

“The Elephant(s) in the Zoom”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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(Sermon begins in response to Niki Andre’s music video, “Stand Up”: <https://youtu.be/OFCZ0gafziE>)

Bigger stuff. Unbroken stuff.

Imperfect...unfinished. Always.

This is the work of love and justice.

The work of art. The work of spirit.

It’s bigger than we expect.

And it is often completely unexpected.

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A few weeks ago I was on a Zoom call with several dozen Unitarian ministers from across Canada.

I was listening to the summary of an Annual Report... feeling, I have to confess, slightly bored and disengaged as I sometimes do on Zoom...

When I heard a buzzing.

I thought it might go away, but it got louder,
picked up by my new and highly sensitive microphone...

Soon I realized it was coming from a wasp
that was flying around the window behind me, trying desperately to
get out.

Taking a few moments to hide my video on screen,
I got up to see if I could possibly catch the wasp and quickly open
the window, before my absence would be noticed in the meeting...

But it was no use.

The wasp was too fast. The window wouldn't open.

I had no choice but to sit back down in this chair,
turn my video back on, and live with the wasp buzzing behind me...

For the next hour and a half.

Now, it was only a wasp.

Not especially dangerous.
Uncomfortable, yes, but could be overlooked.

Not like, say, an elephant.

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In these pandemic days, even before the massive protests against
police violence and systemic racism of these past few weeks...

There were many elephants in the Zoom.

And they are far more dangerous.

There are so many uncomfortable facts with us,
that loom large today and too often go unnamed.

The fact that black and brown-skinned people are far more likely to
get sick and die from COVID-19 than whites.

The fact that people with wealth and easy access
to technology can get together to connect on Zoom while so many
others cannot.

The fact that houses themselves,
the rooms where Zoom can happen,
are not affordable to millions of people
in Toronto and Canada, the U.S. and the world
—particularly people who are Black or Indigenous
or other People of Colour.

The fact, too, that for some people,
the pandemic means safety in solitude while for others,
it means deepening poverty and insecurity.

And then there is the over-arching elephant of
White Supremacy Culture—the culture in which we are immersed in
Canada and the United States.

Robin di Angelo, the influential author of the book
“White Fragility” calls it:

“A highly descriptive term for the culture we live in, which positions
white people and all that is associated with them—whiteness--as
ideal.”¹

¹ Robin di Angelo, *No, I Won't Stop Saying 'White Supremacy'*, Yes Magazine, June 30th, 2017. <https://www.yesmagazine.org/democracy/2017/06/30/no-i-wont-stop-saying-white-supremacy/>

It is all these related elephants,
all connected to racism and police misconduct,
that have propelled people into the streets.

The unmistakable presence of systemic injustice...

And the insistent buzzing that more must be done
to rise up against it.

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Another elephant in the room of Zoom
(as I wrote this, I started spotting a whole herd of them...)

Are the little gridlines that separate us, one from another.
It's a system, a way of organizing.

As we are learning, systems can be unjust.

Just because we take up the same amount of space on a screen
doesn't mean we take up equal space in society.

Doesn't mean we take up equal amounts of resources.

We can reflect on this, even though it can be uncomfortable to do so,
as we consider how lines of power need to be redrawn.

We might also realize that our vantage points are different.

We are, quite literally, not coming from the "same place"
in terms of lived experience.

We are, all, living within our particular rooms...
which have led us to particular experiences.

Without daring to step beyond those walls,
which can become quite comfortable,
we can't get closer to people whose experience
is different than our own...

So that together, we might get a clearer picture of
injustice in all its many dimensions,
and what we need to do to address it.

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The particular walls within which we live can cause us to see our
society, and indeed the huge problems of racism and the coronavirus
pandemic, from very particular points of view—and that can cause a
lot of conflict.

I was fascinated this week to observe the radically different “takes”
on the 20-second pause taken by Justin Trudeau...

When he was asked to comment on Donald Trump's behavior in the
wake of George Floyd's murder and the protests that followed.

Some people, coming perhaps from a view that leadership must be
swift, bold and decisive...were dismayed that he didn't answer
immediately.

Our culture tends to prioritize that kind of response.
It's what we've been trained to consider normal.

Others, though, admired the slower response. The silence.

