



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

No Single Issue Lives

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When did you find your voice? I mean when did you really find your deepest voice—a powerful inner drive to articulate what is true and real for you in service to the world's greatest needs?

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect.

These are words from the self-described black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet Audre Lorde. Lorde uncovered the power of her own voice when she was told she was to have surgery on her breasts to remove cancerous tumors. In the three week period between her diagnosis and the surgery, she took a hard look at her life; her own accomplishments, her fears, her own willingness to take a risk in speaking out. She was disappointed to hold up a mirror and see a less bold version of the self she knew existed but had not been bold enough to speak. She saw too many times of withholding the truth, held back by fear and self-censorship. In the essay Nanette read from today, Lorde wrote:

In becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences.

Changed by the experience of facing her own mortality, Lorde vowed to use her voice to join with other women, black and white, heterosexual and lesbian, to wage what she called a “war against the tyrannies of silence.” She wrote, “Within those weeks of acute fear came the knowledge—within the war we are all waging with the forces of death, subtle, and otherwise, conscious or not—I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.” Lorde used her voice to lift up the common experiences which united women across lines of race and class; the enduring plague of sexual violence and intimate partner abuse which does not discriminate, the tenderness of relationships, marriage and commitments, the defiant spirit to succeed in the work one chooses in spite of sexism, the trials and joys of motherhood, the pain and pleasure of having a body that is female.

I found my voice as a young activist after the death of Matthew Shepherd, a young, white gay man. I was just coming out, a college student just like Matthew. His night out at a rural gay bar in Wyoming led to his violent assault, torture and death. The hate crime hit so close to home, rocking our college campus. Once I saw the violence against the community of which I was a part, I could not look away. I was drawn in to see the history and to find myself a part of the struggle for liberation. I then began to see the deaths of others in my community, less nationally visible but whose lives and deaths mattered just the same, like California transgender teen Gwen Araujo, or Sakia Gunn, both teenagers murdered for being themselves.

I read Audre Lorde as a sacred text which bound me to the struggle, not just to live my own life as a queer person, but to those whose lives are most vulnerable to violence.

Today as the news pours in about the terrorist shooting at a gay bar in Orlando, through the pain of senseless violence, my voice is strengthened yet again. I cry out in rage and lament and ask how can this be so, and yet, know it is so. The world has never been a safe place to be queer, to be a woman, to be disabled, to be poor, and yet even so we press on, living boldly, proudly and visibly. Even so we join in diverse community seeking a place for all generations and experiences to flourish, and believe that peace is possible.

Today we lament, and we grieve, and we take that hard look at our lives, asking how, or if, our voices can be of use. How common is it that we are only inspired to find our voice when facing mortality, our own or our community? How devastating is the death and violence that chastens us to set our fears aside to act boldly?

Jasmine Richards found her voice after she had one too many friends die and be violently targeted. She started to organize her community of Northwest Pasadena around La Pintoresca Park, feeding people, teaching kids to love themselves, and organizing against police brutality. In finding her voice against the violence, she found a purpose.

Early Tuesday, as many Californians headed to the polls to directly participate in the democratic process, my partner Sam, Greg Boyd, Stephanie Ballard and others headed to the Pasadena courthouse. We joined a peaceful crowd of hundreds, sobered by the circumstances bringing us together. We were there to raise our voices in a call for justice in the sentencing of Jasmine, who faced four years in prison after being charged with the crime that until last spring was known as “felony lynching.”

Many of us know the shameful history of lynching in this country, black lives stolen by white mobs to intimidate. In the California penal code 405a, the term “felony lynching” was used to refer to “defend against the taking by means of a riot of another person from the lawful custody of a peace officer.” Over the past few years, multiple young progressive activists in California have been charged with this law for resisting arrest at political rallies, but none of them have been convicted. When an African American young woman was charged but not convicted of the crime last February, with the advocacy of 30th district Senator Holly Mitchell, herself a black woman, the crime was successfully renamed more descriptively “unlawfully removing someone from police custody.”

In a cruel twist of history, after her trial, a jury without any black representation made Jasmine Richards the first African American to be convicted of the crime formerly known as lynching. Many have pointed to the irony of Jasmine’s conviction of a crime meant to protect African Americans and others against vigilante mobs. Being convicted of this crime now in effect silences Jasmine as a community leader and sends a message of intimidation to other activists who openly organize for police accountability in Pasadena, including members of our congregation involved in Civilian Police Oversight.

