“Stories of Hope”
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Let us begin by summoning the spirit of our ancestors.

This is an important exercise because we humans tend to have a very short memory. We forget the struggles that came before us and the lessons learned.

I invite you this morning to think about your ancestors - whether these people are known or unknown, whether these memories bring you a sense of comfort or pain - there were lives lived that preceded you and without them, you would not be here.

Let us also call forth the ancestors of the indigenous people who first lived on this land. Those whose lives and the lives of their descendants, that were forever changed following First Contact.

And let us call forth the countless souls who have journeyed to this land. Those who came willingly and those who did not. Those who saw this land as a beacon of hope and those who were terrified to learn what would happen to them here.

We call forth and hold this energy to help us gain clarity and understand the times in which we live. Blessed be.

Life may be good when the world in which we live meets our needs. But what about those for whom this is not true? The narratives that shape our world, the stories we tell each other are very powerful and create the lens through which we view life, ourselves and each other.

As we think about these stories, it’s important to also think about how we are called to respond to the injustice we find. I’m reminded of the words of America Author John Shedd. He said, “A ship is safe in the harbor, but that’s not what ships are for.” I’m reminded of his words when I think of our congregations and our role in the world.

The narratives you've learned and how you make sense of the world changes as your experience increases, but only, if you are willing to let go of what you think you know. There was a study done that found when person's beliefs are challenged their brain produces feelings of distress. When the new information is rejected, however, endorphins are produced. Endorphins are the neurochemicals that produce feelings of happiness. It's hard when our worldview is challenged and we are asked to accept another's experience that does not fit within our existing narrative.

Letting go of what we think we know does not mean we need to be as a rudderless boat. No, our values and principles must guide us. In today's world we are flooded with information. We may not even realize how a certain narrative may be distorting our understanding. By using our values and principles as our guide, we let what we know as being right and what is wrong, keep us on course.

My father's family came to this country as a result of the Armenian genocide in 1915. Both his mother and father were children when they witnessed the murder of their families and everyone they knew. The pogroms that took place; the methodical, well planned, annihilation of 1.5 million Armenians has been well documented and numerous first-hand accounts have been told. Yet, the Turkish government holds on to their version of the events and states that the deaths were simply a tragic outcome of war. The United States supports the Turkish version of these events and has yet to officially recognize the Armenian genocide.

I tell this story because embracing a truth demands accountability. The Turkish government avoids accountability and responsibility for their actions by denying the truth. If the US officially condemns the genocide and acknowledges the Turkish government's role in it, this action will affect access to Turkish land for military purposes. Avoiding accountability often drives the desire to deny the truth.

When a painful truth is not acknowledged, it is impossible to find peace and establish a new way of being that honors those who suffered. Compare this to Germany's commitment to teaching the lessons of Nazi Germany. Alan Cowell, in a New York Times article wrote, "It is a course…in a standard German history text, that challenges Germany's young to come to terms with the burden of a collective

past far more cruel and destructive than teen-agers anywhere else in the world are obliged to contemplate.

And it is part of the attempt by a postwar generation to explain why the past must not repeat itself to those who will one day run Europe's economic and political powerhouse. The effort, some educators argue, has visibly faltered in the wave of attacks on foreigners and the rise of neo-Nazi groups since the Berlin Wall fell in 1989.

Yet, in interviews with students, both in Bonn and in a comparable high school in what was once East Berlin, a clear impression emerged that while many young Germans sense no personal guilt for a past generation's crimes, they [do] feel a responsibility to thwart any revival of their history's racism, anti-Semitism, militarism and nationalism."

How might the culture in the US change if we offered a truthful account of the genocide and colonization of indigenous people, the cruelty of slavery of African peoples, the abuses and exploitation of the Chinese, the Mexicans and countless other stories that are shameful, painful and difficult for so many to accept?

It's a common practice for many of those who were not directly harmed by these particularly dark periods of time in US history to dismissively suggest that the past is over and it should be forgotten. Like the Turkish response to the Armenian genocide, some believe that the events are simply a tragic outcome and no one alive today is responsible or needs to be held accountable.

How does denial of abuse and atrocities affect collective memory and behavior? Consider the denial of past atrocities committed in the US - how do these continue to manifest in the news stories of today?