The acknowledgement that it can take time for a wise answer to
emerge...

And that it can be uncomfortable to not be in control.
To not have instant answers.

It's been observed that the pandemic itself is too
multi-faceted and complex to get one's head around.

The magazine "The Atlantic" called it "a problem now too big for
any one person to comprehend"²

And that was on April 29th,
which feels like centuries ago,
before the current social upheaval
added even more complexity to the situation.

As we all try, sometimes desperately,
to understand the big picture,
we each carry with us the weight of grief,
anxiety and bewilderment...and in some
cases, much fear and also anger.

Cue the rampaging elephants.

The American lawyer Bryan Stevenson
urged us to "get proximate" to the most
vulnerable in his powerful book "Just Mercy."

He writes:

"Fear and anger are a threat to justice.
They can infect a community, a state, or a nation,
and make us [blind,] irrational, and dangerous."³

² Ed Yong, "Why the Pandemic is So Confusing," The Atlantic, April 29, 2020
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2020/04/pandemic-confusing-uncertainty/610819/>

³ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (2014)

These days, conflict (both inner and outer)
may be a creature we're getting to know.

It can be scary.

But it can also can be tamed...by something else,
that is even bigger still...

And that, I believe, is the unbrokenness of the human spirit
and life's inherently creative process of transformation.

A process that can use everything...

Even what is frightening and uncomfortable
and hard to understand...

In service of bringing more love into being.

When we get closer to the elephants of privilege,
unconscious bias, systemic violence and our own tendency to
divide...

It is this creative, resilient and renewing power
that gives us the strength and the sense of purpose to rise up.

To sense in ourselves the power we hold
to love the world into a new way of being...

Which always starts with ourselves.

To offer what we can.
Without knowing what will come of it.

To listen, to learn, to open ourselves to uncomfortable truths.

To dare to be transformed, both individually and collectively.

The Reverend Doctor Thandeka, a noted Black Unitarian Universalist minister said in the poem we heard earlier:

“I turn to the world
the scenes of the city
the worn tapestries of
brokerage firms
crack dealers
private estates
personal things in the bag lady’s cart.
rage and pain in the faces that turn from me
afraid of their own inner worlds.

This common world I love anew
as the life blood of generations
who refused to surrender their humanity
in an inhumane world
courses through my veins.”⁴

And the poem by Theresa Ines Soto,
another person of colour, is also well worth hearing again.

In their words:

“To be free, you must embrace
the breadth of your own existence
without apology, even if they try to take
it from you.

⁴ Thandeka, “The Legacy of Caring,” in *Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood* (Skinner House, 2014), 9-10.

You must know, not that you
can do whatever you want;
you are not
a kudzu vine, eating entire hillsides for
the purpose of feeding your own lush life.

You must know instead, that inside you are entire
Universes--milky blue, magenta, and gold--
expanding.

But to actually be free, you must
know and you must fight for the entire
Universes inside of everyone else.

Being free is not a license, but a promise.”⁵

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In this, they too are calling everyone to rise up...
to what is within ourselves that is bigger than we know...
and to what is equally big beyond measure in everyone else...all
colours expanding.

Perhaps this is the last elephant to name...
the one that is so big is utterly unknowable
and perhaps frightening as a result--
yet also enlivening as nothing else could be.

Call it God, call it Spirit
call it Creativity
or Holy Movement in the Streets

⁵ Theresa I. Soto, “Teraxacum” in *Spilling the Light: Meditations on Hope and Resilience* (Skinner House, 2019), 5.

It right here now...and it is for you.

Feel it rising in your heart...
Hear it buzzing in the summer air...

And let it move you...powerfully...
to where you need to go.

I invite you to pause now, for a time of personal reflection,
with a simple, meditative video.

You'll hear Danny Fong's beautiful rendition of
John Mayer's "Waiting on the World to Change".

As you watch and listen, you might ask yourself,
"how can I keep the flame of justice lit, in these times of change and
upheaval?"

What is my work to do? How can I rise up?

What are the conversations I need to have...
When do I need to wait...to listen.

And how can I stay connected to love, faith and spirit...
in times of such uncertainty?

These are questions you may choose to reflect on in coffee time
today, and in the days and weeks to come.

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