

Complicated People

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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When the Unitarian Universalist Association’s latest supplement of readings for worship *Lifting our Voices*, was published in 2015, it included a short reading from Aung San Suu Kyi.

I suspect, however, that this reading is probably not used very often in our worship services, even though the spirit of its words would likely resonate with us. It goes: *“It is not enough simply to call for freedom, democracy and human rights. There has to be a united determination to persevere in the struggle, to make sacrifices in the name of enduring truths, to resist the corrupting influences of desire, ill will, ignorance and fear.”* (*Lifting our Voices* #146)

This was published in 2015, the same year that her political party in Myanmar had won a supermajority in parliament, paving the way for her to become State Counsellor – effectively the civilian head of government, leading Myanmar in its transition from military dictatorship toward democratic government.

By then, Suu Kyi was already well-known in the international community, widely regarded as a champion of democracy for Myanmar, and had received several awards and recognitions worldwide, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Suu Kyi had a prestigious pedigree, being born the daughter of Aung San, who is styled “the Father of the Nation” for his role for independence in what was then called Burma, and she further gathered worldwide sympathy when she became a political prisoner in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 2011, her life under house arrest was portrayed in the movie *The Lady* by none less than Michelle Yeoh (whom you would recognize from the latest blockbuster *Everything Everywhere All at Once*) – I

remember watching the film *The Lady* with my grandmother in the theatre, and felt quite inspired by her struggle on behalf of her country.

It is little wonder, then, that her words of encouragement toward the cause of democratic government were chosen by the editors of *Lifting our Voices* in 2015.

And then... things shifted. While she was in office, the world came to know about the plight of the Rohingya people, a Muslim minority group in Myanmar, who have been consistently reported to be persecuted and brutalized by Myanmar's military. Often being denied full citizenship, living in poverty, and facing constant danger, many Rohingya fled to Bangladesh or sought refuge in other countries.

Now, Aung San Suu Kyi has not been identified as the initiator of the Rohingya persecutions, but she has faced intense international criticism for her inaction in what has often been recognized as a genocide, as well as for her refusal to acknowledge the involvement of Myanmar's military in extensive massacres, even defending it before the International Court of Justice. Suu Kyi has also faced several other criticisms, including her treatment of journalists while she was in office.

It was not long after her words were published in *Lifting our Voices* that Suu Kyi fell out of favour in progressive circles and the larger international community. Several leaders in civil society across the world called for her Nobel Peace Prize to be revoked, though there is no mechanism to do that. She has, however been stripped of many of her accolades by civil institutions and governments that had previously supported her, including her honorary Canadian citizenship.

Because of this, I suspect that most worship leaders who know the background to this story would likely hesitate to use her words in ministry, despite their inspiring appeal for human rights. This is not because the words aren't important or worthwhile, but by honoring her in the context of human rights, it might bring into question the value of those very words, and perhaps the reader's understanding of them.

It bears mentioning that her role as State Counsellor had limited power, and that Myanmar's military still had significant sway in the running of the government. Analysts have observed that it might have been difficult for Suu Kyi to have stayed in office as long as she did had she taken bolder action for the sake of the Rohingya people.

Because then... things shifted again. As can be seen in a workout video that inadvertently captured military vehicles in the background, Myanmar went through a military coup in 2021, losing much of its civilian power institutions, including the offices held by Suu Kyi and her party. She was once again arrested for charges that seem to be politically motivated and has effectively become a political prisoner once again.

As conflicted as the international community might have been about her, many advocated for her release and reinstatement, given that she represented a greater figure for democratic government than what has, once again, become a reality of military rule in Myanmar.

My knowledge and understanding of Myanmar's politics, history, its people and its dynamics is quite limited. And I hesitate to make a pronouncement on her character. I have never been a political prisoner, nor held an office of comparable power. I don't believe that I've done anything that would warrant a Nobel Prize, nor anything that would warrant calls for its revocation. I might imagine what I *think* I should have done had I been in her position, but I don't actually know how I would have, in fact, acted if faced with her reality.

Though I am more certain about some other things.

I know that what I've heard about the Rohingya people's recent story brings me great discomfort. And that persecution of a vulnerable minority group is not something that I want to see in the world I live in.

