

“A Letter to the President”

A Sermon Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church
of the Shenandoah Valley

Rev. Russ Savage

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Dear Mr. President:

It has now been two days since you were inaugurated 45th President of the United States. The parties and parades are over, and it is time for you to get down to work. I hope you have been sobered by the millions of people who walked in marches yesterday all over the country—indeed all over the world—to speak out against many of the things you have said. I was at the march in Washington along with half a million other Americans—more than attended your inauguration on Friday, whether you think so or not.

Mr. President, I’m sure you know there are many concerns about some of the things you have said and some of the people you have appointed to be part of your administration. These are concerns about the future, and nothing is more important to the future than children. I would like to begin my message to you by reading you a poem which was written by Rachel Kann only a few days after you were elected in November. It’s entitled *What to Tell the Children*.

What To Tell The Children

BY RACHEL KANN • NOVEMBER 23, 2016 • POEM

Tell them that this is the great awakening.
Tell them that we humans have made some huge mistakes
And that’s how we now find ourselves in this tenuous place.
Teach them that hate is the poison.
Teach them that love is the remedy,
That it is better to be readied for what comes next,
Even if the revelation is painful.
Tell them that this is the paradigm shift,
That the old is collapsing in on itself,
That this death rattle is simply a temper tantrum;

The last gasp of a dying goliath.
Remind them of how they get wild
When they are most tired,
And then pass out,
That this is what it's about,
That this is what is happening to a decrepit and ineffective empire.
Tell them that everything is not ok,
And knowing that is ok.
Tell them that pretending
That what is unacceptable is fine
Is what got us to this sick and dysfunctional spot on the timeline.
Apologize for any prior attempts to teach them denial.
Tell them you were blinded by desire for comfortable numbness.
Express that you had the best of intentions,
That you were working within a broken system,
Where few benefitted at the expense of many,
That you laid low,
Kept to the status quo,
Obediently played your role,
But those days are over, because
Now you know better.
Tell them that they have no responsibility
To follow someone blindly based solely on a title.
Teach them to practice discernment.
Tell them authority and respect
Must be earned and are not inherently deserved.
Teach them that there are good people and bad people
From every background, ethnicity and belief system,
That they must align themselves with kindness,
That there is no more time for divisiveness.
You tell
Them that just because something is legal,
That doesn't mean it's right.
You tell them
To stand up and fight.
Remind them of all the lawful atrocities
Committed in the sick and twisted history
Of this violent country,

That Rosa Parks righteously broke a law and the world took notice,
That Harriet Tubman is our modern-day Moses,
That women would not be allowed to vote,
And no one would have proposed another notion
If the blessed rebels hadn't taken a stand.
Tell them love will win this war,
But only if we remember
That love is not just one unending cuddle puddle,
But fierce as a mother bear protecting her cubs.
Tell them that although this existence is damaged beyond repair,
They must not despair,
There is possibility,
And we will willingly and willfully open ourselves
To new ways of being because
The old way is not working,
Has never worked,
And the world deserves better,
And we're worth it.
Tell them they are not free
While another suffers under enslavement.
Teach them that we are all limbs on one body
And we cannot chop off our own arm without deep suffering.
Teach them humility,
But also to re-learn to trust their intuition and
Beg their forgiveness for unintentionally misleading them previously.
Tell them their gifts are useful.
Tell them they are beautiful.
Tell them they are the truth.

Mr. President, I cite this poem because it reflects the fear which you must know is rampant as your term of office begins. Perhaps you know that a few days after the election, a young man named Karim Suleyman blindfolded himself in front of your Trump Tower in Manhattan with a large poster which read in part: "Hello, my name is Karim and I am an Arab American. Like many people who are black, brown, women, LGBTQ, Latino, Muslim, Jewish, immigrants and other, I am very scared. We are anxious and uneasy in our country and it's difficult to see what lies ahead for us."

According to a recent article in the *Washington Post*, Muslims in Murfreesboro, TN, are holding their breath about what may happen to them under the Trump administration. Despite massive resistance several years ago, they succeeded in winning the right to build a mosque in the city where they could worship. The mosque was completed in 2010, although the case against it went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Since then a fragile friendship has built up among the city's 1500 Muslims and its other, mostly Christian, residents. They go to school together, shop together, eat in many of the same restaurants. Muslims are college professors, pharmacists, storekeepers, gas station attendants as well as neighbors. But since the election there have been insults and incidents of harassment. Many Muslims are hoping things are going to be calm, but afraid there may be more incidents like these and worse. Closer to home, Muslims in Nokesville, VA, are continuing their fight for the right to build a mosque, wondering whether neighbors' concerns over traffic and noise are really discrimination against their faith.

Schools in Prince Georges County, MD, are typical of places where students and their parents are uneasy about fears of deportation. Often these fears cause families to be uncooperative with school authorities because they are afraid they will be turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. School superintendent Kevin Maxwell recently wrote to principals and staff throughout the county, "The most important action you and your staff can take is to reiterate that Prince Georges County Public Schools will continue to be safe places where students and families will be welcome without fear of harm." New York Mayor Bill DeBlasio recently sought to reassure his citizens by stating that if the federal government orders the city to break up families, the city will not comply.