Jasmine's voice put Pasadena on the national map, but for all the wrong reasons, shining a light on the inequality just a few miles away from our house of worship. Before the sentencing hearing, a Color of Change petition was presented to the judge with over 80,000 signatures asking for no jail time—now up to nearly 88,000 signatures and counting. The sentence finally delivered did not fulfill the petition's request, but, at 90 days less the time already served and three years probation, was significantly less than the code's penalty of four years.

While we show up for Jasmine, whose case is not over, on everyone's mind this week is another highly public case—the rape case involving former Stanford student and star swimmer Brock Turner. On the surface, these two cases could not appear more different, and yet they reveal how race, class and gender privileges are embedded in the justice system as these two young lives both face a felony conviction for two very different crimes, one white, male, straight, educated, one black, female, lesbian, and poor.

Tuesday morning, I asked our youngest congregation member present Sophia Goodson, why she and her mom Kathy had decided to show up for Jasmine. She answered simply and plainly that it wasn't fair that Brock Turner was sentenced to six months in jail for raping an unconscious woman, and Jasmine was facing four years. A few days later, it seems that Brock Turner and Jasmine Richards, convicted of very different crimes, will in truth serve the same amount of time, 90 days.

Sophia, a young woman learning about how justice and fairness are not always equally applied, found her voice in standing up for Jasmine, whose voice had been silenced.

Lorde's words this morning call out the false comfort of silence, and the need for us not to wait for violence to strike for our struggles to join together once again, as it has this morning in Florida. We must organize the compassion and empathy we feel into power to transform systems of oppression. We free one another by giving each other permission to end each of our collective silences, transforming our own truths so they may be of use to each other and strengthen the beloved community we yearn for. In this safe and trusted space of sanctuary, we have the privilege and power to transform our words into action that liberates ourselves and others. Here we must wage a war not against one another but against the tyrannies of silence, refusing to be terrorized or turned back.

LGBTQ Pride and Juneteenth coincide every year at Neighborhood. At the end of our church year, it is a time to celebrate hard-won liberation and love in our spiritual community. Juneteenth and Pride call us to see our struggles for justice not as separate issues, but as interwoven. In Audre Lorde's words, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

What will it take for you to find your voice, and to raise it for our common struggles? How can you understand your own liberation as bound up with your neighbor's, with Jasmine's, and yes even with Brock's? What silences are not saving you? What are the words you need to say?

Our struggles are linked, our journeys bound to one another in this covenant of faith. The arc of the moral universe is long, but indeed, it bends towards justice. We are stronger and more powerful than we know.

May it be so, and Amen.

For many years, I spent most Monday evenings in the basement of All Souls church, where their coffee-hour fellowship hall, nicknamed "Friendship Hall," was transformed into a dining room for over 300 guests.

Some of the guests were experiencing homelessness or had marginal housing. Some guests were couch surfing with friends or family or living in shelters, with little privacy, harshly regimented schedules and constant threats of violence or theft. All of these guests were largely invisible to most of the wealthy Upper East Side congregation, though some of them lived side by side in crowded rent controlled apartments, or close by in single room occupancies.

All Souls was famous for having the best soup kitchen in town. I once got in a cab across town and got to chatting about where I worked, only to have the driver share rave reviews about the chicken and the jazz pianist who frequented the dinners. It wasn't only the abundant, freshly prepared food and drink but the radical hospitality that the volunteers, many from the congregation, provided.

At the end of every Monday night, guests spilled out into the All Souls courtyard to smoke and chat. Many lingered in the garden as long as they could. Others went their separate ways and began to blend back into the city landscape once again.

I always took the subway home. On the platform, I started to recognize our guests. I remember the first time I noticed a gentleman who had recently dined at the church. He was dressed in tattered clothes and set himself apart from the crowd. What first caught my eye was a yellow plastic bag bulging with the take-out containers provided for leftovers each guest was offered. What I noticed next was a bouquet of flowers, stems carefully wrapped in another plastic bag, the same kind that held the take out containers. Not just any flowers, but unmistakably the chancel dedication flowers, beautifully varied in color and texture and arranged by a loving hand and careful eye.

I remembered that Monday afternoons, along with ensuring each table is meticulously set, an All Souls member lovingly disassembled the two enormous vases of chancel flowers, rearranging the flowers into a two dozen smaller vases, one for each table.

I'm not sure exactly why, but frankly, I was surprised. I'm not proud to say that at first a question arose in my mind, "Why would a hungry homeless person want to take flowers home with him? What would he do with them?"

As quickly as my thought came and went, heavy laden with my own judgments and assumptions, another feeling overtook me. I felt so moved that the guest had taken the time to wrap the flowers to enjoy and bring home. "Everyone needs beauty," I said to myself, "everyone deserves beauty. Beauty makes a difference in people's lives, if only for a few brief moments."

