

**“You can’t fix *Samsara*”**  
**Rev. Darrell Berger. Nov. 13, 2016**  
**The Unitarian Church of Staten Island**

“The more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.”

– **Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed***

I’ve been wondering if the evening of this election qualifies as the most disruptive day of my life? Certainly the day John Kennedy was shot might qualify. But Johnson took over as president and everything wasn’t called into question.

The year of 1968 was disruptive, with the deaths of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy and the election of Nixon, but these events were cumulatively disruptive. Sept. 11 is a contender, but, as disruptive and horrifying as it was, and it does not now seem as great a threat to the future as last week.

Unfortunately, I haven’t gotten any smarter since last Sunday. I haven’t become more learned, more skilled, though the times seem to demand it. All anyone can do is all they can do. Trying to do more, be better, more committed than before, often just leads to burnout and frustration. The phrase in athletic performance is “play within yourself.”

There is, however, something I think we can do better, and that is, extend our first principle, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” to those who voted for Donald Trump.

I’m tired of hearing rural, white voters called stupid, as though every Democratic voter is a paragon of reflection, altruism and justice. They may be mis-informed, led astray, dominated by lower urges, but we can’t discount all these folks as stupid.

Pablo Freire in his “*The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,” first appearing in English in 1970 after the author’s experience teaching the poor in Brazil, reminds us that the oppressed are ignorant of their oppression, their colonization. The rural white voter has been colonized by agri-business and international corporations as earlier imperial powers colonized other local populations. Now they have been abandoned, and agitated to hate other oppressed populations.

Many Unitarian Universalists have risen from the working class to the professional class, including myself. The working class often looks to the few who get ahead with resentment. Not everybody escaped. Not everybody wanted to.

It is time for Unitarian Universalists to embrace even those oppressed populations that do not completely reflect our values. In the nineteenth century there was a concept, “the worthy poor.” That is, the worthy were those who fell into poverty by circumstances outside

their control: children, widows and so on. The unworthy poor were those who lived in dire circumstances due to their own inadequacies or moral insufficiencies. Reagan resuscitated this concept with his false stories of “welfare queens.”

There must be some way to affirm the anger of the Trump voter without affirming the hatred and bigotry we too often see bundled with it. Perhaps, if it not too late, a real move to toward Progressive policies and candidates by the Democratic Party might exhibit this.

Playing off different segments of the poor and exploited populations against each other has been the strategy of oppression, always. Can we not finally see this and work toward “The people, united, can never be defeated?” The People, not just the groups of people we find worthy.

Meanwhile, let’s be brave about protecting each other and the most vulnerable among us. As we work toward this I am also comforted by something my wife, Dr. Kathleen Lyon, told me last week.

She is a real Buddhist, not like me. Her teacher said to her, “you can’t fix *samsara*.” *Samsara* is Sanskrit for “world” or “wandering” the way a butterfly might wander. More abstractly, it refers to the endless cycles of changes in this world of illusions. It is found in texts going back to 1000 B.C. and is also found in Buddhist and Jain teaching.

It is related to the concept of *karma*, that one’s action influences one’s cycles. The blues singer might say, “What comes around, goes around.” The Old Testament asked, “Why do the wicked prosper?”

The answer is that unearned prosperity won’t last because nothing lasts. George Harrison’s first solo album was titled, “All Things must Pass.” My favorite gospel song says, “this trouble won’t last.....always.” Dylan told us “the winner now will later be last.” Why? Because “the times they are a changin’.” That song is not just for *our* times. It is for *all* times.

Therefore I found “you can’t fix *samsara*” to be a comfort and an awakening for me this week. That is, the calamity of this week will pass. To what? Who knows? It is useful to keep one’s knees bent and wrists loose. There are always waves to ride. We know we might not survive their amplitude or undertow. Tomorrow is never assured.

To those who rejoice in this week’s events, *you* can’t fix *samsara*, either! Your future is equally unrevealed. Will there be some buyers’ remorse? Oh, I think there might. The poor are still poor, the addicted still addicted, the enraged still enraged. It takes more than an election to change lives. There may be some very disappointed people out there in the near future, who may become allies in progress!

Later Buddhist teaching places the cause of *samsara* as ignorance, not knowing yourself or understanding how the world works. While it is an endless task, overcoming ignorance is as good a means of implementing Unitarian Universalist values as I know.

Kathleen also asked this week, “How to apply all this fire?” That is, what do we do with all the emotion and energy coming from so many sources now, with so many various motivations? Remember, creation and destruction are not two events. They are one event. Something comes; something goes. All life is *samsara*, the eternal passing of illusions.

Fredrick Douglass said, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress."

Thich nhat hanh said, "No mud, no lotus."

Yet through all this change, all this illusion, there are intimations of something more. In Hinduism it is Brahma, the unchanging, that which is not *samsara* but simply is.

We touch upon it at times. Leonard Cohen did in "Anthem."

" The birds they sang  
at the break of day  
start again I heard them say  
Don't dwell on what  
Has passed away  
Or what is yet to be.  
Ah, the wars they will  
Be fought again  
The holy dove  
She will be caught again  
Bought and sold again  
The dove is never free.  
Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget our perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in."

"It is necessary that the weakness of the powerless is transformed into a force capable of announcing justice. For this to happen, a total denouncement of fatalism is necessary. We are transformative beings and not beings for accommodation."

**Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed**