

Inside Out and Outside In
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Reading:

(Context for reading) Elandria Williams died suddenly at the end of September. E was the co-Moderator of our Unitarian Universalist Association, a leader at the Highlander Center, and most recently the People's Hub. They were a youth activist and lifelong UU, growing up in the Tennessee Valley UU Church in Knoxville. Elandria was a force of nature, a truth teller, organizer, and a gift in our denomination. I did not have the pleasure of knowing E personally, but I so admired the way that they worked with 1,000s of UUs as co-Moderator to help us get out of our own way to do the business of our denomination, and to live into who we say we want to be. Elandria lived with chronic illness, and just mentioned this spring in a virtual vigil for Black Lives that some of their struggles were the result of activism work, being tear gassed so much as a younger person and so on. Elandria wrote a poem shortly before their death that speaks to our present and what comes next. It is called "We Are Worthy" and they recorded it for their home congregation.

In E's own words: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qrqq2cfc7to>

Sermon:

When I was a kid, I went to UU Sunday School. One curriculum that I loved was called *Holidays and Holy Days*. It was where I learned about charoset for Passover, when my grandmother made it for class, and the lulav and etrog for Sukkot, the greens and lemon that are waved as part of Sukkot rituals. It was a pretty helpful curriculum. I knew what Taoism was when we got to talking about it in junior high history, and when I went to Brandeis for college, I thought I know about Judaism. I mean, I knew more than your average kid in my almost entirely Catholic town, but my learning curve was steep.

I knew that on Sukkot, there was an outdoor structure built for folks to eat in, but when the cafeteria was expanded with an enormous Sukkah my first year, it was more than I had imagined. I have thought of that sukkah many times this fall as folks are getting creative with gathering outdoors in the pandemic. My junior year, I lived with friends in an apartment that was still on campus, but had its own kitchen, and lots of spiders. There was green space in between the buildings, and that year Sukkot fell during November. It was very cold. A student built a sukkah between the buildings, and we watched the process from our window. At first I thought, "good for you! It will be chilly, but fun," and then we discerned that she was also going to be sleeping in it. At the time, I thought that she was taking things too far. I was actually pretty judgy and worried she might freeze and die. Today... I think sleeping outside in the cold sounds kinda fun. Though, I have way better cold weather camping gear than that woman had.

Sukkot is supposed to be fun. *And*, it is a really concrete remembrance of the time of Exodus. Something that I appreciate so much about Jewish tradition, is that within family and congregational ritual there are multi-sensory ways to connect with the story, through food, objects, activities, and of course song, prayer, readings, and ritual. On Passover, we anchor the telling of the story with the taste and feel of unleavened bread, and bitter herbs among other things. On Sukkot, our Jewish family is invited to build temporary structures to remind them of the time their people were in the desert after escaping slavery--to eat and sleep outdoors, to be

uncomfortable, and to look up at the stars. On Sukkot we bring the indoors, outdoors, and create an in-between space, and place neither in nor out, in which we can learn and hold that tension of being in-between. The celebration of Sukkot opens the physical walls that can block a feeling of connection with the web of life. That connection is always there, but it is easier to remember when we feel sunshine on our faces, or a breeze, or see stars over our heads as we settle in to sleep. Sukkot is an opportunity to connect spiritually *and physically*, with the web of life, with the story of the Jewish people's experience in the desert, and with the experience of all those who struggle with finding shelter.

There are more folks than ever spending time outside during this pandemic. As I was driving to the church on Saturday, every hiking spot I passed on Route 20 was packed with people. Vermont campgrounds were on a waiting list all summer. Perhaps during this pandemic we will pay attention and learn from being in in-between spaces. We are *all* living in an in-between *time* between our experience before the pandemic and after, and have a spiritual opportunity to pay attention. Kate Walker shared in our meditation:

...In between creation thrusts ever forward.

Social hierarchies may disassemble and structures may fall.

Communities may revolt or tempt trust.

Tradition may falter or creativity crashes forward.

Leaders may step down or take charge.

The people may choose or refuse.

In between, storm predicted, the horizon beacons.

In between, theology of process reminds us to step back.

In between, where minutia and galaxies intermingle with microbes and mysteries.

