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"Lovers in a Dangerous Time"

I wrote at the top of the page "it's been quite a week."

I wrote that on Wednesday, I think. I don't even know where to start.

On Thursday, I was listening to NPR's the World – and, uh, by the way, don't tell Nathan that I am having trouble keeping my "pledge" from three weeks ago to "stop consuming the news that's consuming us" – I was listening to the World on Thursday, and the show's host Marco Wermen says "it's been a busy week and we're struggling to keep up."

And, this is no joke, I actually said out loud in my car "*You're* struggling to keep up?!?" I mean, really, if the host and production team of a news program can't seem to keep up with what's going on in the news, how on earth am I supposed to keep up?!

Maybe it says something that I feel like I need to keep up.

I feel that if I'm going to do this work, this work to rise, resist, and protect each other, that it feels like honestly we need to do, I have to be informed, right? I have to know everything that's happening.

But this week, I've had a lot of feelings trying to keep up with the news. Outrage. Despair. Anger. Fear. Hopelessness. And, perhaps the most dangerous one of all, for me, overwhelm. This whole thing is incredibly overwhelming.

So maybe you'll forgive me if I don't know everything. And we can forgive each other if we don't know all the details of how it ever little policy, ever executive order, works. We have to rely on each other to help us understand. We have to.

In October, three weeks before the election I preached about "election stress disorder." How naïve I was to think such stress would be over with the election.

Friends, I have felt my stress level rise with talk of "alternative facts," building the wall, bans on refugees, building the Dakota Access Pipeline, fears of blackouts on scientific data... I mean seriously, I never thought we'd be marching for SCIENCE. It's going to be a long four years.

"At this extraordinary time in our nation's history, we are called to affirm our profound commitment to the fundamental principles of justice, equity and compassion, to truth and core values of American society."

Those words begin the statement of conscience read by Megan right before this reading.

Cornell West says, "Justice is what love looks like in public." And during my election stress sermon I said our antidote to that stress was compassion. And what else is compassion but *agape* love, the love that the apostle Paul speaks of when he writes in his first letter to the Corinthians of faith, hope and love, and that is not romantic love, not familiar love, but deep, universal, unconditional love. That love that our religious tradition and its sources calls of us to enact. The love that underlies all of our principles.

And in times like these, "in these extraordinary" times, that love is more important than ever.

We are called to be Lovers in a Dangerous Time.

Now this song Lovers in a Dangerous Time, from which I got my sermon title this morning was written by Bruce Cockburn, a Canadian, in response to seeing two teenagers in expressing love on the schoolyard over the foreboding backdrop of the Cold War and threat of nuclear disaster and an uncertain future. And the title so beautifully captures a reality that many have lived all throughout history. That no matter the circumstances, no matter the terror or fear we may live under, there is beauty around us, there is love around us. And that to express that love can be an act of resistance.

Over the years people have offered up alternative explanations for Bruce Cockburn's song. The main ones have been in reference to Gay men in the AIDS epidemic of the late 80s and early 90s, the other has been in reference to the Guatemalan refugee crisis that happened around that time. Cockburn has been happy with both alternative explanations. And I think it's somewhat telling that the background of Cockburn's song easily brought out three different ways in which one could be a lover in a dangerous time.

And, as our world is changing, as we wonder which way is up, I wonder what are the ways in which we are called to be lovers in this extraordinary time.

The Guatemalan refugee crisis of the 1980s was a cause that was dear to Bruce Cockburn's heart. You see, he was sent by Oxfam to a refugee camp in Mexico and was inspired to write a song of despair regarding the counterinsurgency led by Guatemalan dictator.

In the 1980s there were many refugees fleeing civil wars, economic recession, and violence in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Many came to the United States seeking asylum, but many were detained, or sent back home. Sounds familiar.

A group of Presbyterians in Tucson, after witnessing Salvadorians getting taken away at the border, declared their church, the Southside Presbyterian Church a public sanctuary for those who entered the country from Central America. Outside the church building hung two banners "This is a Sanctuary for the Oppressed of Central America," and "Immigration: Do not profane the Sanctuary of God." By 1985 there were 500 sanctuary congregations of many different religious traditions, include Unitarian Universalists, across the country.

The people of that church in Tucson were lovers in a dangerous time.

The sanctuary movement continues today in many churches, including Unitarian Universalists, across the US, but being a physical sanctuary is only one way we can stand in solidarity with immigrants and refugees.

You see, this week as I was preparing this sermon, still several days before the ban on refugees from majority Muslim countries came down, I heard on the show *This American Life* of two students who had migrated from El Salvador as children and who were granted protection under President Obama's DACA policy, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. The opening of the segment featured the voice of Kenia, a 22 year old woman who entered the US when she was ten years old, saying "I'm thinking, can I make my home somewhere else. Can El Salvador become home? If I migrated to a country and thought of it as my home before, can I do it again?"

Kenia and her brother are concerned because of the changes in policy the new administration might put in to place regarding her status. And, she's speaking clip so plainly and in a way that is totally calm about the situation, but as I listen this looming sense of dread fills in the pit of my stomach. I imagine having to live my home at the age of 22. My heart breaks for them and for all the others who are living in the fear of how their lives might get upended.

And so when I think about our call as Unitarian Universalist in a Dangerous Time, I wonder, dangerous time for who?

