

Rev. Sofia Betancourt  
The Service of the Living Tradition  
Kansas City (General Assembly) - Recording played at UUFES 7/1/18  
June 21, 2018

*Sounding the Call*

READING

Rev. Sofia Betancourt's reading was the conclusion to Audre Lorde's Commencement Address delivered at Oberlin College on May 29th in 1989. "Audre Lorde," Rev. Betancourt said, "defined herself as black, lesbian, warrior, poet. And as such, her wisdom lasts long past the span of her life":

"The white fathers have told us: 'I think, therefore I am.' But the Black mother within each one of us—the poet inside—whispers in our dreams: 'I feel, therefore I can be free.'

Learn to use what you *feel* to move you toward action. Change, personal and political, does not come about in a day, nor a year. But it is our day-to-day decisions, the way in which we testify with our lives to those things in which we say we believe, that empower us. Your power is relative, but it is real. And if you do not learn to use it, it will be used, against you, and me, and our children. Change did not begin with you, and it will not end with you, but what you do with your life is an absolutely vital piece of that chain. The testimony of your daily living is the missing remnant in the fabric of our future.

There are so many different parts to each of us. And there are so many of us. If we can envision the future we desire, we can work to bring it into being. We need all the different pieces of ourselves to be strong, as we need each other and each other's battles for empowerment.

That surge of power you feel inside you now does not belong to me, nor to your parents, nor to your professors. That power lives inside of you. It is yours, you own it, and you will carry it out of this room. And whether you use it or whether you waste it, you are responsible for it. Good luck to you all. Together, in the conscious recognition of our differences, we can win, and we will. "A luta continua." [The struggle continues].

*Sounding the Call*

We are on a journey toward redemption.

We have lived a year filled with lamentation... with the promise of generations, the failures of the everyday, and the deep down gritty messiness that is the promise of our salvation.

There is inherent goodness that exists between and among us.

I want to honor the weary, ragged miracle that is our living tradition.

~ ~ ~

Oh my loves. The last time I got to address you in this great assembly, it was a time of renewed promise, of reinvestment in who we best know ourselves to be. And it was a time when our energy was kindled a bit by fear: fear that we might lose one another, fear that naming our entanglement with white supremacy would prove the undoing of our liberating faith. And we sent ourselves home with work to do, knowing that the struggles in our Association were a small reflection of the larger struggles of our nation. We were called once again to accountability at home, even as we worked for justice in the world.

I have to say that this has been a year of steadfastness in religious leadership. It's been far from perfect. But there are those among us who have worked beyond all reason to keep us accountable to this journey of dismantling white supremacy in Unitarian Universalism. They have my profound gratitude and respect. And when I say that we have had steadfastness in our religious leadership, I mean everyone who is associated with us. All of you who have heard your values and your dreams of faithful living expressed in our congregations and communities, and chosen to cast your lot among us; all of you who have brought your heartache, your failure, your unbounded hope, and your potential to Unitarian Universalism; all of you most impacted by this work, who have remained in our communities even when we have offered you less than what your spirit deserves.

On this night when we honor those dedicated to the work of our living tradition – we honor each and every one of you.

~ ~ ~

Now it has been a year when those before you on this chancel have not only responded to the needs of a nation in turmoil, and an Association deep in self reflection, they have achieved the milestones we ask of our professional leaders in the midst of that unending work. We rightly pause to honor this depth of commitment in times when we do not entirely know what our journey will ask of us, only that the work itself is worthy of sacrifice.

In a world where white supremacy and all other forms of oppression that feed on one another, all the logics of domination, are blamed on the most ludicrous things – sleep medication, absent-minded employees, habit, resource scarcity in a nation shaped by greed, *religion itself*... we are called more than ever to testify with our lives. Poet and prophet Audre Lorde told those embarking on a next great journey that it was their small actions, their everyday decisions, how they moved through this world that not only gave them power, but would define our future. She did not offer

them a great redeeming moment, she simply steered them back to the daily struggle. To what we might call faithful living.

