

Just Us

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 04 March 2007
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OPENING WORDS Our opening words have been adapted from the Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach:
Some days dark tremors sweep across our lives. Troubling events accost us. We have grown accustomed to such things, and often we have fenced off our natural sympathies with the thought: "this belongs to somebody else."

But when a crisis of life brushes close to us, befalls us and those we love, we want to know: how, and what, and why? We want answers, though we know that all our explanations put together do not finally explain. They but fend off worry, anger, and grief. The mysteries of evil and innocence remain.

May we be patient with these feelings. May our grief, and pain, and the nameless fears that overcome us also open us to feel what others have felt.

For the next hour, and for the rest of our lives, may we find balance among our troubles, and may we find compassion for the troubles of others.

FIRST READING Joy Harjo was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1951. She is not a full-blooded Native American, but she is a full member of the Muscogee tribe. She is perhaps the best-known Native American poet, and she is also a visual artist and musician.

This poem is from her book, *She Had Some Horses*.

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window. Her hands are pressed white against the concrete molding of the tenement building. She hangs from the 13th floor window in east Chicago. with a swirl of birds over her head. They could be a halo, or a storm of glass waiting to crush her.

She thinks she will be set free.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor window on the east side of Chicago is not alone. She is a woman of children, of the baby, Carlos, and of Margaret, and of Jimmy who is the oldest. She is her mother's daughter and her father's son. She is several pieces between the two husbands she has had. She is all the women of the apartment building who stand watching her, watching themselves.

When she was young she ate wild rice on scraped down plates in warm wood rooms. It was in the farther north and she was a baby then. They rocked her.

She sees Lake Michigan lapping at the shores of herself. It is a dizzy hole of water and the rich live in tall glass houses at the edge of it. In some places Lake Michigan speaks softly, here, it just sputters and butts itself against the asphalt. She sees other buildings just like hers. She sees other women hanging from many-floored windows counting their lives in the palms of their hands and in the palms of their children's hands.

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window on the Indian side of town. Her belly is soft from

her children's births, her worn levis swing down below
her waist, and then her feet, and then her heart.
She is dangling.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor hears voices.
They come to her in the night when the lights have gone
dim. Sometimes they are little cats mewing and scratching
at the door, sometimes they are her grandmother's voice,
and sometimes they are gigantic men of light whispering
to her to get up, to get up, to get up. That's when she wants
to have another child to hold onto in the night, to be able to fall back into dreams.

And the woman hanging from the 13th floor window
hears other voices. Some of them scream out from below
for her to jump, they would push her over. Others cry softly
from the sidewalks, pull their children up like flowers and gather
them into their arms. They would help her, like themselves.

But she is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window,
and she knows she is hanging by her own fingers, her
own skin, her own thread of indecision.

She thinks of Carlos, of Margaret, of Jimmy.
She thinks of her father and of her mother.
She thinks of all the women she has been, of all
the men. She thinks of the color of her skin, and
of the Chicago streets, and of waterfalls and pines.
She thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms.
Her mind chatters like neon and northside bars.
She thinks of the 4 a.m. lonelineses that have folded
her up like death, discordant, without logical and
beautiful conclusion. Her teeth break off at the edges.
She would speak.

The woman hangs from the thirteenth floor window crying for
the lost beauty of her own life. She sees the
sun falling west over the gray plane of Chicago.
She think she remembers listening to her own life
break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor
window on the east side of Chicago, or as she
climbs back up to claim herself again.

SECOND READING Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. A poet and essayist, he was also a world traveler. His writing helped create the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. In this poem, called *Justice*, he writes about the ideal of "blind justice," where guilt or innocence is measured by objective laws, and not by subjective judgments delivered by people who may have been influenced by connections to, or knowledge of, the accuser or the accused. This ideal is often symbolized as a woman wearing a blindfold. Justice

That Justice is a blind goddess Is a thing to which we black are wise. Her bandage hides two festering sores That once perhaps were eyes.

THIRD READING Yehuda Amichai was a Jew born in Germany, in 1924. Considered by many to be the greatest modern Israeli poet, he died in the year 2000. He wrote in Hebrew; this poem has been translated by Stephen Mitchell.

A psalm on the day the building contractor cheated me. A psalm of praise. Plaster falls from the ceiling, the wall is sick, paint cracking like lips.

The vines I've sat under, the fig tree-- its all just words. The rustling of the trees creates an illusion of God and Justice.

I dip my dry glance like bread in the death which softens it, always on the table in front of me.

Years ago, my life turned into a revolving door.

