

2 November 2008 * “The Struggle and the Power”

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Reading: “The Low Road” by Marge Piercy from *The Moon Is Always Female*

What can they do
to you? Whatever they want.
They can set you up, they can
bust you, they can break
your fingers, they can
burn your brain with electricity,
blur you with drugs till you
can't walk, can't remember, they can
take your child, wall up
your lover. They can do anything
you can't stop them
from doing. How can you stop
them? Alone, you can fight,
you can refuse, you can
take what revenge you can
but they roll over you.

But two people fighting
back to back can cut through
a mob, a snake-dancing file
can break a cordon, an army
can meet an army.

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.
A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own
newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no,
it starts when you say *We*
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

Sermon: “The Struggle and the Power”

These are days, my beloved people, when we’re seeing power at its worst, and power at its best. We’re mired in “the struggle and the power,” both as a country and as a people of liberal faith. Even in the private sphere – I know, because of the sacred trust that you place in me, as your pastor – many of us here are reckoning with what it means to feel powerless, to feel fearful, to not dare to hope that light will trickle in through the cracks that have formed along the edges of our lives.

This morning I want to remind you what power looks like at its worst, and how it behaves at its best. I’m here to draw a clear distinction between power that diminishes others, and power that brings people into their fullest, most authentic, most expressive form of agency: the building blocks of beloved community.

Let’s begin with the seamy side of power – let’s just get it over with – and how it wreaks havoc and diminishes souls. Power at its worst takes the form of unbridled greed and arrogance, without consideration for its outward-spreading ripples. It looks, in fact, a little like recent headlines:

☆ After the greatest economic crash of this generation, as a record number of people are losing their homes, Alan Greenspan sheepishly admits that he had expected the markets to self-regulate.

☆ In an election that will determine whether our country rises to its legacy of greatness, or merely limps into a new era of fear and imperialism, our political candidates and parties are distorting the truth and using other derogatory tactics to win votes through fear.

These are days, in short, when Marge Piercy’s words might ring true: it just might feel like “they can do to you whatever they want.” It might appear that our power – as citizens, as holders of retirement accounts, as parents and teachers and nurses and retirees and householders – has been siphoned away. It might *seem* so. But we’re not alone.

Listen carefully: these are days when I have also seen power at its best, however muted by world events. All around us, people are finding their voice, and finding new agency in speaking with those voices. This election cycle has engaged people who had formerly been *dis*-engaged; it has summoned people to consider anew their beliefs and aspirations; it has granted people permission to hope fiercely and to participate in the democratic process with renewed vigor, or even for the first time. We are witnessing people come alive with their own power.

Although you might not have considered it, there’s also much to be said about how our congregation has come into its power in new ways. Live Oak used its voice, and met its

mission, by taking a public stand against Proposition 8, creating invisible but sturdy strands of outreach into the community. Live Oak has realized its longstanding dream, and met its mission, by building our new Sanctuary building, just outside of these doors. Look at what you did! Look at what you have accomplished, after eight years and nay-saying and trepidation!

Those are just two examples. Take a look; heartfully, prayerfully consider all that we are doing together, in our shared ministry, and tell me that we at Live Oak are powerless.

★ How do we hold all of this? How do we process the different ways that power moves among us; over and around us? Well, I want you to understand clearly the distinction between power that's exchanged "out there," as a zero-sum game, and the generative power that circulates within beloved community.

In most realms of the world, power is a commodity,¹ a zero-sum game. The only way for one party to gain it is for another party to lose it; as one person gets more power, less is available to others. In this framework, power often gets disguised as privilege; it's wielded over others, and easily abused – or at the very least, operates unchecked. (Since our religious tradition is committed to countering oppression, it's important to recognize that while all of us have felt powerlessness at some time in our lives, for minorities and traditionally oppressed groups, powerlessness is part of the fabric of daily life.)

Rather than commodity, a less weighted way of thinking about power is as *capacity*, an ability to do something. Power as capacity is neutral: it can be either a creative, empowering capacity or a destructive one. But "in this interpretation," notes theologian and ethicist Martha Stortz, "the powerful are those who are able to do something: the strong. The powerless are those who are unable to do something: the weak."²

★ I'd like to think that, as a religious community based in covenant, we Unitarian Universalists have chosen to dwell in an even broader framework, giving "power" its most liberal interpretation. Unlike the view of power as a limited supply to be struggled over, we choose to view power as *generative*:³ something that can be shared, without being diminished; something that is freely available to all, and strengthened as it circulates more and more widely.

