

“Steadfast”

“Here is the world; beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Be not afraid.

Because this is what we are about:

We hold hope for each other when hope is hard to find.

We plant seeds that will one day grow.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

We cannot do everything,

But we can do something.

So forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That is how the light gets in.”

Those last three lines are Leonard Cohen’s lines,
Who died this past Thursday night,
making this week we have just lived through even more
Riven with cracks and we might even say chasms,
Which is true regardless of who you voted for,
Because we all woke on Wednesday morning, if we slept at all,
To a country more divided, more polarized, more cracked
Than at any point in most of our lifetimes.
So you might you say we stand together in the dark,
Cracks all around us,
Reaching and hoping and longing to let the light in,
Which, I believe, isn’t so much a light outside us as a light we have inside
us.

But how do we stand and let that light shine?
When the dark is so deep? When the future is so uncertain?
When so much is at stake?
How do we stand steadfast – a word that means holding firm,
Immoveable, solid – and shine?
That is the question I'm asking of myself,
And one you might be asking, too.

But first I need to acknowledge some of how I've been feeling, which I'm
sure breaks some seminary taught preaching rule about self-disclosure,
But that feels important to name anyway,
Because if I'm not real with you and you're not real me,
And we're not real, authentic, honest, no spin with each other,
Then we're failing to meet one of the expectations of creating church
together.
And some of the feelings I have are...*Anger. Fear. Tired. Uncertain.*

I want, as both Secretary Clinton and President Obama expressed
With such grace on Wednesday, to give our President-Elect
An open mind as he prepares to lead,
But I am *angry* at the racism and misogyny and xenophobia and
homophobia his campaign has provoked.

I am *afraid* at what his disregard of climate change and promises of
Isolationism will mean for the country my children and your children
Will inherit.

I am *tired, so tired* of the ways ‘we the people’ talk to and about one another, particularly on social media, and this is true on all sides of the political spectrum,

As if the inherent worth and dignity of every person, which isn’t just A UU principle but also an American ideal, only extends as far as what we do in the ballot box.

And lest you think I’m preaching up here from a pulpit of perfection, let me remind you I’m preaching to myself here, too, because I need this message as much as anyone.

And I am *uncertain* about finding the right words to say or pray or preach, My inbox filled with emails this week reading ‘*help!*’

And my wanting to act as though it’s that telephone game where We pass the message along...*yeah, help!*

Pass it on...!

All of which is why I was so comforted this week by those of you I saw and talked with who came into the sanctuary on Wednesday, This room that since 1826 has held generations through all matter of torn times in our country– Civil War, Lincoln assassination, WWI and II, Great Depression, Vietnam, Cold War, Gulf War, 2000 election and hanging chads, 9/11, Iraq War, Newtown, police shootings of people of color, 2016 presidential campaign.

You reminding me on Wed. that perfect words, perfect prayers aren’t what we need right now....

That when reckoning with great cracks between us,

And how it is that each voting block considers the other side a disaster,
 And how it is that immigrant people are worried they will be kicked out of the
 country,
 And how it is the glass ceiling just seemed to get a foot thicker,
 And how it is that so few politicians reckoned with the economic alienation
 Outside our urban and suburban centers...

How in all that you showing me and me showing you that perfect words
 matter less than something like imperfect presence.

Because what we all have to offer is enough,

Which is what Sue Phillips, a colleague, wrote

To all of us UU clergy this week, looking to encourage us in sermon
 Prep time.

What we have to offer is enough,

because every loving, kind, beautiful thing we do is amplified now.

Shine with your presence.

With Sue's words pushing me, I went down for my regular

Coffee at D&D's on South Main Street there,

And looked to find Luiz (not his real name),

Who is one of the Brazilian immigrants who does the morning shift at the
 convenience store and who I've struck up a loose friendship with over the
 years.

Finding him stacking tubes of Pringles on the shelf,

I went up to him and put my hand on his back...

"Hey Luiz...just want you to know

I'm with you, I stand, and the people up in the church on the hill

stand with you...and on behalf of my country,

I apologize for the things that have been said...”

Because every loving, kind, beautiful thing we do is amplified now.

Because what we have to offer is enough.

Because letting the light in starts at home.