I think about those who, in joy and success, have gotten far ahead of me, carried between two men for all to see like that bunch of shiny pampered grapes from the Promised Land, and those who are carried off, also between two men: wounded and dead. A psalm.

When I was a child, I sang in the synagogue choir, I sang till my voice broke. I sang first voice and second voice. And I'll go on singing till my heart breaks, first heart and second heart. A psalm.

HOMILY, ONE "injustice" How many of you have experienced some sort of injustice in your life? How many of have benefited, at least once, from some form of injustice? How many think it is possible that we'll create an entirely just world, someday?

Fairness and justice are important concepts. They are deep in our primate consciousness. In an experiment in 2003, Sarah Brosnan and Frans de Waal showed that female capuchin monkeys had a well-developed sense of fairness.

The researchers gave pairs of monkeys certain rocks, which they could then exchange for food— usually a piece of cucumber. The first monkey would always receive some cucumber for her rock. The second monkey in a pair would usually receive cucumber, as well. But sometimes, the second would receive a much-better reward, a grape.

As long as they both got some cucumber, they both ate happily. But when the second got a grape, the first monkey would respond negatively: they would rarely eat their inferior piece of cucumber; and they sometimes refused to exchange their rocks, in any future session; and sometimes, they threw their piece of cucumber at the researcher.

Notice: they did not throw it at the other monkey, they threw it at the human, who was the source of the inequity.

Some think this is a demonstration of some innate, biological basis for a sense of "fair play" in primates. Others argue that it might still be learned behavior.

Either way, it shows that "fairness" is a concept that even monkeys can understand.

So why is there so much injustice in the world? Perhaps it comes from another biological urge: the urge to see our children do well. Maybe, in wanting "what is best for our children," we sometimes cross the line and make sure that our daughters and sons get a little bigger slice of the pie.

Or maybe it is just that society is unjust in general, so we all scramble for whatever we can find.

In another study, a year later, the researchers showed that capuchin monkeys, if they were accustomed to sharing, within a tight-knit social group, then they were not angered by one of the group receiving a grape. The scientists suggest that this means, if we know that we are all cooperating, then we are less fearful of not getting enough ourselves. We are less angered by the seeming injustice, because we are all working together to create justice and equity.

Perhaps, all we have to do is get everyone cooperating and sharing food and resources so that we all have a chance to live and thrive.

I guess that isn't really a new concept, is it?

And yet, after more than ten thousand years of human evolution, what we've come up with is not really wide-spread cooperation.

Children still swipe toys from each other; siblings still compete for attention and affection; nations still go to war over natural resources or ideologies.

The rich get richer, and you know the rest... In our first reading, Karen read a poem about a Native American woman contemplating suicide, hanging outside a 13th-floor window. She is lonely, she has been

the victim of injustice upon injustice, she knows a hundred women just like her. We know of a thousand women just like her. Perhaps not personally, but we see them on the news.

Sometimes we can ignore them, sometimes we say or feel something compassionate, sometimes we find a way to blame them for their circumstance.

Often, it isn't until we come face-to-face with a tragedy ourselves that we learn real compassion for their plight.

How **could** we feel this much empathy for every person who suffers? If we were open to that much pain, if we really felt with all of our suffering human cousins, we would be so wracked with woe that we could not stand up.

So, we do what we can. We ignore some, and we acknowledge what we must, and we do as much as we can, in service to others, to help them and help ourselves feel better, feel more fair, feel more just.

We do what we can, when we can, and we try to cope with the rest.

When I went into court a few weeks ago, to support Gary Singer and Maggie Zimmerman, I knew that our system was imperfect.

I knew that the people who lost money would probably never get their savings back. I knew those families would struggle for a generation or more, because of this burden.

I knew that Gary and Maggie and their families were suffering; I knew that they felt shame, and anger, and fear, and that they would struggle financially because of these proceedings.

I knew, intellectually, that our court system does not really create justice, but only to mete out punishment to those who get caught, and cannot work themselves free.

I thought I knew all of that, going into court three Fridays ago. But coming out, I felt a whole lot worse.

I heard and saw the pain of the families who lost their savings. I recoiled and judged their anger, but I saw the pain and fear underneath it, and I was shaken.

I felt the words hammer home on Maggie and Gary and on their family and close friends. It cannot have been the same, but it felt like blows on me, too. And as bad as it felt to me, it must have been worse on them.

I saw—in reality—not just on television or the movies, how the system is designed for revenge, not justice. No justice was created that day; nobody came away better than they had been when they entered. It could have been so, I still believe in my heart, that we could create systems of restorative justice, where peoples' lives are repaired and re-balanced instead of pushed farther down. We could someday seek solutions that are win-win, but that Friday was a lose-lose, and it made me feel broken, and dirty, and hollow, that our legal system is so flawed.

