

# Stronger Together

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

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The United States of America have a new president.

The new president was sworn in yesterday. In his inauguration speech, he suggested that America is in a terrible state, that our educational systems are rich (ha!) but ineffective, that industry has decreased while poverty and crime have increased. He said, "This American carnage stops right here and stops right now."

But in fact, the carnage has only just begun. The things he has promised to do, the things he started doing already, are things that violate our Unitarian Universalist principles and our sense of what's right.

Immediately after the swearing in, this president signed executive orders that take steps to dismantle the Affordable Care Act and reverse a plan to reduce mortgage insurance premiums. Our New York state senator, Chuck Schumer said, "Working class Americans, struggling Americans — now it's harder for them to get a mortgage." The Senator added that "it only took an hour for those populist words delivered on the steps of the Capitol to ring hollow."

This new president has pledged to repeal the Affordable Care Act, or Obamacare, build a wall on the border with Mexico, deport illegal immigrants and ban Muslims from immigrating. He will do everything he can to make abortion illegal again, including Supreme Court appointments, and his sexism is over the top. He has claimed climate change is a hoax, and plans to pull us out of the Paris Agreement, which would threaten all life on earth.

These are only a few of the things that have many of us worried. I have a friend who has admitted to feeling debilitating anxiety, fear that just won't quit that he's going to blow up the planet any day now, maybe within the hour. I imagine some of you might be feeling various levels of fear and anxiety for the fate of our country and our world.

Another friend says, "The marches all over the country, and the world, are inspiring, but also horrifying. The United States elected a president that the entire world is protesting against. In my wildest dreams, I never thought this would happen. I am still in shock."

I have to admit, I kept thinking it wouldn't happen. Right up to the last minute. I thought, how can this go forward given what we know about Russian interference in the election? Doesn't that invalidate the election? And the FBI violation of rules that put suspicion on Hilary right before the election—doesn't that help to invalidate it? Don't we get a do-over? Why didn't that even come up as an option? The election was stolen, and everybody seems to feel that's OK, or that there's nothing we can do about it.

But there is some good coming from it. Since the election, I have observed my inner activist coming out. I am now responding to every petition and many requests for money, and am

looking for other ways to make a difference. And I understand I'm not the only one to react this way. Planned Parenthood has been flooded with donations, many in the name of Mike Pence who gets a thank you for each one. The ACLU, American Civil Liberties Union is receiving an inordinate amount of donations as well.

And whether the election was fair or not, here we are, and now we must deal with it. And the good news is, we are not in this alone. Gathered here in one strong body, Gathered here in the struggle and the power. The power is in this room. Can you feel it?

The power was in yesterday's marches, too. The women's marches, that were about so much more than women. I felt the power here in Ithaca, and our march was so large it interrupted itself. I felt it when I went on Facebook and saw the pictures of all the marches across the country. Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Austin, Texas and Montpelier, Vermont. And the marches weren't limited to this country. There were marches around the world.

I saw a photo of a sign that said, "The power of the people is stronger than the people in power." The people are rising. The people are resisting. We will continue to resist as long as is necessary. Four years?

Author and death penalty investigator Rene Denfeld, says:

"I was very lucky to adopt my kids from foster care. And my oldest son came to me with a lot of problems. He was considered, honestly, a troubled kid, the kind of kid that people expect to end up in prison, just like my clients. He was afraid. And fear makes animals out of all of us. I stuck with him, month after month, year after year. I would hold him in my arms and I would tell him, "I will not let you be bad." I was trying to save his soul, but I was also trying to save my own, because we're all connected. Today, that troubled young boy is now a wonderful young man, kind and considerate and loving.

And I believe that is our country right now, in a nutshell. Are we going to hold it in our arms? Are we going to refuse to let it be bad? Are we going to take every step in our power month after month, year after year, to make sure it grows up healthy and good. Are we all going to walk out of here... knowing that what we do matters? Our one vote, our one action. One person at a time multiplying into something good.

"Stop me," says the secret heart of those who would do harm. "I will stop you," say the brave."

So what can we do? What can we do to make sure the rights of all are protected? What can we do to make sure that health care is there for all when they need it? What can we do to make sure the economy doesn't continue to redistribute from those who have the least to those who have the most? What can we do when the presidency and both houses of Congress are in the hands of a party that has threatened these things?

One thing that's recommended is to call your representatives daily! Call your senators, your congressperson, your state and local legislators. Call every single day to demand the changes, the votes, the protection that are important to you. Activists and lawmakers alike say that phoning is more effective than letters or emails. It's easy enough to find the numbers. If calling every day is too much, call often. Call when there's something going on that you have an opinion on. Be sure to voice your opinion. Give examples from your life if you have them.

Another way to make our voices heard is to keep marching. Keep putting our perspective on the issues out there in the public arena. Keep protesting, and support others who are protesting and protecting, like the Lakota Souix in North Dakota.