Because on Saturday, yesterday, I found myself once again reading the news and feeling overcome with sadness and desperation learn that refugees are being held and detained at US airports. Refugees from Iran, Iraq, Lybia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Refugees from primarily Muslim countries. Some of these people got on the plane before the order to ban them was signed. Can you imagine what that must feel like to get off that plane only to be detained when you got here? I'm reminded of the pome, that was read in worship a few months ago by Somali poet Warsan Shire. She says "no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark."

And so I was struck by how powerless this whole thing was making me feel. But I was also struck by the fact that many of the changes that have been happening, in fact arguably *all*, of we not going to directly impact me.

And this week it felt a little like I was fighting a war with my iPhone and my car radio. But for some people and families, the war isn't just with information. It's an act on their very right to exist.

The declaration of conscience Megan read for us states: "As people of conscience, we declare our commitment to translate our values into action as we stand on the side of love with the most vulnerable among us."

The message here is that we are called to courageous love, to solidarity, to protection. We are called to be lovers in a dangerous time.

And, I don't know about you, but this feel overwhelming exhausting, hopeless, and, yes, sometimes down right terrifying.

But the opposite, staying complicit when things are happening that we disagree with, whatever they may be, on *religious* grounds, and I really mean on *religious* grounds and not *partisan* grounds because this is not about political party, but rather honoring what our faith calls us to do, being complicit is more dangerous. Because if we risk staying silent, if we risk being complicit, if we become so overwhelmed that we cannot exercise our right to protest, our right to free speech, and, most importantly, our right and responsibility to dissent, then we've lost our moral conscience. And we you look back on history, 10, 30, 50 years from now, where do you want to say you stood?

So if our tasks is to be lovers in this dangerous time, how are we going to do it without burning out, overwhelming ourselves, and becoming complicit?

On Tuesday a group of leaders meet in the church to discuss becoming a part of that Sanctuary movement, the one that started in the 1980s that I referred to earlier. It was a good meeting, there was a lot of energy around the possibilities of becoming a Sanctuary congregation, helping another congregation who does so, or doing other kinds of important solidarity work with immigrant and refugee populations.

It was an energizing meeting, and ideas were flying around. And it was also overwhelming, and I'm just speaking for myself here. Because there are so many different ways to get involved, and that was just around this one issue. I think this speaks to a lot of what is happening right now. There are protests, trainings, volunteer opportunities, donations, conversations to be had. We all need to focus our energies. Pick actions or issues that are manageable. Do not feel like you have to do everything, because you can't. One strategy it to pick an issue or two that you really care about and focus your energy on those, not because the other issues don't matter, but because it can become too overwhelming to try to focus on everything. Another is to pick one or two methods of engagement, and really focus on those. Do you like making calls to your elected representatives but hate protests? Focus on calls then.

This ties into something else I want to highlight, and that's that we all have roles to play and they are going to be different based on our skills, abilities, and social locations, that is the identity we hold.

Last week, Heather, Nathan, and I were at a meeting of local ministers. There were about fifty of us there, and we were doing a spectrum exercise. This is the kind of exercise where you say two different statements and you ask folks to place themselves along a spectrum from one seemingly opposing statement to another. An example would be "Individual freedom is most

important” would be on one side, and “what’s best for the community is most important,” would on the other, and then you would place yourself along the line as to which you felt was more important or not.

Now, Heather and I have doing many activities like this with our Coming of Age group of youth this year, right guys? But it seems I have forgotten how much easier it is to be the one reading the statements, then to be the one who has to pick where I fit along the spectrum.

Anyhow, the leader of our activity read out the two poles and they were “It’s important to stand strong in what you believe,” and “It’s important to meet people where they are.”

This felt like, well, a false binary to me, like most of the questions do. And I, like many of my colleagues, found myself standing in the middle opening lamenting the fact that you need to do both. You can’t pick.

A few brave colleagues stood on either side, and one woman who was standing on the side that said “It’s important to stand strong in what you believe” said “I’m here because I work directly with vulnerable communities. This is my role to stand firm in what I believe. Other people might have different roles.”

I thought this was a valuable insight and one that we all need to remember. Figure out what your role is. Maybe your role *is* meeting people where they are, talking to people who believe different things than you do. We don’t gain anything by denying the humanity of those who think differently. We gain by try to understand their perspective, we gain by seeing the ways in which we are similar to them, and we gain by having conversations them in which we stand up for justice.

Loving across these lines can be revolutionary, and can feel scary. For some people, it’s not safe to have these conversations, to meet people where they are. This is especially true for the most vulnerable among us. But for some of us, that might be our role, to love across difference in these dangerous times. Because conversations and relationships can change people. I really believe that.

But let me be clear. Meeting people where they are and having conversations across does not mean that you agree with them or that you are not holding them accountable. Be courageous when you have these conversations.

And yet there are other roles. Just yesterday upon hearing that people were being detained at airports all over the country, people mobilized and showed up. And the ACLU worked and a stay was granted to prevent deportations of those we are already here. And it was powerful, and, ironically, it wouldn’t have happened that way if it hadn’t been for social media and constant news. A little good news, perhaps, but there is so much more work to do.

Friends, being Lovers in a Dangerous time is hard work. But it is the work that we are called to do. As Unitarian Universalists, from our principles. The time is now and the urgency is real. Let us do this together and not forget the important role we all play, and the role that our communities of support play right now. As a faith community we need to be allies. We need to take care of each other. We need to find ways to do the long work for justice. We need to let our love carry us when we feel hopeless.

Let us say together amen.

Amen.