

## **We the People**

The Rev. Ian W. Riddell

Preached at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Desert

Sunday, July 2, 2023

*[Please note that I rely quite heavily at times on the work of Timothy Snyder and Jason Stanley in this sermon. I have listed sources as I have them, but I did quote directly from both of them in several places in this sermon and I do not wish to represent those words as my own.]*

Over the past few months, I've been thinking a lot about my time in Victoria, BC, in the 1990s. Most especially about the LGBT chorus there and my time as a member and its co-artistic director. This past June was the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our first concert together, in a member's back yard.

I say quite often, and I'm only half joking when I say it, that the women of that chorus, mostly lesbian women a decade or two older than I am, trained me, taught me how to be out in the world, how to imagine solidarity and community. Through modeling and conversation they showed me so much as I was learning to be an adult in the world after college.

And lately, over the past year, one conversation has poked at my memory, has come up over and over again in my mind. We were celebrating a small move forward in LGBT rights or representation. It was after a dinner party and I'd stuck around to help clean up. We were doing the dishes together and I made a comment with the certainty only held by someone in their mid-twenties, about how the world would continue changing for the better, only moving now in one direction.

She just quietly said to me, "There will be a backlash. They will fight to take it back. This is not over." I don't remember what I said to her in response, but I do know that in my mind I scoffed at her cynicism and lack of faith in the future.

Over the past year, though, her words have come back to me over and over again, as we've seen discrimination and cruelty and violence and the erosion of civil rights coming from so many different directions.

At first it might feel like there has been this groundswell of conservatism or that the hits are coming from a chaotic fear and anger. I think those things are there.

But it is very clear, perhaps this has been clear for some of you longer than for me, that what is happening now is an orchestrated, calculated, intentional dismantling of the liberal social order.

- Attacks on the bodily autonomy and right to even exist of our trans neighbors and kin.
- Reversals of access to abortion and reproductive justice.
- The banning of books that might make some children uncomfortable or which share the reality of the existence and power of diverse lives.
- The erosion in many places of the teaching and learning of our nation's history, its blemishes and oppressions as well as its triumphs and progress – and also the story of those marginalized people who have courageously resisted oppression and violence.
- Erosion of the wall between church and state and a growing call to make a certain extreme brand of Christianity the national way.
- Erosion in our trust in our election and voting practices by lies and outright fraud
- Growing permission—tacit, clearly expressed from the mouths of religious and political leaders, or even from the rulings of the highest court in the land—permission for discrimination and cruelty and dehumanization.

There has been a plan behind and beneath all of this. A plan to reshape our society in ways that suit a small minority of people with a conservative, theocratic, and restrictive belief system.

It's a decades long movement to disempower and demoralize public schools, to erode our democratic processes, to stack the federal judiciary, and to enforce conformity to conservative sexual and moral norms.

Looking at the courts, and especially the supreme court, it is not just happenstance that the court now leans so far to the right. There has been a decades long push by organizations like the Federalist Society, and people like

Leonard Leo, to force their beliefs, grounded for them in conservative Catholic fundamentalism—not Catholicism generally, but a specific fundamentalism—to force those who share their beliefs about law and order into leadership of our judicial realm.

In responding to this week’s Supreme Court decision to allow discrimination by public business because of religious beliefs, Andrew Seidel at Religion Dispatches wrote, “The goal is a legal system where conservative, heterosexual, White Christian men are protected by the law, but not bound by it—and everyone else is bound by the law, but not protected.”

This is an organized, passionate movement to change the nature of our democracy, our society.

It is, at base, fascism.

I don’t use that term lightly or without intention.

In her Berry Street lecture a few weeks ago, entitled “My Little Pony Was Right: Reflections of Fascisms Without and Within,” my colleague Cecilia Kingman shared her deep worry and fear at the new rise of fascism in our society.

She shared that “the standard definition of fascism is a mass political movement that emphasizes extreme nationalism, militarism, and the supremacy of both the nation and the single, powerful leader over the individual citizen.”<sup>1</sup> It’s not necessarily about the beliefs at the core of the movement, but its techniques, the ways it works to shift culture and undermine democracy in favor of a new reality.

I highly recommend you watch or read Rev. Kingman’s presentation. It does in fact include some rather powerful and meaningful mention of the TV show! There will be links in this week’s reading list.

In her presentation, Rev. Kingman highlights the work and writing of Jason Stanley who is a professor and scholar of philosophy and propaganda at Yale. Stanley talks about fascism as a political method as much as an ideology. “Not all who use

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<sup>1</sup> Cecilia Kingman, 2023. “My Little Pony Was Right: Reflections of Fascisms Without and Within” <https://uuma.org/berry-street-essay/2023-berry-street-essay-the-reverend-cecilia-kingman/>

fascist tactics are ideologically fascist.” He says, “We recognize fascists less by their beliefs than by their methods.”<sup>2</sup>

*[Here I quote from and freely paraphrase the work of Jason Stanley]*

And then he proceeds to lay out what he sees as the ten methods and practices of fascism. I’m going to talk to you about a few of them but not all of them. And it’s not that these things are there on your own but they come together in clumps and in constellations.

