

Breath is Everything

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, June 7, 2020

“Breath is everything.”¹ As we just heard, breath is everything

We are in a world where black breath is not everything.

Our country, still reeling with the deadly effects of the coronavirus, has erupted in anger and grief after the death of George Floyd. Today we pause to pray for this man and his family – and to make a vow that his name never be forgotten; that he never become a statistic.

My heart is breaking for George Floyd and his grieving family. May we hold them in prayer this day and every day. Let us speak the name of George Floyd and never forget it. George, called “Big Floyd” by his friends and family because of his height – known as a gentle Giant. George, who grew up in Houston, Texas, where he loved to play basketball and football. George, memorialized in Minneapolis, MN where he moved for a better life. Let’s honor this life – remember this life – and never stop speaking this name. Let us never stop speaking the name of George Floyd or Ahmaud Arbery or Tony Mddade or Breonna Taylor – let their lives lost change this country.

Today we see murals – we see art decorated throughout the country memorializing this man, George – this father. At the site of the murder, now a memorial, a vibrant mural is displayed, noting not only George Floyd but listing some of those other black people who have been killed. Written on George’s chest are the words “I can breathe now.” I can breathe now.

Today as we reflect I acknowledge as I always do when speaking about race that my words, thoughts, and ideas come cloaked in white privilege – this is the lens through which I have been conditioned to see the world. I encourage white folks to educate themselves about race, racism, and white privilege, through research and reading, and to act, and when acting, follow in the footsteps of people of color who are leading this way. This is what our faith – this is what Unitarian Universalism – is calling everyone to do. This is a time to center voices of color – to center black voices. This is not a time for

¹ Rev. Kate Tucker *A Poem for George*

white folks to speak or lead, but to listen and follow, to educate ourselves. I encourage white folks to explore Black Lives of UU², and Black Lives Matter³.

Let our response to this tragedy be framed by our Unitarian Universalist principles. We've spent this past month talking about our theological roots – our Unitarian roots and our Universalist roots. What I hope we have all digested is that our faith tells us that the holy – whatever that may mean to each one of us – that the holy is love. That we are called to act on our morals – that our greatest aspirations can be to live a moral life. That each and every person – each and every person – has inherent worth and dignity. This calls us to respond to these injustices with love, to live each day dictated by the morals that guide us and our faith movement, and to act – act, not just hope, but act – for each and every one of our siblings to be treated with inherent worth and dignity by everyone. This is our first principle – that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Our second principle? To affirm and promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Let us act in love so every human is treated with justice, equity, and compassion.

This month we reflect on compassion, and I urge that this compassion be coupled with action. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it understands that an edifice that produces beggars needs restructuring." Let's take a look at that edifice.

Racism is systemic in this county – racism is institutionalized. This began during colonization of indigenous peoples, where whites had privileges that those of other races and minorities were denied, where the land of indigenous peoples was stolen and lives destroyed. Colonization was followed by chattel slavery – where human bodies became property, brought forcefully into this country and were sold into slavery. This is the groundwork for our country, and systemic racism continues today! Many people speak of abhorrent racist acts such as a bombing or a hate crime and these acts are abhorrent and need to be condemned and folks need to be imprisoned AND there is institutional racism that happens every single day that is not condemned, that is ignored. Systemic racism that culminates in acts like the killing of George Floyd. George Floyd, the Gentle Giant. Systemic racism is seen in the disparities of wealth or criminal justice or healthcare or housing; basic things in our society and our culture. This is part of what white supremacy is. These things that systemically keep folks of color on

² <https://www.blacklivesuu.com/>

³³ <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>

the margins of society, where folks can more easily be dehumanized. Let us remember our Unitarian Universalist affirmation of inherent worth and dignity. Let us remember our commitment to love and morality.

I watched a news clip from MSNBC the other day. Reporter Ali Velshi was reporting from the streets of Minneapolis in the aftermath of protests. Velshi speaks directly of institutional racism – the income and housing disparities in Minneapolis – and how this corresponds directly to the destruction of black lives. Velshi said “black lives don’t count in Minneapolis,” that George Floyd’s life was “this weeks signal” of the effects of structural racism, of an imbedded racism that makes lives of color dispensable.⁴ I raise again the names of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade, and Breonna Taylor. Can we respond in love? Can we be guided to action by our morals?

Maya Angelou penned the famous poem “Caged Bird,” of which I will read a selection.⁵

The free bird thinks of another breeze
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard

⁴ <https://www.msnbc.com/am-joy/watch/george-floyd-tragedy-symbol-of-institutional-racism-velshi-says-84158533635>

⁵ Maya Angelou “Caged Bird”

on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.

