

**Electing Change—November 6, 2022**  
**UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi**

Our Soul Matters theme for November is “Change.” So let us begin our exploration with poetry and the voices of modern-day prophets, with data and our own experiences. As we journey together, let’s see what insights, old and new, emerge to sustain us in these turbulent times.

Here we are poised before the 2022 midterms, and it is the presidential election of 2016 that remains so vivid in my mind. My son and daughter walked with me to our voting place, a Lutheran church just around the corner. We moved past all the signage and campaigners thrusting candidate information at us, into the quiet inner circle of “no politics 100 feet from the polling station.” Down then, into the basement, anticipating, after submitting our ballots, the Boy Scouts Bake Sale. I showed my Driver’s License, though it is not legally required. My name, even in New York State, gives people pause, looking under K instead of C. My children did not offer IDs. They know the rules, and the first letter of their surname sounds much less ambiguous than mine. We were handed our ballots. We went silently to our own cubicles, pens in hands. We fed the paper sheets into the voting machines. We collected our “I Voted!” stickers. And bought our baked goods. Outside, I insisted on a group selfie, ecstatically smiling, anticipating that we had just elected the first woman president of the United States. Many hours and many tears later, I learned just how mistaken I was. What a grave disappointment, and the beginning of the end of a period of complacency for me and for many other people in this country. The beginning of the end of complacency, because we were finally asking—“What have we been waiting for? How could we think doing nothing would bring about the result we desired?”

To counter the current looming threat of disappointment and complacency that comes from political loss and gain, here are some good words from Nelson Mandela, the quintessential freedom-fighter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, whose working and activism, for 25 years, came from out of a prison cell: “I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.”

How I yearn to live up to this secret, this vision of what it means to work for justice and liberation! I have made many missteps along the way, halting when I ought to have been moving. Resting in the glorious vista longer than was prudent or wise. Fearful, even resentful of the further hills to climb. Wallowing in the irritation and the sadness that work for good and for change is never-ending, the problems never solved once and for all. Frustrated that change didn’t just happen at the flick of a switch. Justice off. Now, justice on. And I ask myself, with all seriousness—will I allow disappointment, will I allow a world that is less in some ways than I want and think we deserve, will I allow that to drive me back into complacency?

These times we are living in, they are depressing, what with the erosion of rights, the rise of lies and suppression of truth, the threats to the humanity of the most diverse and marginalized of us, with casual and calculated violence against those with whom we disagree normalized and even advocated. It feels a frightening and insecure time. Depressing, too, with the loss of habitat and of uncountable species. Depressing with the continuing climate crisis, aware as we are of it even while doing our best to mitigate it. Doing our best, even while knowing that good living conditions for thriving life cannot be achieved without systemic change. Knowing that systemic change too often runs into the challenges of thriving livelihoods in the here and now, not even to mention corporate profits and political power. We live in such times when many of us feel hopeless and want to retreat into any safety and security that we have managed to carve out for ourselves and our loved ones. And yet, the risk of doing nothing is simply too great, too dire. Action by all of us, all sorts of action, it is essential, crucial, and fundamental to living lives of meaning and with direction oriented to justice and liberation, living lives of transformation.

Back on October 27, Opinion Columnist Eugene Robinson wrote the following in the *Washington Post* about the upcoming midterm election: “The fact that we don’t know [how the majority of voters are leaning] is unnerving, not just because the stakes seem so high this year but because it means politics might be stranger than we think, not just now, but for years to come.” The polls are unreliable. The precedents—that the party in power will lose congressional seats—may not be accurate given the many variables at play—the stock market and inflation; voter suppression and intimidation; fear of rising authoritarianism and hate speech; attacks on protections for Queer and Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color; loss of abortion access and reproductive healthcare. What we do is not just about this election. It is about all elections. It is about maintaining democracy, a voice for all of us, regardless of whether our candidates win or not. So, what makes it so hard to just focus on the right actions to defend and maintain democracy?

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In September, I attended a workshop with Episcopal theologian Diana Butler Bass. She works with clergy in many denominations to enliven religious life in a time of political division and slipping church attendance, like the now time. Some of the information and ideas Butler Bass offered can give us a bit of perspective on our current political situation, what holds us back, and how we can both engage it and endure it. During this workshop, she talked us through the graphic that you can see here.