One of the tactic of fascism is the elevation of **the mythic past**—an earlier, purer, simpler time, when everyone was good and everyone knew their place. “Make America Great Again.” It is an evocation of a time when we didn’t have to worry about all this stuff.

Next is the practice of **anti-intellectualism**. So we see the removal of the teaching of multiple perspectives. There is only one perspective. Expertise in this system is a threat so Diverse knowledge and understandings of the world are a threat. We see the banning of books, the banning of the teaching of Critical Race Theory, in the takeover of school boards and university governance as we’re seeing in Florida.

Another is the lifting up of **unreality**. You have to get people used to believing lies or even not caring whether things are lies or not. Our former president, for example, lied—but he’s not the only one, this is not a partisan thing—he lied more and more often as his campaign and then his term of office went along, to the point where what was true became obfuscated and irrelevant to some people.

There is the practice of **victimhood**, and not by those who are actually oppressed or subject to violence but victimhood of, in this case, conservative Christians. Christianity is “under attack.” We are under attack by moral degeneracy. They are coming for us.

And then an idea of raising and cultivating sexual anxiety and worry about the corruption of minors and the safety of our women and children. Here we see

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Stanley. 2018. *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*

attacks on trans folks, we see the attacks on drag shows. We see the questioning of any rights and the elevation of the language of “grooming.”

These are all elements of, pieces of, the fascist way of being. There are links to Stanley’s works in the reading list as well.

What do to? I have to admit to you that I’ve paid attention to myself over the past weeks. I’m angry. I’m sad. And at times I feel so resentful that this is happening in my lifetime. I want to escape, honestly, though I know I can’t and shouldn’t. So I escape into the books I love.

And so this week I opened up *The Lord of the Rings* hoping for a little solace—forgetting that *The Lord of the Rings* is *about* fighting the spread of fascism! I started reading the section where Gandalf is telling Frodo about the history of the rings of power and how their world is under threat and how high the stakes are in the quest to destroy the one ring.

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo.

“So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”<sup>3</sup>

Or in Maya Angelou’s words that Joni shared earlier, we must take “responsibility for the time we take up and the space we occupy.”

So what do we choose to do with the time given to us? How are we to be responsible to ourselves and the future?

[And here I quote extensively from Timothy Snyder’s work.]

I’ve turned to the work of Timothy Snyder lately. Snyder is the author of, among other things, *On Tyranny: 20 lessons from the Twentieth Century*.<sup>4</sup> He is a Scholar of history and resistance movements in Europe and other places. He looks at the

<sup>3</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, 2012. p. 51

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Snyder. 2017. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*

experiences of those in eastern Europe and pre-WWII western Europe to see the ways in which people resisted fascism and totalitarianism. He holds up 20 techniques for resisting fascism and growing tyranny. [He has recently come out with a new edition of the book that takes a look at how we got to where we are with Russia and Ukraine lately.] Again, I'm not going to go through all twenty.

**4 Take responsibility for the face of the world.** The symbols of today enable the reality of tomorrow. Notice the swastikas and the other signs of hate. Do not look away, and do not get used to them. Remove them yourself and set an example for others to do so.

**9 Be kind to our language.** Avoid pronouncing the phrases everyone else does. Think up your own way of speaking.

For me this inspires me to choose ways of speaking that help build the world I want to live in.

There is a Unitarian Universalist thinker named Alex Kapitan who has a blog called "The Radical Copyeditor." They are a self-identified word nerd and work as an editor but with a radical, progressive view of the world. In a recent blog post, they wrote this:

"We can either describe and reaffirm a status quo that treats some people as less important, less valuable, and less human, or we can describe and help create a world in which all people are equally valued. Using language consciously and anti-oppressively is rooted in care, not correctness. Conscious communication is a lifelong practice, not a checklist of good and bad words. It's not about censoring or restricting our words, it's about expanding them, freeing ourselves from oppressive constructs and limiting ways of making meaning. It's about attending to context and honoring and valuing the full diversity of humanity. It's about turning toward life, and using words to describe and help create the world we want to live in."<sup>5</sup>

Timothy Snyder invites us to (11) **investigate**. To pay attention. To invest in learning, reading long-form essays, reading books, going deeper than headlines

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<sup>5</sup> The Radical Copyeditor (Alex Kapitan). 2023. "Conscious Communication and the Power of Language" <https://radicalcopyeditor.com/2023/05/30/conscious-communication-and-the-power-of-language/>

and the clickbait that's in our internet scroll. Paying attention. Support investigative journalism. Pay attention to how journalists are treated in our society. Take responsibility for the news you share with each other

**(12) Make eye contact and small talk.** Pay attention to how we are together. It's not just about being polite. When we got to the grocery store or we go to the movies or we go, as I did yesterday, to have my smog checked on my car. I had a list in my head of the things I had to do yesterday, and the guy at the smog-check place refused to let me go on with that list until we had a lovely conversation and it changed my day.

