

“From River to Sea, From Shore to Shore”

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"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice."

I am grateful to Unitarian minister and racial justice prophet, Theodore Parker, for these immortal words. So long after his ministry and the conclusion of his all-too-short life, they speak to me, in our own time. I do not pretend to understand the world we now inhabit, why we human beings think and behave as we do. I do not pretend to understand, in each moment, how to transform my morals into actions that lend power to the “bend towards justice.”

This is one reason why I am part of a spiritual community. There is so much in life I cannot “pretend to understand.” When I join a gathering in a place like this sanctuary, I am reminded that there are many others, like Theodore Parker and myself, who are intimately aware of our humility in the midst of time that, like water, flows without ceasing, in its own way and along its own path. From river to sea; from birth to growth to death. Amid profound joy, ineffable suffering and elusive grace, life, forever, goes on.

But, despite our doubts and limitations, we also know that we have the power to act with intention, to use our vision to “calculate the curve” of the world as best we can, to make choices. And because we have this power – this limited, fallible human power – we can chart a path. We can, as is sometimes said in Black churches, “find a way out of no way.” We can stand at one shore and look to the other side. We can build and cross a bridge. Moved not by solid certainty but by faith, we can – through conscience, imagination, hope – “divine” being on another side.

When I think of bridges, when I think of faith, I think of the civil rights advocates in Selma, Alabama, marching towards the Edmund Pettus bridge. From the view of engineering and geography, crossing this bridge was the first step in traveling to the state capitol in Montgomery to demand the right for Blacks to vote and the

end of White terrorism. But from the spiritual view, I see crossing this bridge – named for a Confederate general and a Grand Dragon of the Klu Klux Klan – as an expression of faith, of some fragile trust in a reality not yet brought into being. Crossing this bridge was a physical manifestation of moving from shore to shore – from suffering to empowerment, from oppression towards justice.

While the marchers faced terrible and violent obstacles, they eventually made it to the other side. They made it to Montgomery. They made it, perhaps motivated in part by the words of one of their leaders, The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.” This is a beautiful irony, a bridge honoring a white supremacist curving not only over the Alabama River but towards something closer to justice and divine love.

As this morning’s story reminds us, one cannot create or cross a bridge by ourselves. A strong bridge requires the work of many hands. The unimaginable transformation of the Edmund Pettus bridge into a symbol of what good people cherish by conscience was born of African Americans building bridges out of the degradation they lived in towards the shore of dignity, of people of different faiths building bridges between their gods to come together, of people of all colors building bridges in service to one goal.

As we read the news, we know that, in many ways, our nation as a whole is only part way across the bridge towards racial justice. These days, it seems easier to stay frozen in not understanding than to believe in what Parker, then King, then Obama claimed to see, justice as the place that waits for us on the other side.

But we are here, together, to “weave a path” forward. We are here, with our hands and our voices and our votes and our dollars, to join in “bending the arc.” And we are here to not only seek justice on the other side but to find shores that tend to all of life’s pain - places of healing, of growth, of connection, curiosity and hope.

This year, we invite the Winchester Unitarian Society community into a time of “building and crossing bridges,” of doing the hard work of faith to stretch outside of what is familiar to welcome the unknown. Sometimes the unknown is a stranger, seeking refuge and hospitality. Seeking a place to call their spiritual home. Sometimes the unknown is a different way of thinking, another way of

worshipping. Sometimes the unknown dwells within, the shadow that has yet to emerge and find its voice.

When I speak of “doing the hard work of faith,” one may wonder where I assume we might place this faith, in a Unitarian community rich with theological diversity. One reason I am a Unitarian Universalist is I find that faith is not so much a noun, an understanding of reality that lends assurance, but more a verb, a way of acting in the world.

Perhaps the best illustration of this kind faith comes to us from Episcopal priest and Christian author, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor. It is no surprise to me that she uses imagery of a bridge to illustrate. Brown Taylor affirms that:

Faith is not a well-fluffed nest, or a well-defended castle high on a hill. It is more like a rope bridge over a scenic gorge, sturdy but swinging back and forth, with plenty of light and plenty of air but precious little to hang on to except the stories you have heard: that it is the best and only way across, that it is possible, that it will bear your weight. All you have to do is believe in the bridge more than you believe in the gorge, but fortunately you do not have to believe all by yourself. There are others to believe it with you, and even some to believe it for you when your own belief wears thin. They have crossed the bridge ahead of you and are waiting on the other side. You can talk to them if you like, as you step into the air, putting one foot ahead of the other.

All we have to do is to “believe in the bridge more than we believe in the gorge.” All we have to do is to believe in ourselves. All we have to do is to believe in each other and the strength that can emerge when we build something together. All we have to do is – even in our times without understanding, the days when others have to “believe in the bridge” for us – is to believe that it is possible for Parker to be right: justice waits for us on the other shore. As we believe, as we “step into the air,” the water of life flows on.