We are seeing these past few weeks in the news the devastation of the caged bird – hidden behind those metaphorical bars of systemic racism – standing on the grave of dreams, shouting out a nightmare scream. And this bird? This bird sings for freedom. And yet! This bird cannot get to freedom by itself! This requires all birds, caged and free, to sing of freedom. All of us need raise our voices, join in a choir of justice, shout into the night sky not songs of oppression or hate but songs of freedom – freedom for all! Songs of love. Only when those trapped in the cage of racism and those on the other side of those metal bars sing together will justice be reached. Free birds that Angelou writes have for so long focused on pleasant things need to focus on the cage, and the songs of freedom. Elandria Williams, Co-moderator of the UUA, tells us we can't "just be around when it's easy."⁶ Today, things aren't easy. Let's be there. For George. For Ahmaud. For Breonna. For all black lives and lives of color that are lost. Breath is everything.

And these deaths and this pandemic are tied together with those interlocking chains of systemic racism. All around communities of color are hit disproportionately hard by this disease – by COVID 19. Folks of color are disproportionately represented in communities that have underlying health conditions – diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure – conditions that put folks at higher risk. This is reflective of disparities in our healthcare system – like we spoke about earlier. Discrepancies in who can access better healthcare and better diets and better working conditions. Wealthier folks and white folks live lives and have privileges that lead to a much higher survival rate than poor folks and folks of color – because of these systems built up on our society, roots clinging to the soil of apathy planted at the onset of our nation's history. [1][2]

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⁶ #Wecantbreathe Vigil June 2, 2020

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These deaths – these deaths are a result of systemic racism! Deaths that have remained largely silent, unspoken, ignored. Deaths of folks who are not treated with inherent worth – who are not granted justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. Rev. Al Sharpton spoke at George’s memorial service. In front of the grieving family, with that beautiful mural of George as a backdrop, he spoke the words, “George Floyd’s story is the story of black folks.” We need act and act in love; act with our Unitarian and Universalist morals. Not just when things are easy, but also when things are hard. If we actively work to promote this, we can see change. This is what our faith calls us to do. Let all birds sing for freedom. Let every breath be everything. Right now, we don’t need hope. We need action. Let us all, caged birds and free, imagine a new world together. A world where no one needs to be scared of law enforcement. A world where the color of your skin doesn’t make you more susceptible to disease, or poverty, or violence. A world where each and every person is truly treated and respected as having the inherent worth and dignity that our faith so adamantly proclaims. I invite us all to show up for love and peace! What can we do? What can we, as a faith community, truly do?

Our faith calls us to act, learn, and give. We may feel powerless, but there are things we can do. And one of these actions – these necessary actions – is to vote. Stacey Abrams is a fierce advocate for this, and although she notes that it may feel “inadequate,” this action deemed sacred in our country can save lives. Abrams writes, “Across America, would-be voters continue to turn away or opt out, discouraged by the permanence of inequality, the persistence of voter suppression.”⁷ We, as Unitarian Universalists, can help counter this! Our Social Justice Committee has been working on the UU the Vote initiative- working hard to make sure that all of those in our community can vote – promoting our values and our principles. We can also act by calling local politicians. We can act by pledging as a congregation not to call the police. We can act by listening to and following black voices and actions. We can act by researching those organizations created by folks of color and engaging with their asks. Folks are going to protests and vigils, joining the masses of the grieving and the angry.

⁷ <https://www.msnbc.com/am-joy/watch/george-floyd-tragedy-symbol-of-institutional-racism-velshi-says-84158533635>

We can learn – seek out resources to teach us. Again, I encourage Black Lives of UU⁸ and Black Lives Matter⁹, and Side with Love¹⁰. And, we can give – we can donate to keep protestors out of jail, those who can't afford bail. We can give to local grassroots organizations – those organizations led by people of color, those doing that important work on the front lines; giving to those who know what is needed because of their lived experiences. Act, learn, give.

I said earlier, this is not a time for hope, but a time for action. And I am so heartened by what I see in our youth and our young people. All around our country, young folks are organizing and showing up. Last Tuesday I bore witness to a Howard County vigil organized by local youth. As I stood in that vast parking lot that played host to a mass of protestors, I saw around me young faces, determined faces, angry faces, motivated faces. Faces of the young folks. Faces ready for change. I stood in DC yesterday afternoon as the streets were filled with folks who said, “enough!” who said, “Black Lives Matter.”

Earlier, we lit a candle for George. A candle for Ahmaud. A candle for Breonna. A candle for Tony. Let those flames never extinguish in your heart but stoke a flame of action – action based on love – action based on our principles. Let those flames forever serve as a guiding light towards justice. Let those names forever ring in our ears. Let their lights shine. Breath is everything.

May it be so, and Amen.

⁸⁸ <https://www.blacklivesuu.com/>

⁹⁹ <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>

¹⁰¹⁰ <https://sidewithlove.org/>