This generative power comes out of *relationship*; it's co-active. It's what Marianne Williamson captured in these well-loved words:

Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make and manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we

unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

In Unitarian Universalist terms, the power that we discover in relationship is transformative, and sets people free. When power is visible in the quality of interactions between people (let's call that "right relationship"), the focus isn't who *has* the most (power as commodity), or who's *doing* what (power as capacity), but how well our relationships with one another reflect power circulating among all. When power does percolate through a community of interdependent souls, it changes people and is changed by people. No one is "weak;" strong is what we make each other.

I discovered an illustration of this last Sunday, when I was with my parents in Oregon. Don't think for a moment that I indulged in sleeping late on my Sunday off! I was in the pews of their Episcopalian church for an 8:45 worship service. As I waited for the service to begin, I read through their church bulletin. One line caught my eye: the section where all of the staff are listed. There was the priest's name and title, and the organist, etc., and then this: "The ministers of this church" were listed as "the people of St. Luke's."

When a congregation seizes and proclaims its shared ministry – and then puts that declaration into concrete terms (as Live Oak most certainly does) – that's the power of relationship made manifest. Strong is what we make one another, in this community. You may have no idea of the healing and the love that you're offering to each other, in fact (but you'll hear one very powerful testimony to your shared ministry in two weeks, when Emily West is in the pulpit). When we share power, it reflexively circles back to us, further empowering and blessing us.

★ I'm parsing these distinctions – asking what "power" does and can mean to us – because our individual interpretations of power have everything to do with our building, and being in, community together. If relationship is at once the source and the very *expression* of our power, then the way that we view power reveals the value that we assign to community. It's impossible to share power co-actively with those that you disrespect. We can't comfortably circulate power between, or among, us without the presence of an abiding trust.

Our Unitarian forebears understood this, in choosing to shape our religious tradition as one of *covenant*. In September, I reminded you of those roots, which stretch back to the Puritans' colony nearly four centuries ago. Like them, we still believe that the promise to "walk together" in love and respect is more binding than any fixed set of beliefs could be. In that sermon, I also spoke to you about Live Oak's upcoming task (which you'll keep hearing about this winter): to codify and to manifest our faith in relationship through the creation of a Covenant of Good Relations. It's not enough to speak in abstract ways about sharing power – any UU community worth its salt ought to be

willing to put its values into a living document that is owned and embodied by every member.

★ Living our values, after all, is how we Unitarian Universalists spend our spiritual lives. Consider, for a moment, the power that comes from that depth of integrity. Consider, too, the impact carried by your every act of compassion, of justice; all of your small gestures of caring. You incarnate our Live Oak mission statement by going out, as individuals, to transform the world. *You make a difference in people's lives.* I know that you do. I'm certain of it.

The world is full of people, moreover, who – like you – demonstrate that the generative power of relationship will always carry more strength than the diminishing power of a zero-sum game. I have been ministered to, again and again, by people I know and love – and also by strangers. I'm not ashamed to tell you, for example, that I was brought to tears by the kindness and grace of the man who sat next to me during my flight out of Seattle on Thursday, who comforted me through some turbulence, and whom I could not even thank properly because I was so embarrassed that my gratitude would dissolve into blubbering.⁴

There is no greater power – in all its quiet glory – than that of one human being offering the best of themselves in response to the fear in another. That's ministry. That's the power that we share, and celebrate, in this congregation.

Our world, where love and hope are overshadowed by despair, doesn't need people who play small. Our world is full of people hungry for the reassurance that reconciliation is possible; people who need to believe that new beginnings are awaiting them. There are people in our community who need permission to hope, and to heal, and to come alive. *This is real power:* to embody our religious principles. To deepen the quality of our relationships. To practice the ministry, whenever it is available to us, of bringing people into their own power.

“It goes on one at a time,” says Marge Piercy, “it starts when you care to act,... it starts when you say *We* and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more.”

May we continue to bring people into the “we,”
and may we be wise and gentle stewards of our power.

Amen.

Endnotes

1. Theologian and ethicist Martha Stortz, in *PastorPower*, reflects on power as commodity versus power as capacity.
2. Ibid.
3. The concept of *generative* values comes from Rev. Susan Church, priest of St. Luke's By-the-Sea in Waldport, Oregon.
4. I don't know your name, sir, but you're from Walla Walla, you sat in seat 12D, and I've carried your kindness in my heart all week.