

## **“Re-Centering”**

**Rev. Carol McKinley**

**Delivered Sunday, January 24, 2021**

**Reading: “Imagining Our Way to a Better Future,” from an article by the cognitive scientist, Jim Davies.**

Without imagination, we would have no nations, gods, corporations and social institutions. Even money wouldn't be possible. Without imagination, we would never have been able to feel a kinship with people we've never met, be they other Americans or Beastie Boys fans.

Imagination is also crucial for most acts of creativity. Although history has seen many accidental inventions (such as penicillin and the glue used in post-it notes), most inventions are designed: created simultaneously in the real world and in the imagination.

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As we face the future, trying to fight the problems of the past, and to anticipate the problems yet to come, it's hard to think of a better weapon to have in our arsenal than imagination. We can imagine complex possible futures, fantasy worlds, fantasies about being on a beach, the mundane and the majestic. We can use our imaginations to make us relaxed — or anxious. The most impressive feat of human imagination, to me, is our ability to use it in creative endeavors. Sitting in a chair, with our eyes closed, we can imagine what the world might be and construct elaborate plans.

With such power, we have an obligation to use it for good — to make the world better for ourselves and for the world. So, imagine how the world might be better, in both big and small ways.

Then go make it happen.

**Our second reading is “Remembering the Future” by the Reverend Theresa Soto.**

Can we develop the skill of remembering the future?

Can we commit to build the community that will extend into a time that we only know by memory because it will outlast us?

Memorize the compass points of the day yet to come: the truth, the love, the fire, the endless yes of the horizon. Shake the scales from your imagination. Reach. Stretch. Rise. There is no more time for pretending that everything can be all right without your care, without your attention. You can mourn, grief being more real at times than the promise of the sunrise. More real than the piece of the moon, that by inconstant silver turns, disappears.

And yet. While we may mourn changes, losses, deceptions, and betrayals, beneath the ash we find the ember. We weep and then, as we have learned from labor movements, we organize. Remember the day toward which we advance. It is with your actions today that you engage that muscle memory, that sense of smell, the ragged velvet feel of a day that you have never lived. It is also your day. Remember it well.

**Sermon/Homily: “Re-Centering”**

Several years ago, I was asked to introduce Paul Loeb, a writer and researcher, at an Olympia meeting of community activists. I agreed, failing to mention that I was not familiar with his name. To learn more about who Paul Loeb was, I bought two of his books, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen’s Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*, and *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Conviction in Challenging Times*, and began reading. Both books were challenging, hopeful, and inspiring.

During the past two weeks I have returned to Loeb’s books, finding in them inspiration to restore my faith in our ability as citizens to serve the common good.

That faith was severely shaken by the events of January 6. Like you, I watched in horror the storming of the nation's capitol, the deadly assault that resulted in injury and death – an assault by a mob encouraged by the words of the president of this country. The storming of the gates of our state governor's home by shouting protesters, some armed, echoed the behavior of the mob in Washington DC. We have since learned the breadth and depth of the planning by those involved in the January 6th attack on the nation's capitol.

We should not be surprised. The persistent erosion of this country's democratic norms and institutions has been happening for decades; January 6 was the sad culmination. Indeed, the words of the prophet Hosea prove prescient in today's United States: "For they have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind." But it is not they, but we, this nation, that is reaping the whirlwind.

How can we cope with the whirlwind that has swept, and promises to continue to sweep, across this nation? Even as those who abused their power and participated in immoral and seditious acts are held accountable in court, how can we as citizens, and people of faith, respond? Even as new elected leaders assume office, we must ask ourselves, what is our role in restoring hope, even healing in our communities and this nation?

Because of course, a new administration cannot alone bind the deep tears in this nation's moral fabric; as citizens, we too must assume a role in mending those tears.

This month the Unitarian Universalist Association's suggested worship theme is imagination. This theme could not be more timely; it invites us to dream, to envision how we can be a part of lifting ourselves, and our communities, from despair and toward hope and positive action. Our individual and collective imagination can help us create new possibilities, inspire us to think beyond the boundaries of feasibility, of what is easily done. After all, feasibility is malleable – it's not fixed. It responds to curiosity, creativity, and commitment.

Who believed that marriage equality was a politically feasible policy before it was enacted first in Massachusetts, then here in Washington State in 2012, then, in 2015, recognized at the federal level? Who woulda thought! Yet someone, or many someones, imagined it could happen. Other social and political changes were considered unreasonable and un-doable until they happened: Social Security, the Civil Rights Act, the Affordable Care Act. When Dr. King wrote his letter from that Birmingham jail back in 1963, his colleagues chastised him for being unrealistic and implored him to slow down and back off because what he sought was politically unfeasible.

Few thought it was politically feasible to elect a black man to the Presidency of the US or a Black and Asian woman to the vice presidency of the US until it happened! But someone, or a lot of someones, imagined that it could happen.