Rev. William Barber, who wrote the Third Reconstruction that I spoke about last week, recommends some Strategies for Hope based on the Moral Mondays movement he started in North Carolina. He says we've got to stand up. We have to build a new language to pull people together, not left and right, but a moral agenda, one that is issue-focussed. Barber recommends having a legal strategy to fight unconstitutional laws. He urges us to build a movement, not a moment. In other words, don't let our protest be a one-time thing, one phone call, one march, one letter. We've got to keep it up, to organize, to build coalitions, to commit to the long haul. We can build a movement of resistance and hope and justice and love. Barber sees hope in the many movements that have risen up, movements like Moral Mondays, like Black Lives Matter. He points out that we fought slavery, we fought Jim Crow, and we can fight this. This is *our* time, he says, and we will never give up on the heart of this democracy.

We're the frogs in the bucket of cream. We have to keep going, keep fighting, or we'll sink. But if we keep going, and don't quit, don't give up, we can come out on top.

How can we keep going, keep active at this for four years? An activist named Mirah Curzer has an online article called: "How to stay outraged without losing your mind." She says, "This is not going to be an easy four years. We're going to be subjected to constant gaslighting by the President and his administration. We'll be dealing with a ferocious, multi-front attack on the entire progressive agenda, without exception, and a lot of it is going to succeed. We're going to helplessly watch institutions we care about and depend upon destroyed. The Trump years are going to be emotionally exhausting and deeply traumatic for all of us, but particularly to those dedicated to protecting the vulnerable and preserving democracy."

Curzer recommends four strategies veteran activists use to stay sane and keep from burning out during a long fight. The first is: "Don't Get Used to Trump—Get Away From Him." We need to take breaks from the news, to unplug now and then and do things that nurture us. Curzer says, "if you don't do that, if you try to maintain this fever pitch of anguish and fear and outrage, something far worse than a little down time is going to happen. Your brain, to protect you, will just turn down the volume on the outrage and *adapt*. You will stop being shocked by the latest scandal and horrified by the latest attack on civil rights. Trump will become the new normal. And that is the worst thing that could happen, because THIS IS NOT NORMAL, and democracies fall when their people stop resisting." So we need to take our minds off the news, give ourselves vacations from it, so that we can be appropriately outraged when we do turn our attention to it.

The next strategy is to focus your energy on one or two issues. Because you, as an individual, can't focus on it all, don't try to. Pick the one or two most important to you and rest assured that others are picking up the other issues. As a congregation, we may decide on one or two issues to focus on together, and in fact we already have a deep commitment to work on racial justice. The idea is not to feel guilty for not addressing all the issues.

The third strategy is to make activism fun. The march yesterday was fun, because we did it with others and there was creativity involved, particularly in the signs. It was fun to read them all, and I was delighted to be able to hold my sign up high thanks to Whitney's mother's knitting needle taped to it. Curzer suggests that one of the best ways to make activism fun is to make it easy. She says, "Resolve to do something small every day, without fail. There are many "daily action" lists going around, each with different emphasis, but they're all very similar. Pick one and commit to following it. It will make you feel great, and will do wonders to combat that helpless, hopeless feeling. Plus, by doing something every day (even if it's small) you will actually accomplish a lot—probably more than if you only do *big* things once a year."

And finally, take care of the basics: eat well, exercise, get enough sleep, spend time with friends, get some alone time, get outside, get therapy. We need a strong foundation from which to fight.

And remember—you are not alone. This congregation can go through it together. We can support each other, we can work together to plan initiatives and build coalitions and take action. We can work with the wider world of Unitarian Universalists, who have the same values, the same principles, the same caring and commitment as we do.

The Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee have just issued a Declaration of Conscience that they are inviting us as individuals and as congregations to sign on to. They write that they've "concluded that in these extraordinary times we must be united in purpose to protect the values of our democracy and those vulnerable populations among us."

They write that "there is a sense of urgency, and a need for vigilance. And there is clarity that we must act, not alone, but together."

By signing the declaration, we join other UU's in standing on the side of love, protecting the most vulnerable among us, and defending core values that are under attack. By signing, we show our support of our denominational staff to lead us in this work. They say "We will be vigilant of administration actions, policies and verbal assaults that undermine the principles of our declaration or disparage, threaten or attack innocent people. We will respond by speaking truth to power and mobilizing support for those who are under siege. To be successful, your support will be critical.

"This is not about partisan politics. It is a principled response to the potential targeting of people not for what they have done, but for who they are. It is a commitment to speak out and to act in support of basic human rights. We will keep you informed of the progress of this effort and of further opportunities to advance our cause together in the coming weeks and months.

"We cannot predict what the future will bring, and we do not pretend to have all the answers, but we can and will be ready for the struggle ahead of us. If you feel the same, please join us. Join us in transforming faith into action."

What do you say—shall we join them? Shall we sign the Declaration of Conscience as a congregation?

Let's stand up, stand strong and stay together. Together, we are powerful. Together, we can meet head on whatever new horror presents itself. We are absolutely stronger together.