

CHURCH SERVICE

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OPENING WORDS

WORDS FOR REFLECTION

If you want the future to be different from the present, study the past.

Benedict Spinoza

SERMON

MALICE TOWARD NONE, CHARITY TOWARD ALL

This morning I want to offer some reflections about the state of our country. To do that, I want to take a macro view that holds our history and the dreams of our founding fathers who gave birth to this experiment called Democracy; and, then, a micro view of where we are today and what we need to do to preserve the dream of Democracy.

I want to begin with a story that I have shared with you before but in a different context. It is a story of the Caterpillar and the Butterfly and scientists have proven this to be a true story.

...the caterpillar, like us, has a regular cellular structure as well as a cellular overlay composed of isolated imaginal cells. Gradually, as the caterpillar naturally grows and evolves, the imaginal cells become greater in number and threaten to override the old structures. The caterpillar interprets this as an attack on its immune system. It tries to rid itself of these imaginal cells, and it is able to do so as long as the imaginal cells remain isolated units. But when they bond together, as they do as part of the growth process, they become too strong for the immune system to break down; their collective power is too great. As they gather momentum by forming cell clusters and exchanging information, they become the dominant growth paradigm of the organism, until pretty

soon there is no stopping them, and they gloriously morph into the new structure that is the beautiful butterfly.

Like the caterpillar and we humans, I see our country has a regular cellular structure as well as a cellular overlay of imaginal cells. Consider this: The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights are the imaginal cells of democracy. Together, they introduced a new idea that all people are created equal and that we shall have a government of the people, for the people, and by the people. These imaginal ideas were novel and were arrived at only after long and difficult discussions and compromises. Never had these revolutionary ideas been stated as the foundation of a government. But we also must remember that these men were men of their time as well as men of the future. In that time, “all men” meant white men of a certain station in life. Thus, the regular cellular structure of our government back then was “white men rule.”

In fact, from the time that the first boats landed on the shores of America, a caste system was the foundation of life – a system that made people of red or black skin less than human. The Native Americans were to be pushed off their lands so that white men could establish property while the economy was built on the backs of the black people. And women, fifty percent of the human population were not even considered except as beings bringing life into the world and keeping the home.

Thus, the structure of democracy as it was birthed into the world was based on a caste system. It was and is an artificial construction based on the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups. Its foundation is power. It has been the operating system for economic, political, and social interaction in this country over the centuries. The very invisibility and acceptance of this caste system have given it power and longevity.

[When you grow up and live in a system, the system takes on a normality we do not see. When I cross the Mason Dixon Line to visit an old friend in assisted living in Delaware, I am surprised each time by the fact that all on-line staff are people of color, and the forms of communication reflect master and serf. And this is completely normal!]

From the beginning of our nation, the struggle between the regular cellular structure based on caste and the imaginal cellular idea of equality has been the warp and weave of our history. This struggle has waxed and waned. The Civil War, the passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments and Reconstruction are painful reminders of this struggle. The passage of the 19th Amendment, the Stock Market Crash, and the New Deal was another time of upheaval.

We are at another critical time in our history. The question remains as to whether we will be a society in which economic, political, and social power will be held in the hands of white men or whether that power will be shared by all people regardless of skin color, religious belief, sexual orientation, gender, and so on. This more recent struggle had its origins in World War II and the men and women who served in the armed services and industry during that time. These men and women were not interested in going back to the pre-war days. The 1950's and 1960's were times of great upheaval. Those imaginal cells were bonding and all kinds of people were forming groups that challenged the old cellular structure. We enacted laws that protected voter registration, equality education, and equal opportunity. There were movements – Anti-War, Black Power, American Indian Movement, Women's Lib, Gay Power, People with Disabilities, Protecting the Environment. The 1960's and 1970's were times of great forward momentum wrapped in Lyndon Johnson's idea of The Great Society. Lots of energy, enthusiasm, and hope.

But other feelings were bubbling beneath the surface – fear, anxiety, anger. These were the feelings of those protected by the power of the old caste system. Beginning in the 1980's, plans were being made for a return to the old cellular structure – plans to repeal laws to disenfranchise women, people of color, people of different sexual orientation, people with different religious beliefs and how to move the Supreme Court to a conservative majority. Then the Supreme Court made businesses co-equal to human beings which has completely skewed the role of money in our elections and in our society. A Black President was elected and though many of us celebrated this as a big step forward, it created a backlash that continues today. And then two women,

each from a dominant political party, were nominated to run for the highest office in the land! All of this fed fear and a backlash.

