



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

Singly None

Rev. Rebecca Benefiel Bijur

September 3, 2017

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Even as the flood waters start to recede, it's hard to turn away from the images coming in from Houston, from Beaumont, even the coastal city of Port Arthur, where the mayor of that city, Derrick Freeman, posted video of the flooding inside his own home. *Harvey was not playing*, he said, *but I know one thing, though, it's not going to defeat us.*

Amid the destruction and continuing catastrophe that is not only the rain and the flooding, and the mud and the mucking, but how to respond effectively to calls for help, it is hard to know what to do, if anything. Those who are there tell us to pray, if that is your practice, to send loving kindness and compassion to all our Texas cousins and the helpers who are on their way, to give money to organizations that help, including our own UUA-UUSC Hurricane Harvey Recovery Fund, which is committed to assistance right now and for the long haul. And they ask us not to look away, but to see this, too: the children in their parents arms in the shelter, the nursing home residents awaiting rescue, the volunteer in his Trump hat who is loading a boat to go find people who need help. As the poet told us, *Let's not shame our eyes for seeing*. Seeing complexity in this old story of rising waters and destruction and survival. Let's not shame our eyes for seeing. *Instead, thank them for their bravery.*

Here the US we are often accused of having short memories, but it looks to me in the coverage of this storm the presence of Katrina, is very near, and it is being told in the hopeful stories of how humans care for one another in times of disaster, rather than stories generated by what journalist and activist Rebecca Solnit has called "elite panic," which in past disasters has elevated concerns about property over care for people.

No doubt there will be stories of cowardice as well as courage, of hindrance as well as help, that come from this time—and we need to tell and hear them both – what past UUA President, and past Co-Interim President Bill Sinkford called the "feel good" stories of when we got it right, as well as the "feel bad" stories of conflict, failure, all those times we wish we could forget, rewind, undo- the times when we really got it wrong.

We need both kinds of stories about our country, and about our past. In these extraordinary days, as coalitions of people from all different backgrounds, from all different faiths and no faith, stand together in opposition to people who are white supremacists, who want to take our country back to a time of terror that we cannot return to, that we will not return to, we remember all our stories.

We remember... the stories of the statues and memorials that have stood in our cities and towns for decades, statues telling one story about America's history, statues that are finally coming down, statues glorifying the leaders of the Confederacy that tell a story I find difficult to share with my children. Mitch Landrieu, the mayor of the city of New Orleans who has led the effort to remove the statutes, has received death threats for what his critics call his attempt to *erase history*. But Landrieu is not erasing history; he is telling another kind of story. Landrieu speaks passionately about the pride of New Orleans in its history, but he also says, *there are other truths...that we must confront*; he means there are other histories, true histories, to which no monuments or memorials have yet been built. In New Orleans, that story is the story of serving as a port by which thousands of enslaved people were traded, bought and sold; where hundreds of people were lynched; and where the courts made "separate but equal" the law of the land.

These are some of the most “feel bad” stories we can tell about our American history. But they are true, too. The author James Baldwin told us, *Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

This weekend is Labor Day weekend, a time when we remember... the battles that have been fought and won and lost and won and lost, again, at great cost, by workers and their allies in this country. Although you would be right to think that Unitarian Universalists have a long history of support for workers, especially for workers to be treated with dignity and respect, and to have a voice in the decisions that concern them, we have both feel good and feel bad stories to share here, too. Historians will tell you that the reason Labor Day is a national holiday is all due – indirectly, and dishonorably – to one of our ancestors, a lifelong Universalist who founded a church in Albion, New York, that stands to this day.

I speak of Pullman Memorial Church, and of the railway industrialist George Pullman, who is remembered today for two reasons. One, for his hiring of black porters and waiters in the years directly following the American Civil War. Though he paid them much less than white workers, worked them harder, and put into more menial jobs, Pullman porters were still able to earn a much better living working for him than was available at many other jobs at the time, with a great and positive impact on their families. That’s the first reason we remember him. And two, we remember Pullman for his terrible mistreatment of all his workers, which sparked the great Pullman Strike of 1894.

You may not have been taught this American history lesson, but it was late June of that year, 4,000 Pullman employees went on strike, demanding lower rents in their company-owned houses and higher wages, and by July 100,000 railway workers across the country had joined their effort by refusing to handle Pullman cars. All railway industries and those who depended on them, from cattle cars to the mail, were at a standstill. The strike pitted our Universalist ancestor, George Pullman, against Eugene Debs’ American Railway Union. As the disruption spread and grew, Pullman refused to negotiate or arbitrate with his workers. The US government took action by sending 12,000 national troops to break the strike, when led to riots in which six people were killed. In a huge setback to labor organizing for a generation, the strike was declared a crime, Debs was sent to prison and the Pullman workers were rehired only if they agreed to never form a union.

A huge loss for so many workers and their families. A disgrace and a shame for a man who called himself a Universalist, someone who had been formed by a morality and a theology built on the conviction that *God’s love embraces the whole human race.*

But though the Pullman strike set back the struggle for workers’ rights for a generation, it did amplify their voices and their suffering during those disrupted summer days, sparking protests across the country in which people spoke out against the US government’s harsh treatment of the striking workers. Six days after sending in the troops to break the strike, President Grover Cleveland signed a bill creating a new holiday to appease the public and demonstrate his commitment to workers: thus, at great price, Labor Day was born.

And today we remember the story, and tell the story. The good parts, and the bad parts too.

We remember... the story of Unitarian Universalists accompanying workers across the country in the struggle for good jobs and dignity, including here in Los Angeles through our work with organizations such as Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice.

