

## *Antidote in the Venom*

### **A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

**Delivered on August 20, 2017**

The spiritual teacher Shaw Readster asks us, “Can we see how, in one form or another, everything in creation longs to touch and be touched? Flowers and trees stretch their leaves and limbs up to the sun, just as it reaches down to touch them. Fields of grain summon small birds to carry away their seeds; every breeze searches for something to move. Raindrops rush down to slake the thirst of a parched earth.” Our fourth principle grants us the right to be a seeker, “A free and responsible search for Truth and Meaning.” We are indeed seekers who join every other living thing in our search for fulfillment.

I’ve been a pilgrim, a seeker, on long journeys. The most significant was my call to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. I had been a leader in nonprofit organizations for over 25 years and was quite successful. I had worked for major players in the non-profit world in New York and Massachusetts. I had easily moved up the ladder in any organization I worked for. There was one problem. My ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. Even though I was experiencing the success, the benefits, the accolades of my work I was dissatisfied. Richard has spent many hours trying to understand why I was never happy with what I was doing. I spent many hours asking what was wrong with me and wondering if I would ever find what I was meant to be doing, searching for that fulfillment. During this time, I was also the Director of Religious Education for a congregation in Massachusetts. Again, it was a successful program, we experienced major growth and organization, yet I still wasn’t fulfilled. In New England religious education for UU children and youth happens in the basement of the church. When I first arrived here you may have heard me talk about the Religious Education program as “downstairs.” Late one Saturday evening I was preparing for the lessons the next day. I was surrounded by glue sticks, curricula, likely had glitter head to toe and something changed. In that moment I had experienced revelation. The nagging I had felt for years which I was labeling chronic discontent was actually seeking. In the basement of a church, sitting alone, I was called to ministry. I had found what I was seeking and the nagging discontent took leave. I once asked Richard what he thought of all this and he told me that my ministry was the only time he had seen me truly happy, satisfied. As a pilgrim, a seeker, I was relieved, anxiety and discontent removed. I am fulfilled by this call, by ministry.

The hidden nature of almost all that we do is the direct, but unseen, effect of this one great unconscious desire to search out what we believe will complete us. We do experience contentment as seekers, but isn’t this often temporary? Readster tells us, “Our reward may be a momentary sense of fulfillment that, in most cases, passes from sight as soon as do the temporary conditions that provided it for us.” We then return to our search. What are we to do? Where are we to find a solution to this seemingly inescapable dilemma? Rumi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet, tells us that if we wish to bring an end to this cycle of our discontent, then we must “find the antidote in the venom!” Honestly, I spend a lot of time trying to understand what the heck Rumi

is talking about. I adore his poetry but sometimes it bounces off me. I spend a little time with Rumi most days as part of my spiritual practice. I find him calming, challenging, frustrating and all the things we expect of other human beings. Above all, he is philosophically inspirational, a lyric wonder that takes a back seat to no one. "Find the antidote in the venom." Whenever we dare to stand in the light of some unwanted truth we might feel powerless to change ourselves and the world. We understand that our present situation and choices cannot lead us to freedom and understand our present choices are secretly what is holding us captive. This is the venom. In the same moment we see what doesn't work and gain the understanding that if we are to succeed in our search for wholeness we require a new and higher order of self-knowledge. The antidote. To whom and to what do Unitarian Universalists turn to in our search for wholeness and understanding that our way of life, our way of living, of being in the world will transform other lives.

Let us return to the poem by Rumi. The translation I've been reading is by Kabir Hilminski. The full title of the poem is *The Root of the Root of Your Self*. Rumi writes:

Don't go away, come near

Don't be faithless, be faithful.

Find the antidote in the venom.

Come to the root of the root of your self.

Molded of clay, yet kneaded

from the substance of certainty,

a guard at the Treasury of Holy Light—

come, return to the root of the root of your self.

Once you get hold of selflessness,

you'll be dragged from your ego

and freed from many traps.

Come, return to the root of the root of your self.

You are born from the children of

of God's creation,

but you have fixed your sight too low.

How can you be happy?

Come, return to the root of the root of your self.

Although you are a talisman protecting a treasure,

you are also the mine.

Open your hidden eyes and come to the root of the root of your self.

You were born from a ray of God's majesty

and have the blessings of a good star.

Why suffer at the hands of things that don't exist?

Come, return to the root of the root of your self.

You are a ruby embedded in granite.

How long will you pretend it isn't true?

We can see it in your eyes.

Come to the root of the root of your self.

You came here from the presence of that fine Friend,

a little drunk, but gentle, stealing our hearts

with that look so full of fire; so come, return to the root of the root of your self.

