

Thought for Contemplation: "There is a FORT in comfort." Naomi Shihab Nye

INGATHERING CHIMES

WELCOME

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION 11:00 am

CHALICE LIGHTING

Some light fires to keep away what is scary.

We light our fire, the flaming chalice

To remind us of what is good

Anita Farber-Robertson

INTROIT Hist Whist

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come into this circle of love and justice.

Come into this community of compassion, holiness
and health.

Come, just as you are,

For surely that is enough,

and you shall know comfort and joy.

A F-R adapted from Israel Zangwill

HYMN *In Sweet Fields of Autumn* #52

CHILDREN'S TIME Bob Moseley

Song (seated) Go Now in Peace #413

(Children are invited to go to their program.)

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTION 9:00 am

MUSIC FOR REFLECTION

JOYS AND SORROWS

MEDITATION AND PRAYER

SHARING OUR JOURNEYS: Dave Juers

OFFERING

READING: by Rev. Summer Albayati, from Centering, Navigating Race, Authenticity and Power in Ministry, Mitra Rahnema, ed.

I was told that my speaking of Islam reminded some Unitarian Universalist congregants of terrorism. Of course, this had the effect of silencing my voice, yet again....I experience this tension as an Arab-American Muslim Unitarian Universalist minister....

There is another unspoken tension here: I cannot fight for justice in the same way non-Arab and non-Muslim Unitarian Universalist ministers do. I am Arab and Muslim, and that, unfortunately trumps any privilege or protection afforded me as an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. I must tread softly as I educate our denomination on the beauty of Islam, the fears that Muslim Americans face when they enter our own sanctuaries....

I stand here boldly declaring that I am the face we have learned to fear. And I am a Unitarian Universalist minister. I am present and strong and a spiritual leader. I am here to help our denomination cast aside fear of the other....

And so I boldly speak out, but I recognize that this is quite a task for one minister of Arab and Muslim descent.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

SERMON

Creating the FORT in Comfort

The Rev. Dr. Anita Farber-Robertson

Nicole Chung was born of Korean American parents and given up for adoption as a newborn. She was adopted by a white couple in the American northwest. They loved her, cared for her, and gave her everything any parent would give their child, except a family that looked like her, and an understanding of what her experience in a white community would be as an Asian child. They told her little about her birth family- they didn't know much and didn't really feel the need to know much. What they knew, was that she was born prematurely, had been very sick. When they picked their tiny bundle of joy up from the hospital, their aching hearts swelled with love. They named her Nicole.

When Nicole married and started thinking about having a family, her curiosity about her birth family came to the fore, and when she discovered she was pregnant, it became pressing. She felt she needed to know more, and embarked on a search, hiring someone whose profession it was to sleuth out information for adoptees about their birth families.

She recalls:

I didn't know if the discoveries would change how I thought about my parents, or the new family Dan and I were just beginning. To upend our hard-won stability by adding any unknown variables might well be foolhardy...What if I did find my birth family? What if I ended up with a richer and more complete story to share with my children...?...

Of course, there were risks. My birth parents might not want to talk to me. I might not like what I found. ...It would be terrible to be given up all over again, and when I was old enough to understand rejection.¹

¹ Nicole Chung, *All You Can Ever Know, a Memoir*, Catapult: New York, 2018.

We can be aware, as we enter Nicole's story, that Naomi Shihab Nye is right in noting that there is a FORT in comfort. Sometimes, in order to know a deeper, more sustained comfort, we need to have the fortitude to walk where it is scary, to face our devils, whether they be what terrifies us, or merely makes us uncomfortable. Nicole decided, at this most vulnerable time, when she was about to change her life and identity by becoming a mother, to create for herself, and inside herself, not a safe space, but a brave space. She was claiming the FORT she would need, to find the longer-term peace of truth and knowledge. Deep comfort. Brave space.

Rev. Summer Albayati, an Iraqi American, Muslim Unitarian Universalist minister tells us of her experience:

I cannot fight for justice in the same way non-Arab and Non-Muslim Unitarian Universalist ministers do. I am Arab and Muslim and that, unfortunately, trumps any privilege or protection afforded me as an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. Instead, I must tread softly as I educate our denomination in the beauty of Islam, the fears that Muslim Americans face when they enter our sanctuaries.²

So, when Rev. Summer Albayati chose the comfort of a Unitarian Universalist faith that spoke to her, she also had to claim the fortitude required, to make and hold a space for herself in our Unitarian Universalist world. It may never truly feel like a safe space for her, but it can be a brave space, not only for her, but for the Unitarian Universalists in her congregation who have also agreed to walk with her out of their own familiar comfort zone, to inhabit the FORT in

² Summer Albayati, *Centering, Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*, Mitra Rahnema, ed., Skinner House Books: Boston, 2017

comfort, and hold together a brave space, where they can all begin the work of being authentic together.

