

Sermon July 29,2018 UUCSS

When Time and History Collide and Inspire

The challenge the Worship Committee put out for the summer theme is: “Who has inspired the path you are on today and what sustains you?” The events and political dynamics of these days encouraged us to believe sharing our own experience would be helpful to all of us.

I am fortunate that there have been and are people who have inspired me and who sustain me. They have done so in the context of my coming into my adulthood in the 60's at a place and time in history when events and people were colliding; we are again at such a time. Specifically, I find that the questions and concerns of my grand children now coming into young adulthood parallel to mine when I came into my early adulthood.

I am going to paint a picture of my world through a series of brief vignettes and let you find your own parallels from your time and experience. A few dates will help: I was a pre World War II baby born in 1940 and along with an older brother and younger sister, grew up in the very white, very lovely, northern New Jersey suburb of Chatham. My parents were loving and caring, Gramp, my Long Island potato farmer grandfather was inspirational and my brother and sister were and are interesting, caring and supportive siblings. I graduated from college in 1962, Laurie and I married in 1963 and I graduated from seminary in 1966. Our children were all born in the 60's and our first grandchildren in 90's.

A very early vignette: My father, along with my brother, would take turns with others to mow the lawns of families where the Dad's were off fighting WWII. A very big day for me, at age 5, was our neighborhood march with everyone celebrating the end of the war and the return of the Dads who served in the military. We were a single bonded community even including the Roman Catholic neighbors who sent their kids to parochial school!

The vivid memory of that day was supplemented at points in the years that followed including pictures and accounts of American diversity that seemed to cohere in my mind as part of a complete picture: The Navajo Code Talkers, the African American Airmen, old posters of Rosie the Riveter. My sense of the meaning of diversity deepened my five year old victory march feelings as I grew older. The Rector of our

Episcopal Church, who later encouraged me to go to Haverford, his College and then to seminary, shared with me his WW II experience.

He was a first generation German American who studied under a Quaker pacifist, Rufus Morley Jones, at Haverford and then went on to an Episcopal Theological School in New York City. He described visiting relatives in Germany in 1938, including an Uncle who was an SS officer, and coming away from that visit knowing that what was happening was horrible and that war would be a necessary result. He served as a military chaplain throughout the entire war. The excitement of that neighborhood WW II Victory march deepened.

And it gets more complicated with later revelations. Laurie shared with me a frightful time in her teens when her father, a second generation Russian Jew and working for the National Labor Relations Board, came under investigation by the Joseph McCarthy investigations. Yes, there were witch trials anew long after the Salem witch trials. Other voices finally prevailed as McCarthyism escalated and then collapsed under its own weight pressured by a call, by a special counsel to the Army, Joseph Welch confronting Senator McCarthy, "Have you no decency?" The 1964 movie, "Point of Order," captured the moment. And today, I hear echoes of decency. The mounting tirades are building a tower that will collapse under its own weight when confronted by common sense and decency. The words are different but the form is amazingly similar to what we hear now.

McCarthyism collapsed; calling people names lost its power, but there were costs. Many people, afraid, withdrew into themselves. There were actors who were banned from Hollywood! Maybe the worst one was the expulsion from the State Department of people who knew China and Asia—they were lumped together as "Old China Hands" and denigrated and pushed out. Read the biography of the famous cook, Julia Childs. She served in the Far East and her husband, an interesting person in his own right, was one of those old China hands. I just hope we can rebuild our science community in our government operations but know it will take a while.

Despite the fear mongering, there was still inside me the excitement and inspiration of people together and winning WW II. Maybe early impressions have staying power? My next vignette comes from both my college and seminary years and really begins in 1960. I was attending Haverford College, studying Quaker beliefs, among other things, and, at the end of my sophomore year, signed on with a project of the American

Friends Service Committee— working with patients in an old fashioned state mental hospital in Louisville, Kentucky.

Many patients did not need to be warehoused in the old facilities but did need help to become de-institutionalized. The Quakers thought that College students could help. There are people now who have been warehoused in prisons, including mentally ill people. There are efforts now to change warehousing people in prisons. We need to support those efforts.

Important to me, as it turns out, Laurie, having finished her first year of college, learned of the same Quaker project through her home Unitarian Church Fellowship in Shreveport, LA. A lot happened that summer including our finding we liked to hold hands.

And here comes the vignette that found us moving into the Civil Rights Movement: On a weekend field trip, we went down to Eastern Tennessee to the Highlander Folk School. That previous Spring, our opening hymn, “We Shall Overcome,” had been introduced in South Carolina to the emerging civil rights movement by a folk singer and collector from the Highlander Folk School by the name of Guy Carawan. He taught us the song.

There were African Americans in the group and at my Quaker College; we got to know them and respect them but didn’t know how to be really good friends. We tended to insulate ourselves with people we were comfortable with. I look back at that in shame and am glad that our lives have expanded so much in terms of our “comfort zone.”.

In 1963 with a baby in tow, we went to Cambridge for me to attend the Episcopal Theological Seminary. We made friends with African American seminarians while studying together, caring for our babies together, a uniquely bonding experience, and strategizing on the church’s need to step up and live up to the charge: “Even as you have done it to the least of these my people, you have done it to me.” The words resonated in us—and they were favorites of Laurie from her Unitarian roots and her own studies. A large number of seminarians, joined with other seminarians from all over and many faiths to maintain a long term vigil in front of the Lincoln Monument until the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed. And we rejoiced, and my five year old victory march, holding hands with our diverse friends, was reinforced. It was a good day!