Our master and host, Shamsi Tabrizi,

has put the eternal cup before you.

Glory be to God, what a rare wine!

So come, return to the root of the root

of your self

Milminski writes, "I like the term 'the root of the root'. I wish I had access to the original Persian to see how it was expressed there. As it is, to me it reminds me of the famous adage which means: recognize yourself to recognize your God" or translated in Unitarian Universalist speak: recognize yourself to recognize that which holds you. We cannot realize this close connection we all have unless we first establish a close connection with our own selves, accepting and facing all our limitations and faults and weaknesses for what they are. In entangling ourselves with petty worldly needs and fears, we agree for a low existence; whereas real highness awaits us. It's time to realize our potential to the fullest; that is our destiny, but we need to engage it with our own step forward. This understanding leads us to trying to understand the limitations of human reason and human compassion. We've seen and heard some of these limitations over the past week in Virginia and around the country.

The Ku Klux Klan once came out primarily at night, carrying torches with their faces covered by hoods with ghostly openings for eyes and mouths. Not anymore. They were out in droves in Charlottesville, Virginia, last week. Their faces were unmasked and held high, unapologetic. They joined hundreds of other white supremacists protesting the February vote by the City

Council to remove a statue from Lee Park that has memorialized Confederate General Robert E. Lee since 1924. In June, the city renamed Lee Park to Emancipation Park. Remove the statue and you try to erase history, the Unite the Right rally argued fervently. That statue, said hundreds of counter protesters with equal passion, is a monument to white supremacy and must go. Soon evil, like a venomous snake, reared its ugly head in the once-quiet college town. Hatred was spewed that night as tiki torches were lifted high and racial slurs chanted.

The next day, social activist Heather Heyer was murdered when a Nazi sympathizer rammed his car into the crowd of anti-protesters. Two Virginia state troopers died en route to surveillance of the clash. Many were injured. Anyone looking for the holy in all of this may take comfort in considering that, just as the antidote for a poisonous snake bite is found within the venom, the antidote to evil is likewise built within itself. Despite my intense fear of snakes I've done my research. Making an antidote to coral snake poison, for example, takes time, as many as three years and 69,000 milkings to obtain one pint of the snake's venom. After the snake is milked with its head grasped so that it will not bite, the venom is cooled considerably and freeze-dried for storage and transport for immunization. The venom is then injected into animals, horses mainly because of their large body mass, for the creation of antibodies.

But before the chemist injects an animal, the venom is mixed with distilled water or another buffer solution. Then a substance that enhances the body's immune response to a foreign substance, is added. Thus, the horse remains healthy as its immune system reacts, producing antibodies that attach to and neutralize the venom. So, while countless people are horrified by Unite the Right's poisonous display in Charlottesville, we are already using that same venom to make the antidote! The white supremacists did not save the Lee monument; they only numbered its days and ignited efforts across the United States to bring down other Confederate symbols. Fighting may have occurred in Emancipation Park, but now people are going there to reflect, pray and sing songs of hope. Photos of the violence are now frozen in time, chilling reminders that unleashed hatred can be deadly. Culprits are being rounded up and transported to jail. Many throughout the nation were shocked that their president did not immediately and unequivocally name names as he condemned the blatant displays of domestic terrorism in Charlottesville.

Those suffering from the injection of evil into their midst are standing up to it with righteous indignation. They armor themselves with the cleansing waters of tough love and forgiveness. Compassion and the understanding that we are one keeps us healthy and offering revival to those poisoned by hatred. We are the antidote in the venom. We are also the animal that is capable of both creation and destruction on a grand scale. Any being, any animal, can create happiness for themselves, but seeing that happiness for the blessing it is and preserving it for others is an ability unique (as far as I know) to humans."

Is there a center in our lives where we can all arrive and find our place, our values, where we are accepted for our true selves, where we can raise our children to be in love with the world, its environment and its people? Is there a home for us where we can live the life of a seeker and be celebrated and encouraged for this way of life and to be part of the antidote? You are here. You've found the place, the potential center of our lives that holds us and those we love in an embrace of acceptance, learning, love, justice, revelation, and transformation.

Let us create a legacy of happiness, seeking, freedom and justice. What is the essence of a good and faithful life? As Rumi writes, "come near, don't be faithless, but faithful. That faith is love.

Not the kind of love felt in fleeting emotions, the falling in love kind of love but the love we practice all our lives, the love which is an attitude of the heart, a disposition with which we choose to engage life. Whether we discover the antidote to free ourselves and seek fulfillment or become the antidote to save the world, we are seekers on a journey. At the root of our root is justice, equity and compassion. May we engage each for ourselves while creating beloved community.

May it be so.