

Reading by James Baldwin, #186 in *Lifting Our Voices*

For nothing is fixed,
forever, forever, forever,
it is not fixed;

the earth is always shifting,
the light is always changing,
the sea does not cease to grind down rock.

Generations do not cease to be born,
and we are responsible to them
because we are the only witnesses they have.

The sea rises, the light fails,
lovers cling to each other,
and children cling to us.

The moment we cease to hold each other,
the moment we break faith with one another,
the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.

“Nothing is fixed, forever, forever, forever, it is not fixed; the earth is always shifting, the light is always changing...” I selected today’s reading from an anthology for Unitarian Universalist worship, the book *Lifting Our Voices* (an anthology I helped create back in 2015).

It’s by James Baldwin, a gay, black prophetic writer, who wrote these lines in the 1960’s as the closing paragraph to his essay called *Nothing Personal*. It’s an essay that connects very deeply with this month’s theological theme of “holding history.” In it Baldwin names the staggering disconnect between American myths about the past—like the myth of friendship between native Americans and colonizers that surrounds the thanksgiving holiday—and the reality those myths obscure; the brutality upon which this country was founded and the way that—because the myths of American history and values prevent us from fully grasping the past—the violence is still with us. A staggering disconnect. Since as a nation we won’t let ourselves fully acknowledge the violence in our history, we don’t know how to see and understand it now. “It has always seemed much easier to murder than to change,” Baldwin writes.ⁱ

Reflecting on Baldwin's words, Princeton Professor of African American studies Imani Perry says, "As long as Americans, and in particular white Americans, hold fast to the myth and remain stuck in the idolatries of the past, they deprive themselves of a usable past, one from which to learn."ⁱⁱ When you're stuck in untruths about the past, you can't learn from it. It's not usable. Next week, Bob is going to preach a sermon on settler colonialism will hold that history under the light.

Today I want to draw out another theme in Baldwin's essay, and that is the theme of personal history, hope, and change. In *Nothing Personal*, Baldwin flows as he often did between the personal and the social, between history, identity, death, loneliness, and love.

He speaks of the "irreducible gap between the self one invents—the self one takes oneself as being, which is[...] a provisional self—and the undiscoverable self which always has the power to blow the provisional self to bits." I'm going to say that again. Baldwin speaks of the "irreducible gap between the self one invents—the self one takes oneself as being, which is[...] a provisional self—and the undiscoverable self which always has the power to blow the provisional self to bits."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Provisional" means *for now*. Something that is provisional may, by definition, change in the future. So he's saying there's a gap between how we think of ourselves for now, and a different self within. One we don't see. And the self we don't see has the power to blow the provisional self to bits. You with me? He continues:

"It is perfectly possible—indeed it is far from uncommon—to go to bed one night, or wake up one morning, or simply walk through a door one has known all one's life, and discover, between inhaling and exhaling, that the self one has sewn together with such effort is all dirty rags, is unusable, is gone: and out of what raw material will one build a self again?"

The provisional self suddenly expires. It is past the "use by" date. Anybody here ever had a turning point in their life, where the way you've been, who you were, just didn't work anymore?

But it's "perfectly possible" to toss out what is provisional. That raw material we need to build a self again, or even to just make a slight change, is within us always. That raw material lies in the ability, more and more, to show up to our lives, including our pasts. Authentically. Unflinchingly even. Open to learning from the past, and open to a future we may not have expected.

I see a connection between this and Matt's thoughtful sermon for National Coming Out day, last month.^{iv} Baldwin, recall, was an openly gay man in an era when being gay was still illegal in the US.

In his sermon, Matt described National Coming Out Day not just as a day when people who can choose to come out may do so, or when we celebrate the power of queer visibility, but a day to reflect on what choosing to come out is like.

National Coming Out Day is a day that always gives me pause for reflection, though I have not ever personally addressed it in a sermon, and this is, I now realize, a somewhat conspicuous omission, which I'll explain.

Matt talked about the complexity of the decision to come out. He lifted up some of the reasons a person might not do so, or might do so in some contexts but not others. The impact on relationships, the sense of risk. When, and how, and to whom one comes out is something each person must discern for themselves. There isn't a right timeline.

He said, "Coming out is... not something that we decide to wake up one day and just "do." And he said, "Coming out is an intensely personal and contextual act..."

And with that framing, and without knowing I had been grappling with this very issue myself, Matt opened a door for me... to come out.

With that, and without knowing I had been grappling with this very issue myself, Matt opened a door for me... to come out. He opened the door for me to reflect on my own past, my provisional self, and what history I want to make for tomorrow by the way I show up today.