Social change and political change are not a passive activities. Things become feasible because people believe equality, justice, and freedom are possible. We all know stories of the struggles and heroic acts of early organizers, like John Lewis or Harvey Milk or this state's senator, Cal Anderson, people who heeded the call toward liberation, risking, even losing, losing their lives to make change happen. Marriage equality or the voting rights act did not become law because folks waited for it to happen, but because more people got involved. But it began because some people imagined a world where these rights existed, inspiring others, like Black Lives Matter founders Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza and Opel Tometi to engage in the political work that is making change not only politically feasible, but real,

Last Tuesday I listened to Dr. Angela Davis speak at Seattle University's MLK observance. Angela Davis, a leader for radical political and social change for more than 50 years, said we all need to educate our imaginations so that we can help guide the world toward more habitable futures. Look at our country's racist history, she said, and imagine new ways to address the problem, moving us from our comfortable, entrenched society to one where justice for all means All.

And that takes me back to Paul Loeb's books. Loeb, who lives in Seattle, has spent more than four decades researching and writing about citizen responsibility and empowerment. *Soul of a Citizen* has become a handbook for social activists or anyone who want to make a difference, to be part of realizing a better world. But, believes Loeb, we must think beyond a current election, or administration.

He writes, "one election can change only so much, however high the hopes people vest in any given candidate. The changes it can make possible depend on the continuing actions of ordinary citizens, from publicly voicing their convictions to voting." Continuing actions of ordinary citizens, like us.

We have seen how conviction to change through voting has altered federal representation in Georgia, where for the first time in that state's history a Black man and a Jew will serve as the state's senators. Conviction to the promise of voting inspired many of you to write hundreds of postcards, make dozens of phone calls, contribute to candidates you support. Voting is a simple act, and an act of faith. It is, as one journalist observed recently, a pledge of allegiance to the future of the country. Despite a global pandemic, despite postal delays or bad weather, people voted as if their country depended upon it. Despite attempts to undermine confidence in the electoral process, voters held on to a conviction to voting.

Loeb offers other ways each one of us can bring about change as we imagine what the world might be. First, get involved – even at a distance and online – with local groups that are working on issues of concern to you: climate change, ranked choice voting, homelessness, criminal justice reform, the death penalty, racism, like many of you have been doing for many years, even decades. Learn how you can voice your opinions on these issues in our state legislature, even sign up to testify, by using the League of Women Voters' tutorial on using our state's excellent legislative website, [leg.wa.gov](http://leg.wa.gov). I spoke up – via the website – on a police accountability bill this week.

No, we do not lack serious issues in our state, or in the nation. And while not one of us is responsible for or can individually remedy those issues, we are part of the body politic - the polis, the people – that shapes our society.

Find inspiration in the words of writers who dare to dream, who use language to encourage others to dream. The poet and novelist, Ocean Vuong, is a dreamer, encouraging each us to imagine, then articulate – the world we want to live in. Or the words of youth poet laureate Angela Gorman, whose inaugural poem, “The Hill We Climb,” resonated with so many of you. The vision of poets inspires us to take the next step to make the dream a reality.

Paul Loeb is not a poet, but his writing reflects a poet’s gift of looking within to find the spiritual strength, the spiritual commitment, to work toward a better world. Loeb believes that healing our society goes hand-in-hand with healing our souls, understanding our cultural diseases of shortsightedness, denial of difficult challenges, society’s pervasive sense of powerlessness, then exploring how ordinary citizens have challenged apathy and cynicism to bring hope and commitment to their work for change. He does this by recounting numerous stories of people he has talked with as he explores how citizens are empowered to work toward a better world.

These stories might be told by many of you gathered this morning; some of you have been involved in environmental and social justice efforts for decades; some of you are more recent justice activists, compelled to act by egregious displays of racism and inequality in our country.

Loeb’s stories of everyday heroes – people from very different backgrounds and belief systems – people who saw something wrong then worked with others for change and made a difference, are inspiring. These are people who might have been inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s advice: “Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” Loeb’s stories of people who took that first step are inspiring, hopeful, AND soul-saving, antidotes to the cynicism that can undermine the best intentions.

As you take that first step, keep your inner fire for justice burning, as Angela Davis and Paul Loeb have done for decades. Hold on to the vision of human dignity that has inspired curious leaders to ask, “Why not?” This vision can open each of us to new experience, stir our imaginations to envision a world as it could and should be.

Without leaps of imagination, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming, after all, is a form of planning," writes Gloria Steinem. Dreaming, and planning, inspired Steinem to work to make a difference for women and their daughters – and their sons.

Dreaming and planning are at the heart of this congregation's Faith in Action ministry. Programs for learning and action are open to each one of you as we work together to expand the realm of justice in our community, and the world.

In the final chapter of *Soul of a Citizen* Loeb offers ten suggestions for making our engagement with justice issues more fruitful. Number eight is "Savor the journey. Changing the world shouldn't be grim work. Take time to enjoy nature, good music, good conversation, whatever lifts your soul."

Angela Davis on Tuesday offered her ideas on sustaining hope, which she named as the most important element of justice work. Keep hope – and your soul – alive, she said, by joining with others to celebrate the collective joy we experience in the music, art, dance, theatre, literature created by those who imagine a better world. Savor the company of good people working for change.

We are in good company. Savor it.

Adrienne Rich writes,

"... my heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world."

That's what we are being called to do, my friends. As people with limitless curiosity, as people of hope, as people of faith, let us cast our lot with those who imagine a better, more just, more equitable world. Let us – each one of us, work to reconstitute our shared world.

Amen, and so may it be.