Reflection on the Theme of Community Sunday by Ronnie Mars

I became a member of this community, the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver this past March. But my participation in its outreach programs began three years ago. I became a lunch buddy volunteer at the King elementary school.

I met the coordinator to arrange my meeting with my fifth-grade student. I had no idea what to expect. The coordinator felt the student and I would be a good match.

I learned after meeting Jordan; he was autistic. I had not been told this and thought had I been told; I might not have been willing to participate. At least, those were my thoughts.

Jordan and I met on Tuesdays during his lunch time. We sat in a common area where our interaction consisted of playing board games.

After a couple of awkward lunches with Jordan, I found it difficult communicating with him in the beginning, and he was very withdrawn. He sat quietly eating his lunch and did not seem to acknowledge my presence, accept the few times our eyes made contact. I felt like I was floundering in a body of water. But I was not ready to throw in the towel. I spoke with the coordinator expressing my apprehension. She asked me to give it time and be patient. She said to find a board game Jordan and I could play.

Jordan chose Scrabble. Over time he slowly emerged from his shell. He opened more as his tiles spelled words on the board. His personality really shone as I challenged him on some of his choices, I knew not to be correct. I asked him to use it in a sentence. He would feign an attempt and then break out in a big smile when he knew I knew the 'game' he was running on me. When I called him out, we both burst into laughter. I realized I made a connection with him.

We played eight or nine games beginning the school year until the Christmas break. I won two and Jordan won six in a row. I wanted to give him something to symbolize our competition and his achievement. The volunteers were not supposed to give the students gifts, but I checked with the coordinator about a small six-dollar trophy I found online.

The trophy design was for a winner in Scrabble and I had his name inscribed on it. I gave it to Jordan when we continued after the holidays. We mixed it up and played Monopoly sometime. We broke even on the boardwalk. Chess was Jordan’s game. He knew the moves and I was a novice. I was not in his league. That was very humbling.
Our time ended in May. I received a letter from Jordan thanking me for the time I spent with him. He moved on to another school in the sixth grade. It was I that got as much and more from the experience.

*In Praise of Not Returning to Normal© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert*

*Can our hearts make a bridge that brings us close together?* asks Stuart in this song – together is the only way we can make it through. Together.

This is Community Sunday and on this day we are reminded that the church is not the walls built with stone or wood, but rather person, linked with person, linked with person: all ages and genders and abilities—a community built on the foundation of reason, faith, and love, writes Margaret Weis.

This is Community Sunday and Kenny Wiley reminds us that many of us are here because this faith and the people in it affirmed: you may not be perfect, but your life matters just the same.

*You can share your heart with me, anyway you can, I'll share mine with you.*

This is Community Sunday and we cannot be together to celebrate. This pandemic is quite the obstacle. Obstacle to health, obstacle to community, if community is imagined as people in a sanctuary together, creating a love arch for Scott to enter in.

It’s an obstacle to taking to the streets; though many thousands took to the streets anyway all over the world, and the NAACP creatively provided an alternative yesterday in their car rally for black lives. One of my favorite signs yesterday said: Racism is a pandemic, too.

It certainly has upended our lives in ways that have been deeply disturbing, and, for some in some ways, it has been liberating.

I am among those privileged enough to find some of this liberating. I am among those awoke enough—not claiming full awokeness here—but just enough that I recognize that returning to “normal” in a society that continues to value some lives more than others is not what should happen. That this break in the ordinary order of things can give us individually and collectively the opportunity to re-order things into a better alignment with our values.

“Many of us have been surprised by what has come up for us with this pandemic,” wrote Amy Brock, our director of lifelong learning through the end of June, when she wrote to us her decision to move with her family to a different climate and different city.

This break in the ordinary order of things can give us individually and collectively the opportunity to re-order things into a better alignment with our values.
This is Community Sunday and for the last couple of years, I’ve shared readings about “those long haul people” those who mow the lawns and come to suppers and teach Sunday school. And yet, now, in this pandemic, though volunteers are still thankfully mowing the lawn, the church suppers are canceled, and we no longer gather the children in the RE building Sunday morning. The old readings seemed obsolete. The ritual quaint and slightly inappropriate. Things are not normal. And as much as we sometimes long for normal, we can take this pause to really consider what patterns we should return to and which ones we should discard.

We are experiencing the largest pandemic in a century, and the biggest protest movement in a generation. Racism is a pandemic, too, said the sign on the car yesterday.

We can take this time to consider what patterns to continue and which must stop.

Resmaa Menakem wrote *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to mending our Hearts and Bodies* and was interviewed by Krista Tippet on her show, *On Being*, just before the shut-down. He says that the vital force of white supremacy is in our nervous system.

> “Einstein said energy cannot be created nor destroyed. But it can be thwarted. It can be manipulated. It can be moved around. When we’re talking about trauma, when we’re talking about historical trauma, intergenerational trauma, persistent institutional trauma, and personal traumas — whether that be childhood, adolescence, or adulthood — those things, when they are left constricted, you begin to be shaped around the constriction. And it is wordless. Time decontextualizes trauma.” Said Resmaa Menakem.

