

We Are Here – Van Jones

August 26, 2012

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling Opening:

We are here

in late August, in the city of Columbus,

to celebrate this day and its possibilities,

to feel what we sometimes push away

to greet the unexpected with gladness,

and to be together, not believe together. And so,

Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Ingathering: *Goin' Someplace Special by Patricia McKinnick (abbreviated)*

Tricia Ann was about to burst with excitement! Closing her eyes and crossing her fingers, she blurted out, "Grandma, can I go to Somewhere Special by myself today? I know where to get off the bus and what streets to take and all."

Although it had another name, Tricia Ann always called it Someplace Special because it was her favorite spot in the world.

"Please! Pretty please with marshmallows on top?"

Grandma laughed. "Ok, I trust you'll remember everything I told you."

"I will, I will," Tricia Ann said. Then she grinned. "Oh you mean I can go?"

"I reckon, but hurry up before I change my mind!" Tricia Ann blew her grandmother a thank you kiss, then rushed out the door and down the sidewalk. "And no matter what," her grandmother called after her, "hold your head up and act like you belong to somebody!"

At the corner, the green and white bus came to a stop and hissed. When the doors folded back, Tricia Ann bounded up the stairs and put in her coins. The she walked to the back, and took a seat behind the Jim Crow sign that said "Colored Section" Tricia Ann had seen such signs all of her life. Grandma used to say, "Those signs can tell us where to sit, but they can't tell us what to think!"

Pretty soon the whole back of the bus filled up, and there was no more room. Tricia Ann saw Mrs. Grinell with her shopping bag full, and got up and let her have a seat. There were lots of empty seats in front of the sign.

"It's not fair," she said to Mrs. Grinell. "No, but that's the way it is honey. Still, you carry yourself proud, OK?" Soon Tricia Ann got off the bus, right downtown.

As she walked through the park on the way that led to Someplace Special, she saw a park bench with a sign on it. For Whites Only. Her face fell, and she suddenly wished her grandmother was with her. "Silly signs!" she thought to herself.

But all of this made Tricia Ann cry. The tears came. She walked into a church garden so no one would see her cry. But Mary, the gardener, was there and said when she saw her, "My flowers have been watered already. Are you lost, child?"

Tricia Ann told her that she was going to Someplace Special, but that it was too hard. "I need my grandmother."

Mary thought about this for a moment, and then said: "Well I want you to listen carefully. I believe your grandmother IS here if you only listen hard. My granny is here, I know. What do you hear, child?"

She heard a bumblebee in the garden. But as she listened, she began to hear her grandmother's steady voice inside her heart. "You are somebody, child. A human being no better or worse than anybody else in this world. Getting Someplace Special is not an easy route. But don't quit! Just keep on walking forward and you'll make it."

"My grandmother is here!" said Tricia to Mary, the gardener.

"So you are not lost!" "No ma'am, I not." And with that, she left the garden, real determined-like, on her way.

At the corner, Tricia Ann saw the building rising above her. It was beautiful in the late summer sun. It was more than bricks and stone. It was an idea. Grandmother called it "The doorway to freedom." When she looked at it she didn't feel angry or embarrassed. "At last," she said aloud, "I've made it to Someplace Special. Before bounding up the stairs she stopped to look up at the message carved in stone above the front door:
PUBLIC LIBRARY ALL ARE WELCOME

Sequence

So, for now at least,
let's open our fists and reveal our palms
to the world, to the air, to ourselves.
Breathe out, breathe in.
So, for now at least, let's breathe out the

painful words of both this political season and this past week.
Let us breathe out the paralyzing resentment
that may be clogging our spiritual arteries
when men in power dismiss the lives of women,
and just breathe in the molecules of the air
in this room, molecules that may have once flowed through the bodies of Marie Curie,
Margaret Fuller, Emma Goldman, Helen Keller, and Eleanor Roosevelt.
So, for now at least,
let our breathing be steady, our whole lives
be present in this moment and this moment only.
Let's put aside our worries and personal stories for a moment, and let the world spin
without us in the infinite awesome silence of the cosmos as it has been spinning without
us for four and a half billion years. Let us release ourselves for a time into the emblem of
that silence, here, now, in this room.

silence

Returning to our personal stories, may we release our individual details into this precious
common moment of our lives in community, naming or envisioning in our hearts all
those we love, who love us, all those who worry us, or for whom we feel sympathy, all
those we find hard to love, and those whom we remember in grief and with gratitude.

naming

Having kept silence with all that is, having named the meanings of personal lives, we
now proceed through the gates of beauty and harmony that open onto the mindful
morning.

