

“Survival is Not a Theory,”

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday,
January 18, 2026, by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

“Each one of us here is a link in the connection between anti-poor legislation, gay shootings, the burning of synagogues, street harassment, attacks against women, and resurgent violence against Black people. I ask myself as well as each one of you, exactly what alteration in the particular fabric of my everyday life does this connection call for? Survival is not a theory.”

For those of you who may not be familiar with Audre Lorde, she was a writer, professor, philosopher, intersectional feminist, poet and civil rights activist. She was also a Lesbian, a mother of two, and a person who engaged with the legacy of the civil rights movement as it touched on the many varied aspects of her personal identities. She often described herself as “Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother, warrior, poet.” The [essay](#) that provided our reading today was published in her collection *Sister Outsider*, in 1984. She knew that within her many overlapping, intersectional identities, there were included important parts of herself that would still have her labeled as an “outsider” even in communities where she should feel welcomed.

“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial ‘outside agitator’ idea. *Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.*”

Audre Lorde was shaped by the life and legacy of Dr. King, and at the beginning of the address that became today’s reading, she speaks to the fact that - though she is addressing a gathering for the Malcolm X Weekend at Harvard, she didn’t resonate as much with Malcolm’s work or ideas until she read more closely and examined the changes and growth he demonstrated in the final years of his life.

In a slightly earlier part of her essay, she writes, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives. Malcolm knew this. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew this. Our struggles are particular, but we are not alone. We are not perfect, but we are stronger and wiser than the sum of our errors. Black people have been here before us and survived. We can read their lives like signposts on the road and find, as Bernice Reagon says so poignantly, that each one of us is here because somebody before us did something to make it possible. To learn from their mistakes is not to lessen our debt to them,

nor to the hard work of becoming ourselves, and effective.”

Lorde wrote this essay for a diverse audience, and within it she moves back and forth between directly addressing those hearing her words who are Black, and those who inhabit other identities. The ability to hold multiple identities, hear words written to the lived experiences of those who do not share all of our identities, and still find the human touchstones within our shared struggle is a vital skill that we must develop and rely on now more than ever.

“Within each one of us there is some piece of humanness that knows we are not being served by the machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust. If we are to keep the enormity of the forces aligned against us from establishing a false hierarchy of oppression, we must school ourselves to recognize that any attack against Blacks, any attack against women, is an attack against all of us who recognize that our interests are not being served by the systems we support.” (4:35)

The machine which orchestrates crisis after crisis and is grinding all our futures into dust. Remember, again, that this talk was given in 1982. Though she addresses concerns that are not always front of mind in our current

society - the creation of “nuclear poisons” - and though some references feel dated...if you replace “who goes blind assembling the microtransistors in our inexpensive calculators” with “what populations are harmed and exploited to mine the rare earth minerals that are inside each and every one of our smartphones” - it all points to the same thing. We are part of a machine that extracts from us and does not serve us.

I know the machine that comes to *my* mind when I think about this particular passage, and I have to imagine that many of you are thinking of the same thing: the governmental systems and structures of the United States, both those stunted and barely recognizable ones that remain after they have been decimated at the hands of a petty and monstrous tyrant, and the ones that were destroyed quicker than we could imagine.

Perhaps this is a failure of our imaginations. Speaking to my own lived experience, as Lorde does to hers, I want to very explicitly name that I believe this to be a failure of the white imagination. Remember, we can hear the lived truths of others, and as Universalists we must recall all the ways our humanness binds us and binds up our survival with one another - AND, we cannot turn a blind eye to the worst parts of our history. Remember, also, “We are not perfect, but we are stronger and wiser than the sum of our

errors.” If you feel resistance within yourself at the idea of this failure of the white imagination, I invite you to please treat that resistance with curiosity, not judgement. Together, we can - and must! - become stronger and wiser than the sum of our errors.