When I got married in 1996 at the age of nineteen, I did not personally know any queer people. I had been raised UU, so I was aware they existed and that my religion celebrated and affirmed them, but my family lived far away from the church, in a small, conservative town. Because of that, and because we did not have much money and most folks at the church seemed to be at least middle class, my family was not very involved in the congregation. Not involved enough to make close friends. When we drifted away, I was still too young to have paid much attention to sexual orientation. I knew I was different from my friends, but I chalked it up to being more open minded. Anyway, I figured, wasn't *everyone* fascinated by butch lesbians?

Romantic and sexual attention came from boys, so that's who I dated. Meanwhile, there was an ever-present threat of violence. All of my close female friends had been sexually abused, assaulted, or beaten. I was accustomed to being threatened on the street and at school. I was on my own from the age of 17, and longed for safety and stability. So when I found myself unexpectedly pregnant the next year, and the kind, slightly older, more stable seeming man I had just started dating offered to marry me, I said yes.

It wasn't until much later—in my twenties—that I realized I was not straight, and another decade passed before I felt comfortable saying so to even my closest confidants. I had built such a straight, traditional life—one in which I was able to chase other dreams and launch myself far away from the pain behind me. I treasured my marriage and the family we had created. I had no plans to dismantle it. When I thought of coming out, I wondered what right did I even have? What did it even matter, I told myself. I did not link that question with the deep loneliness I carried within.

And then, in late summer this year, that traditional life shifted and fell away. My marriage to Carlos ended. I am on my own again for the first time in decades. Dating, even. And therefore, for the first time, visibly queer. And ready at last to say it.

I have thought often, and never more than now, of the words my mentor spoke when I was ordained, that ministers must live out the same questions as everyone else, but we do it in public.

Still, as I prepared these words, I drew courage from those of you who have come out before me, especially those who did so during the last decade as I've served as your minister. Kids, teens, young adults, middle aged adults, elders. As queer or as transgender. When you were ready and on your own terms. In my office, in the courtyard or the sanctuary. In the rest of your lives.

Baldwin says, "It is love that guides or drives us into knowing and accepting our own identity..." I have witnessed the self-love that summoned your courage, and I've felt so much love for you in that.

The other day, I was reflecting on these things with a trusted interfaith colleague here in town, Erica Lea Simka from Albuquerque Mennonite Church. Erica is also queer and out. She shared a word from her tradition: *gelassenheit*. It's a German word that includes the root *-lassen*, meaning to leave. She says, "Gelassenheit means to release or let go- to be open. Spiritually, this can mean openness to the Holy Spirit." Another definition is "yieldedness." Yielding to the Spirit of Love, to self love, to the direction spirit moves in our lives.

I've said before that even a slight change now can lead you to a radically different outcome, in the same way that if you are traveling and you turn just one degree to the right or left, you'll eventually end up on a different part of the planet than your original course suggested. (Or an entirely different planet, if you turn on a vertical axis.) Even a slight change now can lead you to a radically different outcome. That's one way we make new histories out of the present. And sometimes Love asks us to make something larger than a slight change.

That's as true for our collective history as it is for our personal histories. When it feels overwhelming, here's Baldwin again. He says, "Since, anyway, it will end one day, why not try it—life—one more time?" He himself struggled to maintain hope. But he kept on reaching for love, and he wrote about this, about staying open to it.

Gelassenheit.

There is a poem written long ago by the Spanish essayist Miguel de Unamuno, and I want to leave you with an excerpt from that today. Unamuno was an activist and philosopher who was born in 1864. He was a passionate advocate for Spanish social liberalism. At the time of his death in 1936, he was under house arrest for speaking out against the dictator Francisco Franco. The poem is called, "Arrójate como semilla." Throw yourself like a seed.^v

He could be speaking to an individual, discerning their deepest self, or to a collective, a nation, healing its soul. He writes:

*No postergues por más tiempo tu tarea
Y, al hollar el camino de la vida,
Arrójate como semilla al surco sin mirar al pasado...
[...]
Porque ... algún día esa siembra dará sus propios frutos.*

Don't put off your work,
Throw yourself like seed as you walk, and into your own field,
Don't turn your face ...
And do not let the past weigh down your motion...
From your work you will one day be able to gather yourself.

May this be true, for you, for me, for all of us. May we throw ourselves like seeds.
May it be so.

ⁱ Baldwin, James. Nothing Personal. Beacon Press. Boston, 2021. (p 24)

ⁱⁱ From the Preface to Nothing Personal. (p. xiii)

ⁱⁱⁱ (p. 12)

^{iv} The sermon, delivered October 5, 2021, is titled "At the Risk of Being Myself," and can be found on the uuabq.org sermon archives page or at <https://youtu.be/5vO9YmRNQDE>

^v An English translation of the poem can be found here: <https://www.poetry.com/poem/43328>. I have leaned on this uncredited translation, adding some of my own for clarity in this excerpted format.