The stories we come to believe are crucial in shaping how we understand our world. We are a faith community that proclaims our values to be meaningless without action. Nineteenth century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker said, "We must hold the bible in one hand and newspaper in the other." The practice of our faith, what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, is meaningless unless it is placed within the context of the times in which we live. We are not meant to remain in the harbor.

All the issues that are prioritized by UU Mass Action intersect with one another and we are called to understand how the driving forces interact with one another. Economic Justice is connected to mass incarceration - if people can't meet their basic economic needs they are forced to pursue opportunities in the shadow economies. Mass Incarceration is connected to economic justice - people with a criminal record have few options for work or even to find a place to live and some communities are certainly hit harder than others.

The climate crisis is a driving force in migration and things are only going to get worse. We can see how migrants are being treated in today's world and it terrifies me to think about what's coming.

Racism and white supremacy culture is the thread that runs through all of these issues. Without acknowledging this and demanding accountability, the world we seek to create will never exist.

Before I share the next story, I'd like you to join me in an exercise. Imagine that your family's survival is being threatened. Perhaps prolonged drought has severely impacted the food supply and you do not have enough to eat. Or violence is ever present in your community and a loved one has already been murdered and the threat of death is ever present. You know that if you stay in your town, if you and those you love remain, you will die. What would you do? Would you leave? If leaving meant traveling to a country for which you don't have proper documentation, would you still go? What would you be willing to do to survive?

When my eldest son was in high school, he had a friend named Gustavo. Their school was relatively large, with roughly 1800 students. The student body was diverse; racially, economically, and culturally. Many of these students came to this country as small children. They enrolled in elementary school and grew up with the local children.

Gustavo was one of these kids. He was a good student and dreamed of joining the Army. However, His parents, who were undocumented, brought him to this country as a small child. With no documentation of his own and no chance for a green card, joining the military was out and his options were limited.

He needed a car to get to work; however, due to his status, he was unable to get a license. Gustavo was eventually stopped for a minor traffic violation and charged, which brought him to the attention of ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). He tried hard to find a way to remain with his family but after two years of fighting he faced imminent deportation. Gustavo had no family in Brazil. All his friends and family were in this country. Desperate, and without hope, Gustavo hung himself near the Marlboro courthouse. He was 19 years old.

This story broke my heart wide open. Gustavo died in 2010. In 2011 I traveled to the Mexican Arizona border in order to witness first hand what's happening there. I did this because proximity is crucial when determining which narrative to believe.

On this border, I placed my hand on the wall. The wall that our country built with our taxpayer money. The wall that forces people into the Sonoran Desert. The US government consciously designed the wall to be easily breached in the desert region, stating the belief that a desert route to the US would be a deterrent. But, when faced with life or death, a slim chance is always preferable to no chance and many people choose to make this journey. Since 2009 there have been 2,624 documented deaths in the desert. The total number is estimated to be far greater because many of the people who perish on this journey are never found.

While in Agua Prieta and Nogales, I met with the compassionate people who serve the migrants in the border towns. One day, I helped serve a meal at La Comidor, which is part of the Kino Border Initiative, a cooperative venture between six major religious organizations.

There, I met Martín, a young man who was the same age as my eldest teenage son. He had grown up in a suburb of Detroit. Martín was the eldest child of a very large and very poor family that lived in Veracruz, Mexico. To protect him, his mother sent him to live with her sister when he was about 11 years old. One day, he was stopped by the police for a minor violation involving his bicycle. He was turned over to ICE and very quickly deported to Mexico.

I sat with Martín at La Comidor. He spoke perfect English and had limited Spanish. The police took what little money he had when he landed in Mexico. He

could stay at a local church and eat at La Comidor for two weeks but then, he had to move on. He had nowhere to go. Martín had no money, no family or friends and barely spoke the language. I could not help but cry as he sobbed. I think of him every day and wonder what happened to him.

Some of these stories may seem far removed from you who are here today. Maybe there is someone here today who is facing deportation or is struggling with a loved one or close friend who has been detained or deported. Maybe not. But I hope that you can all reject the narrative that criminalizes immigrants and tells a story of scarcity. I hope that you can instead connect to the stories of human beings who are only trying to survive.
We are taking action as a faith community to confront what's happening.

