“Democracy”
Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday, October 18, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

It is still beautiful. It is so beautiful.

Thank you, Jeff, for your reflection.

Thank you, Jeanne, for bringing life to Auden’s life-changing words.

“Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.”

The fort we are placed into *allofasudden* will never not be a fort to us. It is the slow building of the walls, the iron, brick, mortar, artificial light, artificial mind that surrounds us with the things we think will make us happy and the ways we might hope to be good…that is the fort that assumes the furniture of home. This place, this land, the beauty that surrounds us are not false, but there is another truth there as well.

Multiple truths reside within each of us, as we struggle to hold all that is real within this world. All that will point us to who we truly are, who we truly aim to be, all the distance and depth between those, where beauty and terror reside.

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“Accurate scholarship can
Unearth the whole offence
From Luther until now
That has driven a culture mad,
Find what occurred at Linz,
What huge imago made
A psychopathic god:
I and the public know
What all schoolchildren learn,
Those to whom evil is done
Do evil in return.”

This week we learned of yet another school shooting, another news story that chokes me up, that fills my eyes with tears and with rage, that leaves a part of me turning away from this, the way we have turned from the truth. There is a fort so strong we’ve imprisoned ourselves within, and it muffles the gunshots, it muffles the cries, and it places an artificial distance between ourselves and the evils of humanity. Those who are hurt and hurt others. Those whose whim of will becomes a threat to the life and livelihood of too many. In Bend, Oregon, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, every city where an armed agent of the state decides the gun IS the law, every city where a child sees no recourse but that law, that gun, that harm and evil and emptiness.

It is hard, but we must look, dear ones. We must look, because it is these images that show us what beauty truly is. When we lose breath, lose sleep, lose peace to that evil moving within the world, we must know, believe, trust that what it is showing us is the depth and breadth of beauty that also exists. That still exists. That is worth fighting for.

I call Auden’s poem life-changing because it changed my life. I first found it in the fall of 2020, casting around for hope in a time that felt notable for its absence. Locked in the isolation of global pandemic, I prepared for the United States presidential election by looking for ways to connect, despite the isolation. You see, and this will be hard to hear, but I suffered a

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profound and personal loss on the day after the presidential election in 2016, when a friend of mine found herself unable to see the light or the beauty or the good in the world anymore, and made the most heartbreaking choice imaginable. And in 2020, as I approached another election and another anniversary of her death, I knew I needed to look at those very things. The light. The beauty. The good. Both in the world at large and in America specifically, within the workings of our democracy. That November, I volunteered to serve as an election judge in Prince Georges County, Maryland, where I lived at the time. Bolstered with boxes of KN95 masks, gloves for those who wanted them, tiny bottles of Prince Georges County Board of Elections branded hand sanitizer, and sporting an official Prince Georges County Board of Elections apron, I showed up to do the unlovely, unglamorous, imperfect, work of democracy.

2020 feels like another world now, but the work of the world is still with us. The need for us to show up for the good of our democracy, the good that is within each and every one of us, the good that we sometimes struggle to see, the good that we sometimes struggle to be.

We cannot seek perfection - not in ourselves, not in our neighbors, nor in our systems and structures. But we must also do more than focus upon only the blight, the loss, the rot.

I had never considered myself much of a patriot, I'm ashamed to say, until after the election in 2016. Despite the pain and hurt and anger that my personal loss layered on top of the pain and hurt and anger felt by so many - but by no means all! - I felt a deeper love for my country than I ever had before. Because I felt the threat. Because I glimpsed the walls of the fort around the furniture of comfort that my place and privilege had allowed me to reside within… We had called ourselves happy and good, and when I woke up and felt we were neither, my heart found a new way to break.

Sufi mystic Hazrat Inayat Khan wrote, "God breaks the heart again and again and again until it stays open."

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Whether you think it is the work of god or humanity or just the work of the indifferent world, the fact that our hearts can still break means we can still feel. We can still mourn and rage and our eyes can still fill with tears of joy as well as sorrow, we can still dance and sing and paint and love and imagine a world where we do not assume the worst of others. Where our schoolchildren can feel safe. No active shooter drills. No hiding under the desks that will provide no shield from nuclear destruction. What of a world where we dare to imagine balancing safety and freedom for all, where when someone does evil to others, we have the collective will to say no. No to doing evil in return.

Auden's poem was written immediately following the events of the date of its title, the day when Germany invaded Poland and the rise of Nazi authoritarianism was no longer deniable to the world at large, when the crack in the wall of the fort let in a wind of terror and destruction. It is a reminder to us to look for that world beyond our fort, that world beyond ourselves, those places where we could sow love instead of fear, the places where we might find a chance not to answer evil with evil, but with a force more powerful. That selfsame force at the heart of our faith, Love, and its lived representation in the world, Justice.

"Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame."

Even beleaguered by negation and despair, even though I am the same kind of human being as those who are acting in ways antithetical to myself

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and my ideas, I must show an affirming flame. We must lift those flames no matter who needs the light. If we think the light of truth or Love or Justice is only for some, and not for all, then we will not repair or sustain democracy. We may have never realized the full potential of this country, of its audacious democratic experiment, but the joy and beauty resides within knowing we must still try. With the affirming flame of Love and Justice, we must imagine a world so beautiful that the human heart can only long to make that beauty continue, perpetuate, and grow. And while we imagine that world, we must be willing also to look beyond the walls of our fort, our isolation, and see that it already exists.

So may it be.

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