

Profound Gift: Consolation

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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I am not cheery this morning. In fact, I'm a bit heated. My message this morning was to begin to explore the idea of consolation as our theme for messages this month is consolation and desolation. For weeks, I've been studying the writings of Saint Ignatius, commentaries, and the writings of Jesuit theologians who seem only interested in consolation. In the aftermath of Wednesday's siege of our nation's capital I want to say, to hell with consolation! I take off my rose-colored glasses and stomp them into the ground. I'm not prepared or ready for consolation in this moment. I want to live in desolation right now, thank you very much. I tried to force my writing in the direction of consolation, the direction of pleasantries, delight, and peaceful feelings. If my message led us in this direction this morning it was clear to me that I would be practicing deceptive spiritual consolation. It wouldn't be authentic. I cannot bring you a message of consolation without facing desolation with you. At this moment in our lives, we cannot turn our backs and move to consolation without touching desolation. Some of us tell ourselves it won't be long until we have a new President, things will get better and we just need to wait it out, our elected officials are coming around. Phooey!

I am desolated that the GOP are clutching their pearls and acting surprised that Trump incited an insurrection leaving people dead, our democracy in the balance, our security thin. Still, some that have been elected to serve us participated in these acts, support conspiracy, and egg on an unstable, malicious, and dangerous President. We knew this would happen in 2015 when Trump started his election campaign. Where were these surprised politicians a month ago, a year ago, two years ago? Our democracy, decency, and global reputation has been being shredded daily. A parade of these morally and emotionally afflicted and vexed clowns have burdened us with their racist, sexist, homophobic, incompetent, immoral, and threatening slapstick for far too long. And, if we are honest, this didn't start with Trump. He promoted it, gave it a voice, and made it acceptable. The root cause of this insurrection has been on our doorsteps for centuries. White supremacy, aiding the wealthy and not those in need, favoring, rewarding, and giving medals to those who cheat, lie, and destroy. That is desolation.

And so, in order for us to talk about this intelligently, allow me to put consolation and desolation into context. I am convinced by my research about Ignatius's teaching that, when Ignatius refers to consolation, he consistently means a pleasant, delightful, or peaceful feeling. In the saint's vocabulary, consolation never refers to bitter, distressful, or hard feelings. Ignatius writes about two kinds of spiritual consolation. The first is caused, from the beginning to the end of the experience, by God. The second is initially caused by God but over time is tainted by the evil spirit, who deceptively sows thoughts in the consolation for the purpose of leading the individual away from God and the things of God. Let me translate that to Unitarian Universalist. We look to that which holds us, spiritually, for comfort, joy, satisfaction, hope, and peace. We are challenged and moved away from our pursuit of truth and meaning by the wicked, the immoral, and the malicious. I agree in defining spiritual consolation as a pleasant, delightful, or peaceful feeling, insofar as it is caused, wholly or partially, by our pursuits on our individual spiritual journeys. This is called authentic spiritual consolation. When it is shaped by the infiltration of

misleading thoughts, I call it deceptive spiritual consolation. In this moment we ask ourselves, are we moving toward more doubt, fear, and anger? Or are we moving toward greater faith, hope, and love? In the Ignatian tradition, such discernment involves two key words: *consolation* and *desolation*. What do we mean when we talk of consolation and desolation? We are really only talking about our orientation, and the bottom line is this: which direction is our life taking us—toward building a world we dream about and living a life of meaning[consolation] or away from this [desolation]?

Consolation can hold many emotions and experiences. Consolation does not mean that we feel constantly happy or at peace. In fact, sometimes when we are doing precisely what our Unitarian Universalist faith is leading us to do, we might feel negative pressure from others, or we might find the experience a challenge because we're growing and learning. Yet if we sense that we're going the right way, this spiritual reality consoles us whether the day is bumpy or smooth. We dwell in a state of desolation when we move away from our Unitarian Universalist active presence in the world. We know we are moving in this way when we sense the growth of resentment, ingratitude, selfishness, doubt, fear, and so on. If our outlook becomes increasingly gloomy and self-obsessed, we are in a state of desolation. We are resisting our chosen faith or, if not actively resisting, we are being led away by other influences.

