

## What Does It Mean to Be a People of Memory?

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein©

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Last Saturday, when news of the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue started popping into my social media, two memories came to mind. One was of the times I had visited friends from nursing school in Squirrel Hill; a beautiful and vibrant neighborhood in Pittsburgh, the city where many of my maternal relatives lived. Then I read about the care given to the alleged shooter by hospital personnel, many of them Jewish. That's when I started thinking about another memory.

When Moishe Osofsky, a first-generation Jew from Poland, came home from World War II, he used the GI Bill to attend classes at the New School for Social Research. There he met Margaret Jeanne Ashcom, a Pennsylvania Lutheran whose maternal ancestors came over on the Mayflower. They had nothing in common except their fascination with each other, so of course they fell madly in love. Meeting the families was an interesting experience. The Ashcom's had apparently never seen a Jew up close, and the Osofsky's, I'm pretty sure, had never seen anything like Margaret Ashcom before. It went fairly well on both sides, with one small exception; an Osofsky cousin who was hostile to the point of rudeness. Most everybody just shrugged it off until Moishe (he prefers Morris) got a letter from the local Rabbinical council asking him to appear before them. "No way," he said. "I love her and I'm going to marry her. I don't care what they think." Then his mother explained that he was to go as a witness. A witness? "Yes. Cousin Joe has been charged with failing to be hospitable to a stranger."

Well, Morris and Jeanne got married and a year later I came along. My parents had already decided that they would raise their mixed faith children in the

Unitarian (pre-merger) church; a place they knew would welcome them in their religious diversity and provide me with a religious education that allowed me to celebrate all manner of religious holidays comfortably with Osofsky's and Ashcom's and all manner of folk. Now some of you know that I drifted away from the church in my young adult years, then returned. And some of you know the story I told a few weeks about and being struck by an index card in the Parish Hall of the UU congregation I drifted back into. It was scotch-taped to the wall with that beautiful quote from Hebrews. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for some have thereby entertained angels unawares."

The thread in my memory between the story of the rabbinical court and my re-memebering of my Unitarian Universalist faith decades later is the that of hospitality; of the demand that all the Abrahamic faiths make on their adherents to place hospitality above comfort, above convenience, above particularity. The spiritual discipline of hospitality is in my DNA, as it is in the DNA of all of us. That is a compelling reality for us in this time of acrimony and fear-mongering. Those nurses and doctors in Pittsburgh rendered care to a man still ranting about his hatred of them. They remembered who they were: healers who took an oath to render care to all. They are our role models in faith. The police officers, the first responders who walked into the line of fire. They could do that because they remembered who they were: men and women who took an oath to protect and serve. They are our role models in faith.

What does it mean to be a people of memory? It means that we curate our memories; we ask ourselves, "What does this memory teach us about our current day selves? Who were we? Who are we? Who are we meant to be?"

Scott Tayler writes in the November Soul Matters packet about two important questions we need to consider as we reflect on what it means to be a

people of memory. He says, “‘What takes you back?’ invites us to see memory as having its own volition. Not a skill we manipulate, but a sacred energy that wants something from us, or hopes something for us. And ‘Where does it take you?’ Well, that’s a big question too. The space of memory is elusive. Mysterious. Seemingly beyond our grasp. Who can really say where it is? But here’s what we do know: it is in the space of memory that we are somehow held together, and re-assembled. As we remember, we are re-membered. In that space, memories become these self-animated threads that weave the pieces and parts of us into this more complete thing we call me and you. If memory had a voice, it wouldn’t sing ‘remember me.’ It would call out, ‘don’t forget who you are.’ And so, friends, this month, may that be our charge: To allow memory to flow through us in order that it may patch us back together and keep us whole. Happy re-membering, re-assembling and re-collecting!” (End quote)

To my mind, the challenge of being a people of memory is how to be totally honest about our memories. We are living in times made dangerous by the words and actions of people who are resistant to and terrified of modernity, of progress, of globalization. They invoke the good old days, but their memory of ‘the good old days’ is incomplete. When they hearken back to a simpler time, they must, out of necessity, gloss over the fact that it was only simple for some people. Those privileged by skin color, gender identity, social class. An incomplete or dishonest memory takes us back to a dishonest vision of ourselves and of our nation. It is a vision that erases the experiences of marginalized people. It is a vision that lets us forget that most of us live on stolen land that was developed with stolen labor.

The African American poet Langston Hughes says it best:

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,

But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.  
(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")  
*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?*  
*And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*  
I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.  
O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!

