

## **Knocking Down Statues**

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We are living in a time of great transformation. One of the gifts of the soon to be former president is the disruption in our institutions, and the revealing of painful truths. It's been painful and disorienting. And we have seen so often in the past few years, the current degree of change can have a destructive energy - protests turn into riots, statues are taken down and burned, people are injured and killed.

The earth herself is a great teacher of the power of destruction. Change can come from the slow wearing down by wind and water, or by the sudden power of earthquakes, volcano, hurricanes, wildfires. Energy builds, the forces that are holding back these energies releases and destruction breaks forth.

Hindus acknowledge the importance of this destructive force in the form of Kali goddess of time, destruction and creation. She is one of the Goddesses celebrated at the Diwali – the festival of lights celebrated this week by Hindu's around the world. IN one depiction she has black or blue skin and red eyes filled with rage. She often carries a sword and a severed head. Her presence is a reminder that in the cycles of life, destruction makes room for creation.

This energy of destruction is very present in our world today – and the idea of Kali can help us to remember that destruction is not always bad – in fact sometimes it may be necessary on the path to liberation. Those present at the toppling of statues would likely agree.

You likely recall the torch bearing white supremacist who rallied at Charlottesville – that was in response to the plan to take down a statue of civil war general Robert E. Lee. That statue still stands by the way. The Charlottesville rally along with the murder of George Floyd, really amped up the efforts to take down the statues by whatever means.

Imagine living in a town where there was a monument – or monuments to someone who hated and oppressed your people, and no seemed to think there was anything wrong with it – or at least acted like they didn't care. One NYT columnist referred to the experience as getting used to the stink of racism that pervaded his town and not really considering changing it. What is really remarkable was that they are still up in the 20<sup>th</sup> century –Roger Cohen in the NYT put it well when he said that we are seeing a relentless challenge in Western societies to the white mind-set, white assumptions, white amnesia. How, after all, could those Confederate statues

stand for so long and so prominently in so many American cities when they memorialized men who took up arms for slavery and in opposition to the Union?

Taking down the statues is complicated even among those who agree they should be gone. You hear so many voices – why do the protestors have to be so aggressive? – why can't we sit down and work it out calmly. White culture does not like displays of violence and destruction. But you can't hold things down forever. African Americans have been asked for centuries to swallow their fear and pride and tolerate racism. Amazing it hasn't been more violent than it has – a tribute to white dominance our systems ability to oppress people.

Charlottesville, site of that racist rally in 2017 is a lovely town. I have been there many times and to Monticello as well, Thomas Jefferson's home.

Which takes me to the poem which expresses these complications so well – a black daughter and her white father, Jefferson and his slaves/children, our country relationship to the heroic version of Jefferson as author of the declaration of independence. He was a brilliant man who penned the words all men are created equal, while he owned hundreds of slaves. Slaves that he didn't liberate at his death because he needed the money from their sale to pay his debts.

How to we reconcile all this. Its complicated.

Generally, I have been very sympathetic to the protesters desire to take down statues. Good riddance I thought – these confederate leaders should never have been venerated. But when Joann read that poem in her group a few months ago I had a sudden thought – what if they take down the Jefferson statue in Washington? What if the protestors go so far as to do that! I felt a tightening in my throat and a bit of fear rising up in me. I used to work near his monument in DC and would walk their for lunch on the tidal basin. Jefferson was a great gardener, and inventor and a brilliant politician.

Now suddenly its about something that's important to me. I wanted to be open minded about it, I know he wasn't perfect - but not Thomas Jefferson! What's next. What other monuments and institutions will be destroyed. Where do we draw the line? Who is protecting our history, our culture?

Suddenly I realized that my fear was the same fear of the trump supporters that the world would change in a way that I didn't fit into it any more, that things that I revered and held dear would be destroyed. Suddenly a tiny bit of empathy was opening in my heart.

Liberal were shocked the election was so close- that 70 million people voted for Trump. Do we have that many racists? That many people who approve of Trump? I spent some time in despair over the thought. Then I heard the bracing truth in the words of UU the vote leader – Nicole Presley - wise words from a person of color who was not surprised at all by the election results. – She said we learned from this election that white supremacy is not on the table, white supremacy is the table.

People who voted for Trump voted to keep white people dominant, to keep the institutions that work for white people in place. Their fear was greater than their distain or even disgust at the President. I am not talking about the devoted maniacal fans of Trump, but the regular “good citizens” who want the best for this country. And their motivation, likely more unconsciousness than not, was fear of losing power, fear of the anger of people of color, fear of destruction of institutions of white dominance.

They look at the videos of people tearing down the statues and vote to keep the man in place who says he will stop it because that destructive forces of change are too frightening.

I heard it in the words of one supporter, I don’t support much of what he does, but “Trump will keep us safe”. Read the subtext, Trump will keep white people in power.

I have some sympathy for Trump supporters its reasonable to fear radical change. But I don’t respect how they let their fear control them and vote to keep an oppressive system in place. An oppressive system that is invisible to many white people who choose not to see it.

