

The People We Can Be
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There's an old story that originates in China about a farmer who is hard at work in his field. He's getting his hands dirty and working in the sun, providing food for his family and community, and he's really good at it. He's busy one day when he happens to see a rabbit hopping through his field. Rabbits are rare in his world. They are quite a delicacy and he hungers at the mere sight of the animal. However, he has no way to catch the rabbit, so he prepares to simply continue on with his work.

The rabbit, however, is distracted by the farmer, turns his head to look at him, runs into a tree stump, breaks his neck, and ... goes on to rabbit heaven. The farmer scoops up the rabbit and prepares the perfect meal, grateful for his good fortune. The rabbit – not so grateful. The rabbit would tell a different story. But this one is the farmer's story, or really it's the story of the rest of the town, because after he enjoyed his good fortune, they're the ones who saw the farmer, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, season after season, hiding behind a tree near that same stump, waiting for another rabbit to hop past and injure itself. He craved that same delicacy, achieved with that same level of effort, and so he waited for things to just turn out the way he wanted them to.

Meanwhile his crops went untended. His family went hungry. His neighbors at first laughed at him, and then became concerned for him, and then sent the wisest people in the land to try and talk him out of his stupor. Nothing worked, and well into the winter season, one could still find him out behind that same tree, every day, waiting for a rabbit to break its neck on a stump so that he could enjoy a perfect meal. His hoe became covered in weeds, and then snow, and then ice; useless on the ground that yielded no fruit to one who knew, in his bones, who to make things grow.

One can imagine the farmer staring at the stump, hyper-sensitive to every whisper of wind and every rustling of weeds. He watches the stump at first with eagerness, and then weariness, and then probably a sad sense of finality. Even though he likely, at some point, knows deep in his bones that his behavior is lethal to his spirit, if not his body, he can't change because he can't stop thinking of that perfect meal, of the fortune that brought it to him, and of the pleasure that he would feel in experiencing those blessings again. Whereas his first meal was a joyful surprise, he now comes to view the second as a respite. He has been watching for so long that his joy turned to anxiety a while ago, and he is just exhausted. Now, he just wants to rest.

In this way, he is a farmer after my own heart. He's a farmer after many of our hearts. It's a bit exhausting, isn't it, being a religious progressive these days? When you hold a faith centered in the belief that all people deserve the same expressions of justice, equality, and opportunity, it can be exhausting to live in these times of growing disparity. When you hold a faith centered in the belief that all people are free to develop and express their religious and ethical perspectives without fear of recrimination, it can be exhausting to live in these times of religious bigotry and cultural xenophobia. When you hold a faith centered in the belief that God's love extends beyond

every border humans have or will ever construct, it can be exhausting to live in these times when small, powerful men use borders and walls to prop themselves up.

It wasn't always this way. Not that long ago we were energized by the events of the world and the tone of the country. And so we are tempted today to stare at stumps; to remember feasts of the past and desperately hope that they hop our way again, forgetting that every great feast didn't just happen. They were made, by people, over time.

Marriage equality was brought to being by people working hard for a long time. And greater gender equity, and greater racial equality, and the gradual but growing transformation of a culture of transphobia into communities of trans-celebration; these and every great surge in progressive values have come not through luck but through hard work. The multi-faith movement of love and justice that is forming to stand with immigrants of all statuses may appeal to God for strength and guidance, but it's powered by people standing on local corners and roaming the halls of Washington. The Moms who Demand Action to stop gun violence may find fortune here or there with a politician or two, but that movement is one of feet on pavement, pen on paper, and fingers tapping away on keyboards. The activists who work against climate change and for renewable energy may find fortune here and there, but that movement is people working in meetings rooms and board rooms and shareholder gatherings to press a concern for the earth and all its beings.

And every one of those is strengthened by past successes, and there have been innumerable successes in every one of those and many other areas. But none of them stopped working with those successes and instead just waited for more to hop by. Those workers are working today; tilling land and planting seeds that they may never even see grow, but will feed the future nonetheless. They remember success and good fortune, but build movements of hard work this day; work that feeds right now and into the future.

This is the essence of progressive religion; that we are building the future right now and it is an ever-increasing reflection of the beloved community where peace, justice, and equality reign. We are not trying to reclaim the past; though we honor the past that has brought us here. We're not leaving the future in the hands of what any of us understands to be any Holy-other, for building the future is the calling of our lives. We look to our spiritual centers for strength and guidance, and then stretch out and join with others in building the world of tomorrow, of progress, of progressive values that enhance the freedom of all people to live healthy and just lives.

And perhaps the most dangerous aspect of these days and the attacks on people we care about and values that we share is that despair or exhaustion. When we feel that, we may not stretch out into new relationships and expressions of the spirit, but shrink instead. We can cocoon ourselves ever more tightly in the circles we've come to find comfortable. We can lock ourselves into media outlets that stoke our anger and paralyze our action. We can obsess over social media posts that aim for nothing more than our outrage and spend so much time formulating the highly articulate, and largely useless, response.

