

Voices of Freedom
A sermon by Summer Minister Elizabeth Marsh
Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville
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Happy American Independence Day, everyone. What luck for us that this holiday is a Sunday this year. We really get to talk about freedom in a religious setting, not just near the day we celebrate the founding of our nation but actually on the day. I like when that happens.

I picked three readings for you this morning. They were from a Malaysian Chinese emigrant to the United States, an indigenous Australian woman, and from a Scottish man. Not exactly the readings one would expect in a Fourth of July church service on freedom, right? Stories of liberty and liberation come in many forms.

Once there was a monk named Tenno. After ten years of apprenticeship, Tenno achieved the rank of Zen teacher. One rainy day, he went to visit the famous master Nan-in. When he walked in, the master greeted him with a question, "Did you leave your wooden clogs and umbrella on the porch?"

"Yes," Tenno replied.

"Tell me," the master continued, "did you place your umbrella to the left of your shoes, or to the right?"

Tenno was confused for a moment. He did not know the answer, and then realized that he had not yet attained full awareness. So he became Nan-in's apprentice and studied under him for ten more years.

In this story, even though Tenno the monk had studied for many long and undoubtedly difficult years to become a teacher, he realized that he still had some things to learn. It is said that the more we learn, the more we realize how little we actually know.

And that, in itself, is a kind of freedom. Have you ever had realizations like Tenno did? That despite years of education, despite having come *so far* already, there is always so much we have left to learn.

I stand before you this morning to admit my own ignorance, my own lack of awareness, and to attest to the power of an ever-continuing education.

Last week, I had the great opportunity to attend the Unitarian Universalists' annual meeting in Minneapolis. Each year at this meeting, which is called the General Assembly, members of UU congregations and clergy get together to take workshops, sing and worship together, and to do the business of the denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association. It is an invigorating week of democracy in action.

Some of our own church members can attest to this: our Board president went to General Assembly, along with four other members of our congregation. Also, our director of Religious Education Deborah Kahn, and our parish minister Rev. Lynn Strauss were there, too. Each of them was a delegate of this congregation and could vote in the business meetings on behalf of UUCR.

Going into the General Assembly, I knew that the topic of immigration would be prominent in people's minds. The recent passing of the Arizona anti-immigration bill has saddened and angered many Unitarian Universalists. "Arizona Senate Bill 1070... would empower local police to check the immigration status of anyone in the course of a 'lawful contact,' if they had a 'reasonable suspicion' that the person might be undocumented. Many fear that the law will lead to increased racial profiling and deportations."¹

The Arizona bill's passage put the Unitarian Universalist Association in a particular bind: the 2012 General Assembly has long been scheduled to take place in Phoenix. Unitarian Universalists around the country began to ask, "How can we most effectively protest this inhumane bill, and best protect the physical and spiritual safety of UUs of color who might be unjustly targeted by the law?"

Soon after the Arizona bill made headlines, it became clear that a powerful way to protest the bill would be for the Unitarian Universalist Association to participate in an economic boycott of Arizona—to pull out of contracts with hotels and other businesses and to re-locate the 2012 General Assembly elsewhere.

To make this decision, the delegates at this year's General Assembly would have debate the issue and vote to approve the boycott or come up with another solution.

Immigration is a significant human rights issue on many levels, the Unitarian Universalists at General Assembly felt very charged up about what we could do as a denomination to make an impact on Arizonans on all sides of the debate.

What I'll say next is a hard thing to admit from this pulpit: That to be honest, I didn't feel very interested in the subject. I paid attention to the headlines because at least I wanted to know the gist of what was going on, but I didn't really go much deeper than that. Immigration isn't something I've felt passionate about.

It sounds callous to say, in fact it is callous, but I'll say it to be transparent: My families have been in the United States for generations, and my hometown of

¹ UUWorld Magazine, "Antiracism groups raise concerns about Arizona GA," June 18, 2010. Found at <http://www.uuworld.org/news/articles/167177.shtml>, accessed June 30, 2010.

