

Four Epidemics and a Faith

Delivered virtually by the Hon. Mark I. Bernstein (Ret.)
for the Unitarian Society of Germantown
October 11, 2020

I want to start with a confession. Growing up Jewish in Brooklyn, in the 1950s, just after World War II and the Holocaust where millions of Jews, Gypsies, gays, Unitarians, and resisters of all faiths were murdered, I shuddered as I asked myself, “If I lived in those times, would I have had the courage to resist, putting my life at risk?”

There have been so many holocausts, the Nazi horror, the middle passage, the horror of slavery here, the Armenian holocaust, Darfur, and other ethnic cleansing.

What a sanitizing word, “cleansing”—not systematic murder, but cleansing. George Orwell had it right when he said in the book 1984, “If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.” He also said, “In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act.”

Cleansing, Holocaust, or Murder does not have to be shipped in cattle cars or the hulls of ships. There is the holocaust of fear whenever police stop someone for driving while Black. The holocaust of gay prejudice, the holocaust of violent bullying. How can we, as people of faith, live our values and end these horrors?

These are times which test our resolve and challenge our souls. Are we up to the challenge?

The last time a major world power was governed by a leader basing his appeal on ultra-nationalism, spoken racism, anti-Semitism, and authoritarian disregard for the rule of law was in 1933 when Hitler became chancellor of Germany. Within months he had reduced the traditional conservative power structure to servility and dependence on one man alone because of his ruthless disregard for the traditional norms of government.

Ten or twenty years from now, your grandchildren, some as yet unborn, will ask you, with wide eyes in disbelief, “What did you do in 2020?”

Our Unitarian Theologian Forrest Church said, “Be who you are, want what you have, and do what you can.” I’d like to focus on what we can do.

World mythology teaches truth symbolically. So I searched for a mythological metaphor. This parable is incredible:

No one could understand how it happened. We were well ruled. King Erhos was not the brightest bulb in the pack, but he was honest and sincerely cared for his people. Even while he was on his deathbed, his son, Megrid choked on a peach and we had two funerals in one week. The people voted Aroshos, a playboy prince, ruler. He really was an unknown, perhaps that’s why he won. At first it didn’t seem horrible although Aroshos was crude and seemed not to care about anyone but himself. Since he had not expected to rule, it was not surprising that ministers didn’t last long. But surprisingly, when ministers left, he spoke derogatorily about them.

Then slowly it appeared he didn’t care that society function well. The drainage ditches filled, irrigation ditches ran dry, yet our leaders seemed to only make sure Aroshos’ own fields remained fertile. Slowly the allotments for the poor decreased until he decreed that there was not enough to help the needy at all. People became hungry and the land dried and was barren.

There had always been an undercurrent of discrimination against the blue eyed, but the creeps who espoused prejudice usually lurked in the shadows, behind rocks, hiding underground. Oh yes, they infrequently emerged before, but under Aroshos they were emboldened and came into the light, no longer ashamed to show their faces. They marched around carrying clubs. And when the authorities looked the other way they became emboldened. Beatings of the blue eyed happened on the outskirts of every march. The police were nowhere to be seen and that emboldened the creeps even more.

When asked, Aroshos made excuses. He would say we don’t know the full story, perhaps the blue-eyed deserved punishment and of course decent citizens had to act when the police wouldn’t.

As the worst impulses of the people were released, the fields were not irrigated, and waste wasn’t removed. And that was only the beginning. As the land dried up and the heat bore down, flooding and drought and storms brought misery. And the people cried out to God for relief.

And God looked down on the land and said, “That is who you have chosen to be your Leader? You are destroying the earth I have given you! You choose hate over love? You bring hunger to my people? You must suffer and thereby learn. I send you a plague, a disease, from which you must isolate, you must mask, and you must learn to trust and care for one another if you even want to survive.”

Many mythologies have God creating worldwide disasters. But after the flood, the old testament tells us, God promised to never do it again.

“God said unto Noah: And I establish my covenant with you; neither shall there anymore be a flood to destroy the earth.”

Thank you, God.

But as James Baldwin wrote, perhaps God will send “the fire next time.”

It’s amazing how myth can mirror reality. Today we confront four plagues of biblical dimensions: systemic racism, pandemic disease, job loss and hunger, and environmental degradation.

Ten or twenty years from now, your grandchildren, some as yet unborn, will ask you, with wide eyes in disbelief, “But what did you do in 2020?”

What does our Unitarian-Universalist faith **call** us to do?

Our faith in the inherent worth and dignity of every person calls upon us to actively fight prejudice wherever it rears its ugly head. We do this daily when we stand on Lincoln Drive and proclaim Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter is a manifestation of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the right to be judged not by the color of their eyes or skin or fortuitous location of their place of birth or zip code.

In normal times this is enough. But these are not normal times.

We honor heroes of the fight for equality, but we have yet to adequately honor those of our own church who fought Nazis abroad and racism here. Members of our church were Tuskegee Airmen who had to fight our own country for the right to fight fascism in Europe.

These same heroes fought for equality when they were denied access to “whites only” facilities in Indiana. Among the 162 officers who risked their careers was George Kydd. He was arrested when he insisted on being admitted to a White Officer’s club.

George Kydd became an important member of this church serving as the first Black board member and president of USG.

