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February 19, 2017

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### *Ours to Choose*

My friend sounded shaken up. Someone she's close to hadn't felt well recently and finally went to the Emergency Room. Within hours, they'd shipped her to Boston. Surrounded by her adult kids, the diagnosis of a swift-moving, inoperable cancer came way too fast.

"Not only that," said my friend, "but listen to what she said." The woman in the hospital had emailed the news, characteristically matter-of-fact until she signed off. "Buck up, my friends," she wrote. "We have to be strong." Imagine—she whose life hangs in the balance rallying her friends, encouraging *them* to be strong. We all have to be strong.

Given the way events have unfolded in Washington the last few weeks, this tough news compounded an already formidable sense of helplessness. Maybe some of you are feeling helpless, too? Helpless about your personal challenges? Helpless about world events? Helpless, too, because our Unitarian Universalist values have come under attack, every one of them! From our first principle affirming the worth and dignity of every person, to our belief in fairness and kindness for all, to our quest for truth, to our commitment to the democratic process. Even the health of our planet is under attack.

Threats to the principles at the heart of our faith affect our well-being. The pace feels too fast. The language and tone of discourse shocks and offends. And for many people, the future looks bleak—immigrants, the LGBTQ community, Muslims, non-Christians, our daughters and granddaughters, among others. The truth, remarkably, is now up for debate—it's a moving target. How disorienting.

*We need to find some traction in this new reality, and it's hard to know where to start.*

Not that we're lacking in advice. If anything, there's too much advice. Social media, the Internet and news reports dizzy us with ideas of how to fight back. How to make a difference and protest on behalf of our values. But we find that, once our name is on a list, the volume of mail in our Inboxes explodes. Well-intentioned appeals arrive one after the other with petitions to sign and calls to make. Links that take us to sites that walk us through how to write and phone in to politicians. Apps that give us daily routines in which we pick which causes to take on that day and how to make our voice heard.

Good, valuable work! And overwhelming, It's more than most of us can handle. Still, we want to engage. We want to put up a fight that will stop what's happening, yet the way forward is complicated, not clear.

Meanwhile, there's work to do *outside* the good fight. In recent weeks, a spiritual thread has entered the public discourse. People are having a hard time. The chaos and constant on-line

coverage fray our nerves. We are over-stimulated. While once upon a time the news came with the morning paper and then again on TV in the evening, today it rolls in all the time. It can wear us down.

Fact is, we need more than ever to turn away from the pandemonium and take care of ourselves. We need our health in order to live the way we want to and be present to our loved ones. And if we want to make a difference in the larger community, we must tend to our emotional and spiritual well-being, too. To engage productively in the world, we have to be on our game. We have to bring our best selves. Our compassionate, grounded selves. Our energetic, brave selves. Have you noticed how hard it is to tend to your soul when you are exhausted or anxious or riled up?

What to do? The collective wisdom tells us to walk these two very different paths. One, the path of activism (not easy)—speaking up out in the world, putting our views on the line, calling strangers, often out of our comfort zone, daring to have conversations with people whose views are unlike our own. In this work, the progress can feel slow, but often we don't know what effect our efforts will have.

The other path we're called to walk is spiritual—tending to our souls, engaging in what calms us and cultivates a loving heart—spiritual practices like mindfulness, meditation, journaling, studying, creative work, walking in the woods. As with activism, spiritual progress is gradual, impossible to measure. Life-changing.

How to walk these two paths—activism and spiritual practice? E.B. White once said, “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This,” he said, “makes it hard to plan the day.”<sup>1</sup>

We get to choose our path. Moreover, when it comes to defending our values, we have to choose our path. If we don't, we'll just keep doing what we always do, and we'll find ourselves not doing much at all about the mess of the world these days.