Krista Tippet summarizes his point, that “the trauma in black bodies is born not just of white bodies and white people, but with the history of trauma that white people have inflicted on themselves and each other.” They go on to talk about the Middle Ages and torture chambers and land theft, enslavement, genocide, plagues — all that happened for a thousand years, and Menakem’s point is that all this violence is stored in our bodies and handed down generation to generation.

Some of us may have done some of the work intellectually to understand racism, but Menakem suggests that the work we have yet to do is in our bodies.

The quote from Martin Luther King Jr. has been repeated over and over again in media these last 13 days since the horrific killing of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street, “but in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.” The full quote is this:

> “Certain conditions continue to exist in our society, which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that
the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention”- Dr. Martin Luther King

I just keep coming back to the election of 2016. Many of us were shocked and horrified, disbelieving that this could happen in America. But there were those who were not shocked, who had more than an intellectual understanding of racism but a physical experience of it that they had not dismissed – and they knew, they were prepared, they were not surprised. That conversation I had with the imam in East Lansing when he said “I’m glad it’s out in the open” referring to the hatred and vitriol, the racism– I think of that. Yes, you can’t treat a wound you do not know is there. Some in this country had the privilege of turning away from the trauma – “large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality and humanity.” We loved the fact that we had elected a black president and naively thought that it meant we had changed.

Menakem says that just the term “white supremacy” is a very intellectual term. It doesn’t land in the body. And that’s how we can talk about this stuff, and it doesn’t go away. You can’t talk racism out of being. We can’t understand it into oblivion. We have to do the work in our own bodies. Understand our own traumas.

So, perhaps I want to modify my statement: We can take this time to consider what patterns to continue and which must stop.

It’s not about considering, it’s about practicing. It’s about learning to listen to our bodies -which, by the way, we’ve tuned out because of the damage and hurt, the pain. But we need to tune back in, and work with it. Menakem has some physical practices in his book – it’s part workbook, that we can start with.

No. Things are not normal. I’d never been to a demonstration in my car like yesterday. I’ve been to many a demonstration on a capital step, in Salt Lake City, in Lansing, in DC – but I’ve never sat in my car listening to the speakers on the radio and watching them on my phone while waiting in a line as if waiting for a Washington state ferry. Then snaking around the parking lot in a kind of automobile line dance – not knowing where I was going, but trusting that if I followed the car in front of me I’d get where I needed to go. It wasn’t the most environmentally friendly demonstration. But you know what, things are not perfect. This world is not ideal. We are making choices. I admire the protestors out there who are risking physical harm, and I have to listen to my own body.

We can take this time to continue some patterns of practice and stop practicing others.
This pandemic break, this pause, despite a phase 2 re-opening, this pause is an opportunity to try something completely new.

I was grateful to President Susan Frederick-Gray’s statement that Unitarian Universalist congregations should consider virtual worship through May of 2021, that we should remember the science, and not get casual about this virus until there is a cure or a vaccine. Standing outside with others is one risk, but inside is a more dangerous risk. And as religious leaders, we do not wish to put folks in the dilemma of choosing between religious community or their health. As long as some are vulnerable, we must all be vigilant.

The pandemic has taken a hit on our budget, which you’ve no doubt noticed if you looked at the proposed budget the leadership will ask you to adopt next Sunday in the congregational meeting. But you know what, things are not perfect. This world is not ideal. We are making choices.

We’ve spent the better part of a year considering the next Director of Music – I don’t have an announcement for you yet. But after all that work and energy, we don’t wish to rush into the replacement of our Director of Lifelong Learning. Certainly, not in the middle of a pandemic, when we don’t know what religious education programming looks like when we can’t gather in the RE building or on the playground at church. Instead, we’ve proposed a temporary solution. We’ve put money in the budget toward a ministerial intern instead. This may seem like a reversal of roles – instead of hiring someone to help us teach our children and adults, we will hire someone who is turning to us to learn. But as educators understand, that line between teaching and learning – well, it’s pretty dialogic, interactive – teachers love teaching because they continue to learn, and learners can be our best teachers. By bringing on an intern, we will not only have access to the latest information coming out of our seminaries, but we will have the responsibility to show up as a congregation in a way that helps a new prophetic voice develop.

This is Community Sunday and when I first arrived here, the ritual was to thank each and every volunteer on this day, to try to name every activity of the church and thank those tireless volunteers who made it happen. I’ve moved away form that. Instead, we have been thanking you each Sunday morning as worship begins. To remind all of us, that the church is the people, not the building. I hope you have felt our gratitude. Your volunteer hours are what carry out the mission. When Family Promise of Clark County calculated the volunteer hours it took to host 3 weeks of housing families experiencing homelessness in our Religious Education building this year, they gave that number 732 hours; this from 85 volunteers, serving 777 meals.

You have much to share with an intern. My thank you this year is to say, you are ready to teach others. You have much to teach students becoming professional religious leaders, and you are ready. Just as Amy has been there for our families, children, and youth, we will show up for our families, children and youth. It is now all of our responsibility, and we will show up.
Can our hearts make a bridge that brings us close together? Any way we can. There is a pandemic: The coronavirus pandemic, the pandemic of racism, and we will invent both treatments and cures. We are resilient and resourceful. It will not be easy. The road will be muddy and rough. But we’ll get there. Heaven knows how we will get there, but we know we will.....