In between, liminal, that space where we wait: Look, listen, feel, breathe.¹

We are in a time of change, of things building up and falling apart. In a more normal autumn, in a more normal election year, in a more normal school year, we would be managing a lot of change, challenge, and if we opened ourselves to it, opportunity to see our world in new ways. But, this is not a normal time. Every day, every hour, there are surprises on the national stage, and as we navigate building our lives anew in a time of pandemic and economic crisis, we are holding a lot of feelings, all at once. Our culture, government, and planet are in a time of great change and upheaval. Some changes we have been working toward for generations, others we have been fighting, and others we have been ignoring at our peril. We are managing a lot of change and chaos, all at once, and it might feel kind of awful. For those of us who hold more privilege than some of our neighbors, we are experiencing the impact of stress, the unknown, lack of access to resources, and economic insecurity that *is* the everyday experience of so many folks in our country. Elandria Williams wrote:

I, you, and we are worthy and deserve a life where we are not always fighting for our existence

Imagine what we could create if we were not always in the struggle
We *can* be present in the in-between. We have the opportunity to see things in new ways, to change, grow, and spiritually deepen, and work toward a new wholeness. For those of us with privilege in our culture, this in-between time is an opportunity to reflect anew on that privilege,

¹ Rev. Kate Walker "In Between" <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/between>

and to bring newly deepened spiritual tools to bear on building a more just world. Elandria continues:

The embodiment not of productivity but the embodiment of radical love, care and sanctuary
It's time
Embodiment time
Embodiment

Much of the *Tao te Ching*, which I learned about in *Holidays and Holy Days*, is a reflection on leadership and power, and this is true in Chapter 72. The particulars of this text and translation resonated for me in thinking about being present in this moment. The sage writes:

If people fear your power,
then you don't really have any.

Leave them alone in their homes.
Respect them in their lives,
and they won't grow weary of you.

The sage knows herself,
but doesn't dwell on herself;
Loves herself, but no more than
she loves everyone else.

She adopts the concerns of heaven as her own.²
The sage says, allow people private space and control, respect, and care for others as much as yourself. I hear in this chapter, the stories of policing in our country, of Breonna Taylor in her home, of all of the generations of bodies that white supremacy culture has tried to control with fear. I also hear the failure of compassion, self-awareness, and recognition of responsibility for others that has, among many other factors that are a different sermon, during this pandemic incapacitated our economy and educational system, and caused untold grief and suffering in the loss of so many lives in our country. Holding Elandria's poem in your mind, what would it take to have the kind of leadership described in the *Tao*? Leadership without fear. Respect. Compassion. Considering the cosmic connections and consequences to choices. These kinds of ideas have been in short supply for a long time. Rev. Melissa Carvill Ziemer wrote to our UU Minister's Association this week:

Just a few days ago, Elandria recorded a dispatch from the hospital bed on Facebook live. In that message, E acknowledged that the world is flooded and on fire, the ongoing danger of the pandemic, the outrages of injustice and the disasters, violence and brutality all around us. In this context, E told us, we must care for ourselves. We must care for our families and our friends. We must care for our communities. We must practice extending care to those we know and those we don't so each and every person can get free. We must remember that our actions affect others. We must place care at the center. This is how we work towards liberation for us all."

² Brian Browne Walker translation

The experience for some during this pandemic is as if they are wandering in the desert, building temporary structures, and struggling to survive, for some in an effort to stay afloat, have tuned out the noise of all the churning everything that is happening in our society. Whether you are camping in the desert, or coping, or numb, or panicking, or grieving, or doing just fine - “look, listen, feel, breathe,” and remember that “we are worthy and are whole.”³ Pause for a moment and breathe, and knowing that we are in a time of upheaval and change, breathe again. Perhaps the next time you go out to enjoy the fall leaves, or eat a meal in the sunshine, or look up at the stars, you can breathe, and consider these questions: What am I learning in this in-between? How do I place care at the center? What are the tools I have for paying attention? Perhaps the next time you are with a loved one or friend, and sharing and listening, you can breathe deeply and find yourself fully present and embodied in that moment. Perhaps next time you are watching the news, and feeling lots of feelings, you can breathe, and remember that you are not alone. Perhaps next time you raise your voice against injustice, your voice for change, your voice at the ballot box, you will take a breath. Feel yourself in your body. Feel the power you hold. And know, you are worthy. You are whole. And you are loved.

So may it be. Amen.

³ Elandria Williams, “We are Worthy”, 2020.