Our religious ancestors wrestled with bold choices. A rich, deep vein of justice runs through our UU roots. Even if we weren't born into this faith, we relate—and owe a debt of gratitude—to ways our religious ancestors chose over and over again to re-think the status quo. They paid for it, too. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Arius, the Christian elder who questioned the exact nature of the divinity of Jesus was exiled from society. In the 1500s, Michael Servetus—brilliant theologian, humanist and physician, was burned at the stake, copies of his book questioning the Trinity thrown into the fire. In the 1800s, Boston Unitarians brought such questions to a head, applying reason to scripture. They were ostracized and ultimately split off from the established church.

Thinking outside the lines has long been called heresy—the Greek root of which is *hairesis*, ‘choice.’ This streak of heresy—choosing to challenge what is and insisting on what could be—changes the world. Having taken on Christian doctrine, Unitarians (one God) and Universalists (one Salvation/Love)—addressed social systems in the late 1800s and 1900s. As others

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<sup>1</sup> E.B. White: *Notes and Comment by Author*, 1969, <http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/08/03/lifetimes/white-notes.html>

continued to interpret the Bible as justifying slavery and treating women as less-than, they fought for human freedoms, becoming abolitionists and suffragettes. Fast forward to the merger of the two religions in 1966 into a new faith—Unitarian Universalism—and continued leadership in affirming and promoting the worth and dignity of every person. The UU Association and its congregations have played active roles in the civil rights and marriage equality movements, among others.

And now it's our turn to choose. Choose how to nurture the spirit AND save the world. Either way, we need traction. A sense of yes—off “we're getting somewhere.” Doing something—anything—helps us find that traction. Sometimes even getting out of the house and going to the dump helps move the needle forward (the needle of a turntable, you know?). That sense of traction—of finding our footing on steady ground now and then...and moving forward, if only a bit, changes us. Emboldens us.

Look at what happened the day of the women's marches. The eyes of the world were watching, and people the world over took notice. Also, for the marchers themselves, the act of showing up and marching not only lifted spirits but changed people. Emboldened every one of them. Ask the people you know. Putting your heart and soul—and your body—into what you believe can't but change you.

It's like praying. We can't know whether our prayers for someone, our whispered wishes, will work—we can't measure that. But without a doubt, the one who wishes or prays is changed by quieting. Focusing. Articulating a longing. We're changed by holding another person in love. Not only does the heart rate slow down, and muscles relax, and breathing ease, but we feel better for praying and wishing—calmer, more peaceful, more hopeful. That's change as real as can be.

You may have seen the video recently of a young Sikh woman, a lawyer, who tells the story of her grandfather coming to America a hundred years ago. He's thrown into a dark jail cell for months for looking suspect, foreign with his dark skin and turban. One day, a white man takes an interest, helps, and he is released. Remembering that kindness, he later supports Japanese-American neighbors when they are forced into detention camps, and he takes care of their farms.

The granddaughter becomes a human rights lawyer. Now raising her young son in America, she fears that he, a brown person who might someday wear a turban, may face threats similar to those of his great-grandfather. She draws a parallel between the darkness of that jail cell and these dark times. Then optimism rises: “The mother in me asks,” she says, “what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is about to be born, our forbears standing behind us now whispering, ‘You are brave!’ What,” she says, “if this is America's great transition?”<sup>2</sup>

She talks about childbirth, how it is first about breathing...Then comes the moment of transition—the time to push. The bold work of justice also calls us to breathe and then to push. To resist! You can't have one without the other.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://vimeo.com/193125533>

A silversmith friend makes bracelets with words along the top—whatever words you want. Orders flow in these days, too many to keep up with, for bracelets with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s words about Senator Elizabeth Warren: “Nevertheless,” say the bracelets, “she persisted.”

Solidarity. Traction. Hope.

These times call us to choose: We choose to come here. We choose to value our spirituality and make the world a better place. We choose boldness. Remembering our ancestors, we choose solidarity. We choose traction.

We choose to buck up, friends, and be strong.

So may it be.