Duluth, Minnesota is about as far away from the Mexican border as you can get. I also have few plans to ever travel to Arizona, and besides, the whole thing felt confusing.

I felt overwhelmed, and immigration didn't seem to affect me very personally. I have a lot of social privilege and I can choose to give immigration very little attention.

So I attended other workshops at General Assembly—very good sessions in which I learned a great deal. But I still left the topic of immigrant justice to others. As the week went on, because so many other people were talking about it, I began to understand more about the issues and what was at stake. I talked with people who were more plugged in to the variety of discussions happening.

I heard about the idea that came from the various parties, which was the idea not to boycott Arizona but to go there as planned and do large-scale public witness against the racist, anti-immigrant bill. The longer I was at General Assembly, surrounded by white people and people of color alike, who were all talking about immigration, I began to pay attention. Not only was this conversation about immigration happening in our small UU world at the Minneapolis Convention Center, but also a national scale with 20 or so other states—including Virginia—considering legislation similar to Arizona's.

People I personally love and respect were taking this seriously, and people national influence were talking, so I figured I better start listening. I realized that I still have so much to learn.

I learned that among the many problems with this kind of immigration law is that the enforcement of the law affects US citizens. I didn't understand this at first; I didn't understand why Unitarian Universalists of color said that their physical and spiritual safety would be at risk if they stepped foot in Arizona for the General Assembly. But then I read more, I listened more, and figured it out.

The Arizona law states that anyone must prove their legal status when asked by police authorities. But in stark contrast, the U.S. Constitution specifically states that citizens do not need to carry papers. So enforcement of the Arizona law could mean that US citizens—any of us, but especially those of us who have brown skin or who might otherwise look “reasonably suspect”—can be stopped and asked for ID. If a U.S. citizen can't prove or refuses to prove their citizenship, they could be detained until they can show their identity.

This hit home in a particular way for me just the other day. My partner, Marcia, is a Unitarian Universalist. Her mother is from India, her father is white. So her skin is darker than mine. Just last week, Marcia went into a Mexican restaurant to get some lunch and the people behind the counter started to speak to her Spanish.

Now, Marcia has never studied Spanish a day in her life. She grew up in a small town in lily-white central Illinois. If the Latino workers in a Mexican restaurant can't tell her from a Latina, imagine what quick judgments a white police officer in Arizona might make.

When I imagine Marcia's fear at being asked to prove her citizenship, her fear of being detained whether she can prove it or not, I begin to understand how awful this legislation is.

Our neighbors to the south, in Virginia, are considering legislation similar to Arizona's. We wonder, how would something like this affect us here, in the Washington DC metro area?

This region is rich in cultural and ethnic diversity. It's one of the things I've loved about living here this year during my internship. There is a large Latina/o community in Gaithersburg, the next town north. Driving around this area, I've never seen so many "Diplomat" license plates in my life.

The local movie theaters hold special screenings of the latest Bollywood movies, which means there are many people in the Rockville area who are originally from India. There are people in our very congregation whose physical and spiritual safety could be threatened because their skin color might make them stand out in the eyes of immigration authorities.

Do we want to live in a region where we, our neighbors, and our friends, live in this kind of fear? We are deeply affected by this kind of exclusionary, fear-based law.

Today, I'm wearing a button that I got at the General Assembly. It says, "I could be illegal." I wear it to be in solidarity with anyone who could potentially be asked to prove their identity. Because of my white skin, I have the privilege most likely to not be questioned about my immigration status.

But there is always the possibility of illegal white immigrants, isn't there? All those Canadians sneaking over the border, or stow-away Brits and Australians... even they would probably go unnoticed in Arizona. The legislation is clearly meant to target people of color.