Bulgarian Song

The First Reading *is from Julia Vinograd, of Berkeley CA. I've quoted her many times
and always get good comments about her wry words. It's called American Dream. Hear
these words:*

I've been trying to remember America
when Walter Cronkite of the handsome white hair was president
and there weren't any politicians.
When fireworks and immigration were both legal;
we *wanted* everyone to want us,
it proved we were the best.
I held a sparkler, the Statue of Liberty held a torch,
I expected my light to grow into hers.
I remember when boys who wore baseball caps
played baseball.
There were maps full of geography
but they were the past.

We had fast food, fast cars and movies
of the slowest kiss in the world,
the one that's still going on
but I can't see it anymore.
America. I grew up believing it worked
even though it didn't work for me.
Like all the sad housewives
sure their neighbors' marriages were happy,
watching afternoon soaps in empty houses
with the blinds pulled down.
It might even be better now
in the dark where nothing works.
We're all scared and the birthday cards
painted on the sky peeled off long ago.
No more pretending.
Everything's broken from promises to plumbing,
it's not just us anymore.

The Second Reading *is from the Summer Common Read of our congregation, by Van Jones, called Rebuild the Dream. Many of us read the book and were deeply impressed by its practical wisdom. Hear these words:*

In essence, we are standing up for “liberty and justice for all.” And many of us take that “for all” part pretty seriously. We don’t mean “liberty and justice for all,” *except* for those lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people. We don’t mean “for all,” *except* for those immigrants or those Muslims. We don’t mean “for all,” *except* for those Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, or Latinos. We don’t mean “for all,” *except* for those women. We don’t mean “for all,” *except* for those Appalachians and rural poor. We don’t mean “for all,” *except* for the elderly or the disabled. We don’t mean “for all,” *except* for the afflicted, addicted or convicted. When we say “liberty and justice for all,” we really mean it.

We have a long way to go. In this age of polarization, one political extreme pretends that we already have obliterated every vestige of bigotry and bias. The opposite extreme, meanwhile, insists that we have not made an inch of progress in one hundred years. Neither camp is being honest. There was much to overcome, and much work remains to be done. But our ancestors’ sacrifices and struggles were not in vain. We are a better, more inclusive nation today than we were in 1900 or 1950 or even 1980. And we will be still more so, thirty years hence.

In America, we honor the past – good, bad, and otherwise. And yet we place our faith in the future. We should never deny the pain of yesterday. But we should never let that pain have the last word, either.

The future is worth fighting for. The time has come for the next generation to step forward.

Sermon

When I was a child, the world, depicted with astonishing nostalgia by Julia Vinograd, was what I remember. *We wanted people to want us*, she writes in her poem *American Dream*. We were the best country on Earth, and people flocked here to live out great lives on our nation's shores. Trusted Walter Cronkite delivered the news while actually being moved by what he was saying. I love it when Vinograd writes *I remember when boys who wore baseball caps played baseball. We had fast food, fast cars and movies of the slowest kiss in the world.*

When I was a child, I remember writhing through those kisses myself when I was her age. And, although I wasn't as much into baseball as my brother was, I do think Vinograd is right. Back in those days, guys who wore those caps weren't making a popular fashion statement, they actually played baseball!

And, when I was a child, like most of you in this place, the teacher would have us stand up in home-room every morning, place our hands on our hearts, and say the Pledge of Allegiance, surely one of the very first things I ever memorized. Wanna say it with me?

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. And to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

The pledge was first composed in 1892 by a fellow named Robert Bellamy, who published it in a youth magazine. It very quickly became the thing to say whenever a flag was present for adults as well as for youth. Here is exactly what he wrote – note, not exactly what we just said:

"I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

Two phrases were added later. The simple phrase "to my flag" was replaced by the longer "the flag of the United States of America." And during the heyday of the McCarthy anti-communist scare in 1954, when I was but 5 years old, Dwight Eisenhower had congress add "under God," to which, I must add, Robert Bellamy's daughter greatly objected.

Originally, there was a kind of choreography required when you said the pledge. You put your hand over your heart first, and then, when you got to the word "flag," you put out your right hand, palm down and raised high to salute the flag. This gesture was removed when folks in our country began to realize it was too close to the Nazi salute made popular by Adolph Hitler.

