

This morning's reading from Alice Walker has a powerful reminder for us about how the past is still with us as we are making our way into 2017, leaving a year that has felt particularly hard for many of us behind as we are heading towards a future that might contain struggles we have yet to foresee. Walker reminds us that we are not the first to experience this struggle, that we are not the first to feel the need to rebel against injustice, and that we are not the first to love so fiercely that we hurt.

**Talk about march/election.**

We could look at it this way: how do we engage our own capacity for resiliency? After all, resiliency is our ability to bounce back and work towards a new future in spite of setbacks and past struggle. So I see Walker's words as a call to discover our own resiliency, our own capacity to bounce back and into the future.

And, I don't know about you, but these days I have found myself feeling pretty much depleted, even after a break. Have you been feeling that way? Like you don't know if you can take any more struggle or any more setbacks?

And so this morning, as we move forward into a new year and a new presidency, I invite us to consider three practices to build our own resiliency, inspired by Alice Walker's words.

**Reach back.**

While Alice Walker's words ask us to recall recent history, they also call us to engage the entire lineage of human life, including what might be at the other end. It evokes the Ghanaian notion of *sankofa*, or looking to the past in order to move forward.

And so rather than exhorting one another to let the past go, what if we encouraged one another to learn from it? What if we helped one another reach back to discover what can propel us forward?

[NOTE: On January 22<sup>nd</sup>, I opted to skip this section in favor of talking about the Women's March.] In the mid-to-late 1960s, the then-recently formed Unitarian Universalist Association faced the same conversations about race, racism, and empowerment that the entire country was facing. (And perhaps some of you remember this history, but for me it is part of my ancestry – it is not something I lived through directly, and yet I am one of the inheritors of that legacy.)

For the UUA, the conversation around race and empowerment centered on their funding of two groups of UUs working on dismantling racism in the UUA. One, called the Black Affairs Council, sought self-determination for Black UUs and pressed the UUA for funding of a million dollars over 4 years, over which they would have total control.

Following this initial promise – initially affirmed by the General Assembly and UUA's Board of Trustees – there were a number of instances where

the Association sought to roll back the full funding of this group, and the stated reason was often fiscal – whether it was endowment funds already being spent or a budget shortfall. And with every roll back of funding, there was a serious erosion of trust in the UUA’s interest in really dismantling their own racism.

Fast forward to this past October. The UUA’s Board of Trustees heard a presentation from leaders of the Black Lives of UU organizing collective. The Board of Trustees considered how to fund this group’s important work. They considered the many reasons that it might be imprudent to make a bold financial promise. And they reached back, and considered how they could use the lessons of the past to show them a new way forward. The board promised 5.3 million dollars of funding to Black Lives of UU in the coming years. And, I believe because of the memories of what happened in the 1960s, they were honest and up-front about what a difficult task they had ahead in raising these funds. But they acknowledged that they were not the first to face this struggle, and that they were part of that same story, though they are hoping to create a different outcome.

Perhaps you have felt this before. Perhaps you feel this now, at this moment in the life of our country.

**Reach deep.**

Alice Walker is calling us to recall this history not only with our heads, but also with our hearts. The words she uses are not memories of events so much as feelings of struggles, struggles that connect us in a great tradition of human existence.

When I was a middle school teacher, sometimes students would end up hanging out in my classroom at lunch, or before or after school. And it was in these casual moments that I actually had some of the best conversations with my kids, when their filters were down and they sometimes forgot that there was an adult listening. And one afternoon, two of the students from my intermediate English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class were having a very heated discussion about the romantic tragedy currently plaguing one of them.

“It’s just so hard to be in love. I feel like I’m going to die.”

Half concerned, half curious, I inserted myself into the conversation and asked her what the problem was. “Oh, Ms. Roberts, it’s horrible,” she said. “I never see my boyfriend.”

“Does he live far away?”

“No. He lives across the street. But he goes to a different school! I have to wait all day to see him!”

I probably rolled my eyes as I said, “You’ll be just fine.”

“Oh, Ms. Roberts,” she moaned, “you just can’t understand what it means to be in love.”

I stared at her with raised eyebrows until her friend started laughing. She blushed, realizing that, perhaps, I did know what it felt like to be in love.

But maybe there was something to her point – in that moment, I couldn’t understand what it was like to be 13 and feeling that way. Sure, I knew that, at some point in my past, I had felt something similar, but looking back on it I couldn’t see what all the fuss was about. My relationship with this past experience was up in my head rather than down in my heart, where her experience was. I had forgotten how to feel my connection with my past, rather than just think about it.

So often, too often, when we seek to engage our history – whether individually or institutionally – we act like I did listening to my student’s romantic woes. We recall that a similar thing has happened in the past, but fail to recall the feeling. Or when we consider how another group of people might be feeling, we only think about how their experience compares to ours rather than imagining how we can empathize more deeply. And so as we move through this new year, I invite us to recall the feelings of our past. (Not to relive past traumas, but to remember both the exhilaration and the heartbreak of what it means to be human.) And, hopefully, in doing so, we

will recover confidence in our own capacity to bounce back, and our willingness to help our neighbor bounce back as well.

### **Reach out.**

“The grace with which we embrace life,” is how Alice Walker describes this.

Ultimately, we are called to use our understanding of our past to propel us into the future. It is easy to become paralyzed by the past – to view past mistakes as evidence that we should be afraid of trying anything new.

And there are lots of ways for us to reach out into a new future – it can be as simple as picking up the phone to get back in touch with somebody whose relationship you value, but have neglected of late. Or it can be as complicated as starting to explore your own internalized biases as you engage in community organizing. Regardless of the scale, reaching out helps build resiliency because we can support one another when the inevitable happens and we stumble in our journey towards a new and better future.

Sometimes, reaching out happens in the most unexpected ways. When I was in seminary, I had to take an arts class to fulfill a graduation requirement. And since painting and stained glass both had lab fees that semester, I opted to take liturgical dance.

My classmates all laughed. I did not present myself as somebody who did things like dance. Indeed, I hadn't taken a dance class since I was in elementary school. And on the first day of the class, my god was I nervous. Nervous like I hadn't been in ages. I was going to have to move around and jump and let my body do its thing with all of these other people. And none of us was where we usually were, safely in a chair with a laptop out on the table, taking notes in a lecture hall. It was all akimbo, all of us there in our sweatpants with the chairs all pushed to the side of the room, and it felt like anything could happen.

And lots of things did happen. We were put in silly situations, sometimes I felt stupid, sometimes I looked ridiculous, sometimes I had to look somebody really in the eye or hold their hand. It was all out of my comfort zone.

And yet, there was something so exhilaratingly human about running around together that I think it took us all back to a time in our lives when we had fewer inhibitions, when running around and leaping and falling with your friends was ordinary rather than noteworthy.

And it is appropriate to use these words from Walker to propel us into the future. These words are the epigraph to a section of her book *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems* called “In These Dissenting Times.”