PHOENIX RISING

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FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF SAINT LOUIS

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Eric Wilson, in Psychology Today, wrote about his experience of seeing the September 11th Memorial Museum. “… Affliction can reveal what is most sacred in our lives, essential to our joy.” Then he quoted Emily Dickinson “Water, is taught by thirst”. This past week has filled my mind with songs and stories and images, including the value of water when one is thirsty; it often is hot and dry in Phoenix. But more to the point, the story of a high school senior rises in my mind. She was working to graduate the top of her class, still trying to decide which college to attend. Then federal agents showed up at her school and arrested her. She had lived in this country as long as she could remember and thought this had to be some vast mistake. When her parents came to sign her out and get her home they were also arrested. They were all told they would be deported to Mexico. She fell into a deep despair. It was not that her grades would be ruined for that semester, or that she might not graduate from school at all, or that she might have to live in abject poverty in a foreign country, but she felt that all alone she had no power, no hope and her whole world had turned to ashes in her hands. Then she was noticed by a group of people who sought equity and compassion as well as justice in this nation. In the midst of the ashes was a glowing flame. That is where she is at the moment. She is hopeful of rising like the phoenix.

In the Persian mythos the ‘homa’ or ‘firebird’ is of great significance, this bird is called ‘the phoenix’ in some minor Greek and Roman tales. It is ethereal, beautiful, a bearer of great good fortune, full of healing power, and very hard to ever see or touch. Every hundred years, settling in a sacred place, or mountaintop, it catches fire from its own heat and is destroyed. Then, from its ashes, a new bird is born. In the late 18th Century writers and thinkers in Western Europe and America began using it as a symbol of etheric power, liberation and renewal. Some noted the sacrificial similarity between the bird that dies in fire and is reborn, to Christ who died, was buried and then rose again bearing all souls with him. In 1861 a Confederate veteran moved west. On the banks of the Gila River he saw the remains of the Hohokam civilization from centuries before and he decided to build a new city there. In the heat of the desert one city had died. In the heat of the desert a new city was born and thus was named Phoenix.

There, Unitarian Universalists gathered this past week for our 51st General Assembly, titled “Justice GA”. In 2010 we were faced with a choice. It was on our schedule to hold our assembly in Arizona in 2012. Some said, “Arizona is practicing cruel and unjust enforcement of the law, so you should boycott the state, don’t bring people or money here.” Others said, “Arizona is practicing cruel and unjust enforcement of the law, so you should come and stand with us.” We chose to stand. Two years ago, UUA President Peter Morales linked arms in the streets of Phoenix with other opponents of Arizona’s anti-immigrant law, SB 1070, to oppose implementation of the legislation. Many, including Morales and the Rev. Susan Frederick Gray, were arrested during the protest, a show of solidarity with against hatred directed at the migrant, indigenous, and communities of color in Arizona. Of course some say that Arizona is merely enforcing the law, but Morales and others argue that they are doing so without mercy, compassion, or equity. Being arrested and convicted did nothing to deter President Morales. On the first night of Justice General Assembly, Morales stood again with some of the same partners. “Amigos, and Arizona, we’re back,” Morales said. “And this time, we brought several thousand of our good friends.” The crowd responded with great applause and cheers. In the past couple of years many UUs have chosen the yellow “standing on the side of love” banners and T-shirts as the emblem of our social justice work. In one protest a UU was standing amongst the bystanders. When a non-UU saw many people in these yellow shirts being taken away by the police and the bystander asked “Why have they arrested a baseball team?” We may not yet be universally recognized, but we are rising.

The two days before GA include preliminary activities, including meetings and worship of the UU Ministers Association. On Wednesday morning we honored those who had been in ordained service for twenty five and fifty years. Rev. Kathleen McTigue spoke for the 25-year ministers centered on a line from "Trust," a poem by Thomas Smith; “And sometimes you sense how faithfully your life  / is delivered, even though you can’t read the address”. Rev. Rudi Gelsey, gave the sermon for those who had served for fifty years. In 1949 he lost his homeland, his language became “foreign,” his family torn by upheavals. That decade he had one uncle killed by the Nazis and another uncle killed by the Soviets. Yet, in the midst of devastation, his spirit rose to claim peace and peace-making to which he dedicated his life in the pulpit and beyond. He marched in Selma with the Reverend King, he constantly affirmed that world peace was a growing reality and a possibility, and that that we can help it rise in the world to fulfillment.

Yet not all was of rising: both President Peter Morales and Rev. Frederick Muir, the Berry Street lecturer, noted that the UU Association is facing withering headwinds. First, as Peter put it, "Church has become a bad brand". On surveys more and more people associate the word “church” with hypocrisy, meanness, and judgmentalism. Secondly, there is a precipitous increase of "nones", those who choose ‘none’ as their ‘religious preference or identity. This has risen from three percent several decades ago to eight percent in 1990 to over fifteen percent today. For centuries we have depended on the established assumptions of religion in America to drive our own actions and style. Today, fewer people are looking to "congregations" as the locus of good religion. Thus, we have to change what we are doing. The second statistic of our diminishment is that our own numbers have remained about the same since the 1960s, which means we are declining in terms of percentage of the National population. In part this is because of what Rev. Frederick Muir in the Berry Street Lecture noted as “three great errors” that have hindered UUs in recent decades: Radical Individualism, UU Exceptionalism, and a Systemic Allergy to power.

