

## **THE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF JUSTICE AND COMPASSION**

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Spirituality was thrown out by many humanistic Unitarian Universalists along with God-language and most religious, spiritual, and theological ideas. In the last 20 years, UUs generally have been more open to Spirituality as well as religious and theological language. Part of the change may be the desire by many younger searchers to include more mystical experiences and awareness in their religious spectrum. While older humanists may have been satisfied with rational and scientific explanations for the world as they experienced it, there are things that happen without adequate explanation, or at least that can not yet be explained. The holistic influences of earth-centered religions may have also helped to balance out some of the negative Christian experiences to which many older Unitarian Universalists had reacted.

The importance of ritual, community worship, spiritual awareness, and faith have been re-discovered by younger generations of Unitarian Universalists, though our understanding of each of those terms may be far different from much of the religious spectrum, as well as varying widely within our movement. In 1999, Skinner House published a little book entitled, *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*, edited by Scott Alexander. Many of my colleagues contributed essays covering a wide range of spiritual practices from balance to mindfulness to gardening to relationships to right actions. Among the essays on right action were themes such as Social Justice, Anti-Racism, Simple Living, and Vegetarianism.

This morning, I would like to share some of my thoughts about the Spiritual Practice of right actions in regard to Compassion and Justice. Growing up as a United Methodist in the suburbs of Chicago in the Vietnam and Civil Rights eras, I knew that Justice and Compassion were inextricably linked, but the language of Justice and Compassion came to a much clearer focus while studying at the Institute of Culture and Creation Spirituality with Matthew Fox. My highest religious sense and mystically spiritual experience until that time could probably best be illustrated by a group of youth and

adults holding hands and singing We Shall Overcome somewhere at a camp in the woods, on a youth retreat at the beach, or in the sanctuary of the church I grew up in after discussing the riots and fires that were burning just a few miles away. Not quite a Damascus Road conversion experience, but powerful in my life nonetheless. A few years too young to go to Woodstock and just barely too young for the draft, I sometimes felt out of place with those who had fought for Justice, but we each must discover our own place.

The wars that would end all wars didn't, and racial and economic justice has not triumphed in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Era. Our time is different than every other time in human history in some ways, while in other ways it is just about the same. As the author of Ecclesiastes wrote long ago, there is still a time for war and a time for peace, a time to mourn and a time to dance, a time to weep and a time to laugh.

Unitarian Universalism may offer opportunities to engage in all kinds of religious and spiritual practices, I hope that we shall never move away from practicing works of Justice and Compassion.

Yesterday morning, I happened to turn on MSNBC and heard some of the speeches being delivered at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary March on Washington. I heard Attorney General Eric Holder and Newark NJ mayor and Senatorial Candidate Cory Booker give stirring messages remembering Dr. King and encouraging listeners to continue working for equality and justice for all persons. 50 years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his most famous "I have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where today people remembered him. Dr. King was a critical force in the Civil Rights Movement, which faltered after his assassination, but the work for justice has continued over the last half-century. Dr. King's non-violent direct action probably is the best modern example of the Spiritual Practice of Justice with Compassion.

Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement took time to pray before, during, and after any demonstrations or actions. They also took time to mindfully reflect on their process and their successes and failures. Dr. King also journeyed to India to talk with Gandhi about non-violent direct action, a pilgrimage of

sorts to meet with another spiritual leader practicing Justice with Compassion.

Dr. King's work deeply affected most of the religious liberals of my generation. I do not remember a time in my life when his words and actions were not helping to shape the course of my life and ministry. We sang songs about Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin. We joined demonstrations, walked in marches, and held hands with those most deeply affected by poverty and racism. Those of us who knew about his anti-war efforts may have been moved to embrace pacifism or at least work for peace. Dr. King's commitment as a frail human being exemplified and brought to life the teachings of Jesus.

Today, as many of the speakers at the Anniversary March apparently mentioned, the work for justice has broadened to include GLBTQ&Q persons and immigrants who are currently oppressed in ways even more visible and virulent than the remaining effects of racism.

One of the problems I see with those who would separate actions of justice from spirituality is that true Spirituality cannot be just one component of our lives, but must be in line with the full array of our values. True Spirituality cannot be separated from our actions, but must be the motivator for our actions. The dualisms and multiple compartmentalizations of our work and home and health and spirit lives may allow us to focus in certain areas at certain times, but we are not mostly cursed with multiple personality disorders. We are integrated beings whose values ought to influence each segment of our lives. It is when our work values conflict with our home and spirit values that multiple psychological and spiritual disorders are likely to develop.

