

## Can We Overcome Our Differences?©

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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This past Tuesday night I went to bed feeling good about having done my patriotic duty by voting. I was also feeling relieved that the very contentious and divisive run-up to the election was finally over. Then I awoke Wednesday morning and learned of the election outcome. I was overwhelmed by the many intense feelings that rushed through my body.

Since then I have engaged in conversations about the election with quite a few people. The vast majority of them informed me that they were also overcome with intense feelings. And many of them let me know that the feelings weren't limited to Wednesday morning. The feelings continued throughout the day, into the next and beyond. While I don't know for certain, I believe that the experience of being overcome by intense feelings after the election occurred whether a person voted for a candidate who lost or the candidate who won. Beginning from that belief, my guess is that many of you may have had or are still having a significant emotional reaction to the election. So while the election is over, the outcome remains what it was on Wednesday. And it is clear that we all will continue to be affected by that outcome for several years.

While all Presidential elections are contentious, this one was over the top. That isn't just my opinion, it is an opinion that is shared by leaders of both political parties and millions of people across this country. The events leading up to election day either created or exposed divisions in this country that are wide and pronounced. When I see and hear about the protests which have been occurring across our country over the past days, weeks and months, I am reminded of a time much earlier in my life. A time when this country experienced similar internal strife—strife related to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 60's which led into resistance to and protests of the Viet Nam war in the 60's and 70's. Looking around, it would appear that many of you in this room may remember those times. Those were difficult times, tumultuous times, times of uncertainty and great challenge. They were also times of great change. It seems to me that we are again in times of uncertainty and challenge that will, in one form or another, lead to significant change. There is no way for us to know today what that change will be. What is certain however, is that if our country is to successfully navigate the challenges ahead, the divisions that are currently so pronounced must be bridged.

The question today then, as it was during the 1950's through the 70's, is can we overcome our differences. I don't have a crystal ball that lets me see into the future so I don't have a definitive answer. I wish I did. But I am willing to stand before you today and assert that I believe we can overcome our differences. I say this at least partly because I believe that we must overcome our differences. We must because, as Abraham Lincoln said two years prior to being elected President. "A house divided against itself cannot long stand..."

There are those who would have us believe that the greatest threats to our country come from without or at least from those who are considered "other." Lincoln recognized that the greatest threat to this country was not from beyond our borders or from those who were perceived as "other" or "less than." No, Lincoln recognized that the

greatest threat was internal division within our county—division that eventually led to Civil War.

If we look back to the time of Lincoln, as well as the larger history of this country, it is clear that we have found ways to overcome significant differences in the past. Doing so hasn't typically occurred easily or quickly. In fact, overcoming major differences within and across our country has involved significant struggle and sacrifice over a period of years, sometimes many years. As I consider the current situation in our country—from the recent election cycle, to the Black Lives Matter movement, to Water Protectors' protest of the proposed oil pipeline in North Dakota, to the armed takeover of a National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, to calls from some Californians to secede from the United States—it seems evident that we are in the midst of such a struggle today. I believe we are in the midst of a struggle for the very heart and soul of this democratic country. And I agree with Terry Tempest Williams when she asserts that the first home of democracy is the human heart. So I would invite each of you now to take a moment to check in with your heart. How is it doing this morning? (pause) What is it feeling? (pause) What does it need? (pause)

In the coming days, weeks and months ahead I would encourage you to take time frequently to check in with your heart. I would encourage you to listen closely to what it needs. As you become aware of what it needs I would recommend you seek out people, places and things that nurture and feed your heart. Feed it and nurture it until it feels nourished and strong. And when your heart has received what it needs I would suggest that you find ways to nurture and feed the hearts of those you know are struggling and in need of reassurance and encouragement. I know that there are many in our community who feel fearful and threatened, folks who need to know that there are people who will be there for them in times of vulnerability or weakness.

In the short time I have been here with you I know that you have the ability and the willingness to do all of these things I have mentioned. My experience here over the past few months has shown me that the members and friends of this Fellowship are caring, compassionate, resourceful, resilient and dedicated folks. As we move into the unknown that lies ahead it will be important for all of us to draw on and demonstrate those important aspects of who we are. We will need to draw on them and demonstrate them because in the not-too-distant future each of us will almost certainly encounter people who have very different beliefs and perspectives than our own. Some of those people will be on the other side of the divide or divides that are so present and evident today. That is the reason I have asked you to attend to your heart this morning.

Over the years I have been around a lot of Unitarian Universalists and I know that we do an incredibly good job of attending to our heads. That is a very good thing. That said, I believe in the coming days we are going to need to attend much more closely to our hearts and to the hearts of others, whether those others are on our side of the divide or on the other side. In fact, I believe it will be especially important for us to pay attention to and to learn from what is in the hearts of those who may have significantly different beliefs or opinions than our own. It has been my experience that attempting to bridge divides by seeking to change another's belief typically results in the bridge collapsing. Instead of building a bridge, focusing on beliefs and opinions often results in people just banging their heads together. It is more likely to lead to harm to one or both people than to benefit and good. Terry Tempest Williams clearly

understands this when she writes; “Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions?” Listening with our whole beings and offering our attention rather than our opinions is one of the challenges that lies before us.

But that isn’t the only challenge. Williams identifies a second great challenge in her last sentence. “... do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever—trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?” If we are going to have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever, we will first need to have taken the time to feed and nurture our hearts. If you remember nothing else from this service today, please, remember this. Remember this because it is essential that our hearts be strong and vibrant and open in order to have the strength and the resolve which will be needed to do the work of overcoming the divides our country is currently experiencing.

The challenges that Williams presents in her reading are very, very large, at least as large as the divides our country is dealing with. There quite probably will be times when you will feel overcome or overwhelmed with feelings such as despair or hopelessness. My sense is that many people have been feeling such things for a long time and that may be part of the reason we are where we are today.

So with the divides and the challenges that face us in the forefront of my mind I wonder what words I could possibly share that will feed and nurture all of our hearts today. Words that will reassure and inspire us today and in the days ahead. The words that come to mind are those of Robert Kennedy, a candidate for the President of the United States in the late 1960’s. “Bobby” as he was generally known, knew the great challenges and risks that he and the country were facing. He knew because he lived and died during a time of great division in our country. Here, in his own words, is what he would have us remember. “The torch still burns, and because it does, there remains for all of us a chance to light up the tomorrows and brighten the future. ...this is the challenge that makes life worthwhile.” Life is worthwhile. So let us go forth with the torch that is the human heart burning strong and bright within us. And may our hearts guide us as we face the challenges that lie ahead and as we work together to overcome the divisions within and between the people of this country.

So may it be.