

I Am that Too©
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
All Souls: A Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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For those of you who have been listening to my sermons for a while, you know that I often like to begin with a story. In fact, my first sermon was entitled “A story worth telling” and my last one with you, in June is called “The Story of Your Future Happiness.” I like to tell stories from real life, because that’s where our theology and values intersect with moments of encounter in real time. It is in the stories we tell ourselves and each other that formulate a version of reality. And, it can be profoundly disorienting when your version of reality and mine conflict with one another.

Such is the story of my encounter with a man named Joseph on a bright and cold Monday morning, November 4, 2024. Does that date sound familiar? It was the day before the Presidential election and my husband and I had volunteered to staff the table in support of our Presidential candidate. Next to our table, separated by about a hips distance, was Joseph’s table. Joe, a white man, in his mid to late 70’s, was handing out buttons and information about the other candidate for President. My story today is about an encounter with Joe that led me to a conclusion that is imbedded in this morning’s sermon title “I Am That Too.” But first, I must set the stage for you.

Our two tables outside the polling booths were there to provide information about the candidates. As people came to vote, some would stop at our table, others at his, but for long stretches of time, we would have nothing to do. Joe and I would glance over at each other and nod, but it was clear that both of us were wary of speaking to one another. During a lull in the stream of voters, Joe leaned in my direction and said “Hey, can I ask you a question?” I nodded yes. “Can you tell me why you think your candidate is prepared to be president of the United

States?” And what happened next was a brief, but deep dive, into one man’s assessment of progressive politics, his abhorrence of wokeness, and the story about the history of race and racism in American that he rejects as well as the one he embraces. So, throughout this sermon, I’m going to return to that conversation, not because he is the definitive spokesman for an opposing view, but because of what was revealed throughout our two- and half-hour debate.

I’m not proud of this, but if I’m honest, I was spoiling for a fight. I saw this as an opportunity to sharpen my intellectual ju-jitsu, to come back at him with such irrefutable arguments about the fallacy of his position that he would fold up his table and come join mine. What proceeded instead was a list of issues, that later I realized were drawn directly from Project 2025, the playbook on how to reshape the federal government and consolidate executive power in favor of right-wing policies.

This is the document that is directing all of the Executive Orders, from the trivial, such as Executive Order 14264 “Maintaining Acceptable Water Pressure in Showerheads” to the troubling “Executive Order 14173 “ Ending Illegal Discrimination and resisting Merit Based Opportunity.” From its title, that Executive Order sounds fairly innocuous. Who wouldn’t be against ending illegal discrimination? Ah, but that’s where you must read the fine print. It continues: “ ...After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, critical and influential institutions of American Society...have adopted and actively use dangerous, demeaning and immoral race and sex-based preferences under the guise of so-called “diversity, equity and inclusion” DEI that can violate the civil rights laws of this Nation...it undermines the traditional American values of hard work, excellence, and individual achievement in favor of an unlawful, corrosive, and pernicious identity based spoils system. Hard working Americans who deserve a shot at the American dream should not be stigmatized, demeaned or shut out of opportunities

because of their race or sex.” (end quote.) What is so appalling about this is it is a blatant effort to reverse the intent of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Although it is not explicitly written in the executive order, it seeks to redefine the protections of that law – ironically - for white people. When Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act, he and the Congress of his day knew that race-neutral policies would perpetuate the effects of discrimination if left unchecked. What this Executive Order would do is further the belief that the people most oppressed - most under attack from the left – the woke mob – the radical judges – are white people.

Most of us were upset about this executive order, but beyond this single order are other policies that represent an effort to change history itself – to whitewash all the aspects of American history that historians today consider to be essential parts of the American story. America’s wealth was built not solely by the hard-working Europeans who worked the land and started the businesses and developed the country – it was built on the labor and the backs of 200 years of institutionalized racism and slavery. American culture did not arise from a monolithic, white Christian Protestantism, but instead has been vastly enriched by the diversity of cultures living with and among one another, the diversity we experience on the streets of New York every day. What we are witnessing is today is an attempt to erase the stories which, for at least the last sixty years, scholars have researched and told to present a more complete and therefore more truthful history of this country – with all its greatness and with all its flaws.

