

Through the Web of Life and Heart Space

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Ellicott City, MD, Nov. 8., 2020

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes a poem that navigates a journey beginning in panic, traversing through understanding and ultimately ending in joy. While waiting at an airport among throngs of people, the poet hears an announcement calling for help from anyone in the vicinity who speaks Arabic. Nye, a woman who spoke halting Arabic, responded to the call for help and arrived on the scene. She immediately encountered an elderly Palestinian woman crying in agony on the floor. “Help!” the woman cried in Arabic. Nye spoke to the suffering woman in a language she could understand, and the crying stopped. Nye assured the sorrowful woman that her plane was not canceled – as the panicked woman had thought – merely delayed. The calm spread to joy as the two women together called the aged woman’s son, and then a second son, and then a friend, and then some of Nye’s colleagues! Two hours later the two women shared laughter and a package of homemade cookies. Before they knew it, the entire room was laughing together, enjoying cookies, children covered in powdered sugar! Nye writes in her poem, “This is the world I want to live in. The shared world.” She ends her poem, “This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”¹

I wonder of this story. Panic met with compassion and listening leading to peace and love – leading to cookies. Leading to a “shared world.” The world we currently find ourselves in is so separate from shared – there are huge political divides splitting the country. We are a country in panic, crying hysterically on the floor, awaiting, someone to speak to us with a kindness, with a language we can collectively understand. “This can happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”²

¹“Gate A-4” Naomi Shihab Nye

² ibid

Yesterday, we saw our values lifted up and affirmed as the presidential election came to a close. Folks here may be breathing a sigh of relief. Let's pause and be with this for a moment! And yet the nation remains divided. As a nation, we need to heal.

We've all seen the division leading up to these long days of uncertainty, ads on the side of a highway or commercials or family arguments or stories depicted on the news. How can we, as a nation, reach out our hands in kindness and love and share homemade cookies, just as they all did in that airport? We need to heal. Our country needs healing. This begins when we intentionally listen to each other's stories. This begins when we don't see each other as "others," but as people with a lifetime's worth of experiences. This begins when we frame our actions in love. Let's not be pulled into division.

What does love mean in a time of so much division? Love is not passive – love is active. Love is being the change we want to see in the world. Love is acknowledging privilege and the disproportionate harm that is being caused to marginalized populations. Love is making sure that everyone who faces marginalization is acknowledged as having inherent worth and dignity. I want to highlight here – there are those who want to hurt us and hurt the most vulnerable. In scenarios of potential pain and violence – love leads to social justice and love leads to action. Love means knowing our values, living our values, and intentionally working to spread those values.

Love means doing this work of truly listening to another's story – Just like Nye was able to do in the airport. Love means truly seeing even those with the starkest differences as a whole person, not a list of identities or dichotomies or stereotypes. Listening to stories is the first piece of dismantling dehumanization and othering. Love is acknowledging all the seeming differences and wondering about common ground. Love is not hate, love is curiosity. Love is not passive, love is active. Love is not animosity, it is listening, and wondering. Love is not assuming, but asking questions. Sharing personal

stories may save us. And when we share stories, we share a reality. We join together with a collective reality. Sometimes, it may feel as if this is lost.

Poet Joy Harjo calls to put down our potato chips and connect with the earth – to connect with the insects and birds. She calls us to release ourselves from worry, and to follow our hearts. “The heart knows the way.” Even through massacres, wars, and “those who will despise you because they despise themselves.” This journey we are on – this journey we are all on – just as Harjo laments – may indeed be a long one. It may indeed be a difficult journey to traverse. But the heart knows the way.³ To me, the heart is my center. My true self. My “heart space.” It’s the piece of me I work to connect with when goings get hard and I need guidance or inspiration to move forward – to act in love. For to be grounded in the heart is to be grounded in love.

I see love as those sacred threads that hold together the interdependent web of which we are all a part. Love as those delicate strands that I liken to those of a spider web, seemingly fragile and insubstantial but in reality those strands can withstand even the harshest of circumstances! Our faith reminds us that we are all a part of the interdependent web of existence. All of us. Not simply those for whom these conversations may feel easy and opinions seem to easily align. All of us. Any political affiliation, any gender, any socioeconomic background, any state of mental well-being, each person we encounter is a piece of this sacred web, held together by that delicate yet impactful thread of love. Those threads that connect those of every belief! Every political party. They hold strong amidst division.

What do we each bring to this web? This web connecting each and every person. We bring love – which in this critical time is a desperate call for action. We bring our hearts. Can you imagine a world where

³ “For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet” Joy Harjo

each and every person guided their actions in love? It begins with each individual person – with each one of us! – with what each person brings to this web. And every day we bring something new.

Every day we bring what is weighing on our hearts and minds. Today, we may have such a myriad of emotions: relief, calm, anger, confusion, exhaustion. Each feeling we have is right. Each feeling we have is appropriate. Today, let us simply sit with them. Today, let us simply be. There is no should, there is no should not. There just is what is. Let's breathe together

We each bring to this web our own stories, a lifetime of stories, stories that shape who we are to this day. Stories that shaped how and why we voted as we did. As we center in our heart space together, I invite us to be curious of another's story, to express an invitation and in return deeply listen. Someone may be writhing on the floor in anguish, simply waiting for a voice to speak to them, to ask, "what's wrong?" leading pain to joy, anguish to powdered sugar. Listening is healing.