You'll notice that I'm also quite informally dressed for a Sunday in the pulpit. It's not to introduce a new "Casual Sunday" look, or to celebrate the Fourth of July in a t-shirt. I'm wearing this bright yellow t-shirt from the Unitarian Universalists' Standing on the Side of Love campaign.

This campaign is not just to advocate for marriage equality. We choose to stand on the side of love whenever there is a violation of human rights; whenever

an action is done in fear. Instead of fear, we choose love. Love for our immigrant neighbors, whether documented or undocumented; we choose love for all people whose life and human dignity is threatened by fear. And in the end, aren't all of our lives harmed by the legislation of fear?

I'm very proud to bring you good news of Unitarian Universalists willing to take courageous actions in the name of love. Last Saturday, at the General Assembly in Minneapolis, the delegates made a decision about whether or not to pull the 2012 meeting out of Arizona.

There were days of discussion and dialogue, in small and large groups. People deeply listened to each other. People of color and their allies got to share their stories, and everyone paid attention. There were tears, there was anger, and above all, there was a commitment to make a decision with integrity. People made mistakes, people corrected each other, and everyone learned.

After revisions, amendments, and much conversation, the Assembly voted to go to Phoenix in 2012 but to have a justice-based General Assembly instead of "business as usual." Business will be limited to the minimum required by the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Instead of days and days of meetings in a big room to *talk* about how we live in relationship with each other, the vast majority of the General Assembly will be dedicated to direct action, public witness, education and reflection.

This "Justice" General Assembly will be the first of its kind. Never before have delegates chosen to act in this kind of solidarity with people on the margins of society. When I think of this "Justice" General Assembly happening on the ground in Phoenix, I feel so moved. I am most moved at what Unitarian Universalists of color would risk to participate.

My friend and colleague, Rev. Mitra Rahnema, was a spokesperson for the Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries—a UUs of Color organization. At the General Assembly discussion about whether or not to boycott Arizona, Rev. Rahnema said, "It is okay to compromise *some* of our safety for humane right; it is not okay for us to compromise some of our safety for *business as usual*."

Unitarian Universalists, she said, "must only go to [the General Assembly in Arizona] as a prophetic imperative." My heart feels full that thousands of UUs said a radical "yes!" to this imperative.

It is understandable that many people will choose not to participate even in this "Justice" General Assembly because their safety or the safety of their loved ones might be compromised. White Unitarian Universalists are beginning to

understand the risk that UUs of color face. This is a hopeful continuation toward more loving relationships within our own denomination.

I invite you to consider joining this Justice General Assembly, in June 2012. You've got two years to save up for it! We have a lot of work to do, to prepare ourselves spiritually to send people to participate in this kind of large-scale public witness.

Reverend Lynn hopes that this congregation will take up immigration as one of its own study/action issues for the next year. I invite us to be open to the possibility of what we might learn through a year-long, congregation-wide dialogue about immigration.

We might hesitate to start our study of immigration issues. Where do we even begin? Will we do it right? There is no "right" place to start—there is only the task to start somewhere, and let ourselves be led. How will we know when we've learned all we need to know? One of my professors in seminary said, "There is no such thing as perfection, as arriving at the point where the work is finished. We can only continue to do the work, continually discovering new dimensions of it."

The reading earlier today by Lilla Watson said, "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come here because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together." One of the ways we can begin to understand that our liberation, our very freedom, is connected to the freedom of others is by listening to the stories of people affected by immigration. Stories of immigrants, like the one by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, called "Learning to Love America," can open our hearts. We must all do our own education and our own spiritual reflection, on how immigration affects our relationships with each other. Are we remaining disconnected from other human beings? How can we remain connected? Why must we refuse to be separated?

As we begin to notice more and more that immigration legislation touches all of our lives, let us remain open to the sense of awe and wonder that our study reveals. Like the Zen teacher Tenno, who realized he still had much more awareness to achieve, let us be willing to continue learning. Let us continue to listen to the people on the margins, who have much to teach us about what it means to be free.

Blessed be, and Amen.