This is where we find ourselves today – our federal government has been gutted, programs to support us common people have been destroyed, healthcare is unreachable for many, ICE walks our streets, cost of living steadily climbs and so on. This is all in the service of a caste system and reclaiming power that has been lost in the 50 preceding years. This is what those supporting the present administration most fear – those imaginal cells that had been isolated through most of our history had grown and coalesced since the 60's and had finally begun to birth something beautiful in our country – the possibility of equality and that a government of, for, and by the people could become a reality.

This is the macro view. Now I invite us to turn to a micro view and ask what must we do if we want recollect those imaginal cells so that we can take back our power and nurture that hope of a true democracy.

- Since the 1960's, many diverse groups have been empowered in our country – people of color, women, elders, LGBTQ+, handicapped, and others. As we look ahead, it is critically important that all are welcomed into this Rainbow Coalition. We must remember that the goal is democracy for all and we cannot allow those who are fearful of losing their power to divide this coalition which they will surely attempt to do. We must keep our eyes on the prize – democracy for all, even those with whom we do not agree.
- We must seek and support at all levels those who share our commitment to democracy – local, school board, state, and federal. This means we must educate ourselves, ask direct questions, and remain alert. What we have lost will not be fixed by a single election. Little “d” democracy is an exercise in participation. We are in this for the long haul. Sometimes amidst the struggle, this is difficult to remember. And we must impress that on those who follow.

- We can all increase our consciousness. Look around and become more conscious of both the big and little ways that we allow discrimination to exist in our everyday life. Be aware of how we ourselves react when we see a biracial couple or family, or when a woman owns a business or runs for office, or when we see a person in a wheelchair, or our judgments of others with whom we disagree. Democracy is a homegrown exercise in releasing judgment.
- The price of privilege in our culture is the moral duty to act when one sees another person treated unfairly. Once we have increased our own consciousness, we can grow our spine of courage and conviction secure within ourselves and not reliant on others for our sense of self. Think back on those times in your life when you acted with courage and conviction on behalf of another. But also reflect on those times when you lacked courage. What stopped you? Of what were you fearful? How would you do it differently today?
- Risk Radical Empathy. There are many ways to educate one self. One way is to risk conversation with another, to listen, to understand another's experience as she or he knows it and not as you imagine it. Listen with an open heart. I know my story, am I willing to share that and am I willing to listen to your story. We are all here together and we must seek our common ground?
- Then there is voting and helping others to vote.
- There is boycotting those companies owned by technocrats who support this administration. In other words, vote with your pocketbook.
- Support those communities organizing to protect and support those families who have arrived here in America to find a safer and more productive life.

These are all grassroot ways for growing the imaginal cells of democracy. My last thought is much bigger and will require all of us as a nation. Caste based on color has been the bedrock of our nation since boats first landed on these shores. It has been the foundation of economics, politics, and society. It has

used color – whether red, black, brown, yellow, or off-white – as a means of discrimination and cruelty. It is at the heart of our struggle right up to this moment in time. How can we come to resolve this struggle without admitting that it has and continues to exist? This would seem to be the right time for a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to have a public accounting of what caste has cost us in lives, in lost opportunities, in discrimination, and dehumanization. And how do we make it right with those living on reservations, those living with poor healthcare and housing, with those living with ancestral trauma if we are unwilling to take a deep and soulful look at this? South Africa did. Are we courageous enough to do likewise?

In closing, I would say that it is helpful to have the macro view of how we have arrived at where we are today. But the micro view of how each one of us fits into the warp and weave of our society is where the action begins to make real a government of the people, for the people, and by the people. Thank you.

CLOSING WORDS

I offer this quote as we close:

Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It is a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well, can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.

Pema Chodron

This morning, we opened with a meditation that stated, “If we want the future to be different from the present, study the past.” Not only do we need to see how racism and caste have strangled the dream of a democracy of, for, and by the people, we must also look at our own complicity in leaving others behind. Then we must commit ourselves to our collective power to realize the real dream of a democracy – malice toward none, charity toward all. Go in Peace.