I imagined the bouquet somehow softening him, providing a balm against the harshness of the life to which he returned. Just as the food nourished his body, the beauty of the flowers nourished his soul.

After that day, I began to see that many of the guests treasured the flowers as much as the food each week. Two young sisters delighted in taking the flowers with them at the end of the meal, quarreling over who got the prettiest ones. Another woman with long beautiful hair took azaleas and tucked them into her braid.

Like clockwork, each week I watched an older woman stayed till the last moments of the evening, then traveled from table to table gathering the remaining bouquets together into one large arrangement. I asked her if she liked to have the flowers in her home. "Of course, what else would I do with them?" She replied curtly in a heavy German accent. What else indeed but enjoy them? Why did I even need to ask why?

Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.

These words were written by naturalist John Muir in his 1912 book The Yosemite. He described beauty as a "hunger" shared by every person, from wealth or poverty. He said:

This natural beauty-hunger is made manifest in the little window-sill gardens of the poor, though perhaps only a geranium slip in a broken cup, as well as in the carefully tended rose and lily gardens of the rich, the thousands of spacious city parks and botanical gardens, and in our magnificent National parks--the Yellowstone, Yosemite, Sequoia, etc. -- Nature's sublime wonderlands, the admiration and joy of the world.

Muir was right. Beauty is fundamentally a human need. We seek out beauty, delight in beauty and need to create it in our lives. Beauty is as nourishing to our souls as bread is for our bodies. I know this is true in my own life. I come from a long line of gardeners, farmers and

florists, men and women. Every spring in New York, I would haul pots of flowers and herbs and vegetable starts up three flights of stairs up onto my tiny fire escape to make a garden. I rushed to the farmers market every Saturday to buy fresh flowers, and delighted in my walks to the Botanic gardens. Beauty was not a luxury, but a necessity I cannot live without.

I think this is what Norbert Capek was thinking about when he created the flower communion nearly a hundred years ago. Most of his members had come from the Roman Catholic Church, and while they were eager for a new religious community they did not feel comfortable with the bread and wine of the Catholic communion ritual. Still, Capek felt that the bread and wine ritual bonded members to their faith and to each other. In a time not unlike today, with extremism and authoritarianism on the rise, he looked for a symbol in the peace of the pastoral countryside, undisrupted by human conflict. No wars were fought in the name of the flower, no hatred or oppression, no bigotry or harshness. To Capek, flowers represented pure, boundless innocence, and the temporary but vivid pleasure of color and fragrance.

Capek felt that the beauty of flowers would challenge his members to discover the same sense of beauty in each other, even and especially because of their differences. While it is easy to see the beauty of a flower, seeing the beauty of another person is more difficult. And yet that is what our task is as a religious community—to bring out one another's beauty and to celebrate it. Von Ogden Vogt, 20th century Unitarian theologian, knew this well -- he called beauty one of the "three liberal religious absolutes, alongside truth and goodness." Beauty was a fundamental spiritual need, an aesthetic end in itself but also a calling to understand the trinity of absolutes together as necessary for the flourishing of human love. Truth begets beauty, which begets goodness, and vice versa. He wrote:

Anything beautiful is an end product, and the joy we have of it an end in itself. But our satisfaction is not enough. The sense of beauty calls us to look and see the object in itself. It says see this flower, (...) see this person, they are beautiful in themselves. It says, see this person—not see this voter, this customer, this employer, this saleslady—but rather, see this person, as (s)he is in and for herself.

All those Monday nights spent at the All Souls soup kitchen taught me this well. As we chatted about the flowers, I began to really see the beauty of the guests as they were nourished body and soul. Our common humanity eclipsed the separateness of our lives.

Today, our communion charge is not only to see the beauty in the flowers, but to see the beauty in one another – friend, family and comrade, sometimes obscured by the common rhythm of our day to day. The thing about beauty is it is meant to be shared. I think about our members who gather up the beauty of their yards every week to create our flower arrangements every Sunday, or our member Mud whose ministry at Muir Ranch is to make incredible bouquets, and then give them away only for the pleasure and delight it brings others. Beauty is not meant to be kept to ourselves. We must take our beauty of our beloved community out into the world to share it with others who so badly need our deep and soulful nourishment. We must take it to the polls as we exercise our role as citizens advocating for our country's return to civility and

politics of human rights and human dignity. We must take it out into the sanctuaries of nature as we celebrate and revel in the brief but bountiful blossoming of summer.

Amen and blessed be!