Desolation also holds many emotions and experiences. If we are in desolation, we might try to alleviate the discomfort by drinking too much or seeking distraction through more work or social events or maybe a three-layer chocolate cake with buttercream frosting (that might be just me). The food and drink and activity might feel quite good, but they are not leading me to greater joy, peace, and love. In fact, "false" consolations can help me avoid the true consolation of our Unitarian Universalist practice and faith. And so, how do we determine if we are in consolation or desolation? Desolation turns us in on ourselves, drives us down the spiral ever deeper into our own negative feelings, cuts us off from community, makes us want to give up on the things that used to be important to us, takes over our whole consciousness and crowds out our distant vision, covers up all our landmarks on our spiritual journey, and drains us of energy.

Consolation, on the other hand, directs our focus outside and beyond ourselves, lifts our hearts so that we can see the joys and sorrows of other people, bonds us more closely to our human community, generates new inspiration and ideas, restores balance and refreshes our inner vision, shows us where our faith is active in our lives and where our faith is leading us, and releases new energy in us. As we learn to recognize when we are in desolation and consolation, we can respond accordingly: changing course when in desolation and staying the course when in consolation. I may want to steep in my desolation this morning, but my nature, my Unitarian Universalist soul won't let me live there. As I always say anger and desolation are places to visit, but we cannot live there.

A message of consolation is appropriate this morning as we begin our stewardship campaign, our plan for giving, deciding to be all in for All Faiths. It's time to pledge our financial gifts for next year. This is what we do out of a deep love for this congregation, for Unitarian Universalism, and for our liberal spiritual inheritance. I want to hear from you not only about your financial contribution but about what this congregation and this faith mean to you. I'm aware that annual appeal goals don't—and really can't—express the ways in which our ministry touches and transforms lives and leaves something lasting and holy for future generations to inherit. Consolation. The reality is that in this very moment our hot water heater is on the blink leaving no hot water in our bathrooms, our deck is crumbling, we may not be able to afford an electrician to fix our outside lighting, our air conditioning is old and expensive, our carpets are stained and

need replacement, we need more space, we've no money for supplies for our youth, I pay 97% of my professional expenses out of my own pocket, our music director will need to go to Canada if he gets sick because the affordability for health insurance that we can offer is out of reach for him, we go without supplies and equipment needed to manage the congregation, our congregational administrator does the work of two people because we cannot afford assistance. Perhaps worse is our growing inability to respond, to bear witness to all that afflicts our world, our community, our people. Desolation. I ask you to dig deep. Bring consolation. Untie my hands, untie the hands of the congregation, let us stop hobbling around on a deficit budget trying to live our mission and bring transformation to so many lives. Give your minister, your staff, our racial justice team, our homeless team, our membership team, our environmental justice team influence and power to do our work. As we've learned this week, our community and country are aching. If we are to live our values, fulfill our mission, do the work that needs to be done to bring about equity, compassion, and justice I need you to show up and be all in in a way unlike never before. Yes, we do ok, but we can do better, be greater, we must do better and we must be greater to bring real homes, real jobs, compassionate relationships to our community and congregation. and now to preserve a stable democracy and our security. Again, I cannot, we cannot, do any of this while hobbling around with a deficit budget.

The Rev. Cecile Kingman tells us that she is jealous of the religious right. She writes, "Now, I have a confession to make. I'm jealous of the Religious Right. I'm jealous of their strength. I'm jealous of their organizing power. I'm jealous of their ability to affect elections – from school boards to presidential campaigns. Anyone else jealous? And you know, frankly, I'm jealous of their clarity of purpose. That clarity makes it possible for them to commit themselves wholeheartedly to the pursuit of their values in the world. They have a vision of our nation's future, and they give willingly, joyfully, gratefully of their time, energy and money to the fulfillment of that vision. What motivates these religious people to give so deeply? They believe that their values are in danger in these times. They believe that their families are threatened, their worldview is under attack, and their god is defiled. And so, perceiving themselves under attack, they work diligently against that threat."

So often we decry the power of the religious right, and wish our own message of love and freedom could be heard. And yet we have only begun to lift our voice in the world. Our times demand of us a new fidelity to our faith, and that fidelity requires us to live in new ways. It asks us to be bold, to be strong, and to grow in generosity.

You have a mission—you are hoping to shine the light of our liberal faith here in this community. We need your voice here—there are so many who could find a home with us. The great Unitarian theologian and ethicist James Luther Adams said often that in order for goodness to triumph, it must be institutionalized. If we are to make changes in the world, to create a just society, we must organize ourselves. We must lend our voices to the cause of mercy and peace. We must use all our resources—our energy, our time, and our money—to create that society. Choose to be all in, I mean really in, for All Faiths.

May it be so.