Maybe, I wondered, might Joe, my pre-election day table-tending partner, might like to talk about this? Our conversation led us into a recitation of his issues; abortion he said, is a big one for him; illegal aliens is another. No surprises there. And then, we got down to it – these two white people - talking about race. “Trump doesn’t capitulate to wokeness” Joe said. “He fights back.” “Hmm. I said, well let me ask you, do you believe that racism exists?” He thought for a

minute and then said “yes, but not institutionally – not systemically like liberals keep promoting. I don’t buy it. I mean, look at the Orientals,” he said “they came here, worked hard, they aren’t complaining about oppression.”

Now the conversation was taking a hard turn and becoming more intense.

I said “Well, their story is different. Their ancestors were not enslaved for 200 years; they were not subject to the same documented, legalized, oppression as black people in the United States.”

Then Joe interrupted me. “You know what the problem is with people like you is?” he said, “The problem is that you teach black people what they can or can’t do. You tell them that they are incapable of rising to greatness --that they are inferior. The policies that I want to see in place are color-blind; we are all equal; we don’t need affirmative action or all the laws protecting other races. In God’s eyes, we’re all the same.”

When Joe said “people like you,” I must admit, I just saw red – or, maybe politically, it was actually bright blue. Feeling the anger rising in my chest, I took a deep breath. Maybe you feel the need to take a deep breath too at this point in my story, especially if you are a person of color. Stories like this about two white people arguing about which people of color are more oppressed can be infuriating for anyone in the bullseye being targeted by the current policies.

Know that I see you.

I was mad because there Joe was, lumping me into the story that he had about me in his head, and that just got my back up. You know how when you get fired up, and try to get a hold of yourself before you fly off the handle, you can have a lot of different thoughts go through your mind. Well, that’s what was going on with me. One voice in my head was ranting:

“What is driving this guy to believe an American story in which everyone is supposed to have an equal chance to become what ? -- like Steve Rogers, Captain America from the Marvel Comics and the Avenger films – an ideal that is white, blond, able-bodied, attractive, kind, considerate, and a super soldier fighting for truth, justice and liberty?

I have to say, my heart had become pretty hardened by that point; the arguments I was starting to frame were like daggers; my anger hot; my desire was not only to persuade but to conquer was front and center. We had reached a stalemate. Joe was no longer a mid 70's gentleman with a genial smile and a easy demeanor, he was the enemy. The antithesis of everything I held dear. I could not see a way out and I couldn't see myself in him at all.

But there was also this other voice in my head as I took that deep breath – a voice that said : “ You know, that last thing Joe said – In God's eyes, we're all the same. You believe that too.” And when I heard that voice, I had a flash of a different Joe, a Joe not wearing a Captain America uniform, but instead a guy trying to apply values he had learned in church the best way he could to the political problems of the day.

Then another thought flashed through my head, an image really, an image of a Minnesota vanity license plate that my colleague and friend Rob Eller-Isaacs had ordered for his car. It had six letters and a number on it. I-A-M-T-H-A-T=2 .

“I am that too.” This is a Sanskrit phrase, and a central concept in Hinduism. It's a translation of “Tat Tvam Asi”. In the Upanishads, it refers to the relationship between one's own self and the entirety of the universe; that the one and the many are not separate. All that I admire and strive to become – I am that too. And all that I despise and reject: I am that too. It is both exhilarating and humbling to acknowledge that we contain the multiverse, because it means we also have to acknowledge the parts of ourselves we wish we didn't have.

