

Darkness/Light
Words of Inspiration
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration, Philadelphia, PA
Sunday, December 4, 2016
by Linda Hansell

Like many of you, I am still in shock over the election results. I keep wanting to believe it is a bad dream from which I will wake up. Just when the intense initial physical and emotional sense of devastation I experienced the morning after the election starts to subside a little bit---feelingsthat are similar to those of trauma—just when those sensations start to recede I read another news story that kicks me in the gut and sends me right back there. Readingthat DT—I really cannot say his name, so I will refer to him by his initials, DT--wants to appoint Betsy DeVosas his Secretary of Education,abillionaire, the sister of the founder of Blackwater USA, a woman who has no education degree, who has never been a teacher or a school administrator, who, in fact, has no experience working

in a school, who never enrolled her own children in public school, who supports for-profit education-- makes me want to cry. Each successive cabinet pick produces the same feelings of panic and dread. It is beyond my comprehension that this is happening in our country.

This is a darkness that is a sign of deeply unhinged collective psyche.

A darkness that causes hate-filled rhetoric to proliferate and become commonplace. A darkness that places profits before people. A darkness that tramples people's rights and scoffs at justice. It is truly a dark night of the soul for all of us who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, who believe that we are all connected, who believe in the use of democratic principles, who believe in the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, and who believe that LOVE, not hate, is our highest calling.

How do we find the light? This morning I'd like to share with you some strategies I've developed for dealing with post-election angst, and some thoughts on how we can move forward.

First, every time I feel a sense of dread or despair about the new reality we find ourselves in, every time I read or hear a news story that upsets me, I take a moment to plant my feet firmly on the ground.

Because no one can take the ground away. And I breathe. Feel free to do that with me now. Feel your feet on the ground, and breathe.

Second, I take time to connect with my inner self and find calm and steadiness. This can be through reading, meditating, taking a walk in the Wissahickon alone or with a friend. Finding calm and steadiness in times of darkness can be challenging. We have a tendency to want to escape the darkness as soon as possible. But all of the sages and all of the teachers

of Buddhist philosophy impart the wisdom that trying to escape the darkness is not the answer. It is a false haven. As we heard in the words of Marta Valentinat the beginning of the service:

Then there are times
when you will light no candle
and favor sitting alone,
letting the darkness fall around you,
inside you, sometimes on top of you...

We need to fully embody our grief, our anger, our despair, and then take action out of compassion for ourselves and others. Carl Jung says, “There is no coming to consciousness without pain. People will do anything, no matter how absurd, to avoid facing their own soul. One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.” When we allow ourselves to sit in the darkness, we will find our way to the inner light within us that will not be extinguished.

My third strategy is that I actively manage my news intake. I saw this cartoon that someone posted on Facebook, and it says it all.



Here is how I deal with this: I do not watch television news. Ever. It is too assaultive to my senses, it makes me feel anxious, and I feel it damages my psyche to watch it. Instead, I read the newspaper every day. This allows me to take in the news at my own pace, and decide how much I want to read and absorb about any particular story.

My fourth strategy is that I try to show up and speak up. I am signing a lot of petitions, making phone calls, writing letters and emailing legislators,

participating in protests, and contributing to organizations that support important civil rights and/or provide assistance to marginalized groups. As J.K. Rowling said, "We stand together. We stick up for the vulnerable. We challenge bigots. We don't let hate speech become normalized. We hold the line."

My fifth strategy is that I have been consciously finding and focusing on positive things. Things that give me joy or hope. One of the things that has given me hope is a group on Facebook called Pantsuit Nation. Some of you may have heard of it, and some of you may already be on it. It is a site in which many people, men and women, --now up to 4 million people!-- post stories--of hardship, or love, or triumph, --and why they were supporting Hillary Clinton. It was very uplifting to read people's stories leading up to the election, and even now afterwards it continues to be a site

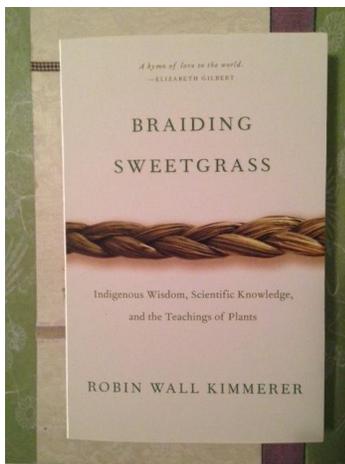
for inspiring stories, and the positive things humans can do. If any of you are on Facebook and want to be added to the group, just let me know.

Pantsuit Nation gives me hope.

Another thing that gives me hope is the Standing Rock Sioux's protest of the Dakota Access Pipeline. It gives me hope to see oppressed people rising up in peaceful protest, and to see that they have been joined by many non-Native American water protectors in their grassroots movement to ensure clean water for themselves and for future generations. Even while law enforcement officers have been using increasingly violent and dangerous tactics to get the protesters to leave, there is growing support for the water protectors. This gives me hope. I sent a contribution through the Unitarian Universalist website Faithify.org to help pay for food

and shelter, blankets and supplies for the water protectors throughout the winter.

Another thing that gives me hope is a book I just read, called *Braiding Sweetgrass*¹, by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Dr. Kimmerer is a professor of botany and environmental biology, and an ecological scientist at the State University of New York, Syracuse. She is also a Native American, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. Her work is devoted to merging traditional indigenous and Western scientific knowledge systems.



¹ Kimmerer, Robin Wall, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013. www.milkweed.org

In her book, Kimmerer writes shimmering essays that are, as she says, “an intertwining of science, spirit, and story.” Author Elizabeth Gilbert describes the the book as “A hymn of love to the world.”

