

Women's History: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

How do we encounter suffering with integrity?

This is my basic question this morning. What does our Unitarian Universalist faith offer us in the way of hope? Knowing that optimism is insufficient to healing our wounds, Is there a balm in our Gilead?

To speak of suffering is to understand that we all suffer. All people suffer. There is no hierarchy of suffering...it is not something to compare. Sometimes our suffering feels insignificant in the face of someone else's – but we cannot imagine, judge or know the suffering of others, we can only fully know our own. Just know that we all suffer, as our first reading reminds us...in this room this morning there are all Varieties of suffering.

I've had a very tough week. My first version of this sermon was a meandering through several experiences of complaint, lament and also inspiration. I invite you to follow me as I wander through my pain, my readings, my pondering and my context as a woman who was never meant to be a minister.

The forward and backward steps of the Feminist movement are key to the forward and back steps of my life. And forgive me if this offering is more personal than usual. But I'm living in the last days of my ministry with you and I don't want to waste a moment of my truth.

Over and over again this week, I have had painful reminders of the fragility and suffering wrought by the human condition. Over and over I have cried out in disbelief- “From whence cometh my hope?” “Where is the good news?” “Where is relief?” “Will my religion sustain me?”

Over and over this week, I have felt despair, anger, helplessness. I have yelled at motorists, cried on the phone, searched books, newspapers and magazines for insight, usually I trust that the spark I need will come, that the pain I feel will pass, that a word from a loving friend will touch me. But this has been a hard week. And we are all in an exhausting and divisive moment in America and in the world.

The Parkland High School community suffered two suicides – a Year after the shooting that took 17 lives.

Renewed threats are gathering to attack the Affordable Health Care Act and my son, and perhaps yours, has a pre-existing condition.

Hundreds of families are detained in harsh conditions at our border. Children, youth and mothers, without comfort or shelter or security.

Prisons across the country are filled beyond capacity-while solitary confinement is considered acceptable.

Anxiety enters every American home with each news cycle, and we are all exhausted by politics.

Several in our congregation are facing serious health challenges and are in daily pain.

Transgender people struggle to find safe spaces in a dangerous world.

Black lives still don't seem to matter as much as white lives.

In our state a \$15 minimum wage won't kick in till 2025!
And Maryland still won't allow dying people to choose a peaceful death.

I'm sorry, I know I supposed to be a purveyor of Good News, but in spite of the welcome spring flowers and mild weather, it's been a very hard week.

I have been considering the impact of things.
I have been wondering what my faith offers by way of hope in a week, in times such as these. And there are always times such as these.

Reverend Nancy McDonald Ladd in her new book challenges the soft optimism of our UU tradition. Ours is a history grounded in the dream of the city on the hill, founded on the belief of salvation for all, founded in high ideals and a progressive morality.

We have claimed ourselves to be an optimistic, hopeful, ever-upward faith. Denying sin or hell, sometimes even denying evil, we have inherited a faith without rituals of lament or repentance- thus we are often left silent and alone in our sufferings, and bereft of a solid kind of hope- a hope that trusts in something more than ourselves... and thus, we are left with a soft optimism. And we fear to tell our whole stories to one another.

To know ourselves, “who am I really?”. We must accept the fullness of the human condition, we must acknowledge our limitations, our failures, our anger, our hatreds, our sins. We must allow ourselves and our faith must make spaces for lament, for wailing, for a fully honest word, for rituals of confession, rituals of forgiveness, rituals of blessing.

I am a lover of literary and social criticism. If not theology, then philosophy. I recently learned there is a field called “affect theory”. In 2011, literary scholar, and cultural theorist, Lauren Berlant published, “Cruel Optimism”, a meditation on our attachment to dreams that we know are destined to be dashed.

Have any of you ever had a dream that you knew was destined to be dashed? Have you held on to it tightly anyway? Berlant sees all politics as sentimental, trailing a fantasy of the good life. Think the American Dream.

Sounds like Unitarian Universalism to me-trailing a fantasy of the good life.

But aren't all movements, all labors, all loves, driven by a dream of what might be a good life?

So it was for me with the advent of the women's movement in the late 1960s and early 70's just as I was getting married and before I became a mother. I was in the right time in the right place...Boston Women's Health Collective members were my friends.

I was a serious feminist, reading all the books, joining a consciousness raising group, sharing household chores 50/50, Later, earning a Masters Degree in Women Studies while taking my second baby to class with me in order to nurse her...I trailed the dream of a good life that would give me the freedom to "have it all" as they say. And change the world while I was at it.