And I recognize that I have the luxury of not being in the position of a Rohingya person, without a true appreciation for the hardships that many of them have gone through, including direct danger to life by the government.

I also know that I've done things in my lifetime that have hurt people and that I greatly regret. I don't think these make me a bad person, but they do offer some guidance on who I want to be now, and how I might become a better person than I was or currently am.

Among those things, is recognizing the different layers that people have, and in the case of Suu Kyi, I feel that if I ever feature her words of democratic and human rights advocacy, I also need to acknowledge parts of the story in which her public record is more complicated.

There are complicated people in the world, and we are each complicated people.

Closer to home, a similar kind of discomfort comes to mind around the author J.K. Rowling and her intellectual property, primarily media relating to her Harry Potter series.

Harry Potter captured the imagination of an entire generation, including people of all ages, starting in 1997. I worked at a bookstore when the final book in the series was released, to great fanfare, and was asked by management if I would dress up as the lead character on the weeks leading to it, since they saw a resemblance in me – I even got a bookseller's nametag with *Harry Potter* engraved in it. J.K. Rowling had become a literary superstar.

And then... something shifted.

In recent years, Rowling has made several statements that have been hurtful to the trans community, including dismissive remarks about trans women and declarations that disregard the nuances of sexual and

gender diversity. She has also implied that increasing access to certain services for trans women would put cis women in increased danger, without acknowledging the dangers that trans folks face on a regular basis.

Many fans have found what Rowling has said, or the way she says it, rather disappointing. And the Potter fandom community has been struggling with how to reconcile their appreciation for the Potter lore with its creator's refusal to acknowledge the reality faced by trans folk around the world.

In trying to understand Rowling's perspective, one might note that she has expressed fears about her safety as a cis woman who has experienced sexual violence. And some of her critics also invite attention to the source of those fears, so that they may be honoured and addressed – without neglecting the fear that trans folks often face in everyday life.

And, there have been notable causes for concern about the toxicity around this conversation. The way that some critics of Rowling have further threatened her safety, or focused on attacking her character, rather than educating or engaging her, her supporters, and the general public around trans matters, have raised appeals for what might seem like more gracious approaches.

I don't know Rowling's experience or how I would act if I were in her position, given what has shaped her worldview. But I do know that trans folks often find themselves among the marginalized people in our world, who need our support and solidarity.

I also know that, not being trans myself, I don't face the same challenges and struggles that they do, and I usually have the opportunity to be more gracious with people who do not yet have some appreciation of what trans life can be like.

Trans folks often don't have the same luxury, and may often need to prioritize their own wellbeing and self-preservation over graciousness or politeness. Those latter approaches may be the kind of work for people like me to do.

My friends, I'm not here today to prescribe how you should feel about these figures or your relationship with the stories of any other complicated people. But I do offer a set of invitations.

An invitation to acknowledge our own complicated lives, our actions, and our stories, and identifying how we may improve upon them (that is one of the appeals of the Lenten season).

There is an invitation, my friends, to be mindful of the people that face immediate danger to their lives or hardship due to who they are, and who may often have little space, time, or energy to walk us through their experience, especially when they're not sure of other's intentions.

And, my friends, there is an invitation to be gracious with others, especially when others are not in a position to offer that grace.

My friends, there is a time for grace and a time for anger, a time for forgiveness and a time for accountability, a time to look out for oneself and a time to look out for others, a time for self-reflection and a time for self-improvement.

So may it be,
In the spirit of complexity,
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening Hymn #360 Here We Have Gathered**

~)-| Words: Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , © 1979 Alicia S. Carpenter

Music: Genevan psalter, 1543

OLD 124TH

Hymn #186 Grieve Not Your Heart

Words: Confucius, 551-479 B.C.E.

~)-| recast by John Andrew Storey 1935-1997

Music: From *Kentucky Harmony*, 1916

PRIMROSE

Closing #213 There's a Wideness in Your Mercy

Another accompaniment, 161

Words: Frederick William Faber, 1814-1863, alt

Music: Amos Pilsbury's *United States' Sacred Harmony*, 1799

CHARLESTON