Unitarian Universalism, being a relatively small religion, has not always been as successful as some other groups in advocating for change in society. Until recently however, UUs have been almost unanimous in knowing that work for justice and the betterment of society has been an essential part of what our religion is about. The works of compassion and justice in our

history have been many and various, but always they have been a core expression of our religion.

In the essay, *Social Justice*, in *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, Art McDonald, Deborah Holder and Rev. Stephen H. Furrer reflect on the behavior of Christian anti-war activists in the 1960s-70s:

*This new coming together of prayer, reflection, and activism brought many of us a completely new understanding of spirituality and spiritual practice. Suddenly spiritual practice was embodied. No longer about flight from the world, it was immersion in the world—immersion that aimed to enlist all of our spiritual power in the service of social, cultural, and political transformation. (p.197-8)*

Similarly, Matthew Fox, founder of the Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality and voice of the Creation Spirituality movement, often talks and writes of the importance of work for justice and the way it is an expression of compassion. Compassion and Justice are the keys to a meaning-filled life for the Creation Spirituality movement, as Fox elaborates in many of his books. Here, too the work of Compassion and Justice is a spiritual practice.

Unitarian Universalists have engaged in the work of justice and compassion throughout the history of both sides of our movement as well as the 5 decades of united effort. It has not always been discussed in terms of spiritual practice but it has always been seen as critically important and in line with the values of the movement.

It takes courage to put oneself on the front lines of an unpopular march or demonstration. It takes courage to stand up for what we believe. It is not always easy to get motivated for action even when we believe strongly in the rightness of the cause. That may be part of the reason UUs so often talk things to death rather than actually getting on with doing something! If it is indeed spiritual work, we will keep hearing the call to action until we actually engage, until we find the courage to act in accord with our principles, to practice acts of Justice and Compassion.

And we will not be alone. Even if we do not go out in the company of friends, we will find friends joining in common cause for the betterment of

society. Whether the specific cause be peacemaking or bullying, racism or homophobia, there will be others like us who are called to work for justice.

Churches serve many roles, but UU churches include among their roles the responsibility to encourage members and friends to work for justice with compassion. This is clearly in line with our values and the Principles that express them. For UUs this is a spiritual practice, and like most of the humanist values of our movement, it is also rooted in the teachings of Jesus and the other great religious exemplars. Healing and caring for the outcasts of society was something Jesus did himself and sent his followers out to do. He did not judge people by societal rules and laws, but by the motivations of the heart and a sense of higher justice. Jesus and the Bodhisattva responded to human need and they inspire us to respond in similar fashion.

This call to engage in right actions, to practice the spirituality of justice and compassion is a high calling indeed, one that touches all UUs at one time or another for it is at the core of our principles. We each respond in different ways, but most of us respond by engaging in some kind of compassionate work for justice, whether it be providing support services, donations, or actively demonstrating, marching, or lobbying.

For many of us, it was the commitment to justice with compassion in some specific instance that attracted us to Unitarian Universalism, and for many it is the work of building a better society that keeps us engaged in this movement. For many UUs, the work of Justice and Compassion is the only meaningful Spiritual Practice, while for others there may be an array of natural and supernatural occurrences and realities that also inspire spiritual awareness. Whatever moves and energizes us for this lifework is valuable and significant.

One of the most important facets of this Unitarian Universalist commitment to Justice and Compassion is that it is a shared value at the core of our principles and at the core of our community life. We may not always agree on what injustices need our strongest attention but we recognize the importance of the work as a community and as a community we are committed to building a better society.

I hope that we can work together to choose an annual social justice project and join our efforts together, but until that happens we can continue to support each other in our individual efforts. There is so much work to do and so many challenges to distract us from the work. We also do well to approach this work humbly, recognizing that the work is never finished, that there will always be more to do. Even if this work expresses our most important values, we also need time for our hobbies, relationships, families, music and art, and all the ordinary stuff of life--you know the stuff that keeps us sane and balanced!

I commend to you thus, the spiritual practice of compassionate justice-making! May we each find fulfilling and meaningful ways to make a difference and to continue in our effort to shape a better world!

So May it Be! Amen.