



“Staying on the Ground (Even When It’s Moving)”

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November 16, 2008

Reading

Lessons from an Ant Farm (adapted from original by Kristen P. Wyckoff)

When I was seven, my family assembled an ant farm from a kit. After the ants were dropped into the glass structure, they got to work making tunnels. I was amazed that each one knew exactly what to do and that the ants had assigned jobs.

But one day, disaster struck. I put my face so close to the structure that I tipped it over, caving in all the tunnels. Although the ants survived their earthquake, one by one they began to die. The ants were dying of “frustration.” They could not stand the reality that their tunnels had been destroyed.

I still think of that ant farm. The ants were a study in the benefits of teamwork. Working together, day in and day out, they created an amazing world, demonstrating that teamwork and perseverance are two key ingredients to success.

But there was an even larger lesson. Adversity is a natural part of life, and must be accepted. Unlike the ants, humans cannot give up when they face disappointment. We have to realize that if a tunnel caves in, we just have to build another.

From time to time, I fall short of a goal, but I try to spend as little energy as possible feeling sorry for myself. Giving up, I say, is not an option. In a competitive world, the only way to survive is to stay positive and never give up.

So I try to live my life like those ants who worked hard every day. But, unlike them, I try not to let frustration defeat me. I have to keep building my tunnels.

Sermon

I want to let the adults in on what I’m doing with the youth this morning. Every youth received a handout on the way in to the sanctuary with four questions ... What are two things you heard in my sermon that you agreed with? What are two things you heard that you disagreed with? What one thing confused you? And finally, what are you left wanting to know more about? The answers to those questions are going to be what we talk about in Religious Education today. What I hope to reinforce is our covenantal practice of the Free Pulpit and the Free Pew. Unitarian Universalist ministers are asked to preach from their conscience. We are not obligated to preach a dogma, code or church discipline. By the same token, those in the pew are free to challenge, accept or reject what they hear from the pulpit based on their conscience. This is what it means to be part of the free church covenant, and that covenant guides us Sunday after Sunday after Sunday, and it is that covenant which is alive and well as we embark on an exploration of what we are called to be and to do in times when the earth shakes under our feet.

In the last week and a half, this country has been watching two groups of people react to the significant losses they experienced in last week’s election – those two groups are the Republican Party and the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual and Transgendered Community, which I’ll call the LGBT community for short. The Republicans lost the White House, and experienced losses in the Senate and the House, and in gubernatorial

elections across the country. LGBT folks lost four state ballot initiatives that curtailed the rights of same sex couples. Figuratively speaking, both these groups woke up on Wednesday morning experiencing their own earthquakes. Since that day, they have been like those ants in the ant farm trying to move towards solid ground, because it didn't feel very solid that morning. In both groups, there was a lot of fear, anger and disappointment.

It is interesting to see how they are making sense of their losses, because if you watch carefully, what you'll see is a very public example of some of the things we all do in our private lives when we find ourselves in a place where the earth has shifted under our feet in a pretty frightening way.

One thing we're seeing is the blame game. Republicans are blaming the presidential candidate, the vice-presidential candidate, the current president, the president-elect, the president-elect's money, the economy, and so on. LGBT folks are blaming African Americans, Hispanics, most people over 65, evangelical Christians, Mormons, and each other.

The blame game is often what we fall into when we're feeling weak and beaten down, when the experience of loss is so raw that we desperately need somewhere or someone onto which to project our despair and anger. To project means that you take what's inside you, like anger or fear, and put it out onto something else and then blame that something else for your fear and anger. Projecting is kind of a big energy-sucking circle. The problem with the blame game is that it is self-serving. It's often just a convenient way to be self-righteously angry. The biggest problem is that blaming eventually ends up hurting the people doing the blaming, and I'll tell you why.

The blame game separates us from each other at exactly the time we need to be reaching out. Why blame Sarah Palin? Why not look inward at what it is about the Republican Party that allowed her to come into such prominence? Why blame two ethnic groups? Why not reach out towards African Americans and Hispanics and try to understand them rather than simply judge? As some elements of the Republican Party and the LGBT Community play this blame game, they are actually stoking the fires of hatred and division, and that's a sad thing to see.

When the earth is shifting around you, it is so tempting to isolate yourself, to build up barricades, to blockade yourself into the safe places of what you know, and to close off from the larger world. What we're really called to do when we're in that place where things are shifting around us, is to stay open. The craziness is actually asking us to grow. Now let me be clear here. I'm not saying that a retreat into solitude can't be a good thing. We all need solitude. What we don't need is isolation and separation. Solitude is about recentering and finding your way again so you can go back out there. Isolation is about cutting off and shutting out.