If we are to be a people of memory we need to be a people of painfully honest memory. We need to pay attention to the sacred energy that takes us back to a place of honesty and vulnerability, a place where we can grab onto those threads that link our stories together and weave them into a healthy whole. A place where we can be reassembled after recognizing that all of us must evolve, grow and change. Individuals evolve. Congregations evolve. Nations evolve. Creation evolves.

A place of painful honesty is a place where the whole story can be told. From that whole story comes a holistic vision of the next chapter in that story. We

gain perspective; we come to understand some of the things that we always took for granted, and we get to reject those things that no longer serve us well. That sorting and sifting and surrendering is part of the re-assembling or re-membering that Scott Tayler writes about.

And that, beloveds, brings me to the election. No, not that election. I have only one thing to say about that election. If you want to make America great again for the first time, if you want to contribute to fulfilling Langston Hughes vision of the America that could be, then vote on Tuesday. That's all. On Wednesday we will offer two times of respite from election fatigue. We will gather in the Library at 11 am on Wednesday for reflective conversation. And at 6:30 the Vespers service here in the sanctuary will be an opportunity to de-stress and decompress as you share music, silence, and the power of meditative worship.

But the election I want to talk about this morning is the one that ended here on Friday evening. First, kudos to the Board for taking a risk on a new and different voting process. Their hope was that the rolling voting would make the election accessible to many more voting members. The fact that 187 ballots were cast is evidence that their experiment worked. Board member Mike McCabe came up with this proposal; our thanks to Mike for his creative approach. And all of you deserve credit for your participation. You read the briefing papers, you came to the information meetings, you talked to each other and you listened to each other. And then you voted. Now remember what I said a couple of weeks ago about keeping things in perspective. Given the state of the world, the questions about what kind of doors we will walk through and what kind of chairs we will sit on seem to fade in importance. But this whole capital improvement project is an opportunity for you to embody your values in your physical home.

Enhanced accessibility tells the world that you care deeply about all the people who may wish to join you in worship and fellowship and religious growth and learning. Enhanced technological capability tells the world that you recognize the ways in which communication and fellowship have evolved and changed. You are saying ‘welcome’ to a new generation of Unitarian Universalists.

And now on to seating and doors. First of all, I want to remind you of the promise of the practice of faithful democracy, which is enshrined in our Sixth Principle (The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large). The promise is this: You will not always get your way, but your voice will always be heard. You kept that promise to each other; all your voices were heard respectfully and with clarity.

I also want to remind you of two clauses in your congregational covenant. One: To seek to understand others with humility and an open mind and interact with my fellow UU members with integrity and respect. Check. This rolling voting experiment was the incarnation of that clause. And two: To use wisdom and patience in challenging or conflicting situations, and to seek honest reconciliation while recognizing we may not always come to agreement. That means when a decision is made there are no winners and no losers. Don’t let me catch you gloating! Don’t let me catch you whining! Your job now, no matter how you voted, is to come together around the decisions and to remember to place principles above personalities.

So here’s how I suggest we go from here. These pews served you well for many decades. Let’s have a farewell ceremony for the pews before they are removed. Let’s thank them for their faithful service to us, verbalize what we liked about them and what they meant to us, and then let them go.

As for the doors. This decision is an opportunity to be completely honest about a piece of history and memory. One of the keys to anti-racism work is to understand the difference between intent and impact. The original intent of Charles Parks, the artist, has often been lost. Without a guide, it is hard to understand what story he meant to tell. Now you can tell that story clearly. You can also acknowledge that our understanding of Thomas Jefferson has evolved over the decades. When these doors were commissioned, Unitarian Universalists had been mistakenly claiming Jefferson as one of our own. He never was. We named churches and organizations after him based on the soaring rhetoric he left us in such documents as the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and the Declaration of Independence while ignoring the hypocrisy of his slave powered Virginia plantation. His history with Sally Hemmings had been hushed up and covered over. Now we know more about Jefferson. And we know more about the ways that white supremacy culture infiltrates even the best-meaning institutions. You now understand that despite the original intent of the Park sculpture, enshrining an acknowledged and unrepentant slave holder at the entrance to your sanctuary might seriously and negatively impact the experience of people of color and their allies exploring whether First U could be their spiritual home.

So move the doors and tell the whole story. In that process please remember that while Jefferson's words endured, those of the enslaved persons did not. Give them voice in the re-remembering. I close with a few more words from Soul Matters. "We go with the call and the challenge to "re-member" the world. May we do our part to restore what has been broken, to return trust where doubt and betrayal now live, and to repair hearts whose hope has been lost. And as we give ourselves to this sacred work of healing and wholeness, may we find ourselves re-membered as well."