Several decades ago, when I was still in seminary, one of my mentors got into the pulpit one Sunday to preach a sermon that changed my life. This was a colleague who, as a straight, white, Southern male minister, who heeded the call to Selma Alabama, and who had worked his entire life to combat racism and oppression; and to challenge white supremacy culture. He stood up in the pulpit that day and said something that shocked me. He said “I want to confess something to you. I am a racist.” You could hear the congregation gasp. And then he continued “and I am sexist.” (again, more gasping) and I am homophobic. “ But it’s what he said next that also stuck with me: “I’m not a racist because I want to be. But what I’ve learned is that racism, and homophobia and sexism (and he would have likely added other isms) is the culture that raised me, even if my parents resisted it. It’s in the air. It’s in the water. It’s my task – our task – to be able to simply identify it when it asserts itself. That’s our secret weapon, our special power...to name it when you see it – and the first place to look is in yourself.”

In other words, “I am that too.” His sermon reminded me that we can hold more than one truth at a time-- in fact, we can hold multiple truths! We can actively fight racism and acknowledge we are embedded in it. We can criticize this country and we can love it and defend it fiercely. We can acknowledge our American heroes and heroines while admitting their human flaws and failings.

Meanwhile, I realized that while I was deep breathing Joe was moving along to his next talking point– immigrants, the scourge of illegal aliens and how his candidate was going to get them all out of the country. I stood there listening to Joe talk and asking myself “how am I that too?”

I’ll bet you want to know what brilliant spiritually deep response I came up with next??

Well, I didn't have to, because that's when Barbara stepped in. Barbara was an external election integrity observer who was sitting near my table. Before I could open my mouth, she said:

"I've been listening to the two of you and was wondering if I could share a story with you about my experience with immigrants?" At that point Joe and I were both glad to have someone else talk so both of us nodded.

Barbara began by telling a personal story, of a family she met while working at the hospital. The family had made their way to America because they had a baby who was born with her intestines on the outside of their body. There was no facility in their country that could help them. She described in vivid detail what this family went through and how some members of the Charlottesville community had rallied in support of this family. She had pictures of Gabriel and Maria and their baby, coincidentally also named Joseph, now a five-year-old. As she told this story, I once again had more than one thought! Part of me was very moved by Barbara's story and then there was this other voice in my head saying: "A bleeding heart story is not going to make any difference to this guy!" When Barbara was finished, she asked Joe "I wondered if you know any immigrants personally? Any of their stories? Their families?" Joe had continued to stare at the picture of the five-year-old child, and then he spoke softly: "Yes, yes I do."

And then, I heard some of Joe's story. It's too complex to tell here, but after he finished, I felt my own heart soften. "Look," I said. "A few moments ago, I got on my liberal soapbox. I cut you off a couple of times. I'm sorry." He immediately responded in kind. "Yeah, I got pretty hot myself," he said grinning. "Sorry 'bout that."

What didn't happen was that Joe folded up his booth and came over to mine; nor, do I suspect that he changed his vote or his mind. But what did change was the air between us, and by that I mean, somehow, telling a different story – a humble, truthful and honest story

humanized all of us. I could see the same anger and self-righteousness in myself as I saw rising in Joe.

“The heart is not like a songbird” writes the poet, “singing only one note at a time. More like the Tuvan throat singer, able to sing both a drone and simultaneously two or three harmonics high above a sound. The Tuvans say that gives the impression of wind swirling among the rocks.”

This insistent breeze leads us wordlessly deeper into ourselves, blessing us with paradox, with the awareness that I am that too, I am Joe and Kathleen and Barbara; I am foe and friend; I am racist and anti-racist. I know – this is not a political strategy that will change a policy. For that I count on the lawyers and the non-profits and the political leaders. Our political strategies, however, must be accompanied by this spiritual practice, to keep us whole, to keep us centered, so that we do not become what we hate, and as the poet says “so that we might walk more openly into this world – so rife with devastation, this world, so ripe with joy.”