So my question is, are the Republican Party and the LGBT Community going to rebuild those tunnels, or kill themselves with the blame game? Are they going to choose solitude or isolation? They face the same challenge you and I face in our lives in those hard times, when the earth has shifted under our feet. Are we going to give up, or are we going to get up, dust ourselves off, and go on?

Ironically, as I watch these different communities work through their stuff, I am reminded of a different story, the story of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X and how they struggled with competing visions for the Civil Rights movement. Now I know there's a lot of people in this room, me included, who weren't even alive in the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement was most powerful, so let me provide a bit of history.

In the 1960s, two camps developed in the African American community about how to work on the civil rights of African Americans. Martin Luther King was on one side, and Malcolm X on the other.

Martin Luther King advocated non-violent passive resistance. This meant that you used peaceful means to work for your goals. If you were marching and police beat you, you did not fight back. If mobs stood at the side of the street and spit on you, you simply kept walking forward, step by step, for freedom. Their violence

hurt them and their hatred, not you and your vision of justice. They shamed themselves not you when they beat and humiliated you, and that truth would spell the end for racism. Martin Luther King believed at a very deep level that peace was more powerful than violence and would prevail. You just had to stay steady and persevere.

King also believed in reaching out to whites. He trusted in the human spirit and believed that whites could give up their racism and their privilege and welcome blacks as equals. So he welcomed anyone that chose to walk with him.

Malcolm X was different. He didn't have faith in peaceful means and he had no hope of whites ever accepting blacks as equals. He said whites had no conscience. The only way to achieve equality was through active revolution, what he called black power. You had to take the equality you believed was yours because no one was going to give it to you. A lot of people, especially young men, flocked to him. They wanted change, and they wanted change now.

Martin Luther King worked very hard to hold the militant wing of the Civil Rights Movement in check. He ached for justice as much as anyone, he understood their anger and how hard it was to be patient under the yoke of suffering, but he feared what would happen if blacks met violence with violence. He was afraid it would undo everything they stood for.

And then, he was assassinated and all hell broke loose. The deep sorrow, grief and anger was too strong for King's followers to contain. Militants proclaimed King's murder as proof of the failure of peaceful means and rose up in anger and retribution. The civil rights movement then split between those who advocated an integrationist peaceful struggle, and those who advocated for black power and revolution. Some would say this split derailed the Civil Rights Movement and is one reason that we still struggle so much with racial injustice in this country. Peaceful resistance was never given a chance to really work. Of course, some have a different approach, still convinced that whites are too attached to their privilege and even sympathetic whites would never sacrifice what needs to be sacrificed for true racial equality.

This is a difficult story but one that I think we need to hear over and over. It shows us many truths about human nature itself. We are complicated beings. Sometimes we are capable of bearing the heaviest burdens. That is what allowed King's followers to shoulder such inhumane treatment. They saw their own suffering as an instrument of justice. It is still amazing for me to watch film footage from that time and to see the strength in the faces of the people as they marched, and the strength grew and grew no matter what was thrown at them. It seems as if the weight of the burden we can carry is directly related to how we understand the bigger picture of carrying it. We are deeply moral beings, and if we can see a higher moral purpose to carrying a burden, we can often carry it farther than we had imagined.

Sometimes, though, the burden becomes too heavy. It is easy to be judgmental of Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement, unless you know what it is like to be judged and discriminated against every day of your life, unless you know how it chips away at the soul and at one's self esteem. We can never know what goes on in the heart of another person. We can look at their lives and make all kinds of judgments about what they should do and why they should be doing it, but really, the only person who can know that person and make decisions for that person, is that person.

It is easy to judge the blaming that is happening in the Republican Party unless one can find that empathy to understand what it must be like to have held the reigns of power so completely and to then be so thoroughly defeated. It is easy to judge the blaming that is happening in the LGBT Community unless one can find the empathy to understand what it must be like to be a second class citizen, to have this breakthrough in a state like California, and to have it taken away. I don't think we're called to judge here. For who among us has not judged and blamed when we have faced our own earthquakes? There is a difference between judging someone and holding them accountable.

How we carry the heaviness in our life says a lot about us. How we respond to the earth shifting under our feet says a lot about us and our deepest spiritual needs. Are we in need of forgiveness or forgiving, are we in need of reconciliation, are we in need of grace, are we in need of gratitude, are we in need of the giving and receiving of generosity, are we in need of community or solitude, or both? Every shift in your life is a wake up call and you can look at what is exposed in you when the earth shakes, and you will see what your soul and spirit are calling for. To use the words of our prayer, we are always being called into new life so that we are more at one within ourselves and with all others, and more close to that higher power that each of us names and experiences in our own way.

May the power of this spirit burst forth into your lives that you may do the work of the spirit itself. Amen and blessed be.