called “The Must-Do List,” of actions and corrections which the Congress must pursue now in order to restore the integrity of our way of government. This is not a short list and nor is it in any way comprehensive. In fact it only addresses the abuses resulting from one piece of legislation passed last year (the Military Commissions Act). It is a start. At the very least we must:

- Restore habeas corpus, the ancient right to challenge imprisonment through legal means
- Stop illegal spying and the unwarranted interception of Americans’ international phone calls and emails
- Close the secret CIA prisons operating around the world
- Account for all the “ghost prisoners” who have disappeared in those prisons
- Screen all detainees fairly and effectively, and free all innocent prisoners
- Ban extraordinary rendition, the practice of abducting foreign citizens and flying them in secret to countries where we know they will be tortured and indefinitely warehoused
- Ban the use of torture, period, and recommit to its definition in the Geneva Conventions on basic human rights
- Ban the admission of secret evidence and tainted evidence in court, including any evidence obtained through physical or emotional abuse
- Ensure the right to legal counsel for every person
- Redefine or abandon the classification “illegal enemy combatant” which currently may refer to anyone, anywhere, who is not a US citizen. (1)

It is hard to believe how fragile, how vulnerable, how precarious are the founding principles and basic liberties we take for granted, and hard to believe how easily we concede that their suspension or eradication is required by the so-called “war on terror,” how easily we accept that these are reasonable or responsible sacrifices. At some point there could be precious little left that’s worth defending. And so we wonder, what in this moment might comprise a reasonable, responsible response to these abuses and to the disastrous war, and at what point does a reasonable

response become responsible resistance? All of the conventional avenues to civic participation and influence, writing letters, signing petitions, sending money, voting seem urgent and also absolutely insufficient to the crisis at hand; but what right action would suffice? What ought we to do?

That is a perennial question for serious citizens in a free society, sometimes a theoretical, philosophical kind of late-night question for the local debate team, and sometimes it is immediate and disquietingly personal.

I knew a woman once who was in her late sixties when I met her. She had been a nun for many years, and had left her order at mid-life with a mix of crystal-clear intention and also deep regret. Shortly after that she came out as a lesbian to a few close friends, but never to her family and never to her church. She lived alone, a very quiet, deliberate person. The town we lived in had a large, lavish, festive, feisty gay pride march every year in May, and she never would march in it. She never even went to it, though the route went right past her apartment building. She confessed once that the thought of doing anything like that was very frightening to her. She didn't have a job to lose or a public reputation to uphold. Her family would never have known, but it felt risky, she said, and she wasn't sure why. One year in the spring two gay men were attacked in that town as they walked home at night; they were not killed, but badly beaten. They were members of our congregation, and though this woman didn't know them well, something in that connection made her decide to go to the pride march that year, on their behalf. The injury to that couple, and the desecration of everybody's sense of safety, somehow called her to bear witness – meaning she opened her front door, and stepped out onto the little patch of sidewalk there with about 12,000 other people on a sunny afternoon.

Afterwards, she said that it was the bravest thing she'd ever done, to be visible and exposed like that, even though she was just one person in a great anonymous crowd. She said the hardest thing about it was that the people were joyful, exuberant, loud, proud, demanding, angry, openly grieving, openly laughing, singing, a little wild around the edges, and so lucid in their purpose, their call for justice and freedom – all the things, she said, “that I've practiced all my life not to do and not to be. But I can see how this could be good for me, and how it could be the right to do.” (She was the kind of person for whom “the right thing to do” trumped “it might be good for me” every time – but here was a moment in which the two were one and the same.) As far as I know, she never did march in that annual parade, never did make a float nor even make a sign, or wear a button, nor ride with the motorcycles, the Dykes on Bikes, at the front of the line, but she was

present every year after that, present and accounted for, on purpose. It mattered deeply to her.

Showing up, in some kind of way, matters. I think of one definition of “vocation,” or calling: it is the exact place where your own greatest joy and the world’s greatest need intersect. Sometimes the world’s greatest need is for a big crowd to come out, speak out, show up, act up, so the will of the people can be spoken and heard and the people themselves (we ourselves) can encourage each other and go on from there to fight the good fight. And sometimes our own greatest joy, much to our surprise, is to be true to our hearts and our convictions, as hard as that may be, as inconvenient or as risky as it may be. . The intersection of your great joy – not flimsy happiness, not passing pleasure, but substantive joy – and the world’s true need is the place to listen for what calls you.