This chart was created by the Public Religion Research Institute following the 2012 Presidential Election, when Barack Obama was re-elected president. You see here a breakdown of religious affiliation by age group, as well as the religious demographics for Obama voters and for the defeated Mitt Romney voters. You can see that Obama voters tend toward the religious affiliations of the younger Americans, while Romney voters tend toward the religious affiliations of older Americans. And notice the title of the graphic: “The End of the White Christian Strategy among voters.” Now, remember, this graphic was created in 2012, and things certainly have not worked out this way, and that is possibly in part because of how political operatives and ordinary citizens of many stripes interpreted this data.

Butler Bass was most concerned about how religious institutions behaved in the face of this data, which shows not only voting but how religious affiliation has changed over time. But she was interested also in what this data revealed about our current political life in America, 10 years later. Look at the “unaffiliated” percentages: the younger the group, the more folk who do not identify as religious, and seem to track more liberal politically. Since the young age and the old die, in general, it is easy to anticipate a trend, an inevitable motion, where our population becomes less and less religiously engaged. This has certainly been true. And the corollary—that our population will become more diverse and liberal, that, too, has come to pass.

And do you know what mainly happened—for those of us who are liberal—well, we just waited for the switch to go off. Many of us simply waited for the dying off of illiberal ideas and actions. We grew complacent—just waiting for the age shift to inevitably happen and imagining it would bring about the government expressing that values that liberals hold most dear, the values that match our Seven Principles most closely. And guess what else? Power doesn’t work that way. While liberals waited, more conservative folk got activated. One of the consequences is that the so-called White Christian Strategy has morphed into Christian Nationalism, a movement of violence and discord more akin to fascism than to the model and embodiment of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures. The most divisive and restrictive and violent impulses among us fomented and rose up and began to trouble if not overwhelm our civil society. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.

Ok—let’s stop that slide and raise the screen.

Hans Krebs, Nobel biochemist and father of The Krebs Cycle, gave us this glorious vista of civil discourse: “I saw them argue without quarreling, quarrel without suspecting, suspect without abusing, criticize without vilifying or ridiculing, and praise without flattering.” Doesn’t that sound marvelous, especially in the incendiary rhetoric of our time. I hear, through the roar, in the hush of my soul, such a dream. Do you hear? I hear “All the dreams, all the dares—yours, mine, and theirs.” I wish for such beautifully civil discourse concerning all that needs to be done in this world to make it a better place of all of us. But I can’t wait around for such a glorious vista. I have to keep working, we have to keep climbing the hills, regardless of the toxicity of the environment, regardless of this election and its outcomes.

400 postcards sent by this congregation encouraging voting in places where it has been actively suppressed. You have stories of your work that I don’t know but I hope you will share. Do we know, do we celebrate, all the acts of justice-making created through this Fellowship and by its people? As activist Ijeoma Oluo reminds us, “When we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else’s oppression, we’ll find our opportunities to make real change.” It may be that I am disappointed with the results of the election next week, that the hills feel too hard to climb and the glorious vistas are obscured by murk and gloom. But the fact of my privilege remains real, and my privilege in this culture calls me, calls all of us, to use it for good. May we be a like a wave rather than a switch. Not a matter of on and off, not such a simplistic notion of transformation, but rather a wave. A wave that we must ride,

and a wave we must make. Swelling, receding, crest and trough, but never stopping the fostering of democracy, of justice and liberation, of climbing the hills, of making the world better than it is.

As Unitarian Universalists, as a strong UU religious community, we remember both success and shattered dreams. We dream of a celebration of diversity, where differences are understood as a source of creativity and possibility rather than of hatred and separation. We accept that sometimes pain and suffering can be one source of transformation. We risk awareness and connection, even when the work is hard. We work within a vision of the future for this community and our world—where who we are is never separate from the rest of reality, our place within the interdependence of the web understood and embraced. Why lean into such aspirations? Because we sew this together. Because “Change Sings” when we maintain a hopeful spirit, when each of us recognize our responsibility, and when we know that we must join in community to make the world as we dream it to be.

Within a bubbling cauldron of transformation, may we fully embracing the sorrows and the joys that make change within us possible, and enable us to “co-create a new realm of justice and beauty,” dancing to life goodness and peace and abundance. And as we transform ourselves, taking responsibility for goodness in the here and now of which we are certain, as we work to transform and to co-create a more just and liberated world, may we extend loving kindness to ourselves and to all of us. May we be filled with loving kindness, as you remember also, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together “Amen.”

<https://www.prrri.org/research/american-values-post-election-survey-2012/>