

High Places and Low Places

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By The Rev. CJ McGregor

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Our reading by A. Powell Davies this morning ended with, “How strange and foolish are these walls of separation that divide us!” Whilst in the hospital last week feeling sorry for myself, I had a lot of time to think about this statement, thinking about just how all the things that divide us in our country are indeed foolish. The name of our nation claims we are united, but one could compile a history of America just by chronicling our civil conflicts. Starting with the clash over the independence movement, Americans have been bitterly divided over tradition, faith, morals, and the rights of people of color, women, the poor, immigrants, and other groups. And, of course, we are divided between political parties.

On one side are the followers of Enlightenment, who believe in science, reason, and the rule of law. It was enlightenment thinkers who framed our government and wrote our Constitution. Today’s followers of the enlightenment believe in a “civic nation,” founded on a social contract between the individual and the state. The people on this side exchange a measure of personal liberty for membership in a mutually supportive society. On the other side are followers of the Counter-Enlightenment, who believe a focus on reason is too constraining. It doesn’t account for culture, art, tradition, spirituality — the elements that bring richness to life. This group believes in an “ethnic nation,” which is rooted in their race and culture. This focus can appeal to bigots, counter-enlightenment people.

Senator John McCain once said, “We weaken our greatness when we confuse our patriotism with tribal rivalries that have sown resentment and hatred and violence in all the corners of the globe. We weaken it when we hide behind walls, rather than tear them down, when we doubt the power of our ideals, rather than trust them to be the great force for change they have always been.” By overturning *Roe v. Wade* and ending the guaranteed right to abortion nationwide, the court’s newly entrenched conservative bloc has set the country on a course toward legal and political warfare destined to last for years, a conflict perhaps even more intense than the one that has raged since *Roe* was decided in 1973. The implications of the court’s ruling are difficult to overstate and nearly impossible to predict. The immediate impact will be felt by millions of women in states that will now outlaw abortions in all or virtually all circumstances. But it could be felt as well by others who now fear their rights are in danger, particularly those in the LGBTQ community.

It has been said that America has lost its soul. More and more minds are closed to reason, compassion, and justice. The rights of others are being trampled because more and more believe in a theocracy and allow our differences to create deep and hateful divides. Last week I remembered reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a novel by mark twain. It took me awhile to find a specific passage that I thought relevant to our message this morning. Twain writes, “After traveling down the Mississippi with his friend – and runaway slave – Jim, Huck learns that Jim has been captured and imprisoned. Huck faces the choice of whether to write Miss

Watson, Jim's owner, that Jim is in custody – or to help Jim escape once more. According to the world in which he lives, and the Christianity of the time, Huck's duty to Miss Watson is clear: he must turn Jim in. When Huck has written the letter, he recounts:

“I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the letter paper down and set there thinking – thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the nighttime, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

‘All right, then, I'll go to hell’ – and tore it up.” In this moment I believe Huck grew a soul.

A. Powell Davies was a Unitarian minister, for many years the minister at All Souls Church in Wash D.C. He understood God as “what the soul ‘breathes’ as the body breathes air.” And life, Davies said, “is a chance to grow a soul.” Davies saw spiritual life as the center of religion. This notion of growing a soul cannot mean that we are born without souls – I believe it can only mean that life is the chance to nurture our souls, to bring it maturity, and, perhaps, beyond. If we are to take advantage of this chance, it is essential to make a place for it to grow. A soul needs fertile soil. It cannot grow in an arid, sterile body. It must be a place that accommodate the dynamics of life and contemplate that we must have windows. A soul cannot be sealed up tight. It must be open, it must breathe.

I believe that everyone is born with a soul that is open, welcoming and fertile. Children have souls touched by change and that grow with understanding. But as we experience the natural cycles of pain and so our lives, we close the windows to our souls, cutting them off from the seeds they need and from the n necessary to grow those seeds.

But why is it important to grow souls? A mature soul, a knowing soul, is a soul that will let possibility of acting differently, of choosing differently, when it is touched with a new understanding. Huck hesitated because suddenly he saw Jim differently than he had before. He saw Jim's importance in his life, importance to Jim's. In Unitarian Universalist terms, he saw the inherent worth and dignity of Jim, and he saw he was connected to him. Sometimes, such a transformation eludes us. We experience the shift, on some level, but we do not lean into it. We do not accept it. We keep the windows closed.

So – how do we open the windows to our souls, to let the air in, to let God in, to make them vibrant and fertile so they can grow? I think the windows open, if we let them, at the moments when we suddenly see things differently than we have before. If we pay attention to those moments, if we are mindful of them, we can keep our windows open, we can make room for change, we can help our souls to grow. What can we do to stretch our hearts, and souls, enough to lose their littleness? May today be a day full of chances to grow your soul. Yes, the walls that divide us are foolish. They are also dangerous and oppressive and rotten.

May it be so.