Yet, from the ashes of despair speakers called us to arise and claim our power. Over and over the theology of a power that moves to create Justice and Beloved Community was invoked. This power is not the power over others, the ability to control people, but the power that arises from just, loving and kind relationships. Not power-over but power-with; the power of love. President Morales said, all over he sees congregations that are feeding vibrant needs, the talent and intelligence of our people is incredible, we are doing good work, and responding to dispaire with revival. Our future, he argues, is dependent on still doing "congregation" well, AND reaching out to impact the world to create non-congregational institutions, programs, and alliances.

The use of power was repeated by a member of the Lakota who spoke at our opening ceremonies. Steve Newcomb, a UU and member of the Lakota people, called on us to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and to demand that the US government uphold and implement UN mandates for establishing right relations with the First Nations of the Americas.
This doctrine of Discovery originated in the Papal Bull of 1483. It justified patterns and pogroms of subjugation and domination. This doctrine encourages those with power over to take from people all dignity, to undermine any rightful compassion for those people, and to eliminate their fundamental rights. This was justified originally, "because they are not Christian". Still today US policy and law depends on this Doctrine.

Yet, despite these centuries of destruction and reduction of their lives and cultures to ashes, the spirit of the phoenix raises people up again to call for justice, equal and fair treatment.  More than that, their call was for Deep peace, for harmony and relationship of care and union. The call was for us to stand with those who seek to be free and independent of domination and dehumanization. He asked “What is the opposite of domination?” and then responded “It is spirit!” by which he meant it is being in right relations, with all living things, fiercely compassionate and kind. He used the words of a youth, "We are all the same, differently"

Along with Pablo Alvarado, director of the National Day Laborers Organizing Network (NDLON), Morales extended a warm welcome to the thousands gathered in the Phoenix Convention Center that night. The UU world reports, “Alvarado said he was proud of and grateful for the relationship that has been built between Unitarian Universalists and people in Arizona struggling for migrants’ rights. The work of UUs and the partner organizations opposing SB 1070 “has set an example for the whole country of what solidarity truly is,” he said”. Alvarado called Arizona an “epicenter” of anti-immigration legislation, but he noted it is not a “rogue state”. ““Do not allow the ugliness of Arizona’s example to keep you from seeing the Arpaio’s in your own backyard,” he said, referring to Maricopa County Sherriff Joe Arpaio. He urged people to go home to improve the climate for migrants in their own communities. “It is our moral obligation to do so,” said Alvarado. “Every one of us has a role to play in turning the tide from hate to human rights.”” One of the T-shirts I saw at General Assembly, playing off the hot weather said, “Arizona; it’s a dry hate”. Of course it is not just hate that creates injustice and oppression. Often unfair situations arise from unintended consequences of good actions.

Nonetheless, we must stand with those who are oppressed, and if we feel oppressed ourselves, then we must stand together. Today several of us will be carrying our name into a march for the pride of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. I am glad to do this, pride is part of finding one’s inherent worth and dignity. But any political or social movement should raise questions in the minds of thoughtful people. We must ask, “What do protests accomplish?” “What are the policies and practices that are good and which cause more harm?” “What are the spiritual resources for justice work?” And the question asked at a workshop this past week, “How can we do viable social justice work if we don’t agree politically?” Often I have seen an uncritical affirmation of liberal political positions at UU Assemblies. Thus I was deeply encouraged to see over 150 people, an overflow crowd, at a workshop titled “Crossing Political Borders, Breaking Down Barriers”. The workshop focused on the viewpoints of politically conservative UUs.

“We are not separated by the labels of our chosen party,” said the Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael, of Sterling, Va., in opening remarks, “but by the unholy authority we give those labels to speak for us and to split us, one from another.” Her husband, minister of Accotink UU Church in Burke, Va., said. “Some Unitarian Universalists act as if our churches are the religious lobby for the Democratic National Committee”. I agree with him that in order for UUs to be “justice-seeking people, we must be critical of the culture and its politics and never be a reliable source of support for just one party. Party affiliation is a corrosive substitute for theology.”

The Rev. Nancy McDonald-Ladd, of the Bull Run UUs in Manassas, Va., earned a hearty round of applause from the crowd when she asked, “…are we not called—as faithful, courageous people—to something higher than mirroring the worst of the world around us?”

We invoke the power that is in just communities. When your life is in ruins, when you are reduced to ashes, figuratively or literally, it will be the power incarnate in people that causes you to rise again. Not the power over others to get things done, but the power with others to create Beloved Community, fair, kind and compassionate community. UUism is not about the free individual anymore, but the free individual in a covenantal community.

To conclude I share with you this poem from this past week that seemed to capture the spirit of this gathering. “MY TRIBE” by Mexican poet, Alberto Blanco. At GA it was read in Spanish and the English translation was projected on a screen. (English translation, by James Nolan)

Earth is the same / sky another. / Sky is the same / earth another.

From lake to lake, / Forest to forest
Which tribe is mine?
--I ask myself—
Where’s my place?

Perhaps I belong to the tribe / Of those who have none;
Or to the black sheep tribe;
Or to a tribe whose ancestors / come from the future:
A tribe on the horizon.

But if I have to belong to some / tribe
--I tell myself—
Make it a large tribe, / Make it a strong tribe, / One in which nobody / Is left out,
In which everybody, / For once and for all / Has a God-given place.

I’m not talking about a human / tribe.
I’m not talking about a planetary / tribe.
I’m not even talking about a / universal one.

I’m talking about a tribe you can’t / talk about.
A tribe that’s always been / But whose existence must yet be
proven.

A tribe that’s always been / But whose existence
We can prove right now.