

*Collective Liberation*

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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American social justice activist Chris Crass says that he feels like everything he says and writes these days begins or ends with, "In these times." Surely, we all are feeling the pain, grief, trauma and isolation in these times. On top of our fear and anxiety in these times we have been handed an additional burden from the federal government level to people in the streets offering violence and dangerous narcissism. That is the burden of battling for security, safety, and our collective health.

In 2007 I started working with the United Nations Women's Human Rights Network. It was then that I met my first real swami. Before then the only notion of a swami I had was Bugs Bunny. Do you remember Bugs as a swami? He asked a guy if he wanted his palm read and then painted his extended palm with red paint. His name was Swami Agnivesh. I am introducing him to you because he said something to me that I've held onto. In fact, what he said is a reason I love Unitarian Universalism and will always hold this faith close. The Swami said, "If one of us is not free, none of us are free." This phrase wasn't new to me but hearing it while looking in the eyes of a Hindu religious teacher was a transcendent experience for me. Another hero of mine is Nelson Mandela who said, "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." Our freedom is inextricably intertwined.

I'm clinging to the wisdom of these two teachers in these times. The disagreement of how to move forward through this pandemic is heating up. Protesters armed with rifles and misspelled signs are enraged that they are being asked to stay home for their safety and the safety of others. No matter your feelings about these protesters they have a right to do what they are doing. Why they need to do it with rifles, violence, and spitting in the faces of nurses is beyond me.

Yes, they have the right to protest. If exercising your rights causes pain, injury, illness, and is threatening the good of all, you are not doing it right. This brings us to the idea of collective liberation. If one of us is not free, then none of us are free. Collective liberation means recognizing that all of our struggles are intimately connected, and that we must work together to create the kind of world we know is possible. We believe that every person is worthy of dignity and respect, and that within systems of oppression everyone suffers.

Fueling this divisiveness is our President who says there is a sufficient amount of tests being conducted to reopen the economy. The states disagree. In Maryland and Virginia, governors said stay-at-home orders would have to remain in effect until those states begin to see decreases in the number of Covid-19 cases. Elsewhere in the nation, state officials said they would need to conduct far more testing before easing restrictions and continue to face shortages of supplies and testing kits. A battle also brews over "liberation" tweets such as Liberate Virginia, Liberate Minnesota, Liberate Michigan. Despite saying he would "allow" governors to make their own decisions on when to reopen their economies, our president called on Minnesota, Virginia, and Michigan to "Liberate" their economies. For starters it is not up to Trump to "allow" states to

make their own decisions. Rather, states get to make their own decisions, period. Second, after that presumptions power grab, the President incited residents of those states to defy their governors. This notion of liberation does not satisfy our demand for collective liberation. This notion of liberation is dangerous, destructive, and irresponsible.

“Liberate” — particularly when it’s declared by the chief executive of our republic — isn’t some sort of sassy off-the-cuff statement. Its definition is “to set at liberty,” specifically “to free (something, such as a country) from domination by a foreign power.” We historically associate it with the armed defeat of hostile forces during war, such as the liberation of Western Europe from Nazi Germany’s control during World War II. Insurrection or treason against state government is a crime in Virginia, Michigan and Minnesota, as well as most states. Assembling with others to train or practice using firearms or other explosives for use during a civil disorder is also a crime in many states. But the President himself is calling for just that. Regardless of whether the tweets are criminal on their own, more importantly, they are irresponsible and dangerous.

Collective Liberation is not just a value, but an action. When we work together across the barriers kept in place to divide us, we strengthen our organizing. When combined, our diverse identities and experiences give us the tools to dismantle systems of economic, political and social oppression, and to create a world in which all people are seen as fully human. How does our current dilemma measure up to collective liberation? How do we ground our social justice work, our struggles against racism, oppression and the destruction of our environment? Where do we find reliance and even joy? As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Junior put it, “We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality ... This is the inter-related structure of reality.” He writes, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Injustice anywhere is a threat justice everywhere. There are some things in our social system to which all of us ought be maladjusted. Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that. We must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation...The foundation of such a method is love. Before it is too late, we must narrow the gaping chasm between our proclamations of peace and our lowly deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. We shall hew out of the mouton of despair, a stone of hope.”

Community organizer, Dara Cooper tells us, “As a part of our liberation, the Earth teaches us that everything—E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G—is connected. The soil needs rain, organic matter, air, worms and life in order to do what it needs to do to give and receive life. Each element is an essential component.” She says, “Organizing takes humility and selflessness and patience and rhythm while our ultimate goal of liberation will take many expert components. Some of us build and fight for land, healthy bodies, healthy relationships, clean air, water, homes, safety, dignity, and humanizing education. Others of us fight for food and political prisoners and abolition and environmental justice. Our work is intersectional and multifaceted. Nature teaches us that our work has to be nuanced and steadfast. And more than anything, that we need each other—at our highest natural glory—in order to get free.”

We are all tired, all lonely, all experiencing the devastation of this pandemic on some level. The reality is that we must eventually liberate our economy to avoid near apocalyptic times. That's just a reality. But our liberation must be measured and safe. I am not interested in hearing how some will benefit and some will die. I'm interested in how we can collectively move forward where all are considered. "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together" says Lila Watson an aboriginal activist. I am a Unitarian Universalist with these beliefs. Liberation means recognizing all the trauma, oppression, and human struggle as connected and the truth that working together is a way to implement the world we want to live in. We have to be willing to recognize the greatness within each of ourselves, the beauty that we are of the earth – we hold our own sacredness and the instinct to heal, transform, and change. We all have a role in this creation and when we each understand the complexity and vulnerability to sit with our humanness; we have the courage and capacity to be ourselves with those walking beside us. No act of resistance is completely independent of another. We must be courageous and rise in these times and without violence in the streets. We must rise, with our vision, our values, our communities, our courage, for collective liberation. Collective liberation emphasizes the importance of maintaining conscious decision making capacity and practicing active consent.

We want all to be free, to be safe, to be healthy, to be considered because if one of isn't, none of shall have freedom.

May it be so.