

Chalice Lighting

We light our chalice, symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith, this morning, with words by Audre Lorde.

History is not kind to us
we restitch it with living
past memory forward
into desire
into the panic articulation
of want without having
or even the promise of getting.

And i dream of our coming together
encircled driven
not only by a love
but by lust for a working tomorrow
the flights of this journey
mapless uncertain
and necessary as water.

Sermon

I used to think history was boring. At least, I thought that studying it in school was, although I loved historical fiction through books and movies. I know that might be an unpopular opinion in this room, that history courses tend to be, well, dry. But it is true: in high school, my history courses were each based on one giant tome of a textbook, which presented information in an unquestionable and unengaging format. I lugged my AP US History textbook around hopelessly, trying to convince myself to read it, and often failing to do so. I remember sitting in the library, willing myself to take notes, to make flashcards, to memorize the facts. You might already have caught a hint of what I was missing: a way to engage with history, a way to question, to be in conversation.

Last spring semester, I read a lot about the Salem witch trials, in a previously unimaginably engaging history course called *Witch Hunts: Persecution in Public History and Ethics*. We had lively and intriguing conversations about stories, not so much as a fixed part of the past, but as a live thing, something slippery and growing around us still. I enrolled in the course because of the intrigue of studying Salem closely, and stayed in it because of the kind of discussion we had.

In that class, we imagined ourselves in the conversations about the decisions which make up our known history. We placed ourselves in those impossible situations, knowing that those conversations were had by rooms of real people who we will never quite understand. This did more than present a thought exercise about how people used to live, which usually ends us allowing us to distance ourselves from them: “Ew, how did people in history stay clean?” “I could never live like that!” Instead, by engaging with the thorny ethical questions in their own historical context, I was able to think outside of my everyday life. This kind of conversation

allowed us to imagine who we might be in a moment of real moral quandary, or uncertain truth, of ethical greyness. By studying history imaginatively, we can pry ourselves off of the paths we walk each day and into a new way of understanding.

We started to talk about Salem by reading a book by Emerson Baker, which presents a complicated situation in a complicated way. I imagine most of us in this room know what happened there, and I also imagine that most of us consider it a tragedy. In 1692, the judicial system in the Massachusetts Bay Colony wrongly executed nineteen people, mostly women, and imprisoned more than a hundred more under accusation of witchcraft.¹

I'm not here to talk about that judicial system, or if its judges convicted those innocent people out of a sincere belief that they were all practicing witches. I'm also not here to talk about how that conflict came to an end as the court of Oyer and Terminer ground to a halt, or the havoc wreaked on the lives of the everyday people of Salem and the surrounding area, or the fear that you might be next.

I'm here to talk about what happened in the years after the wrong was done and unable to be undone. I want to talk a little bit about how we live with it, how we might grapple with atonement and forgiveness and hope for a new way forward.

Salem was a tragedy-- a tragic year in a time of anxiety, of bitterness, of theological uncertainty, a time of hope of a different life beginning to unravel. Puritans, the settlers of Salem, took seriously their covenant with God, their understanding that they were God's chosen people, chosen to be saved, to build a beacon of righteousness in a world new to them which had been home to indigenous people for centuries. By the generation of the witch trials, this had begun to unravel: their children were less theologically rigid, war put tremendous pressure on their economy, and food ran scarce.

¹ Baker, 8.

I am not trying to absolve anyone of responsibility for their actions, or present false heroes in a human-made crisis, but instead, to make sure to describe the tragedy as a hurricane of mistakes and the kind of cruelty which comes with fear. It was a dark time.

In the four years after quiet had setted back over the colony, tragedies began to befall the families of those prominently involved with the court: the judges and prosecutors. To these people of faith, this felt like a sign from God of wrongdoing, but ultimately, only one would come forward. In the spring of 1696, Samuel Sewall, who had been one of the six judges in the trials, and a man with significant political power, gave his minister, Reverend Samuel Willard, an apology letter to be read in front of the congregation at South Church, here in Boston. It came to be known as Sewall's Apology, and reads:

“Samuel Sewall, sensible of the reiterated strokes of God upon himself and family; and being sensible, that as to the Guilt contracted upon the opening of the late Commission of Oyer and Terminer at Salem (to which the order of this Day relates) he is, upon many accounts, more concerned than any that he knows of, desires to take the blame and shame of it, asking pardon of men, and especially desiring prayers that God, who has an unlimited authority, would pardon that sin and all other his sins...”

Before this public statement, there had been no admission of responsibility by any of the involved parties.² Sewall, in a moment of humility consistent with the Puritan theology of the time, admitted to the gravity of his mistake and sought absolution both from God, to whom he ascribed “absolute power” but also from his faith community, from whom he asked forgiveness. Notably, his minister was a strong opponent of the trials the whole time. To our modern eyes, this feels incomplete. Sewall went on to face no consequences in his career, yet many in his life noted that he was never able to forgive himself. He wore a hair shirt, a symbol of his shame, for the rest

² Baker, 223.

of his life. Sewall is not a hero, not a villain, not a God, but a man responsible for so much harm who tried to find a way to live with it.

I want a better life for us all: not punishment, but accountability. Not shame, but forgiveness. Not to point fingers at those in the past and laugh at their foolishness, but to take a moment to place ourselves in their shoes. Not a call for pardon from God, but for compassion and grace from our community.

When we read the stories of historical violence, we have no choice but to lament it, for it touches us to this day. At Halloween, crowds gather in Salem to celebrate the joy of magic, to delight in the possibility of transformation. Is this a kind of lamentation too? We read the stories of the violence which is happening now, and we grieve, and must know ourselves to be alive in this moment and hold one another more closely, and then reach out.

When we allow ourselves to sit for a moment with these stories of complex tragedies of the past, we make space for moving on in a new way; we make space for stories of reconciliation not yet told. We make space for narratives of how the violence almost continued, past our knowledge of how we know it ended. We make space for the wisdom which surely kept more tragedies from happening, because they are not inevitable. We make space for those moments of turning points, for our own agency and imagination.

We make space for saying I'm sorry. This is not good enough. We can do better. We can forgive ourselves, and each other. We can begin again in love.³

Baker says later in his book that "Americans today gaze back at the people of 1692 as a foolish, superstitious, and intolerant lot. How could they possibly have executed nineteen people as witches? Yet that is to dismiss the figure in the mirror. Imagine for a moment the situation

³ Eller-Isaacs, 1993.

they faced in 1692 and consider their quandary from their perspective...Wanting to protect what they held most dear, they [the Puritans] tore it apart."⁴

I wonder if our fascination with the witch trials also endures because of our commitment to try to be on the "right side" of history, despite the reality that we only know so much about the moral standards future generations will hold. Prejudice doesn't so much "rear its head" as underlie the ground most of our institutions are built on; the death penalty is still legal federally and being used to execute innocent people every year. For me, much of the work of putting myself in the shoes of future generations is about building a world that is a little better, one step at a time. My hope is that this will allow our planet to survive, and that our descendants will see us as fallible humans and forgive us the errors we are sure to make.

We can forgive ourselves, and each other. We can begin again in love, and we are blessed to start today.

⁴ Baker, 285.

#637 A Litany of Atonement

For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference

*We forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.*

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible

*We forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.*

For each time that we have struck out in anger without just cause

*We forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.*

For each time that our greed has blinded us to the needs of others

*We forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.*

For the selfishness which sets us apart and alone

*We forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.*

For falling short of the admonitions of the spirit

*We forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.*

For losing sight of our unity

*We forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.*

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of
separateness

*We forgive ourselves and each other;
we begin again in love.*