Yet we do not appropriately remember and honor these men in our hearts or our church building. George Kydd, Oscar Gibbs, Bert Levy, and others were Tuskegee heroes who remain unspoken. Say Their Names.

Racism in every shape: Epidemic Number 1 which we must conquer.

Another principle of our religion is justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Countless neighbors have lost employment and worry about feeding their children. We respond when we bring food for our food cupboard drive and contribute to the Covid-19 drive. We usually host PIHN families moving from homelessness and offer our skills to support neighbors with Rebuilding Philadelphia.

In normal times this is enough, but these are not normal times.

The wife of our minister William Sullivan left a legacy which we call the Sullivan Assistance Fund. For many years, these funds were used only for members of our congregation who experienced financial hardship. But Mrs. Sullivan’s will does not restrict its use to members of USG. Its mandate is to use her bequest for the poor.

This modest bequest had grown. During this crisis of hunger in our community, when neighbors must choose between feeding their children and medication, when neighbors worry about becoming sick or losing their jobs, we need to stop hoarding this fund for a “rainy day.”

How many families could we feed with a major donation? It is raining on so many of our neighbors now, and we must do what we so easily can, to donate to covid relief from this fund.

Hunger among our neighbors: Epidemic Number 2 which we must conquer.

Our seventh principle, “Respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part,” calls us to action. We recycle. Our congregation voted to maintain our little piece of the Monoshone Creek “forever wild and sacred.”

In normal times this is enough, but these are not normal times.

The New York Times on January 3 had these headlines:

- “In Australia Blast Furnace Flames Trap Evacuees”
- “India Shivers and Gags in a Foul-Air Cold Wave.”
- “Floods Kill in Jakarta as Over a Foot of Rain Falls”
- “30-Foot Drifts of Tumbleweed Bury Motorists”

All this before the apocalyptic California fires.

The world God gave us is in danger. Only governments led by our country can halt the disastrous effects of global warming.

Environmental destruction: Epidemic Number 3 which we must conquer.

The Unitarian Society of Germantown leadership has done everything right in Epidemic Number 4, Covid-19. We believe in science, we respect our medical professionals, and while we have cautiously resumed activities and refused to be deterred, we are respectful of the health of our community. Our government leaders must do the same.

Hubris, macho, even adamant resolve cannot defeat this deadly disease. Only caring, as a community, for the national community, and following the advice of scientific epidemiology, wearing masks, isolating if exposed, and social distancing can succeed.

Epidemic Number 4 can only be overcome by leadership. Which leads directly to the anxiety we now all feel.

Most important, 22 days from an election, is the fifth principle of our faith: “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process.”

As Benjamin Franklin left Independence Hall after signing the Constitution, he was asked, “What kind of government have you given us? He replied, “A republic, if you can keep it.”

The disagreements of the competing parties and candidates are broad and wide: masks, immigration, environment, racism, equality, gun violence, and the list goes on and on. But one thing they agree upon: this is an election between two visions of America. This is an election which tests the soul of our country.

Anxiety yes, but do not despair. Have faith. Our country has navigated this before.

We survived the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln famously asked whether any nation dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal can long endure.

This election tests that faith. Can any nation, conceived and dedicated to the worth and dignity of every person long endure? Can hate and division conquer our love? I tell you no they cannot!

So, whoever you support, the issues could not be clearer. Vote, of course, and give money to your candidates, of course, but after you have given all you can possibly do, people of faith must do more.

Abraham Lincoln again:

“America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.”

Vote, by mail or in person, and on election day, call everyone you know and make sure they have voted too. And between now and election day, ask yourself, “What more can I do for

the soul of our country? How can I live my faith?" Sign up for UU the Vote, or any one of the many opportunities to ensure that every voice is heard.

So, my friends, that was my message Thursday night.

Until I learned of a plot to kidnap the Governor of Michigan. The media reported "militia" were involved. But "Thought corrupts language, and language can also corrupt thought." Words matter. There is no militia. These people are "criminal terrorist traitors."

Governor Whitmer articulated the task before us in these dangerous times better than I ever could. She quoted President Reagan:

"Isolated groups in the backwater of American life still hold perverted notions of what America is all about. To those who still adhere to senseless racism and religious prejudice, I tell you, you are the ones who willfully violate the meaning of the dream that is America."

Governor Whitmer went on: "[N]one of us has ever faced a challenge like COVID-19 . . . We are not one another's enemy. This virus is our enemy, and this enemy is relentless. It doesn't care if you're a Republican or a Democrat, young or old, rich or poor. This should be a moment for national unity, where we all pull together as Americans to meet this challenge head on with the same might and muscle that put a man on the moon."

Ten or twenty years from now, when your grandchildren, some as yet unborn, ask you, with wide eyes in disbelief, "What did you do in 2020?" will we have an answer? Yes, we will!

In Brooklyn in the 1950's there was a song with a line, "Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition." Sometimes the arc of history needs a helping hand, or even a good strong shove. Now, not tomorrow, is the time to pass the ammunition—which is the vote. Every citizen's voice shall be heard.

We people of faith must act now to realize the prophetic words of John Lewis, who,
expressed his faith:

“When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate, and peace triumphed over violence, aggression and war. So, I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”

So may it be. So will it be.