I’m thinking of this now as I think about the march and rally this afternoon in Minneapolis, protesting the war in Iraq. When someone says, and they always do, “What good will that do, walking around in the rain, clogging the street, shouting those slogans at each other?” I think not so much of changing the world and changing minds, but of people like that woman, and of our own flickering confidence. “What are you demanding there?” says the same person. “Do you have a solution for what should happen in the Middle East, a plan for how the troops should be withdrawn, or what will happen in Iraq, or in with Iran, the next step and the next?” We all have our armchair ideas, but we also have some sense of what needs to happen in ourselves. A large demonstration might or might not put pressure on elected representatives, or raise new questions in their minds, or encourage them to pursue some specific course of action. You never really know. What we know for sure is that *we* need to be encouraged, *we* need to be pressured, *we* need reminders of how much is at stake. Every so often I need to see and hear and stand beside many, many others, and remember that I’m not alone, that I am not afraid. I need to recall to whom and to what I am accountable. Sometimes our calling is where our joy intersects with our own greatest need.

One writer says,

The human psyche can withstand appalling abuse and prolonged periods of unrest. But then there are moments when, like a volcano silent too long, it explodes- with anger, terror, desperation. We know that volatile mixture all too well in this day and age. It is the dark side of being human. But then there are breakthrough moments – call them transcendental – when a shaft of light comes pouring through a hole in the clouds, and a truth that was previously hidden becomes obvious in an immanent and almost hallowed manner. A truth, perhaps, like this one: the life

force within each of us is but an extension of the life that breathes through the trees and the air and the grass and the rain. (2)

That sense of essential connection, of belonging, of mutual relation, of sympathy, responsibility, finds an outlet for expression, and also sustenance, in direct action – whether that action be marching in the street, or writing letters, making art, or prayer. Sometimes “a truth that was previously hidden becomes obvious,” and somehow you must answer it then, honor it, bear witness to it, make it tangible, commit to it some way.

This week I’ve been reading a memoir by Joshua Key, a young soldier from Guthrie, Oklahoma, who joined the Army in 2002 to learn a trade and earn some money and who was surprised, but not too sorry, to be deployed in spring 2003. He was willing to fight for freedom, and he believed what he was told about Saddam and Al Qaeda and weapons of mass destruction, and “fighting the war over there so we don’t have to fight it over here.” By his own admission, he liked guns and uniforms, and he was up for the adventure. Now he lives in exile in Canada, a fugitive with his wife Brandi and their four children. His book is called *Deserter*. He says that the things that he was ordered to do, and others that he witnessed done, to civilians were too terrible, too inhuman and unnecessary. He writes about conducting neighborhood raids at night, randomly blowing up houses, taking dozens of innocent young men and boys away to unknown jails in handcuffs and hoods, where he now knows they are imprisoned still. He writes about the killing of children, the abuse of prisoners, and seeing soldiers playing soccer with the severed heads of dead civilians. Joshua Key was in Iraq for seven months, and when he came home on leave he knew that he could not go back. He had some sense that it was already too late, that the damage he’d done (though he himself did not kill anyone) and the damage done to his own soul was perhaps irrevocable. *I never thought I would lose my country, he writes, and I never dreamed it would lose me. I was raised as a patriotic American, taught to respect my government and to believe in my president. Just a decade ago I was playing high school football, living in a trailer with my mom and step dad, working at Kentucky Fried Chicken... I am neither a coward nor a traitor. I will never apologize for deserting the American army. I deserted an injustice and leaving was the right thing to do. I owe one apology and one apology only, and that is to the people of Iraq. (3)* I think of this man, and it seems that somehow we’re called to bear witness to his story, and to so many other true stories.

...There are breakthrough moments – call them transcendental – when a shaft of light comes pouring through a hole in the clouds, and a truth that was previously

hidden becomes obvious in an immanent and almost hallowed manner. A truth, perhaps, like this one: the life force within each of us is but an extension of the life that breathes through the trees and the air and the grass and the rain.

To speak that word of truth as plainly as we can, in our words, in our actions, to live into it, act out of it, to listen for it deliberately when we find we're not hearing it so clearly anymore, that is prayer and activism both.

In the fall of 2002, we called a special congregational meeting here and voted publicly to proclaim our opposition to the then-impending war. The decision was not unanimous, but it was a resounding declaration. Votes like that are rare here; it's unusual for us to try to speak with one voice to an issue like that because we so cherish diversity of opinion and the evolution of opinion. We were mindful that there are times when a congregation such as ours may be called to speak, but it's hard to know when exactly those times are and so we proceeded carefully. Obviously our statement did not stop the war, and you could argue that it was a meaningless gesture, empty and slightly self-righteous. But that vote was a point of departure for us, not an endpoint. It signaled our intention to continue the conversation about this war. We would struggle with it as a spiritual and ethical community of children and adults. I think we've tried to do that. In March that spring our Youth Group led the services the week the war began, and they as much as anyone have kept us focused on the hardest questions, kept us honest, searching, hopeful, brave and appropriately outraged. They've held us to the promise of our vote, because they themselves are honest, searching, hopeful, brave and appropriately outraged. It does not escape their notice that the 3,211 soldiers who've died in Iraq are mostly very young, nor that the damages done globally will be theirs to clean up. When the adults of their church said by that vote, "not in our name," the effect on our children was more than symbolic.

