

## WHAT IT MEANS TO LOVE MY COUNTRY

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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If the election of Donald Trump on Tuesday were an earthquake, it would lie along what geologists call a normal fault. Two plates of the Earth's crust are explosively forced apart, creating a deep rift zone in between. And everyone and everything around gets shaken to the very core.

I've been shaken to the very core, and I know many of you have as well. In your responses to the pastoral email I sent out on Thursday, and in individual conversations with many of you over the past few days, you have expressed to me your disbelief, your anger, and your deep despair — for yourself and those you love, and for your country. Come January, the leader of the free world is going to be a man who has unleashed the demons of division among us like none other in recent memory.

We knew the fault lines were there — the line separating people in the middle of the country from people on the coasts, nativists from globalists, city dwellers from country folks, and perhaps most especially, conservative white Christians from everybody else. Robert P. Jones, author of *The End of White Christian America*, observed on Thursday that over the past eight years, America has been transformed from being a majority to a minority white Christian nation — from 54% white Christian to 43% white Christian. He says, “The waning numbers of white Christians in the country today may not have time on their side, but as the sun is slowly setting on the cultural world of white Christian America, they've managed, at least in this election, to rage against the dying of the light.”

And rage they did, along with other Trump voters whose grievances were more economic than religious. Living in the rural communities of our nation, surrounded by shuttered stores and rusting factories, beleaguered by rising debt and disdained by political elites, they found a voice for their pain and anger in the candidacy of Donald Trump. He's an unlikely mouthpiece for social conservatives and economic refugees — he's defiantly vulgar and unprincipled, and also exceedingly wealthy— but they didn't care. At long last, someone seemed to be listening to them.

By now, all of us are listening. And a lot of us don't like what we've been hearing. We don't like it at all.

Make no mistake: my concern this morning is not how you voted; I realize some of you may have voted for Trump. As a pastor and preacher, and as a public theologian, my role is not to help secure certain partisan outcomes, but rather to help safeguard the moral and spiritual integrity of our nation and its people. My concern is the rift valley that now divides our nation against itself.

This valley has been created, or at least been made substantially wider, by the morally reprehensible animosity Trump and many of his supporters used to achieve their victory. The vitriol they whipped up against immigrants, Mexicans, Muslims, Jews, people of color, women, LGBTQ people, and other minority populations has been truly terrifying. Trump has essentially promised to turn back America's clock to 1953, if not 1853. And now he's going to be our president — my president — for at least the next four years. God help us.

It's hard to believe that, as Hadley Freeman said in her Guardian column on Thursday, "The most qualified candidate in a generation was defeated by the least qualified candidate of all time." But this presidential election didn't turn on who has the better resume. Presidential elections almost never do.

At their best, presidential elections turn on hope. "It's morning in America," declared an actor-turned California governor named Ronald Reagan. "I believe in a place called Hope," proclaimed a little-known southern governor named Bill Clinton, referring to both the Arkansas town where he was born and his optimism for America. An inexperienced senator named Barack Obama rose to the Oval Office on what he called the audacity of hope. "Yes we can," he said to a nation pilloried by two costly wars abroad and a devastating economic downturn at home. Trump's promise to "Make America Great Again" tapped into people's hope that prosperity might be theirs once again.

But presidential elections can also turn on fear. Perhaps no presidential campaign in US history has more blatantly fear-mongered than the Trump campaign — fear especially of immigrants and of terrorism. The New York Times editorial board, in its response on Friday to President-elect Trump's appeal in his acceptance speech for guidance, rightly called upon him to "immediately and unequivocally repudiate the outpouring of racist, sexist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic and homophobic insults, threats and attacks being associated with your name."

I hope he does. As I said in my pastoral message, if I didn't believe people can sometimes find it within themselves to rise above the limitations of their past selves to meet the daunting challenges that life presses upon them, I wouldn't be a minister.

That said, I must confess I'm not holding my breath. Trump has seemed pleased to embody the bigotries he embraces, and he seems especially comfortable in his role as Misogynist-in-Chief. In her Guardian column, Hadley Freeman adds, speaking of Trump, "That is what misogyny looks like, and, like all bigotries, it will end up dragging us all down."

Anyone who cares about the moral and spiritual character of our nation should feel dragged down by what has transpired. Wednesday brought a painfully-bleak dawn to a nation explosively driven apart — not because a Republican had defeated a Democrat for president, but because fear had trampled hope, misogyny and racism had trampled equality, and retribution had trampled opportunity. As Trump and his

supporters fervently hoped would happen, an unexpected electoral earthquake drove our nation apart, impelled by forces of economic desolation and racial disdain.

Given what America seems now to have become, I ask myself, as the poet Adrienne Rich asks, what it means to love my country.

Many of you — along with many others, especially people in New York — have compared the events of this past week to 9/11. In the early weeks and months after that desperately difficult Tuesday in September of 2001, many people described the terrorist attacks as a clash of civilizations — the clash of the West against the East. While this analysis ended up being historically misguided, we nonetheless had a clear sense that America was being attacked by some malevolent force from without. And we banded together as a nation to rally against it.

In some ways, the clash of civilizations we experienced this past week turns out to be even more difficult to take. It's not us against them; it's us against us. In my view, we are now experiencing a clash between the reality of what America had always been against the ideal of what America could become — and indeed, has been becoming. We've become even more of a melting pot, even more open and inclusive. That's the irony, and that's the source of deepest pain, at least for me. The earthquake on Tuesday came precisely because America has been edging ever closer to the ideal America has always represented, both to itself and to the rest of the world.

The day after the election, Aaron Sorkin, the Oscar-winning screenwriter of *The Social Network* and mastermind behind *The West Wing*, wrote a letter to his 15-year-old daughter Roxy and her mother Julia. After decrying the misogyny and bigotry that had carried the day, he concluded, "America didn't stop being America last night and we didn't stop being Americans and here's the thing about Americans: Our darkest days have always — always — been followed by our finest hours."

After the earthquake, here's what it means to love my country. It means committing myself to embodying the best of our nation's ideals. It means treating people with dignity, insisting on equality, and working tirelessly for equal opportunity. It means standing with people who feel threatened or afraid — with women, with people of color, with immigrants, with Mexicans, with Muslims, with LGBTQ people, with Jews, and with anyone else who feels marginalized or left out.

It means not losing hope, not ever, even though the voices of derision and forces of division threaten to overwhelm us. It means keeping our minds open to other people's problems and our hearts open to other people's pain. It means keeping our spirits alive and our souls on fire, which is why we come to places like this sanctuary, where we find refuge and comfort, and remind ourselves of the ideals of liberty, equality, and opportunity to which we have committed ourselves.

We can do this work, you and I — along with millions upon millions of other points of light, shining with courage and conviction, even in the darkest night.

Shine on! Shine on!