We remember that workers who try to organize are taking a huge risk. That hasn't changed enough since 1894, when the Pullman workers decided to strike rather than starve. Still today, workers face retaliation and intimidation when they participate in an organizing campaign, and about one in five workers who actively support a union will be fired during such a campaign. Over 50% of employers will threaten to close their business if workers unionize, although fewer than 1% do close; and even if workers succeed in forming a union, 34% of employers will refuse to negotiate a contract after the union has been formed. During the campaign, the workers will need to meet in secret, often in spaces made available by supporting congregations, in order to limit this kind of retaliation and intimidation. Why would workers go through something like this? Why would they risk so much?

Rev. Aaron McEmrys, a UU minister and former labor organizer, points out no one puts so much on the line for a fifty cent raise – workers don't put job, house, security, and healthcare at risk for that. They do it because, as Aaron writes, of "the need to be treated with respect and dignity, the need to have a voice in one's own working life. That is something people are willing to risk everything for."

As First Principle Unitarian Universalists, we have a theological and a moral commitment to accompanying one another in the struggle for fair and dignified treatment. We know how important it is to be treated as people of dignity and worth—and to treat others with dignity and respect.

And as Seventh Principle Unitarian Universalists, we also know how much we need one another, to take our places in the interdependent web of life. Accompanying one another in the struggle for equality and justice means just that – it means showing up for one another, when we are called. That's why young students of James Reeb, who was killed by white supremacists outside of Selma fifty years ago, remember the chains that held them, white and black together, to the lunch counters. That's why so many Unitarian Universalist leaders and clergy were in South Dakota at Standing Rock last year, and why they were in Charlottesville, North Carolina just a few weeks ago, linking arms of solidarity and strength in the face of hate and violence and fear.

One of the practices of interdependence that we can embody today is to remember the stories, and to tell the stories. Another is to show up when we are called, and take our place in the chain.

Let me tell you what I mean.

You may have seen the story a few weeks ago of a group of strangers on the beach who came together to take their place in the chain, and to save the lives of people they'd never met and would never see again.

A few weeks ago, on a Saturday in July, Roberta Ursey had just left the water at Panama City Beach, Florida, when she realized her sons were much further out than she remembered, out swimming in the clear waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The lifeguards had left for the day, and yellow flags marked the beach to caution swimmers about potentially dangerous currents. A moment earlier, the family had been fine, enjoying the swim. But when Ursey looked back, they were too far out. She realized they had been caught up in a rip tide and were unable to swim back to shore.

As I'm sure many of you know, rip tides – or rip currents – are far stronger than any swimmer can outswim, and the only way to survive is to hold on to a life preserver or other floating object until you are rescued by a boat, or to keep your calm and swim with the current, along the shore, until you have passed out of its deadly strong but also narrow grip.

Terrified, Ursey and her family didn't do those things – they did what everyone's first instinct is to do, which is swim out to reach the swimmers who are in distress – a tragic and common response that usually leads to even more deaths.

But something was different this time. This time, another passer-by, Jessica Simmons, had just found a discarded boogie board on the shore. She saw people on the beach pointing and saw the swimmers out in clear distress. Although they heard a rescue boat was on the way, she didn't wait for it – and it turned out to be too far away to arrive in time. Instead, Simmons grabbed the board, and she and her husband and other strangers on the beach began organizing, one person at a time, until they had put together a huge human chain to bring the swimmers in. Link by link until they were 80 people strong, they held on to the shore and to one another as far as they could stand, then Simmons went out on the boogie board to tow all nine swimmers out of the current, into the chain, and then back to the shore. It took an hour, but they got them all out.]

These people are not drowning today. It's not happening, Simmons told herself. We are going to get them out.

The poet tells us,

*In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves
reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to
But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions
drove along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I.*

No one woke up 120 miles from Houston last week wanting to be a hero. They wanted to sleep in, take the kids to school, have a personal life. *They were headed somewhere else.* But when they saw what was happening, and when they were called to see it more clearly, and to see the action they could take to save others, they brought their boats unofficially, joining the government rescue effort, in the water up to their necks. Link by link until every person is brought back to shore.

Union organizers tell us that *an injury to one is an injury to all.* In our UU tradition we call it *the interdependent web of all existence*, how much it is we need one another, and we sing it like this:

*Step by step the longest march can be won, can be won
Many stones can form an arch, singly none, singly none.*

And so on this Labor Day weekend, whether you are on the shore staring at the waters, working the holiday, or marking it in some other way, I ask you *take your place in the chain.*

Because I hope and pray that when I am called to join the line of clergy holding together for justice and peace, when I am asked to pull more tightly on the web tying each to all, to embody my Universalist values, to show up for workers, for people in detention, for my kin and neighbors who are asking for support from all of us who hear their voices and recognize their full humanity, when I am asked to take my place in the chain, I will do it and gladly. Because that's how we all make it up to higher ground.

Sources:

Mitch Landrieu. Speech on removal of Confederate monuments in New Orleans, transcript published online by the NYTimes 23 May 2017.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/opinion/mitch-landrieus-speech-transcript.html?mcubz=0>

Nugent, Jim. "George Pullman." Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography.
<http://uudb.org/articles/georgemortimerpullman.html>

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/31/us/riptide-rip-current-drowning-safety.html?mabReward=ART_TS2&recp=2&moduleDetail=recommendations-2&action=click&contentCollection=Opinion®ion=Footer&module=WhatsNext&version=WhatsNext&contentID=WhatsNext&src=recg&pgtype=article

<http://www.nwfdailynews.com/news/20170710/amazing-human-chain-formed-to-rescue-drowning-family-in-pcb>

McEmrys, Aaron. "There is Power in Union."
http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/mcemrysaaron/power_union.pdf