Make eye contact and small talk. For Snyder, this is partly because then you'll know your neighbors better and you'll know who you can trust. But it's also about—as we know here in this community—about building connection, building support.

**(13) Practice corporeal politics.** Resist the politics where they want you doom scrolling. Get out there and vote. Help other people vote. Get out there and speak, talk, push your elected representatives to do the work of building the community we want to see. Snyder ends that section by saying, "make new friends and march with them."

And the last one I want to share is **(19) be a patriot.** "Set a good example of what America means for the generations to come. They will need it." On this day we celebrate, where we are called to celebrate our nation, its history, and its reality, be a good example of what we want this country to be.

The work of Stanley and Snyder and others is really helpful in seeing clearly what is going on and finding ways to resist the movement toward fascism and theocracy.

But this is not a TED talk, this is not just any community I'm talking with. We are a religious community, grounded in shared values that both demand that we work for the building of the beloved community in the face of all of this and offer us resources and grounding for the work.

Our values are our framework for building the beloved community in the face of all of this. Our deepest values are antifascist values whether we talk about them in our current 8 principles or in the newly proposed revisions to those principles.

We affirm and strive for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning – whether comfortable or not.

We strive for justice, equity and especially compassion in human relations.

We center ourselves on the idea of the worth and dignity of all people – no matter how different from us they are.

We champion the use of the democratic process.

And we believe that we are called to be accountable in our work to build the beloved community—accountable to those the current society has oppressed or marginalized.

We find ourself grounded in and inspired to be a people who champion Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity, and Justice. These are our anti-fascist values.

We can't just proclaim these values, rest in comfort inside them. We are called to live them out in the world, "to act in this way to counter that way"

Because there are people all over this country whose lives are being disrupted and destroyed. Parents who are moving their families because their families have been declared illegal – because giving their children the healthcare they need has been deemed a felony. There are teachers charged and fired for teaching their children that there are diverse ways of being in the world. Doctors leaving and hospitals closing because laws against reproductive healthcare have meant that providing care to their patients could land them in legal peril. And those patients ... struggling to find healthcare and being forced to travel great distances or suffer.

We are called to act in their defense.

That is where our hope lies.



Cecilia Kingman and the Side with Love organizers are presenting a two-session gathering called “Combating Fascisms Without & Within: An Organized UU Response” this month. I hope you will join me in participating. I’ll share links to register in the newsletter, the UUCOD Community facebook page and in the reading list for this sermon.

I hope you’ll join me for that as we think together about what a Unitarian Universalist response might be to all of this.

It’s July 4<sup>th</sup> in a couple of days. It is the time when we pay attention to our nation, to think about how we are proud of it, to think about now we love it, to think about where it has gone wrong, where we might do better and be better.

The framers of our constitution chose to begin our grounding national document with a preamble that laid out the reason for our Nation, the reason for this constitution they were creating.

The constitution, they wrote, was established by “We the People”

*in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,*

On this July 4<sup>th</sup>, we are called by our religious values, by all we hold dear, by the hope that is in our hearts, by the love that binds us together, and by the founding document of this country that we are asked to love, to strive to be more perfect, to build a community of justice and liberty where the general welfare is protected and cherished.

My friends, even with the things going on out in the world, I have hope seeing your faces this morning. I have hope knowing the work that we do here in this community, that we spread into the world around us. The work of resisting fascism is the work of imagining and envisioning a community and a society that is grounded in love, grounded in justice, grounded in the embracing of the richness and diversity of life.

I have hope even in the midst of anger and sadness because of who we claim we are and who I know we have all committed to work to be together. I have hope and I know that together we are called to build a new way.

## Rev. Ian's "We the People" Sources and Suggested Reading List

Diana Butler Bass – **"Understanding Christian Nationalism"**

<https://dianabutlerbass.substack.com/p/understanding-christian-nationalism>

Andrew L. Seidel - *Religion Dispatches* - **"Contrary to popular narrative the supreme court's '303' decision gutting civil rights laws is not about an individual standing up for her beliefs"**

<https://religiondispatches.org/dont-be-fooled-todays-supreme-court-decision-gutting-civil-rights-laws-isnt-about-an-individual-who-opposes-same-sex-marriage-as-a-tenet-of-faith/>

Jason Stanley - *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*

Jason Stanley – **"The 10 Tactics of Fascism"**

<https://youtu.be/CpCKkWMbmXU>

Timothy Snyder - *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*

Cecilia Kingman - 2023 Berry Street Essay – **"My Little Pony Was Right: Reflections of Fascisms Without and Within"**

<https://uuma.org/berry-street-essay/2023-berry-street-essay-the-reverend-cecilia-kingman/>

Alex Kapitan - The Radical Copyeditor – **"Conscious Communication and the Power of Language"**

<https://radicalcopyeditor.com/2023/05/30/conscious-communication-and-the-power-of-language/>