This morning I am going to reflect on the book Rebuilding the Dream, by Anthony Kapel Jones, who now always goes by his nickname Van. Van Jones. It's a book we here at first UU asked people to read if they had a chance this summer. Don't worry, if you didn't read it, everything is OK. You'll find the essence of what Dr. Jones wrote tucked away in my sermon.

Now, earlier this year, I had the great privilege of meeting Van Jones. He had given a speech at a two-day conference I attended, sponsored by Ohio State's most remarkable Kirwin Institute. I was mesmerized by his talk, as was everyone else present. After lunch, I waited to talk with him so I could thank him. Dr. Jones had mentioned Theodore Parker in his speech, the 19th century Unitarian minister from whom Abraham Lincoln borrowed and adapted the phrase "of the people, by the people, for the people" in his Gettysburg address.

I thanked him. I said to him, "As a present day Unitarian Universalist minister in the tradition of Theodore Parker, I want to thank you for mentioning the Unitarian source of Lincoln's great phrase. Not many people bring that up, for fear of even suggesting that Lincoln cribbed something he did not write." "Yes," he said, "but Lincoln didn't quote it exactly. He edited it. What Parker wrote is that ours is a government "of *all* the people, by *all* the people, for *all* the people." For some reason, Lincoln removed the "all."

"Yes," I said, "I thought of that too when you spoke of the Pledge of Allegiance. It struck me forcibly when you mentioned that modern Tea Party pundits only quote the word *liberty* from the pledge. They say they want liberty from taxes, liberty from federal government influence, and especially in these last few months, liberty from President Obama. But then, with a one-two punch during your speech, you simply pointed out that the word *liberty* in the pledge does not stand alone, but is bound up completely with five other words: *with liberty and justice for all*."

"Yes," he responded, "six words that cannot be pried apart. Without liberty there is no justice, without justice there is no liberty...and if it's not for all of us, then what of it?"

"Right!" I concluded.

We both went our separate ways then, but the conversation has stuck with me.

Liberty and justice for all. Of all the people, by all the people, for all the people.

When I was reading his remarkable book this summer, I was deeply affected by his practicality, his concrete programs rooted in values that are central to my vision for my own country. I was touched by his reclaiming of the word patriotism, a most difficult thing to do when folks on the right these days blast everything they don't approve of as Un-American, and think that settles it once and for all.

But, even though he is referring to the pledge of allegiance obliquely, it's Dr. Jones' remarkable litany toward the end of his book that really lifted up the conversation we had at the Kirwin conference.

In essence, we are standing up for "liberty and justice for all." And many of us take that "for all" part pretty seriously. We don't mean "liberty and justice for all," except for those lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people. We don't mean "for all," except

for those immigrants or those Muslims. We don't mean "for all," except for those Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, or Latinos. We don't mean "for all," except for those women. We don't mean "for all," except for those Appalachians and rural poor. We don't mean "for all," except for the elderly or the disabled. We don't mean "for all," except for the afflicted, addicted or convicted. When we say "liberty and justice for all," we really mean it.

Like Tricia Ann in this morning story, Jones is talking about finding a way to get to Someplace Special, where all are welcome no matter who they are.

But how do we get there? What vehicle will get us there? Do we have walk all the way? Crawl?

In the story this morning, Tricia Ann takes a bus, because the library is too far to walk. In the bus there is a sign telling her to sit in the crowded back because of her skin color.

Was the bus something bad? No. The vehicle worked just fine. It got her to where she needed to get off to walk the rest of the way. And got her there efficiently.

But the journey in the vehicle was tainted by the cruelty of the sign. It was 1955, when Tricia Ann took that bus. Back when boys who wore baseball caps actually played baseball, when the fast food was taking over, and the kisses were long; back when the white picket fences around charming houses supplied the nostalgia images that still seduce many a modern American, progressive and Tea Partier alike, things were not all good. The busses and park benches and drinking fountains had awful signs back then, and people of color were kept away from the ballot box. Vehicles, like busses in the South, that went from place to place, actually went nowhere ethically and morally speaking. This is why the psychiatrist who supplied the words for our affirmation this morning wrote the words we spoke earlier:

Nostalgia is the enemy of hope. A more realistic view envisions the past as the theater of experience, some good, some bad, and opens up the possibility of growth and change.

