



# High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

## Summit County, Colorado

Celebrating life in community  
in the beautiful mountains of Colorado!

July 15, 2018

Monthly Touchstones Theme

Liberty

Service Leaders: Pat McShane

### Sunday Services, 4:00 pm weekly

Fellowship Hall

Lord of the Mountains

Lutheran Church

56 Highway 6, Dillon, CO 80435

(Services are not held in the  
months of October and May)

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## When Dreams Become Nightmares

*Rev. Kirk Loadman-Copeland*

### Loving a Parade

I was raised on the American Dream. As a boy in the Cub Scouts, I would look forward to the parade each July 4<sup>th</sup> when I would decorate my bicycle with red, white, and blue crepe paper. It took a bit of skill to weave it between the spokes on both tires so that it would look just right. I loved the effect the crepe paper made as I rode my bike in the parade all decked out in my blue Cub Scout shirt and hat and yellow scarf.



I rode with my friend who was African-American. We were in the same class at school and had become good friends. He was the only black in our small Cub Scout den.

### When The Lesson is Racism

The elementary school we attended was different. In my fourth grade class, I was one of four white children. The other 27 were black. Our neighborhood was in the eastern part of the city of Pittsburgh. It was called Homewood-Brushton and

had once been predominantly white, but that had changed.



My sister, mother and I lived in a tiny house with my grandmother and uncle. There were just six other houses on our street. It was a dead end. And without luck, it could have been a dead end for the people who lived there. They were all working people in the low class, most with a high school education, but some with less. And some of the children, as did my sister and I, made it into the middle class.

I had some insight into the lives of the families who lived on my street, but no clue about the lives of the black children and their families. No clue! No idea about what they thought about the American Dream. I did gain a bit of insight through literature, especially the plays of the African-American playwright August Wilson. I dragged my daughters to see the film, *Fences*, which was one of his plays about Pittsburgh.

I'm not sure what those on my street thought about the American Dream either. I do know that most of them were

**Our Mission:** It is the purpose of the High Country Unitarian Universalist Fellowship [HCUUF] to be a community filled with love, beauty, and compassion. We are committed to freedom of opinion, expression, and spirituality. We seek to be of service to each other, our families, our larger community, and our natural environment.

racist. For some, the racism was quite overt, for others it was more covert. In this, I include members of my family. Did this mean, as seems to be the case today with the emergence of white nationalism, that the American Dream was restricted to some, but not all.

Because racism is learned, racism is taught. It was being taught on the street where I lived. I guess that I was not a very good student. And yet, as I have reflected on my life, I have only ever asserted that I am less racist than some.

Being white, being male, being straight, being privileged, I cannot objectively assess the absence or presence of racism within me. Often the bias is so implicit, that we cannot recognize it. Still, I am strongly anti-racist, and I have been as long as I can remember, much to the dismay of my family.

Some thought, and I was probably among them, that with the election of Barack Obama, we were moving into a post-racial America. Such a belief was understandable, but so terribly naïve. The backlash has been stunning. And for many, including myself, it appears that the Civil War is still being waged.

## The Necessity of Dreams

So the question is, what brings solace, what brings hope when hope is hard to find, when the American Dream slowly turns into a nightmare? I take solace, in part, in the words of the



African-American poet Langston Hughes. He wrote of the black experience with uncommon power and beauty, startling the reader into awareness.

Langston Hughes was a dreamer, insisting on the importance of dreams, dreaming in his own way of liberation. As I explored his poetry, I discovered just how central dreams were to his work, to his vision of America, and to his aspirations for the world.

In 1932, Langston Hughes published a book for children entitled *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*. It was a book of

poems encouraging children to dream, especially African-American children. In the title poem he wrote,



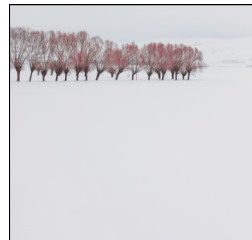
“Bring me all of your dreams,  
You dreamer,  
Bring me all your  
Heart melodies  
That I may wrap them  
In a blue cloud-cloth  
Away from the too-rough fingers  
Of the world.”

For Hughes, dreams were like red-wood saplings that must be protected if they are going to grow into something truly magnificent and powerful, if they are going to be made real.

In that same book, he included one of his best known poems, *Dreams*. He wrote,

“Hold fast to  
dreams  
For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-  
winged bird  
That cannot fly.  
Hold fast to  
dreams  
For when dreams go  
Life is a barren field  
Frozen with snow.”

Hughes knew that we live by dreams. And this is especially true when one’s prospects in life are meager. Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri in 1902. His father left the family and later divorced his mother. After the separation of his parents, Hughes was raised mainly by his maternal grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. After her death, he went to live with family friends for two years. Because of all this upheaval, his childhood was not happy. He later lived with his mother, first in Lincoln, Illinois and then in Cleveland, Ohio where he



attended high school. Through it all, he clearly dreamed.

For Langston Hughes, the ability to dream, the courage to dream, the demand to dream, was closely tied to America. He wrote, “America is a dream. / The poet says it was promises. / The people say it is promises—that will come true. / The people do not always say things out loud, / Nor write them down on paper. / The people often hold / Great thoughts in their deepest hearts / And sometimes only blunderingly express them, / Haltingly and stumblingly say them, And faultily put them into practice.”

In one of his most powerful poems, *Let America Be America Again*, he dreamt even as he acknowledged that the dream of America has never included him.

Hughes wrote,  
“Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers  
dreamed--  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants  
scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)”

Insisting that he must be included in the dream, near the end of the poem he wrote,

“We must take back  
our land again,  
America!