This is about the *journey* of redemption.

Now I imagine that some of you are tired of this conversation. The work of dismantling oppression can feel endless at times. In our tiredness we sometimes fear that speaking the truth of our own complicity somehow invalidates the good that we have done in the world. Instead I see it as a sign of our commitment to a task that must rest on our faithfulness if it is ever to succeed. It will take a strength larger than our individual beliefs, larger even than our collective intention to reshape our surrounding culture. We seek to reform *Unitarian Universalism* because we can never be the bearers of love and justice that the world so desperately needs if the foundation that sustains us is still perpetuating the very problems we long to solve.

I know that we grow weary – some of us because our lived realities rarely require that we build the stamina for staying in the struggle day by day whether we want to or not, some of us because the long haul living with the daily requirement of justifying our humanity is unspeakably depleting, some of us because our faith is profoundly challenged each time we debate whether and how much this work matters at this point in our history.

I want to remind us, myself included, that it is the promise of our faith itself that calls us to this work and it is the integrity of *living* the values we bear witness to in the world that requires us to focus our energy in this way. Beloveds we are the theological inheritors of teachings on universal salvation. There is no winnowing out of the supposedly unworthy that can be named sacred among us. It is our very Universalism that is at stake when we turn away from the impact that our institutions have on the same communities and groups that society encourages us to dehumanize and make small.

This is not a new story.

When I look for something to hold onto in these days when the death struggles of institutionalized white supremacy and heteropatriarchal capitalism are attacking every group thrown to the margins to justify unearned privilege and immoral gains, I turn to the wisdom of activists who have long taught us that our liberation is collective. Many of us know the words attributed to indigenous Australian activist, Lilla Watson,

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Watson herself reminds us that this wisdom has grown collectively from activists and organizers, so I want to bring us back to one of our own, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, who is remembered for teaching us that “we are all bound up together.” Collective salvation was not a new idea at the time, though Harper predates the theologians in our own tradition best known for embracing this worldview.

In 1866, flanked by white allies Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony at the 11th National Women’s Rights Convention in NY city, Francis Ellen Watkins Harper insisted that “we are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the

weakest... of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul.” Harper, a freeborn black woman who belonged to both Unitarian and AME churches, lived her life using her relative privilege to fight for the freedom of her people. All of her people. This beautifully intersectional abolitionist organized for women’s suffrage alongside the ending of slavery, and civil rights for all. She challenged us on the dire consequences of oppression, and how the violence we inflict on those we convince ourselves are less worthy harms not only those sacredness we dishonor, but irrevocably violates our own souls as well.

I am not going to continue quoting from her speech, because the accepted ableist language of her time has no place in a modern pulpit. But I want us to understand that we are also inheritors of Harper’s insistence that there is a level of immorality worse than the systematic oppression we are giving so very much of ourselves to uproot from our beloved communities. When the poetry poured from this black mother’s heart, she unflinchingly called the nation to account for reaching out to peoples of African descent for help in a time of great need, then utterly rejecting them once again in times of safety. Beloveds, I am not suggesting we are repeating the “depths of infamy,” to use Harper’s words, of Civil War America but I *am* experiencing echoes that frighten me.

~ ~ ~

The journey toward redemption includes truth telling and I am going to ask you to bear with me for a minute, trusting that I know that every congregational and communal situation is complex, just as I know that we can do better. That I can do better.

This is a year when we have rightly thanked our gifted religious educators for their compassionate investment in our faith formation through the white supremacy teach-ins. I have heard anecdotally that this is also a year when many religious educators, of a wide range of racial and ethnic identities including white co-conspirators, have struggled with ministerial supervisors who are not as committed to this work. This is a time when more than 800 of our congregations have engaged in communal learning about dismantling white supremacy and it is also a time when we have needed interventions from the UUA and received negotiated resignations from religious professionals of color at unprecedented levels.