Because even when all I want to do is hunker down

And stay in my own little bubble,

Our faith pushes up and out, asking me to stand fast, *be steadfast.*

“*Thank you Nathan,*” said Luiz. “*I accept the apology.*”

I actually thought of Luiz one week before election day,

Nov.1st, when I found myself driving north and west into New Hampshire

To meet UU clergy from all over New England

For a three day conference,

The theme ‘*speaking truth, living truth*’

Because you deserve clergy who say what we believe, and live those

Beliefs with our lives,

And the morning I drove up it was such a beautiful morning,

The only way New England in autumn can be,

So much light shining everywhere, cracking through the red and yellow and orange and gold in the trees...

And offering such a contrast to the flurry and fury of the campaign news

On the news, the mood dark, the polls tight, the anxiety high.

The news was bad enough, and the day was beautiful enough, that

somewhere off of 495 I started my media fast and turned on my Pandora

To the acoustic guitar station, the music that drives my family screaming

From the room, but that I didn't have to apologize for
Because I was beautifully alone in the little protected bubble
Of my black Massachusetts Subaru.

Somewhere across the border, forgetting, of course, that I was
Now in a battleground state,
I began to notice the change.

The change being what? The change being "Trump" signs
Everywhere.

On road sides. Posted across driveways. Pinned to houses.
Giant banners outside manufacturing buildings. Everywhere.
And barely at all a Clinton sign,
Because this being a clergy retreat, of course,
We're not in a city center, we're out in the woods,
All of us in cabins, like Thoreau, but with heat.

And in ways that no NY Times article had done all year,
Or any Facebook feed,
It dawned on me that something is terribly wrong...
Because if all I see around me are Clinton signs,
And all I see when I go into rural NH are Trump signs,
Then something is going on that means we don't talk to each other
In this country, and we don't know each other,
And maybe we're all in our little bubbles, hunkered down,
Getting our realities affirmed by our neighbors,
Our churches, our ministers,
and our Facebook algorithm that only give us the news that

corresponds with our views,
standing not so much steadfast, as standing only with People Like Us.

Worried, quiet, pensive, thinking of Luiz,
Thinking of all these folks with their signs,
Wondering how to acknowledge the divides and the economic alienation
With the campaign of scapegoating and race-baiting...
And feeling small and not all like I have much to stand on...
I turn into the outskirts of Greenfield,
The little town that will host us, Prius' passing me
Behind and before me like UU clergy scarlet letters in a sea
Of NH pick-up trucks,

And drive up through the most gorgeous ribbon of road you can
Imagine, because despite it all, the world is so achingly beautiful.
And to the right I see a river...
A river white with rapids, and leaves sparkling, and glistening rocks
And a shoulder wide-enough to park the Subaru
And me still with plenty of time before I go
Hear how to speak the truth and live the truth,
Because this is also true...I feel called to stop,
'Call' I say intentionally because I believe grace is at work in our lives,
and like the song written by slaves
Seeking freedom says,
I feel called to go down to the river and pray.
(Go down out of pulpit...).

And there on the edge I hear the thrush of the water,
And watch the trees, and feel the air on my face...
And worry what will happen in a week,
And worry about Luiz and my adopted immigrant sister
And about all the people voting in a way I don't understand,
And if what I have to offer will be enough,
And if I can shine,
And if I can stand....

And there to my left, I see the most magnificent boulder in
The center of the river,
5ft out of the water, the raging water bending around it,
All the turmoil flowing around it,
It standing firm, steady, what's the word...*steadfast*....
Because like so many things the earth shows us how...
And I pray...

God, Spirit of Life, Mother Spirit, Father Spirit...
Help me...stand steadfast with Luiz, in the immigrant...
Help stand steadfast with my daughter, hearing the now president-elect
Talk about her gender as if women were an object to be used...
Help stand steadfast with woman wearing hijab...
Help me stand steadfast with black teenage boy....
Help me stand steadfast with the white factory worker
Whose job just left to Mexico...
Help me stand steadfast with the trans woman living out in the suburbs...
Help me stand steadfast with the veteran...

Help me stand steadfast with the fast food worker making minimum
Wage...

Help me...who do you need help standing steadfast with...

(stand up as each person names someone).

(name...them).

Help us...

Let us stand up,

Stand with me, stand with your neighbors.

Let us go down to the river and pray....

And let us sing....