I felt so proud of being a UU when First Parish in Bedford voted to become a Sanctuary Church. I've gathered with many other UUs and our faith partners in rooms filled to capacity as we engaged in planning how to resist the attacks on local immigrant communities.

In the greater Boston and Burlington regions and communities such as Framingham, a coalition of interfaith and community networks are resisting the immoral and frequently unlawful practices of ICE agents and their attempts to break up families.

Sometimes, the coalition is able to intervene. We now have clergy of many faiths visiting people in detention facilities. Through these visits, we have learned the names and stories of people who are so very alone. Our volunteers connect the people we are supporting with attorneys and accompany them to court hearings. If the immigrant has family here, volunteers reach out to them, as well. The intervention, support and witness our volunteer network offers is an important manifestation of resistance. This is emotionally difficult work but it is crucial in order to counter the narrative being told by ICE officials.

Another story I'd like to share comes from First Church Unitarian in Littleton. I was contacted by the worker center in Framingham and informed that the contractor hired by the Littleton Church to replace their roof has a long history of committing wage theft and in fact, the workers who repaired the Littleton roof

were not paid. I was asked to set up a meeting at Littleton to allow the workers to share their story.

The Littleton church had researched contractors and thought they found the perfect person. They had no way of knowing his history. The contractor had been the subject of a class action lawsuit in the past but he went bankrupt before meeting his obligations. He closed that company, open another, closed that one as well and is now operating a third company. He continues to take money for jobs and not pay his workers.

This story and Littleton's response demonstrates the importance of understanding the intersectionality of justice issues. The Littleton church has deeply engaged with anti-racism and anti-oppression education and action over the past few years. There are also a number of people involved with ending mass incarceration. When I approached people at the church and shared the story of wage theft, they did not reject me, by stating,

"We had no way of knowing and therefore, we are not responsible for the contractor's behavior."

They did not tell me, "We are involved with anti-racism and ending mass incarceration. We're not involved with worker rights and we can't take on another issue."

No, I was not rejected. Instead, I was invited to bring the workers and a person from the worker center to tell the story of what happened by those who were directly affected. This was a critical step in understanding the situation. After learning of what happened, the team at Littleton reached out to the contractor. Initially, he refused to even speak to the members. Then, when he likely understood that these folks were serious, he told his version of the events which cast himself as the victim.

This is a case where being guided by values is important. It is not right to hire people and then not pay them for their work. Clearly, if this is done repeatedly, it is evidence of exploitation.

My message to UU congregations this year is to tell your stories and listen to the stories of others. Some years back I was a member of a suburban congregation when we chose to read the book by Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow. Initially, one person said, “Mass incarceration isn’t a problem for us here.” Then, one woman shared her story. Her brother struggled with addiction for years. He had already been sent to prison twice and the third time he relapsed he faced prison again for violating the terms of his parole. He couldn’t face another prison term and committed suicide. Even though I knew her for years, she had never shared this story before. She stated that she felt ashamed talking about her brother, his struggle with addiction and his history of incarceration.

We need to make space for and understand the stories in our communities in order to ground our justice work in our faith. As you listen to what drives your passion, pay attention to how this strand from the greater web of interdependence connects right here - to you personally, to your congregation and to your community. It is this grounding that allows us to be present in a way that honors what a person is saying.

This grounding centers the story of you and your fellow human beings and gives you context when addressing systemic change. And yes, when a congregation wishes to move beyond solely performing charitable acts and engage in a justice movement, it means addressing systemic change.

We are practicing our faith and taking action to dismantle white supremacy culture when we listen to personal stories by those who are directly affected. Don’t try to rewrite someone's story with your own point of view. When we place a story within context and consider the evidence of impact - not just intent, we truly honor another human being. It is from here that our justice work begins.

Listening requires us to step back and place someone else’s experience in a central role. How will we be transformed if we deepen our connection to one another?

I encourage you to begin sharing your stories within small circles and then let that circle grow. Let it continue to grow bigger than the walls of this church.

Be the leader and the follower.
Act, then take time to reflect on what you experienced
Share aloud both your sorrows and your hopes on a regular basis.
Take time to be grateful when you harvest what you did not sow -
and be sure to sow new seeds to benefit those who will follow you.