But standing up can come at a price. The next year, in the summer of 1965, I was working at the seminary library in Cambridge. People in the south with help from others were demonstrating and marching to make a difference. And there were those killed, black and white. One of them was our friend and seminarian classmate Jonathan Daniels. An African American schoolmate had said, “There are those who will kill you for being white and helping black people.”

He was doing voter registration work with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and was arrested and jailed in Haynesville, Alabama. He was ambushed along with others by Deputy Sheriff William Coleman after being bailed out of jail. Jonathan was buried in his home town of Keene, NH. We went to the funeral.

The Episcopal Church Funeral Service was dignified and emotional at the same time. Jonathan had grown up in Keene and his mother was a school teacher there. At the end of the interment/burial service, some eight to ten African Americans from the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, lead by Stokely Carmichael, gathered around the grave, joined hands, and swaying together, sang, :”We Shall Overcome.” And the voter registration work went on. And it shall in this day and time. And I shall never forget, standing there, holding hands with Laurie and holding our son David. Sometimes, there is a painful price to be paid. And the killing of civil rights leaders and workers went on.

My last 60’s vignette says more about the price. While we were making progress in Civil Rights, our country backed itself into the Vietnam War based in part on an American lie about the Gulf of Tonkin. Maybe our country might have found a better way if we hadn’t dumped our old China hands and their Asian expertise and President Johnson would not have backed us into a full scale war justifying it with a lie.

At the time, the war almost seemed like a diversion to move people’s attention away from progressing on the Civil Rights front. Dr. Martin Luther King thought so. I found my own opposition re-inforced by Quaker beliefs I learned as a college student. Our young men were being killed and children killed in their villages—a strategic necessity supposedly as the enemy hid among them. There is no morally acceptable strategy for harming children. And, we would remember the Scripture, “Even as you have done this to the least of my people, you have done it to me.”

In March of 1968, an anti-war group I had become a part of known as “Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam (CALCAV), had a rally and march here in DC. At the time, I was a curate at St. Peter’s Church in Morristown, New Jersey. We met first for speeches which included ones by Dr. King and also William Sloan Coffin, the Yale University Episcopal Chaplain, as well as others including rabbis and monks. We then headed to the Lincoln Memorial. Most of us were to march but the leaders and speakers were riding a bus. Among those who were getting on was Dr. King and an old Rabbi, Abraham Heschel, and he was struggling to carry two great big Old Testament scrolls that had been saved years ago from Nazi Germany. I happened to be there and being young and strong, I offered to help and he handed the scrolls to me and let me carry them up into the bus. He took them back from me, I am not Jewish, and he asked me to sit beside and keep him company. Dr. King was across the way and he smiled. His two protective aides on either side of him, concerned for things that were to come later that year, 1968, eyed me suspiciously.

Not surprisingly, if you read back over that era, you will find that Hoover’s FBI looked for a connection between Dr. King and the communists. There were those in the media and in congress that thought of us all as communists, or communist sympathizers or, at best, dupes. But what I have is a picture of the old Rabbi who survived the holocaust protesting war along with Dr. King sitting across from us knowing his life was at risk. We marched and we were people of all faiths and we sang, “We Shall Overcome.” There is progress and, at the same time, so much to do locally, nationally and internationally for all kinds of people in all kinds of places.

We have made significant progress regarding sexuality, particularly homosexuality—there are aspects to sexuality that we maybe are beginning to understand—and that can include our own. Many of us have been helped by people being open about themselves. We are at our best when we march together.

A powerful vignette moment for me was two years ago come this October: Three of our grand children presented their Momma and their Mommy, pour daughter Rachel, to be joined in Holy Wedlock. And we joined them with the blessing of the Episcopal Church, legal recognition by the State of Maryland, and the applause of 150 family members and friends, and the 100 per cent support of this church and our UU friends!

But what about those who have gone unnoticed in many parts of rural America? In my work on the federal Food Stamp SNAP Program going back 15 years, I saw the numbers increasing in rural American and was glad that the program was there to help.

Food is a necessity but it isn't the only thing needed. For the most part, people were unseen by most of us, their schools underfunded, and depression and addiction on the rise. And now they have been politically capitalized on but will see no meaningful return. Where were the petroleum companies whose scientists told them about global warming and there was profit and opportunity to invest in people and energy alternatives? Where were the people who could have been developing people and technology for wind energy in the Mountains of West Virginia? We all need to see more clearly and look further.

There is marching on another front in this time—the Woman's Movement. The challenges of women are a standing part of history. But maybe something is different this time. Most women are not isolated and connectivity can make a difference. Blatant comments get shared, not buried. Victims can discover they are not alone. The Women's March in DC was a powerful statement. There were a great many people joining hands together. Laurie and I were there, our daughter-in-laws were there, our daughter was there, our grand daughters were there. Many of you here heard Lily not long after the March, express herself very clearly about where she stands in her Coming of Age statement and you affirmed her. She knows she does not stand alone.

Hateful and divisive language and actions are not new. Seemingly patriotic and faith based language gloss over an underlying sense of fear and needing to protect ourselves. Fear mongering and then violence becomes a part of the picture. As has happened in the past, though, the hatefulness is seen and rejected by more and more people. And, that is happening now!

In our lives, the sense of community and what can be achieved together, what I felt as a five year old, is basic. And people with determination and decency holding hands will prevail.

Three things I close with: First, Lily you will always have our hands to hold when you march. Second, Laurie, I am glad that we started holding hands in the 60's and that we continue to do so! Finally, all of us, in all our variety and our goodness, let us march holding hands.