She writes about several concepts that I believe played a big role in why the election turned out as it did, and speak to underlying causes of our society’s illness. She talks about what she calls a “species loneliness,” writing “It has been said that people of the modern world suffer a great sadness, a “species loneliness”—estrangement from the rest of creation. We have built this isolation with our fear, with our arrogance, and with our homes brightly lit against the night.” Other terms I might use for this condition are a spiritual void, a spiritual hunger; a sense of dislocation. Fortunately, as Unitarian Universalists, we are frequently reminded of the importance of the interconnected web of life.

But our consumer oriented, capitalist, technology-driven, and media-saturated culture makes it a challenge for all of us maintain that sense of connection. Kimmerer uses the story of the mythical Native American figure of the Windigo to explain the ways in which our money-driven culture has lost this connection. She writes, "The Windigo is the legendary monster of our Anishinaabe people, ... a being in the shape of an outsized man, ten feet tall, with frost-white hair hanging from its shaking body. With arms like tree trunks, feet as big as snow-shoes, it travels easily through the blizzards of the hungry time, stalking us. Yellow fangs hang from its mouth that is raw where it has chewed off its lips from hunger. Most telling of all, its heart is made of ice.... This monster is no bear or howling wolf, no natural beast. Windigos are not born, they are made. The Windigo is a human being who has become a cannibal monster. Its bite will transform

victims into cannibals too....It is said that the Windigo will suffer the eternal pain of need, its essence a hunger that will never be sated. The more a Windigo eats, the more ravenous it becomes. Consumed by consumption, it lays waste to humankind."

"The word Windigo, according to Ojibwe scholar Basil Johnston, can be derived from roots meaning "fat excess" or "thinking only of oneself."Writer Steve Pitt states that'a Windigo was a human whose selfishness has overpowered their self-control to the point where satisfaction is no longer possible."

Kimmerer and Johnston sound the alarm that multinational corporations have spawned a new breed of Windigo that insatiably devours the earth's resources "not for need but for greed." The footprints are all around us, Kimmerer tells us—lagoons of petrochemical waste,

mountaintop removal in West Virginia and other coal regions, clear-cut forests, dying coral reefs, oil slicks on the beaches of Gulf of Mexico. And closer to home, a closet stuffed with clothes. These are all Windigo footprints, says Kimmerer. “They are the tracks of insatiable consumption.”

“We are all complicit,” she notes. “We've allowed the 'market' to define what we value, so that the redefined common good seems to depend on profligate lifestyles that enrich the sellers while impoverishing the soul and the earth. It is the Windigo way that tricks us into believing that belongings will fill our hunger.... (W)e seem to be living in an era of Windigo economics of fabricated demand and compulsive overconsumption, a systematic policy of sanctioned greed.” Sound familiar?

I don't want to give you the impression that Kimmerer's book is all doom and gloom, because, in fact, it is quite the opposite. The book gave

me hope because Kimmerer shows us how we can repair our relationship to the land, to each other, and to ourselves. She shows us how to defeat the Windigo mentality through what she calls the "economy of the commons, where the resources necessary to our well-being, like water, land, food crops, and forests, are not seen as commodities to be owned, bought and sold, but as belonging to all. She portrays a society based on a completely different mindset, one of abundance and gratitude, not scarcity. "Scarcity and plenty are as much qualities of the mind and spirit as they are of the economy," she reminds us.

And "Gratitude is a powerful antidote to Windigo psychosis. A deep awareness of the gifts of the earth and OF EACH OTHER is medicine.

Gratitude celebrates cultures where wealth is understood to be having

enough to share, and riches are counted in mutual beneficial relationships." {READ paragraph again.}

Mutual beneficial relationships. This brings me to my final thought for moving forward after the election. I believe that the most effective way to turn people's hearts and minds from hate to love is through one-on-one, face-to-face interaction, over a period of time. This is why we can't close ourselves off to those we disagree with.

In an article in last Sunday's N.Y Times, entitled "Why I Left White Nationalism" a young man named R. Derek Black, who is David Duke's godson, and the son of the man who started the first major white nationalist website called Stormfront, shares how he went from espousing white nationalism to denouncing it. He writes:

"Several years ago, I began attending a liberal college where my presence prompted huge controversy. Through many talks with

devoted and diverse people there — people who chose to invite me into their dorms and conversations rather than ostracize me — I began to realize the damage I had done. Ever since, I have been trying to make up for it.”

People’s hearts can change. “Hate is just a bodyguard for grief,” Sarah Fields said². “When people lose the hate, they are forced to deal with the pain beneath.” Hate is a bodyguard for grief.

Which brings me to the truest thing I know:

Pain that isn’t transformed gets transmitted.

Transformed people transform people.

Love transforms

These are sometimes referred to as the three spiritual principles. I’ll say them again.

Pain that isn’t transformed gets transmitted.

Transformed people transform people.

² In a blog post by Charles Eisenstein, “The Election: Of Hate, Grief, and a New Story.” <http://charleseisenstein.net/hategriefandanewstory/>

Love transforms.

So let us do the work—all of it—that this dark night of the soul requires of us. Let us do the protesting, petition signing, running for office, singing, praying, making phone calls, writing letters, contributing dollars to causes we care about. Let us stand with all Americans who feel threatened, marginalized or frightened. Let us do the deep listening, and the deep loving that will enable us to transform our pain and that of others, and bring about the transformed world that we seek. Let us gently find the grief under the hate. Let us use the darkness to gain a deeper understanding and awareness, and then fling ourselves out the other side to a culture of generosity, gratitude, and abundance.

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