I am sure you remember that last year, the occasion of the federal holiday celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. King also happened to fall on the day of the inauguration. I know that at this time last year, I was preaching on the Ware Lecture that Dr. King gave to the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations in 1966 called “Don’t Sleep Through the Revolution.” And I also know that I was about to be rudely awakened by the immediate depredations of the current administration. I was in danger of staying asleep in the face of changes unimaginable in my middle class white mind.

My friends, colleagues, and peers who do not share my white identity - though we may share many other overlapping identities, affections, points of reference, and cultural connections - were simply not as surprised by the turn of our system to directly attack its own as I was. Because this country has never, ever treated its residents of color the way it has treated its white residents. It still does not. Every year, every King weekend, in nearly every pulpit across this nation, we gather in our

still-too-segregated churches and both honor Dr. King's legacy and lament how true this still is. Things have improved, AND: we are still divided. I wish it were not so, but if I deny the truth of our history and our present then I will not be prepared to engage with the truth that I hope we can shape in our future.

The fact of the matter is that the appalling murder of Renee Macklin Good is the thing that appears to, I hope, have finally awakened the white imagination in this country to the fact that whiteness is no longer the shield it once was. It has awakened me, personally, in a way that other violent actions have not - I am not proud of this fact, I am not proud of the fact that it took the death of a queer white woman to get me to really consider what alterations in the "particular fabric of my everyday life" I am prepared to make.

But if I admit this to myself - if I admit that this one particular horrific act was the straw that broke me open - then I can begin to internalize what Audre Lorde told us, what Dr. King told us: "Survival is not a theory." "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Survival is NOT a theory.

It is, it must be, a practice. I must be truly and deeply honest with myself, both about my shortcomings, my gifts, and what I am prepared to do with my life in the face of this latest, grandest, most existential threat of a system that is literally, before our faces, grinding us to dust. All of us. Any of us. Any of us who dares to look after our neighbors, to expand our ideas about who a neighbor is, any of us willing to learn from the mistakes of the past and understand these do not disqualify us from building the future. Together.

By examining our reactions, but setting aside any shame about them, we can become the ones who dare.

Researcher and storyteller Brene Brown calls guilt a learning tool - our conscience is telling us to pay attention. But shame is not a helpful tool. Shame tells us that we are unworthy of love, care, affection, justice. But our Universalist faith assures us that ALL of us are inherently worthy of love, care, affection, and justice. Set aside shame. Listen, with love, to your conscience. How are you called to the practice of survival in this moment?

I will share with you one last quote from this same essay (at the same time encouraging you to seek out and read the essay in its entirety) as we consider survival not as a theory but as a practice.

“We share a common interest, survival, and it cannot be pursued in isolation from others simply because their differences make us uncomfortable. We know what it is to be lied to. The 60s should teach us how important it is not to lie to ourselves. Not to believe that revolution is a one-time event, or something that happens around us rather than inside of us. Not to believe that freedom can belong to any one group of us without the others also being free. How important it is not to allow even our leaders to define us to ourselves, or define our sources of power to us.”

The revolution isn't a one-and-done. The actions we are witnessing each day, that are horrifying us and radicalizing us and making us weep and making us rise up in anger and solidarity and humanity - this didn't happen overnight. It won't end overnight. There is internal work to be done within each of us and within our country if we are ever to trace our way to a new future. Not to go back to the system that allowed this current rot to fester, but to consider, deeply, the mistakes of our past so that we can - collectively - become wiser and stronger than the sum of our errors. Whether you have been working on your internal revolution for a long time or whether you're just starting to awaken to the need for it, you are welcome, you are *needed*, to join the practice of survival, the practice of revolution we are called to engage in, day by day, moment

by moment. We must consider the fabric of our lives, how much of it is illusory, how much of it is obscuring the truth of our cruel and grinding system. When we lift the fabric obscuring the truth, that truth will make us free. None of us are free until all of us are free. Come, let us practice survival, together. Amen, ashe, and blessed be.