At what point does a responsible response become responsible resistance? When does a concerned person, or a congregation, need to step beyond ordinary activity into activism? When do you cross that line and how do you draw that line? For each one of us, it's different.

This week I was sitting next to someone at a middle school band concert, someone who's a member here, and somehow it came up that when she was in junior high school in White Bear Lake, about 30 years ago, the girls in her class one day rose up all together when the boys were invited to go down to the gym and sign up for sports teams. This was before Title IX was passed, in the days when the choices for girls were gymnastics or cheerleading. The teacher said, "Where do you girls

think you're going?" They said they were going to sign up, and when they got to the gym, there were teachers there blocking the door. But the girls did not back down, and although that year they did not play, in the following year things started to change. Did Title IX pass because of that one spontaneous action in White Bear Lake? Would it have passed anyway had those girls just waited quietly and obediently at their desks for a few more years, ironing their cheerleading outfits and curling their hair? There is no question that the law changed when it finally did because many, many, many girls like them stood up and said they were ready to play. I'm hoping that this story will be told by the perpetrator to the girls and the boys in our congregation very soon. For each one of us the line is different. We all need the inspiration of true stories to answer the call to cross over.

150 years ago the freed slave Frederick Douglass spoke words that are now famous. They are among the readings in the collection in our hymnbook:

The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle... If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its mighty waters... This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. ... Men may not get all they pay for in this world; but they must certainly pay for all they get. If we ever get free from the oppressions and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal. We must do this by labor, by suffering, by sacrifice, and if needs be, by our lives and the lives of others. (4)

He was not speaking to slaves (not directly), nor inciting rebellion among them; he had no direct access in 1857 to groups of slaves, nor they to him. They did not attend his lectures. He was speaking to white citizens, mindful that the economy of slavery oppressed everyone involved in it, in the South, in the North, in Europe, black and white, whether they realized this or not. He knew that slavery enslaved

the soul of every citizen, and he wondered out loud, on the lecture circuit, how much they would “quietly submit to,” and for how long.

In some ways we are like that white audience in rural New York State in 1857, who up until about that point lived worlds away from the plantations of the South, or believed they did (all the while eating sugar and wearing cotton clothes). Their region was in fact a hotbed of abolitionist (and also suffragist) activity, but not everyone chose activism or engagement in the issues of the day. They didn’t have to. For a long while they *could* have crops without plowing up the ground, and rain without thunder and lightning. They could lead the decent lives of quiet citizens -- and until John Brown attacked the arsenal at Harper’s Ferry two years later, they didn’t have to wonder, unless they chose to, what might be required of good people, white people, who disapproved of slavery and wished that it would go away.

And so it is to some extent with us. Unless we ourselves have loved ones in the armed forces right now (as some of you do, but most of us do not), or unless our accidental circumstances make us likely targets of the Military Commissions Act or the US Patriot Act, most of us have the dubious luxury of choosing whether to remain distanced from or even disinterested in the great emergencies of our time. The war does not affect us directly, unless we choose to be affected; the assaults upon our Constitution don’t change the way we live from day to day. But we do know that without struggle there will be no progress, and we know that that struggle is first and ultimately an interior reckoning.

Pray for peace, says Ellen Bass. Pray to whomever you kneel down to... and she names a few gods who might come to mind. But then she goes on in her poem to suggest that everything we do, every breath we take might be a kind of prayer: riding the bus, drinking your coffee, slicing the carrots...

*...if you are riding on a bicycle
or a skateboard, in a wheelchair, each revolution
of the wheels is a prayer as the earth resolves
we will do less harm, less harm, less harm...*

Pull weeds for peace, turn over in your sleep for peace, feed the birds for peace...

She’s talking about mindfulness, about choosing to hold in the forefront of awareness the circumstances of our world, the conditions of our time. She’s

talking about the deliberate practice of attentiveness, when it would be so easy not to pay attention.

Pray for peace, she says. Fold a photo of a dead child around your VISA card. Wash your dishes, call your mother, shovel leaves or snow...

Stay awake, in other words. Stay connected. In the strong company of others who will remind you what your truth is, what your calling is, what your life is for, stay bright. Brave. Honest. Hopeful. Outraged.

With every breath in, she says, take in the faith of those who have believed when belief seemed foolish, who persevered. With each breath out, cherish.

To cherish is the beginning of responsible resistance, which asks of us the same presence of mind, the same willingness to show up and be present, the same risk and love of this life that is required for prayer.

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1. Editorial, *The New York Times*, Sunday, March 4, 2007
 2. Editorial, *Orion*, January-February 2007
 3. Joshua Key, *Deserter*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007
 4. Frederick Douglass, "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies." Speech, Canandaigua, New York, August 3, 1857.