Cocooned too long, we begin to consider the Beloved Community that we want to build to reflect exactly who we already are. That is its own kind of idolatry that can only be corrected by

stretching out and getting to know the Holy in the stranger. For the Beloved Community has to extend beyond our community; beyond our circles, beyond who we spend our days and energy with. That's our Universalism; that Love extends beyond every limit we imagine containing it. That Love is ultimate. Love is not just its own end, it's the beginning and everything about the journey as well. Love is it – the foundation, the alpha and omega; it forms and fuels every human heart and every human hope. Though evil is real and powerful and sometimes over-powers love in the moment, Love in the end always wins. It always brings forth unity. For the early Universalists that unity was in the hereafter and was the providence of God. For us, that unity is today in hearts and minds pledge to the power and promise of love among neighbor and stranger.

And that's what builds the beloved community that doesn't look like who we choose to surround ourselves with right now. That's what allows us to see the essence of that community and the Love that holds it in the supermarket as well as the political rally. It's what allows us to see the beloved community at the big, box bookstore as well as the small, local bookstore. It's what allows us to see the Beloved Community at chain donut shop as well as the local coffee place, and it's what allows us to see the beloved community in Wal-Mart as well as Whole Foods. The Beloved Community has to include everyone for it to be an expression of our faith. If not, then the Beloved Community expresses the limits of our vision of love. It imagines a limit on God's love, which in our tradition is a force that should always call us to stretch and stretch and stretch toward the other.

The danger of these days and this year ahead is that we will become frozen like that farmer; just watching the stump, while others stare at different stumps, waiting for something great to happen. And we'll become locked in our own ideas of what perfection is, and miss the goodness that can come from joining together and tilling what ground we can as one, which is how we can really build a world that reflects our dreams.

It's like the old story about the snipe and the oyster. They snipe, which, if your zoology, like mine, is less developed, is a bird that apparently likes to eat oysters. Snipes wait for oysters to open up and then eats them. This oyster sees this snipe waiting nearby and says he's not going to open up until the snipe leaves. The snipe says well I'm not leaving until you open up. The oyster says well then you'll die of hunger. The snipe says well then you'll die of thirst. And it's true – both will die if they don't change what they're doing, and for both of them, the only way out of this is, in some way, together.

That story is actually used as an illustration about two countries who have long been at war. Both countries are locked in their positions of hunger and thirst; each caused by their actions and their reactions to what the other has done. In the story, ancient like the one about the farmer and the rabbit, and also from China like that one, both sides decide to stop warring with each other so that each will become more prosperous. Each chooses peace. The oyster that is one side opens up and drinks; the snipe that is another goes away and finds different food.

But they had to come together first, and find common ground and common goals and move in those directions. They had to stretch out and talk to someone they viewed as the "other" who would have nothing in common with them to find that their destiny was tied together. They

would both live, or they would both die, but they were, as Dr. King would say, “Tied together in a single garment of destiny.”

As are we this day, and always, tied together in a single garment of destiny. And we may not agree on what that destiny is or how we should reach it or who should even realize it, but it is our faith, uniquely our faith the western canon, that we are indeed headed there together, and so we are faithfully-suited to live in that spirit now. We are the people who are faithfully-suited to reach out to the stranger and forge common ground. We are the people faithfully-suited to find among those with whom we disagree about much a thread or two of that garment we share. We are the people faithfully-suited to center who we are in relation to everyone else in a love greater than we can ever express, because that love is at the very center of who we are, and it is not dependent upon agreement or similarity.

To be clear, I’m not saying to reach out to every snipe you come across. Especially those who are online – just leave those snipes alone. They’re only interested in your misery. But nonetheless hold love in your heart for that person. And know that everyone you meet; everyone, has a place in the Beloved Community. Everyone you meet has a place at the Welcome Table. Everyone you meet is of and worthy of love, and stretch out to meet more and ever diverse people, holding that same assurance in your heart. For that is our very, very demanding faith. It ask so much of us – this ancient call to center who are in relation to everyone else in the creative spirit of Love – but that’s the people we are meant to be. When we’re at our best, it’s the people we already are. And it’s what the world needs more of from us, every day; the, ever-present, universal love that is our faith, that forms our communities, and that animates our lives.

There is no time to be frozen, for the good fortune that comes our way will manifest through our deeds and work, just like it always has. And it’ll come not by any one of us, but by many of us, moving together, just as it always has. And it’ll come not just through the deeds of us and our neighbors, but through broadening coalitions of strangers who build something beautiful, and get to know each other in the process, just like it always has. There is no time to be frozen and wait for good fortune. We have to move and make good things happen. May love be our guide toward one another and the stranger, as we move, again and again, into building a new world.

May it be so, and Amen.