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was  
America to me,  
And yet I swear this  
oath--  
America will be!”





I find his phrase, “America never was America to me,” haunting. Given his understanding of the power of a dream, he continued to dream knowing that the American Dream was not yet a dream for him.



## The American Dream

So many immigrants have come here in search of the American Dream. I’m sure that the American Dream drew my ancestors, who were Scots-Irish, to this country. This group had first migrated from Scotland to Ulster in Northern Ireland. Between 250,000 and 400,000 Scots-Irish migrated to America in the eighteenth century, and settled primarily in Virginia and Pennsylvania. My ancestors came as farmers with limited literacy and struggled to make a life. They came for the promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

## Liberty

This idea of liberty is so important. In the Declaration of Independence, it is one of three inalienable rights. The word, “inalienable,” means “unable to be taken away from or given away by the possessor.”

It is easy to confuse liberty and freedom. They are often used as synonyms, but they have subtle, yet important differences. Liberty, like worth and dignity, as we refer to in our first principle, is inherent. Liberty is a condition of being human. It is the condition of having the power to act and speak without restraint. It is liberty that facilitates



asserting our worth and dignity. Liberty is a component of human agency, of will power.

Freedom, by contrast, is the absence of external constraints that otherwise would restrict our ability to act as we choose. Still, when our freedoms are under siege, our liberty is also affected. We may want to act, to exercise our liberty, but the absence of freedom because of external realities constrains us. The *Declaration of Independence* was an act in which our country exercised its liberty as it sought to throw off the rule of King George and the lack of freedom that existed because we were colonies, and not a sovereign state.

## The Assault

In the current political reality of America, we are experiencing an assault on rights and freedoms. This is expressed in countless ways including the attack on the 2018 Presidential election, the Muslim travel ban, the undermining of the Affordable Care Act, withdrawing from the Paris Accord, ignoring the human rights of asylum seekers at our Southern Border as children were separated from their parents and imprisoned in locations at great distances from where their parents were imprisoned. The attempt to force educational institutions to eliminate Affirmative Action is another example. And the list goes on and on.

## Democracy Damaged

The impact is growing. The recent release of the 2018 *Varieties of Democracy Project* report, which is also known as V-Dem, determined that democracy is in decline worldwide based on the assessment of 178 countries. America is in the forefront of the decline of democracy. This is based on the Liberal Democracy Index, which assesses whether there are free and fair elections; whether leaders are constrained by the rule of law and oversight by the legislative branch and the judiciary; and whether civil liberties are protected.

From 2015 to 2017, the United States

fell 24 places in the country ranking on liberal democracy, from seventh in 2015 to 31<sup>st</sup> in 2017. When the United States’ 2017 score is compared with

its average score over the past 10 years, the drop is ominous. Ironically, some of the countries and leaders that Trump most admires are listed among the 30 countries at the bottom of the ranking: Turkey, Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea.

There is a growing concern among knowledgeable people in America about what is happening as the following books illustrate: *The Plot to Destroy Democracy* by Malcom Nance, *Fascism: A Warning* by Madeline Albright, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* by Jon Meacham, *Russian Roulette* by Michael Isikoff and David Corn, and *How Democracies Die* by Steven Levitsky.

## The Silence of Good People

The Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller was a prominent Protestant minister in Germany as Hitler rose to power. Initially, he supported Hitler, but then he came to oppose him in the years leading up to the war. In 1933, he became the leader of the *Pastors’ Emergency League*, a group of opposition clergy members. Because of his opposition to Hitler, Niemöller was arrested and sent to concentration camps for seven years—first to Sachsenhausen and then to Dachau. He survived. After the war he wrote a famous piece that begins “First they came for....” I have adapted his piece to the



Julian Assange



current situation in America.

- ◆ First, they came for the Muslims and I did not speak out—because I was not a Muslim.
- ◆ Then, they came for members of the GLBTQ community and I did not speak out—because I was straight.
- ◆ Then, they came for the immigrants and I did not speak out—because I was born in America.
- ◆ Then, they came for people of color and I did not speak out—because I was white.
- ◆ Then, they came for the Democrats and I did not speak out—because I was an Independent.
- ◆ Then, they came for the elderly and I did not speak out—because I was young.
- ◆ Then, they came for women and I did not speak out—because I was a man.
- ◆ Then, they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Depending on your identity, you can construct the sequence in different ways, but the conclusion will be the same if you do not speak out: “Then they came for me—and there was not one left to speak for me.”

In retrospect, Niemöller made a tragic mistake by supporting the authoritarianism of Hitler. He never imagined how far Hitler would go. We should not make the same mistake.

## No Time for Despair

Returning to Langston Hughes, now is not the time to despair. It is in fact the time to dream of a noble America and fight for what we value. As the poet wrote,  
“O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!”

## In Search of Our Better Angels

Regardless of our occupation, or the fact that we may be retired, our most important vocation is that of citizen. May we pledge to do one thing each day, however small, to insure that “America will be!” Let us join the faithful remnant of patriots who refuse to stop dreaming and work, instead, for the idea and ideal of America.

In one of his last poems, *Dream of Freedom*, Langston Hughes, who died in 1967, wrote:

“This dream today embattled  
With its back against the wall—  
To save the dream for one  
It must be saved for all—  
Our Dream of freedom.”



Pulitzer Prize winner Jon Meacham concludes his book, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* with these words, “For all of our darker impulses, for all of our shortcomings, and for all of the dreams denied and deferred, the experiment begun so long ago, carried out so imperfectly, is worth the fight. There is in fact, no struggle more important and none nobler, than the one we wage in the service of those better angels who, however besieged, are always ready for battle.”

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