Rev. Sue Browning

Unitarian Universalists of the Chester River

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship at Easton

**Sermon**

**“An Attack on Our Capitol”**

**January 10, 2021**

Thank you Terron. Thank you. Yes, our souls are breaking. (Note: Terron Quailes offered a solo of “Lament” by Mark Miller and Alan Tice; full recording of this service is on our Youtube Channels.)

We gather today with many feelings. Seeing the physical breach of our Capitol crossed a line – a line in our nation’s history, and line I had never imagined would be crossed. Today is check-in with one another. How are you doing? How are we doing as a country?

The questions seem intertwined and I know I’ll bounce back and forth this morning. Grief is like that, and I sense we are grieving today.

It was scary to watch the situation unfold Wednesday afternoon. I can tell you where I was when I heard to turn the TV on. I was safe, yet the volatility was terrifying. While those moments from Wednesday have passed, I worry of further violence in the next weeks.

I feel sad for the country. Wednesday was a deflating moment. It’s a discouraging time. It’s hard to imagine a turning when divisions are so deep.

I’m angry at those who vandalized the capitol. My capitol. Our Capitol. Many here have a story – a tie to the building, and a visit remembered, moments of history we’ve watched together. Mourning those who have died, transitions of power. Even 4th of July concerts.

I know DC well. My kids went to high school close enough that their track practice runs when around the Capitol. I’ve had meetings at the Capitol. I’ve taken many guests to the capitol, and my boss, a former member of congress, took my Dad and I on a special tour where you walk outside at the top of the dome.

I’ve protested at my Capitol (and on the mall and at the Supreme Court). I’ve stood outside Paul Ryan’s office and sang.

The last time I remember being in the Capitol building was to protest. Clergy collar on, I went to the Senate chamber on the day of the healthcare vote in 2017. I waited in line for 2.5 hours. Like others going through security I had to put all of my belongings in a basket, even the pin on my coat with a rainbow flag signifying my views was not allowed. It had to come off and be put in a locker. There were rules. Rules at our Capitol I was clear needed to be followed.

I am angry at the president and all who have enabled his actions. I am fuming, and have been for years, at those who have allowed hate and bigotry to balloon – to go unchecked.

Where is your heart today? Maybe confused, or stunned? Breathe deeply. The images are hard. The reality is hard.

The role of witness here matters. What did you see? What are you feeling? Take a moment.

Consider how the week intersects with your life experience. Your lens. The perspective of a teacher, a nurse? Of veteran or government employee? Maybe the lens of a poet, or musician? A partner, child, parent, a grandparent?

Please don’t dismiss where you are today. We are called to pay attention in this moment.

I was surprised by the horror show on Wednesday. But truth be told we’ve been on the brink of such an episode for a long time. The kindling has been smoldering as event by event for at least four years, and likely for much longer.

It’s amazing it was only 3 and a half days ago. I’ve read a lot – watched a lot. I’m clear I want accountability – the identification of those who broke rules and those who incited the riot.

I read and reread the security planning accounts – what was done, and not done. Our minds can delve into the details as we piece together the specifics. And it may be what we need to do – to calm our heads and hearts. There is loss. There is grief. We are sorting.

The details, and too we can step back further.

During the coming week, take a moment and play back the anthem Terron offered this morning. Where does love call each of us in this time? In whatever way you think of the bigger good, where are you called at this time?

Over the last days I’ve found some clarity. Not answers, but some fresh questions.

In an article in the Washington Post on Wednesday, Philip Kennicott shares, “

“One moment in today’s appalling mayhem was telling. As they filed through Statuary Hall, some of Trump’s thugs snapped selfies of themselves, as if they were merely tourists. Meanwhile, windows were being broken, room trashed, historic spaces defiled.

You might think it odd that the hardcore Make America Great Again crowd would damage a beloved symbol of the country they profess to support. But not if you understand the deeper dynamic. This was never about who wins elections and the right to govern. It has always been about ownership. Trump’s cult believes that they are the sole, legitimate owners of the country, and if that’s true, then there can be no sin in damaging what is rightfully yours, right?”

The word ‘ownership’ captures so much. …sole, legitimate owners…

The blatant implication – “Others” are not entitled to claim such ownership.

On Friday evening I had the opportunity to share my perspectives on the past week at Temple B’Nai Israel’s Friday Shabbat service. I was blessed to share the pulpit with Rev. Dr. William Wallace, the pastor at Union United Methodist congregation in St. Michaels.

Rev. Wallace laid out the experience of the week as a black man.

He talked about the crux of the event Wednesday as at its core about voting, the disenfranchisement of black voters, and the price paid when black votes are counted. He reminded this gathering that ‘Others’ (citizens who don’t count) are discouraged from voting, and led to believe their voice won’t matters. Voting is made difficult. Where participation is inclusive of all, results of the election are to be not only discounted, but violently and vehemently denied.

Rev. Wallace talked of double standards at protests and demonstrations. He talked of symbols of hatred – the confederate flag and nooses on the mall. Kennicott’s narrative of who owns the country explains much.

Something is foundationly broken. We hear, ‘This is not who we are as Americans,’ and yet as a society we fall short time and again. From mass shootings, to policies which de-humanize.

William J. Barber, pastor of the Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, N.C., and a co-leader of the Poor Peoples Campaign shares, "What we saw today in the U.S. Capitol was un-American, based on our Constitution, but it was not non-American, because oppressed people have seen this kind of mob violence many times before in this country."

The expectations for accountability and integrity in leadership are not shared – are not understood in the same way.

Rev. Wallace asked how it is God calls us to live ‘beyond’ where we are (today)? In “Lament” (that Terron sung earlier) are the lyrics… ‘Anger to melt swords of hate. Tears to water thirsty ground. Courage to love all you create. Come to us to turn your world around.’

Not a morning of answers. What might help with the turning? What if we start by taking time to name our questions? Questions discipline us to reflect on where we are most deeply troubled, most deeply concerned. Might we find questions that open doors – stir imagination. Expand the story rather than lock us in debate. Questions are harder to frame than answers.  Good questions move us from righteous certainty.

Questions invite us toward the crux of deeply layered and challenging problems. Questions are a tribute this week to Alex Trebec. What is the most pressing question arising for you this week? Start with the feelings – sadness, or anger, fear or confusion and try on some questions.  What questions are emerging for you?

I sense imagination is key. Imagining where the story goes from here rather than argument may be key. How have other deeply troubling histories been turned? What truth needed to be told? What questions asked?

With thoughtful questions in the forefront, where might our faith take us? As Unitarian Universalists, we are in covenant with one another – we are committed to one another.

In part, that is the power of the gathering – the group that meets week to week – in local community. Our covenant is broader – I’ve heard it described as ‘each to each’ and ‘each to all.’ If everyone bought into an understanding full interdependence among all, would a deeper change be possible?

What can we imagine together? How might a core belief in interdependence help us imagine with some specificity where our national story will go from here? Imagination over argument may be key. How have other deeply troubling histories been turned?

What is the story we want to tell our children of this time? What needs to be passed through the years?

We need a record of accountability to the most vulnerable – not in a transactional way. Not a, “I give you this, you owe me that” kind of way. Accountability as a practice to see one another in our full humanity. Accountability as evidence that we can depend on one another.

Accountability doesn’t just emerge. It requires leaders of integrity who offer their honest selves to the work of leading. We don’t need flawless leaders, but do need consistency and integrity in leaders. We need leaders who see the humanity in all.

We are called to pay attention, to care for one another, and to think deeply. I see this as the path to change – a path to the deep changes needed to restore accountability and build community where all can trust and be seen and heard.

As bear witness to the specifics of this moment in history, and file away images, and reactions, we owe ourselves some grace. Trust that to be part of a turning means we need time we digest this difficult week. We need our questions to guide us.

As we walk through these next weeks of uncertainty together, I invite us to consider these words from Jane Rzepka,

We live in a fragmented world that tempts us to despair

We would put it back together, piece by piece, if it were ours to choose

But sometimes the fragments are enough

In a world of cruelty

There is still power in every act of kindness

In a time of doubt there is still power in every act of hope

In an ages of division there is still power in every act of unity

May we remember that sometimes the fragments of meaning we makes are just the right size to hold in our hands. I offer my prayers for the hope of a peaceful transition.

May It Be So