Lest we think too highly of our own state, we saw some of this racial undercurrent in the California election. Our bail system is inhumane – people lose their jobs and have no one to take care of their children because they can’t afford the bail for a minor offense. And its mostly people of color who are affected. And yet the Bail initiative lost likely because of fear that we would have crime on our streets.

Restoring voting rights to felons won- we love a good redemption story! We care about you once you have paid your dues to society, not before.

One step forward and one back.

But the good news is, of course, Biden and Harris won. I am curious to see what this means for the rate of change in our country. Kamala Harris is exactly what older conservative white people fear, particularly men. She is mixed race, female, confident, experienced, capable, and now she will be the second most powerful person in the county. There was a video of her descending the steps from a plane with a smile and confident stride. Here I am ready to change the world she seemed to be saying. She is terrifying to the white patriarchy and those that

enable it – they may think “what is going to happen my way of life now that someone who looks like her had power over me?”

Much of this fear is fed by the campaign rhetoric that paints Biden and Harris as radical progressives – which any radical progressive will tell you they are not. This came up around the campaign to defund the police. The idea creates fear for many people including many liberals. We have been told this story that there is a great tide of violence in the world and we need armed police to keep it at bay. We have been led to believe that guns and violence are necessary, that use of force is the only solution. But what about rethinking the institution of policing, the use of violence and repression that holds back a whole group of people. I am speaking of the institution of policing in our country, an institution of white dominance no matter the race of the individual officers. It is an institution that has not been serving anyone well for a long time, including officers. We use policing to solve too many of our problems– think homelessness, domestic violence and mental health - and ask way too much of those who serve. What about rethinking the whole institution of how we police in our city, our county, our county. Exciting to some, terrifying to others.

The confederate statues are symbols of power of white dominance - they memorialize institutions that have benefited white people and oppressed people of color. Some of these institutions need to be toppled, all of them need to be transformed. When I think of institutions I think of all the big stone building in Washington DC or at the capitol in any state – or banks with big stone columns even churches, these symbolize institutions of white dominance as much as any confederate statue. Do we knock them down, or topple them, or thoughtfully and methodically dismantle them piece by piece?

Even the thoughtful dismantling takes courage and will invoke fear. What do we do in the meantime, we ask what will replace it? Sometimes we prefer an oppressive prison to the unknown.

But we must learn to tolerate this fear if we are to dismantle these systems and institutions of oppression, if we want to have the world that we talk about in our UU principles – respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice equity and compassion in human relations etc etc. etc. The proposed 8<sup>th</sup> principle of UU calls on us to “affirm and promote Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by building a diverse, multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” Are we up to the task?

This is the time in our country when there is great possibility for transformation. The toppling of statues needs to continue with even greater force. Our institutions of white dominance are breaking, and we should help them break even more so that we can bring in the possibility for a new way with more just, humane and inclusive systems and institutions.

So breathe. And breathe some more. Its OK to be afraid, it is reasonable to be afraid, but don't let your fear hold you back from participating in the changes that you know need to happen. Don't buy into the fear and keeps us frozen in systems that only serve those who want to keep things exactly the way they are.

Try to have some empathy for trump supports who are afraid of what is to come. Acknowledge that you might have a piece of that fear as well, like I did with the Jefferson poem. Your empathy will go a long way to begin the process of healing our country.

When fear comes can you try curiosity? Why am I reacting with fear to this news report? Is there some possibility that what seems to be destructive can lead to positive change? Can I imagine the feeling of motivations of people who engage in destructive acts? This can be a spiritual practice for when you come up against an idea or a person or an event that evokes fear – bring openness and curiosity to question your fear. Let your fear lead you to deeper understanding.

And of course, breathe. Deeply and slowly. Let your body release the fear that you are holding. I am not going to tell you that everything will be OK. There is no guarantee of that. The worst may not be over. But I can tell you that we are in this together. I can tell you that there are a lot of decent people in our country who at heart want the same things that we want. That the possibility of transformation is greater now than it has been for generations. That its OK to be afraid of what's to come, but not OK to let that hold you back or judge other or stop or stop the process.

And I can tell you that that love remains a powerful force in our world and we must harness it to lead this transformation.

And that, I think, for now is enough.

Benediction

**Breathe by Lynn Ungar**

**Written at the time of the fires.**

*Breathe, said the wind*

How can I breathe at a time like this,  
when the air is full of the smoke  
of burning tires, burning lives?

*Just breathe, the wind insisted.*

Easy for you to say, if the weight of  
injustice is not wrapped around your throat,  
cutting off all air.

*I need you to breathe.* <sup>[LSEP]</sup>

*I need you to breathe.* <sup>[LSEP]</sup>

Don't tell me to be calm  
when there are so many reasons  
to be angry, so much cause for despair!

*I didn't say to be calm, said the wind,  
I said to breathe.*

*We're going to need a lot of air  
to make this hurricane together.*