Having grown up in the thick of patriarchy in a home where father knows best, where my value was seen as less than my brother's value, where I never saw a woman in a clergy robe... Or an adult with a college degree. I was totally optimistic about the Women's movement. We all were. Both working class and middle-class white women were.

Feminism has come to us in waves...a never ending movement forward and back. There was the first wave...a high point of which was the Seneca Falls Declaration written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1848. 200-300 women and men attended this first women's convention in NY to demand the rights of women- particularly, the right to vote. 72 years and many waves on the shore later, Congress passed the 19th Amendment granting women's suffrage.

Before this first wave of feminism, all women were considered property, all women were objects in a patriarchal world. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." All men weren't, of course, but women were property .

Women of color were treated, owned and used in more evil and violent ways than white women. Their lack of freedoms were different from white women's lack. Black women's chances of survival were far less. And in this difference, of slave and free... seeds of division and status and treatment of women by women were also sown. A divide among women we still feel today. A divide that is real.

The second wave of Feminism was in the 1960s and 1970's. What version of the future is viable we asked ourselves. We experimented with all kinds of relationships and structures.

We, mostly white women, marched for equality and equity in both the public sphere and in the home. We lent our voices and bodies alongside black women to the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement.

And though we believed that Sisterhood was powerful, we didn't cross boundaries with our Black and Brown sisters. Society had separated us and we accepted the distance.

In spite of meaningful advances in the Second wave...with women advancing in law and the academy, and politics...and in the ministry – in spite of Dolly Parton and Jane Fonda, and Shirley Chissom, Hillary Clinton, Sandra Day O'Conner, and so many others...there were and still are many women who went unrecognized.

You know who Caesar Chavez was? Founder of the National Farmworkers of America, leader of a national boycott, a public figure in the 1970's and 80's.

But have you ever heard of Dolores Huerta? She was a leader alongside Chavez and just as important. She co-founded the National Farmworkers of America. When farm workers in Arizona were denied the right to strike in 1972, she coined the phrase, "Si, Se Puede! Yes we Can! Si, Se Puede!

And today two Black Women are in a run-off for the Democratic Mayoral Candidate in Chicago !! And the almost governor of Georgia, Stacy Abrams, give the Democratic response to the State of the Union. And how many new congresswomen are in Congress. Si, Se Puede!

The Third Wave of Feminism include those new young congresswomen led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. They embraced the concept of intersectionality including The voices and presence of lesbian women and trans and Queer- identified people. (one of the criticisms of the Second Wave was the binary of male/female that put others on the margins.) It brought the #MeToo movement and the Women's March.

The Third Wave also brought, Womanist theory. The rising profile of Womanist theology and the centering of women of color in education, politics, literature, journalism, The arts, sports and much more.

Writer and poet, Alice Walker, first used the term womanist in a novel and later defined it this way: "Womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender."

Womanism incorporated the feminist concepts, but focused not only on gender inequality, but on race and class-based oppression as well. Womanist theory was committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people male and female.

In 1974, Reverend Dr. Katie Cannon became the first Black Woman ordained by the United Presbyterian Church USA. Reverend Cannon investigated the theology with which she grew up in the Black church in North Carolina. And courageously critiqued how the Christian theology taught her to live with, rather than resist, the oppression and segregation that was her childhood experience.

The patriarchy that is America and the larger world indoctrinated all women toward compliance and complicity with 2nd class citizenship, but women of color had additional layers of burden and suffering and exclusion.

Each wave of feminism brought additional strides to women's resistance and rise...I wonder what the Fourth Wave will look like? The women to lead the fourth wave are our granddaughters, and I know them to be quite gifted and formidable even at ages 11, 12 ½ and 4 months.

One wave, one iteration, one decade, moving us closer to our optimistic, strong held dreams and ideals, but we must keep on keeping on- making sure each new wave moves everyone, every group closer in connection and in the shared struggle...closer to a solid hope.

Circling back to the social criticism of “Cruel Optimism”- Lauren Berlant doesn’t offer a new and hopeful dream...no, her strategy advises relinquishing or recalibrating our fantasies of the good life. Journalist, Hua Hsu suggests that to imagine ourselves beyond the present divisive moment in America even if feelings of exhaustion, indifference and disillusionment are getting us down...we might follow Berlant’s secret motto: *“We refuse to be worn out.”*

I offer that motto to our Unitarian Universalist future leaders and to all of our daughters and granddaughters and sons and grandsons.

May we Refuse to be worn out”.
May It Be So.