Our Unitarian Universalist theology calls us towards goodness and love. This calls us to do hard things! To meet the world with love. In our first principle we are called to "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Our 7th Principle calls us to "affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are all a part." Inherent worth of everyone – no matter beliefs. All held together by those delicate threads. Each action of love or action of hate reverberating to all else in the web. We cannot let our values be torn apart amid difficult times. What about the stories of folks who act out because they are not listening to that inherent worth that is there in their souls? What about the stories of those who have been damaged? Often, folks who create harm have been harmed themselves. Respecting a person's inherent worth acknowledges their wholeness, allows us to see them as people, not "others," to strengthen that web. This does not mean that another's actions are ok or right. But it gives us a greater understanding of why these things happen. This means finding inherent worth in those we vehemently disagree with. Likewise, this means making sure that

those on the fringes, those on the margins, those who face discrimination – our faith calls us to act each and every day to make sure all folks are treated with the inherent worth and dignity that each person deserves. We are called to affirm and promote our values, and love in many ways means holding those we love and those we barely know to the standards of these values.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks of the dangers of a single story. Adichie tells how this affected her in her move from Nigeria to the United States, all the stereotypes she faced. She paints the picture of arriving to university in this country, where her college roommate was shocked that Adiche spoke English “so well.” The roommate shocked that Adiche did not listen to, quote, “tribal music.” She encountered many people who believed that Africa was a desolate, desperate place depicted in movies and literature. This is a single story. A single story is when you encounter someone and believe they are who they are because of stereotypes or false narratives. Single stories are dangerous! Stereotypes are “incomplete” – one story becomes the only story. Adiche says this single story “robs people of dignity” and “makes recognition of equal humanity difficult.”⁴

I wonder how this plays out in our own lives – the danger of a single story. I wonder the hate and animosity this invites. If a white supremacist heard and listened the stories of those they claim to hate would terrorism still exist? And yet we need not be terrorists to believe the narrative of a single story. Single stories keep hate alive and snip away at those delicate threads. We are each guilty of following the narrative of a single story – believing stereotypes and acting or thinking a certain way in response. In the time we are currently in, political divides are strikingly prominent. Getting caught up in politics we may find ourselves assuming instead of asking, of assuming ill intent because of stereotypes. Let’s listen to each other, these days and every day. Let’s understand each other. Let’s build a common reality. And,

⁴ https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript

let's acknowledge that listening to another's story does not make their actions ok. Listening to another's story simply makes them more human. Listening is one large step towards healing.

Our mythological origin story earlier talked about our world being created by love. The whole world was created by an entity called love! This entity created all dirt, plants and animals. This entity sent delicate glass bulbs of love to earth, but on the journey these bulbs shattered, spreading broken shards of love all over! This entity of love then created humans to collect these shattered shards of glass and piece them back together. All of us, this story dictates, have a job to do. Our job is to find love. "If we do that, we are fixing the world."⁵

We are called to find shards of love – that is why we were created. To go out into the world, find good. What better time than now to search for those shards of glass? What other time to look for and find good? To intentionally look for good? Hate is rampant – we can see hate everywhere. And hate can be justified at times. Hate is a fine feeling to have. And yet I wonder about love in going out to do justice work. I wonder about love in asking to hear the story of another. I wonder about the love that guides us in living our values and covenanting on who we want to be in the world. I wonder about love calming chaos – just as it did in our opening story. The poet Joy Harjo reminds us, "Don't worry. The heart knows the way." She reminds us to "call upon the help of those who love you," just like we do in this sacred community. She reminds us to "call [our] spirit back."⁶ Last week we spoke about living in a dense time, and being intentional about connecting with our holy. I remind us each, again, to find that time to center with that which is holy to you.

We heard a poem of Hopi wisdom. The poem talks about a difficult time likened to a swiftly flowing river, a river with such force and intensity that anyone who tries to hang on to the riverbank will be torn

⁵ "Shattering the Vessels" Amy Petrie Shaw

⁶ "For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet" Joy Harjo

apart! We are in that fast-moving body of water, and we cannot hold on to what was, even if we are afraid. We must move with the changing times, knowing that there is a destination, doing all we can to keep our heads above water – doing all we can to survive!⁷ We are the ones to heal! To heal a country, to listen and share love. We are the ones.

Each day, focused on heart space. Each day, being cognizant of that interdependent web of which we are all apart. Each day, loving like-minded folks and loving those who think differently. Strengthening those delicate strands of love by following our hearts, in each and every action we take. Listening, listening, listening – always! – to the stories of others. I want to live in the “shared world” Naomi Shihab Nye lived in. A world where listening leads to healing. Where we all share cookies and find ourselves covered in powdered sugar. “This can happen anywhere.”

May it be so, and Amen

⁷ “From the Elders of the Hopi Nation” from November 2020 *Soul Matters* Packet