I've read Langston Hughes before; I've marveled at his imagery. But I'd never really seen the eyesocket sores of blind justice like I did that day.

I wanted to fix it, for the millions of people whose lives are affected; and I felt powerless to do so; and I just wanted to cry.

Fortunately, I found a way of coping with all that; I found a source of strength. We'll talk about that, in a moment, but first, let us sing.

HOMILY, TWO "just us" The song asks, "will you be with me, through this time?" That seems to be the key: that is the source of strength I mentioned earlier. We really are like the monkeys: if we know we are all in it together, then we are better able to cope.

When I left the courtroom, three weeks ago, I got phone calls from people who had also been there. They offered me a chance to talk, a walk in the woods, dinner together that night. It wasn't so much **what** they offered, it was **that** they offered, that helped.

The eight or ten of us who were in the court room met together after church, the very next Sunday. We shared how we felt, and supported each other in the process. No two of us felt the same way, each had his or her own mix of anger, sorrow, fear and sadness. And somehow, sharing those feelings helped.

It did not change our physical situation— we still live in a competitive society, where the gap between the haves and have-nots is widening daily, where the legal system is still terribly flawed— but we knew that we in it together, and that did make a difference.

Not just in this one instance, but in all kinds of struggles, through all sorts of injustice, if we face our troubles together, we may find the strength to continue. Margaret Wheatley wrote, 'I've been working with colleagues in Zimbabwe as their country descends into violence and starvation by the actions of a madman dictator. Yet as we exchange emails and occasional visits, we're learning that joy is still available, not from the circumstances, but from our relationships. As long as we're together, as long as we feel others supporting us, we persevere. Some of my best teachers of this have been young leaders. One in her twenties said: "How we're going is important, not where. I want to go together and with faith." Another young Danish woman at the end of a conversation that moved us all to despair, quietly spoke: "I feel like we're holding hands as we walk into a deep, dark woods." A Zimbabwean, in her darkest moment, wrote: "In my grief I saw myself being held, us all holding one another in this incredible web of loving kindness. Grief and love in the same place. I felt as if my heart would burst with holding it all."

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Yehuda Amichai, in our last reading, wrote, "I'll go on singing, till my heart breaks, first heart and second heart."

No matter what we do, we are still in danger of our heart breaking. But maybe, if we work with each other, if we face injustice and inequity together, our hearts might burst from love, as well as grief.

If we work to end injustice, if we try to end hunger or poverty or war or racism or intolerance of any kind, if we attempt any of these things by ourselves, we are unlikely to change anything, and we are likely to burn out and succumb to despair fairly rapidly.

If we work to end injustice together, then we may still make less change than we'd like, but we will be working together, and we may draw strength from each other, rather than exhausting our own reserves.

The Spirit of Life pulses in each of us, but we have to direct that energy, as it flows through us. As the saying goes, "we are the only hands god has." If we are to seek justice, it is *just us* who must do the work.

Fortunately, "just us" can be enough. As long as we remind ourselves and each other that we're in this together, as long as we answer the song, "yes, we will be with you, through this time," then we may get through this life with our hearts bursting, not breaking.

If folks would like to be with Gary and Maggie, through this time, please write letters to them. Their addresses will be posted, or available through the office. If you would like to support their families, please contact them directly, or tell a member of the Pastoral Care Team. I have one last point to make, this morning. All this talk about justice and injustice raises the question of forgiveness. When should we forgive? How should we forgive?

We know that Jesus, and Martin Luther King, Jr., exemplified forgiveness. We may recall the mass murders of Amish schoolchildren recently, where one of the dead children's fathers forgave their killer.

I agree that forgiveness is a good goal. I think it is better for us, to forgive whoever wrongs us, than to harbor anger and fear and feelings of betrayal inside us. Forgiveness is not about the perpetrator, it is about the person forgiving. AND it is still a process; it still takes exactly as long as it takes. We cannot hurry it, we ought not judge ourselves or others, for not finding forgiveness "soon enough." We must accept, honor, and move through our suffering and forgive whenever we are able.

It takes me back to the monkeys. When they are part of a tight-knit social group, where they knew their resources were shared, they were not angered when one monkey got an extra grape. They were able to forgive that injustice, because they were part of a larger group, which worked for equitable distribution together.

Together, we can work for justice. Together, we support each other through injustice. Together, we might even be able to forgive. And all of those statements begin with the word “together.”

So may we be.