From the President – January 19, 2024

***Picking Up Stones* – My Learning Journey**

Since early October my partner Bina (Barbara Holtzman) and I have been working on producing Sandra Laub's play, premiering TOMORROW at UUCSC, called *Picking Up Stones: An American Jew Wakes to a Nightmar*e. (Sold out!!) While this has been a huge amount of work, co-producing this performance has also been an amazing learning experience.

For the past year, I've been trying to learn to be "curious, not furious" (the slogan of URI's Courageous Rhode Island initiative), that is, trying to increase my capacity to listen with curiosity, without judgment, to people who have a worldview that is not just different from mine, but diametrically opposed. Going into this election year, I am not at all at the place that I'd like to be.

A particularly helpful book for me was Mónica Guzmán's *I Never Thought of It That Way*. Mónica is a Senior Fellow for Public Practice with Braver Angels – a national non-partisan organization devoted to bringing people together across the political spectrum in civil conversation. Several years ago, I discontinued a long-standing friendship after getting (yet another) email about her latest belief in a conspiracy theory – this time about the nanobots being injected through the COVID vaccine. Essentially, I dumped her friendship for being unable to handle our ideological differences. However, a year later, after a webinar with Braver Angels and Guzman's book, I apologized and reconnected with this person (albeit a much more distant relationship).

Picking Up Stones has similarly challenged me. This is a play that invites us to move beyond our tightly held narrative and to acknowledge, come to understand, even respect (without having to agree with) the narrative of the other. I am finding that it is much harder to "demonize" the other when one can empathize with their story. As Sandra, in *Picking Up Stones*, struggles with the complexities of the brutal war between Israel and Hamas, within the context of a long and conflictual history between Israel and the Palestinians as well as the surrounding Arab nations, we are witness to considering these disparate points of view as well. And perhaps, through our witness, even learn how to hold both sides ourselves.

As I went into the planning for the play, I realized that my knowledge of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was woefully inadequate. Another very interesting book I just finished is *Side by Side: Parallel Histories of Israel and Palestine*. This is truly a telling of parallel histories, with the even pages written by Israeli educators, explaining the Israeli perspective of the topic of each chapter, and the odd pages written by Palestinian educators, giving the Palestinian perspective of the same topic. These narratives, these histories, exist side by side – each is incomplete in its own way; each is biased, for sure, and at the same time, each is "true".

Picking up Stones is, at times, hard to bear. Yet we will be better for it. I know I am.

Wishing for peace in our hearts and across the globe.

Nancy