Let me be clear. When we do this work we almost always ask more of the people most impacted by it, project our greatest fears onto them, and allow the system to remove them rather than sustain the deep, culture changing work required for us to truly live our values in the world. And this is not just about race or ethnicity. It is about every disempowered group in our leadership. I would ask you to make it part of your faithful living to learn about the stories of our religious leaders who live with disabilities, who identify as transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming. Learn about how our congregations are treating women, making space for people with a range of class identities, embracing queer religious professionals, or responding to the leadership of people of color. Notice the things our beloveds feel justified in saying to us about our appearances, particularly to those of us who are fat. This list goes on and on.

It is past time that we stop expecting extra help from those we impact the most, then burdening them with the behaviors that come from our own wrestling with grief and dismay in the aftermath.

Let us find better ways to care for our souls in times of change.

~ ~ ~

The journey toward redemption is about truth telling, lamentation, and owning our wrongs, while at the same time claiming the profound possibility that calls us forward. We are the inheritors of the legacies of white supremacy, but also of an unimaginable grace, of certainty in the possibility of redemption, of weaving a tapestry of leadership that may not yet be what we long for but is called to be the richest expression of humanity's sacredness. We believe in human capacity great enough, a god loving enough, values strong enough, communities dedicated enough, and leaders *humble* enough to move us toward redemption.

And I think we know that redemption is a shared ministry that means everyone, that elevates all, that seeks out the suffering, neglected places of the world and breathes the Holy back into them. Redemption is a professional religious leadership that is humble, that apologizes, and that limits its own power to move us toward a greater truth. Moving in that direction means trying even when we don't know how it can ever come to pass. Trying because the struggle itself is *holy*. It means celebrating the successes that *do* in fact exist among us, elevating them, and putting them to the service of creating even greater success. At the same time it is modeling that the reality of our failings is not more powerful than the inherent goodness that we teach.

We are left asking ourselves *what will we risk for this grace?*

~ ~ ~

The thing is, I believe in our callings. Yes, many of us are called to professional religious leadership. We agree to be there in the difficult moments, and in the successes and celebrations, and we promise to wrestle and show up even as our hearts are breaking. But we also promise to understand that every member and friend of a Unitarian Universalist community is also there by calling. We are called, collectively, to this great experiment in communal salvation. Whether we arrived in this faith by birth or by choice, our everyday expression of our values in the world matters.

Friends, colleagues marking profound milestones in your professional service, what will you risk for this grace? Where lies your hope for our interwoven salvation? To my colleagues whose chosen absence we mourn, for all who serve in spite of what has been done to them... is it strange to say I remember you every time I watch Black Panther again? It is during that moment, near the end of the film, when T'Chala tells Nakia, "I think I know a way that you can still fulfill your calling. Please stay."

Oh my loves. Please stay. I believe in the power of our callings. I believe in saving the soul of our nation and that we cannot show up authentically for that struggle if we ignore the one right here, right in this community of faith. I am asking you to love us even when we don't deserve you, but not at the expense of your health or well being, both physical and spiritual. Do lean into the fierce and fabulous network of colleagues who share some of your identity shaped experiences, and know that you are never alone.

~ ~ ~

The good news is that we are in control of what we do with our daily living. If we, each one of us, represent a missing remnant in the fabric of our collective future – then together we can lean into a possibility that we have yet to fully experience in human history. A collective wholeness. An unassailable good. That is the kind of salvation I am here to fight for in the small moments of every single day. Whether you are here in person at general assembly, or participating online, or researching our history at some future date to learn the many ways we held ourselves accountable on this journey toward redemption, I invite you to learn all that you can from this gathering. Immerse yourself, unapologetically, in what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist in these days. Then go back out into the world and live knowing that your faith matters. May the poetry of our hearts set us free.

Amen, Ashe, and Blessed Be.

“Service of the Living Tradition” service at <https://www.uua.org/ga/off-site/2018/worship/slt>

**Reading 1:28:28**

Sermon 1:33:40