How do we learn to inhabit brave space, instead of only seeking safe space? How do we cultivate that way of being, in ourselves and in the world? Some call it courage. Some call it resilience. But whatever you call it, that capacity to engage, even when it feels unfamiliar, difficult or scary, is critical, because there is a world out there that is our oyster, if we engage it rather than hiding. Inhabiting brave space is a spiritual practice, and truly, it is the quality that allows all of the other virtues we embrace, to thrive.

For eleven years, in the 1980's and beyond, I served the First Parish in Canton, Massachusetts as their settled minister. Every year, at this very weekend of the year, they put on a Haunted House. It took over the church. Everyone in the congregation could find a way to participate- by making costumes, inventing scary exhibits, building the exhibits, playing characters, taking tickets, making brownies to sell, setting up sound effects, ushering, directing parking.

The sanctuary was where the customers waiting to be frightened sat, with heavy organ music and spooky sounds in the background. Hundreds sat waiting while the line snaked out the door for blocks. Every year we made about \$5000, scaring people out of their wits. They came from miles around. And we did it, I must say, ethically and tastefully. The point was to create the experience of being frightened for which people had come and paid, but not to play on their sadistic or murderous fantasies. And every year the congregation and its leadership had to wrestle with the question: Is this something a church should be doing? Is this compatible with our mission? Our values? If so why, and what lessons does it need to be teaching to justify all this time and effort?

I came to call it fright management. It is a phenomenon we experience or observe in many venues. I went to Disneyland with my California grandchildren a few years ago. There was a scary house. My granddaughter, the older sister, was eager to go. My grandson, the younger brother wanted to go, but he was scared. “Grandma, will you come with me?” he asked. Of course I said yes, even though I really was not all that keen on intentionally putting myself through an experience of being frightened.

We went through the scary house. He was scared- very scared! He clung to me. Maybe even cried. And when we came out the other side he turned to me and said, “Grandma. Can we do it again?”

I had to laugh. It was the same behavior I had seen year after year at the church’s Haunted House. Many of you have probably seen it. Maybe even did it when you were youngsters. You do the scary thing, feeling the grip of terror, and then the rush of elation at the other end, when you actually did it. It’s a real high. And children do it over and over again, practicing being brave, practicing choosing the hard thing, practicing until it becomes true and real and known that there is a FORT in comfort, your own fort of internal brave space that is inside, practiced and familiar. We are more able to be comfortable in more places if we have cultivated that brave space, practiced so that we can draw on the strength we have cultivated within, the strength that ultimately presents as resilience when we live out in the world.

We live with all kinds of scaries. Illnesses that threaten our quality of life, financial uncertainties, losses expected or experienced. Maybe all of our scaries, are in some ways, losses expected or feared...things that we fear will diminish us or our well-being. In addition to the concrete losses, such as financial stability and full use of our mind and body, there are more subtle losses that can keep us in a

grip of terror. Loss of our place in the community. Loss of our friends and other relationships. Loss of respect, or of being valued. How often do we neglect to speak up or say something for fear of saying the wrong thing, something that others may think wrong, or stupid, or insensitive? And rather than take that risk, we say nothing, choosing safe space over brave space, and sealing the isolation that surrounds us.

Pat Maravel, a member of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington, New York told about her experience of having had a miscarriage. She said:

Upon my return to work, most of my colleagues welcomed me back or asked how I was feeling. One man in my department said, "Welcome back. I was so sorry to hear about the baby." I almost kissed him. Someone acknowledged that I hadn't been out with the flu for a week."³

Brave space. Risking possibly making a social faux pas, this man gave the gift of authenticity and affirmation.

Our first Unitarian Universalist principle is to "Affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Maybe that sounded easy on paper. Maybe it just sounded like a philosophical statement, or a proposal about the law. But what if the principle, covenanting to "Affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person" is actually a call to us to embody brave space, not only calling in our politicians when we see them dishonoring the worth and dignity of others, but actually taking the risks of making errors in how we speak, so that we might have a chance at authentic communication?

³ Bruce T. Marshall *A Holy Curiosity, Stories of a Liberal Religious Faith*, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Huntington, 1990

Rev. Summer Albayati asks:

...how can our congregations become sanctuaries of freedom and hope? How can we free the chains that bind us and keep us from truly living our principles?⁴

One way we can begin, is by cultivating the brave space within us, and within our children. And we can practice more often than just on Halloween.

Amen and Blessed be.

CLOSING HYMN *We Are Building a New Way* # 1017

BENEDICTION

CLOSING MUSIC (please remain seated for the closing music)

⁴ Op cit