

H. Rap Brown was right, “Violence is as American as cherry pie.”

I remember that when I heard him on television in 1967, I was annoyed because I thought he should have said “*apple* pie.” And I was scared because it was a time of turmoil. Of Black Power and the Vietnam War and anti-war marches and race riots. I had a two-year-old son and the care of a big house in a suburb west of Chicago.

And I know why that remembered statement resurfaced now, 54 years later. On Jan. 6, 2021, an armed and angry mob of mostly white men invaded the Capitol of the United States, destroying remnants of our history and threatening the official recording of our votes.

No one could believe it was happening. But it was. And no one who saw those images, now seared into our common memory, could doubt the anger, fury, and fear in the faces of those scaling the walls and rampaging through the historic halls.

I am sure that’s what prompted me to remember H. Rap Brown’s statement. I looked it up and wandered around YouTube for an hour watching H. Rap Brown (later named Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin) exhort people of color to rise up and demand equal justice, equal opportunity, equal hope.

More than half a century later, all the wrongs that his rhetoric addressed still exist.

Worship Associates have assigned reading and assigned writing assignments to help prepare them to lead our community’s worship services. Our text is “The Shared Pulpit” by Erika Hewitt. In the segment most recently assigned, we are cautioned that “the Unitarian Universalist Principles are not theology”. They feel like theology to me. And I think the most challenging statement is the first: we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Even those invading our capital, breaking windows, defacing statues, terrifying elected leaders?

Yes. If we take the UU Principles seriously, even those.

The invaders had inherent worth. Not apparent worth. I believe they were driven by fear. Fear about how their world was changing. Fear that white males would no longer be the final arbiters of our society. Fear that people of color, and women, and homosexuals, and transsexuals, and people from different cultures, with different beliefs would make the rules, control the economy, decide the conflicts.

Fear that their Norman Rockwell vision of the United States no longer existed, if indeed it ever had.

Back in 2002, I was working on a memoir. To do so, I created a personal chronology listing significant personal, cultural, and political events for all the years I have been alive. Just glancing at that document reveals years replete with violence. Every single year since 1941. Every single year of my life.

That chronology is also laced with wonders. Children, friends, loves, trips I have taken.

So many powerful experiences that filled me with awe and wonder. So many connections with great souls.

And all those notes trigger memories that are overwhelmingly positive.

In the course of my 79½ years I have discarded lots of illusions and myths: the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, ‘happily ever after’, and one nation, indivisible with liberty and justice for all. I know that none of these is absolutely true. And I also know that none of these is absolutely false.

The things that are perhaps the most difficult to abandon are the national illusions. The events of Jan. 6, 2021 shattered my vision of an inviolate capital. It invoked images of coups and counter coups around the world. Events that were never supposed to happen in this country. Now I know they can.

I also know that the concept of an inviolate country has never been true. I know that my nation’s history is soaked with blood and injustices. Those are my heritage. And the heritage of Native Americans and people of color and immigrants.

Acknowledging this is probably the first step toward remedies. Toward equal justice for all. It seems that if indeed this country is ever to become what all of us have always imagined it to be, all of us will need to adopt our First Principle.

Think about it. If we, wherever we went, whatever we were doing, we were able to see all those we encounter as persons of inherent worth and dignity.

It should not matter if they are Republican or Democrat, black or white, rich or poor, right or wrong, Donald Trump or Barack Obama.

It will matter of course. Unitarian Universalists are not saints or supernatural in any way. But if we could strive to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every other human being, it is entirely possible that those other human beings could respond in kind.

Then, perhaps, eventually, this country could actually be the land of the free and home of the brave ... and the just. And Native Americans could finally be sovereign over their own traditional lands. And immigrant families could stay together and be welcomed. And Blacks and Browns and people of all ethnicities would be treated with respect.

Together, this rich conglomeration of cultures and races could at long last make this country what we were always taught it was, the greatest country on earth.

And H. Rap Brown would at long last be able to revise his judgement. Finally pardoned and freed from prison, where he has been for more than 20 years, he could be reunited with his family and friends and – after time to experience the new version of his home country-- Imam **Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin** could say “America is beautiful.”