Mr. President, you need to be aware of these fears. I'm guessing you already are, and hoping you have plans to do something about it. It was encouraging to hear you say in your acceptance speech after the election that we all need to come together as one people. But many people are concerned about some of your appointments. Your pick for National Security Adviser, retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, is an Islamophobe who has repeatedly said that

Sharia law is spreading throughout the U.S., when no such thing is happening. Your chief strategist, Steve Bannon, comes straight to the White House from Breitbart, an alt-right news site which champions white supremacy. What are we to expect of these and other of your appointments?

Shortly after you were elected, a church in Virginia invited its members to post answers to these questions on a bulletin board in the church vestibule:

- How are you feeling?
- What are you afraid of?
- What do you hope?
- What are you going to do?

Here are some of the things people said. They said they were feeling sad, ashamed, worried, stunned, afraid, confused, exhausted, anxious, disgusted, and numb. But they also said they were feeling hopeful, fine, pensive, and confident that love is stronger than hate.

People said they were afraid of an increase in visibility and acceptance of intolerance, of growing division and divisiveness, of violence, anger and fear, losing rights as a gay or lesbian, indifference, and even civil war.

Among their hopes, people listed that we will have a peaceful world filled with love, that civility returns, that government works as it should, that we can dialogue with those with whom we disagree, that we can learn tolerance, that our leaders will listen to science, and that calm heads will prevail.

To the question, “What are you going to do?” people gave answers like these. Get involved, exercise my constitutional rights, pay attention, attend the Women’s March on Washington, love unconditionally, keep an open mind, get involved and vote, seek to listen to those with whom I disagree, redouble my efforts to communicate across political, social, ethnic, and racial boundaries.

Mr. President, these are the voices of some of the people you will be leading over the next four years. Those who supported your election look

forward to the implementation of many of the ideas and policies you expressed. Those who opposed your election now face a choice: resist all that you attempt to achieve, or cooperate in hopes that the outcome can be shaped in part by many voices and will perhaps be less strident than the things you said. People of faith and good will—good citizens all—will be traveling both these paths in the coming days. I hope you will be respectful and understanding of them all.

Mr. President, you are following a President who was well liked, although he also had many detractors, and who enjoyed unusually high approval ratings. This does not mean that the system he is leaving you is perfect. Far from it. As you have said, many things about our country need to be fixed. The poem I cited earlier said this: “The old is collapsing in on itself.... This is what is happening to a decrepit and ineffective empire.... A broken system where few benefit at the expense of many.... This existence is damaged beyond repair.... The old way is not working, has never worked, and the world deserves better.”

Mr. President, it is you who must lead us into that better world. I support you and hope for your success as our President, because your success as President of the United States means the success of the United States. Indeed it means the success of the world if we continue to embrace and exemplify the values and ideals which we have projected for generations. We are counting on you. But you cannot achieve success by dividing groups and setting them against one another. You cannot achieve success by holding up one group as superior or inferior to another. You cannot achieve success by sending out tweets at 3:00 AM to insult, degrade, and vilify those who disagree with you. You cannot achieve success by seeking to return to an idealized world which probably never existed but which in any case has been displaced by technology, population growth, climate change, and other forces beyond even your control. As you said in your acceptance speech, we must come together as one people, and you must be the leader of that.

I return to that day in November when the Arab American Karim Sulayman stood in front of Trump Tower blindfolded alongside his poster telling of his fear for what is to come. Here is what the rest of his poster said

to those who were passing by: “But I have hope that I am safe with you. Together we can build a community of caring rather than one of fear. You can trust me to care for you no matter who you are, what you look like, or where you are from. Will you embrace me as willingly as I embrace you? Will you shake my hand or hug me or take a photo with me and post it as a sign that I am safe here with you? I trust you. You are safe with me. There is safety in numbers.” Indeed, if you saw the YouTube, people at first looked with curiosity at Karim, but then little by little began to approach him, smile, shake his hand, give him a hug, and take a selfie with him.

Mr. President, this is what you need to do. You said it in your own acceptance speech, that we need to come together as one people. Unfortunately in your inauguration speech you spoke more of fears—mothers and children in poverty, rusted factories, and dysfunctional schools—than you did of coming together. Your “America First” theme is frightening to the world, and to Americans who know and depend on the world order which has been in place since before you were born. You need to speak and act so that people will know they are safe with you, whatever they look like, wherever they are from, however they worship and pray, whomever they love. So far you have not given us a clear signal that this is how you are going to behave as our President. I hope you will be working to rectify that perception, and that together all Americans can work side by side to build the nation we dream of under your leadership. This is a tall order in this troubled world, and I hope you are up to it.

Sincerely,
A concerned, faithful, and patriotic citizen