But it was not all bad. Tricia Ann did indeed experience good things in 1955: her grandmother's wise words telling her she was someone important, the people in the back of the bus who invited her not to **be** put down when she was put down, Mary in the garden who offered a shoulder for her tears, and anger, and of course, that Someplace Special, the library where *all were welcome*...these were the good things, worthy of a healthy nostalgia, worthy of rebuilding.

But Tricia Ann also experienced bad things: exclusion, categorization, rejection, hurt and self righteousness from those around her. The bad experiences of 1955 invite the twisted nostalgia of many modern Tea Party folks, and no one needs to rebuild those experiences, or take a bus with nasty signs and scowls from the front.

Dr. Martin Luther King had those experiences too...remember, he was a child once. And from his experience and the experience of those like him the "possibility of growth and change" opened up. The sit ins. The marches. The letters. The speeches. Ballots in the box. Girls in the school. The whole world beginning to change into Someplace Special for ALL people.

Even Julia Vinograd's poem admits this truth about nostalgia (back in 1955): *America. I grew up believing that it worked, but it did not work for me.* She too witnessed the drama being played out in the theater of experience, the good and the bad. And clearly her poem suggests that the good things from her nostalgia dream might be rebuilt, but this time, it had better include her, a disabled poet in her sixties who was Tricia Ann's age in 1955.

This is why Van Jones talks about looking for a vehicle to take us to a place, Someplace Special, where we can start to rebuild the good parts of the American Dream: the sense of liberty and justice for all, the anger, the encouragement. He wants us to find a vehicle to take us to our common future, but a vehicle without signs. A bus without a place in back and a place in front that are different. He wants everyone on the bus in all parts of the bus, as we rebuild the good dreams of Tricia Ann's loving grandmother and friends: "You ARE somebody!"

In his book he describes the vehicles we have to take to get to the Special Place where dreams really can be rebuilt. He offers us clear concrete ways to get big money out of our election process, as we bring reforms in. He invites us to overturn the "Citizens United" Ruling and offers us practical steps to do so. He invites us to put lobbyists on a leash, to reform campaign finances step by concrete step. He invites us to fix the filibuster and increase transparency and accountability in this government that is "of all the people, by all the people and for all the people." Jones calls us as a nation to create 21st century energy jobs, as well as a Green economy. He calls us to invest in our crumbling infrastructure, secure Social Security, offer Medicare for all, invest in Public Education, tax Wall Street speculation and strengthen our democracy with clean, fair elections. All of these are efficient vehicles for rebuilding a dream for all, not some, everyone not a few.

All of these vehicles can take us to Someplace Special, our great future, where we shall live for the rest of our lives, and not the past for which we sometimes feel nostalgia.

The phrase "liberty and justice for all" is not just a memorized phrase to begin a grammar school home room period. It's the very summary of what Julia Vinograd, Van Jones, Dr. Gordon Livingston, and you and I can rightly call the American Dream without embarrassment.

And, as Dr. Livingston wrote, and as I believe, "our best days *are* ahead, not behind!"

Offering

To give of our livelihoods during the morning offering is to form a circle with the world that gave us our lives, and this religious community which nurtures our spirit and our

vision, and calls us to our mission. We therefore now make that circle and give and receive the morning offering.

Affirmation of Life

These word were written by my good friend Andrzej Baranski, who grew up in Costa Rica, with a Polish father and Costa Rican mother. He has been thinking about his own theology and life recently, and he shared with me these beautiful words, which he wrote in Spanish and then translated for me in English. He gave his permission for me to use these words today with you.

A New Way

Un Nueva Camino

1. Voy a enfrentar el presente con mi corazón. Voy a dejar que mis emociones y sentimientos florezcan con sinceridad y así podré experimentar la plenitud de vivir.
 2. Buscaré lo mejor en los demás, y seré un instrumento que entone notas de esperanza y amor.
 3. Mis acciones y palabras serán medidas con la regla de oro.
 4. El pasado será fuente de inspiración y meditación, habrá gratitud y cambios positivos en el presente,
 5. con los cuales construiré un mejor futuro viviendo cada día a la vez.
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1. I will engage the present with all of my heart.
 2. I will let my emotions and feelings burgeon sincerely in order the experience the fullness of life.
 3. I will see the best in other people and will be an instrument that plays a tune of hope and love.
 4. My words and actions will be measured by the Golden Rule.
 5. The past will be a source of inspiration and meditation; gratitude will induce positive decisions in the present with which I will build a better future one day at a time.