

JUSTICE AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

From my earliest days in Sunday School at the Methodist church, I remember hearing about Jesus caring for people, especially the downtrodden and unacceptable, the blind, the lame, tax collectors, lepers, women, children and even the despised Samaritans. There was never a time in my life when I could even imagine religion or spirituality being separated from justice work. I have run into a number of people even in Unitarian Universalism who choose to emphasize either Spirituality or Justice Work, but most UUs today would probably say that both are expressions of our values and ways to live out our Principles.

There have been periods when I have been inspired to engage more religiously in contemplative practices, though that has not been the case of late. Recently, especially over the last few months, I have been much more engaged in the work of justice. Admittedly, most of my efforts have been utilized in writing sermons and other messages, posting and forwarding messages from others, and attending meetings (oh, so many meetings), rather than marching or joining demonstrations, but I do think that my efforts express a Spiritual Practice of Justice Work. I wish I had the energy to do more. I did go to Sacramento for the demonstration with the Climate March, but I only stayed a couple of hours and I will try to go to other demonstrations when I have the time and energy.

This work of Justice has been the main Spiritual Practice of many Unitarian Universalists in recent years. I have heard many UUs talk of being called to work for justice by various experiences during their lives. In many ways, my biggest sense of calling originally was to make things better for youth who felt left out, disenfranchised, discriminated against. As I have aged and dealt with some health limitations, I have not been as involved in youth work in the last few years, but it is still a passionate concern for me.

There are also many people who loosely identify as UU but find their community in groups working for justice. It would be nice if they would also engage with the church, but the work that they are doing is important and it is where they find satisfaction, spirituality, and a sense of meaning. This congregation has a long history of engagement in social justice work, particularly through the community ministry of the Rev. Bob Green. We may have even more members engaged in social justice work now, but even if not, it certainly continues to be an important aspect of the life and work of First UU.

I would like to think that we can offer important support for justice work while also offering opportunities for meditative and contemplative spirituality, but that is not always possible. I am very appreciative of Sara's offering of classes on Buddhist Meditation this year to help balance our spiritual opportunities! I very much believe that we each have something to share and that our shared ministry strengthens the church! So if any of you have ideas for additional things that you would like to share or places where you would like to serve, please let us know!

The idea of justice as a spiritual practice expresses both a reality and a hope. The importance of justice work is particularly apparent even in these early days of the Trump Presidency, but that it is work coming from the heart of our religious tradition as well as from our many sources is not always as clear. Our UU Principles are only a little over 30 years old, but they express values that were formed out of hundreds and thousands of years of religious and humanistic history. Those values were often expressed in the teachings of Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, and other religious exemplars and philosophers. Early in the last century, humanists separated these values from any reference to divine beings and still found them to have meaning and importance as humanistic values. The work that we do based on the values behind the UU Principles is both religious and spiritual, as well as necessary in the world in which we currently live.

The injustices in our nation and world are all the more apparent under the current regime in Washington. We are the only nation left with health care primarily existing to make money for rich corporations and individuals, caring for only those who can afford to have exorbitantly priced health insurance or pay for treatment. We are the only nation where hundreds of thousands of people go bankrupt each year trying to pay for healthcare. In just one more example of the problem of the wealth and income gap, millions of poor people will die earlier because quality affordable healthcare is not available to them. This is a matter of life, and spirit, and justice!

The immigrants who have come in waves to America have changed our nation with each new wave, but not because they are taking jobs from anyone willing to work in the fields. Immigrants have time and time again paid their dues harvesting fields, building railroads, and filling whatever low-paying jobs that have been available because those from earlier waves of migration have moved up and won't work the fields or engage in hard manual labor. Closing the borders to migrant workers from Mexico will mean that fields of produce are left to rot in California and across the South. This is not rocket science but has been demonstrated each time the borders have been closed. And even paying workers a living wage hasn't closed down many farms or corporations. The lies told or financed by billionaires have done far more harm to our nation than fair treatment of the poor and migrant workers. And building a wall won't protect 99% of Americans from the billionaires and their schemes. These are matters of life, and spirit and justice!

There are terrorists and militants who claim allegiance to Allah, just as there are militant radicals who claim to be Christian, but those who follow the core values of every religion recognize the value of every life as an expression of love from the divine or a blessing from the universe. Shutting out people who have become our allies, and who are our friends from Islamic nations will not stop the violence by those who oppose the expansion of American consumerism and the rapacious attitudes of American corporations around the world. No, it will take diplomacy and

dialogue and agreements that guarantee human rights and fair treatment to workers to reduce the anger of those responding more to American expansionism and control. This is a complex world in which we live, a world that will benefit from international agreements that protect workers far more than from corporate windfalls. These are issues of life, and spirit, and justice, issues which call us to engage.

The immorality and corruption of the current regime in Washington clearly calls us to make a moral response. The Billionaires and Millionaires now in charge of our nation are not making decisions that will benefit ordinary people, rather they are making decisions that will make themselves and their families and their corporations even wealthier and more powerful. Congress is not caring for ordinary citizens by striving to eliminate the Affordable Care Act or dismantle Social Security. These are decisions made by the wealthy to benefit the wealthy. There will be no trickle down benefit if they succeed. Previous generations of leaders have understood the benefit to all Americans of a robust middle class and affordable healthcare and fair wages and even a social safety net. The benefits to the wealthy now in charge will soon disappear if workers cannot afford to buy their wares. These are deeply troubling issues that are leaving millions to suffer, pushing those in the middle class into poverty, taking away the hope of generations. We are called to make a moral response for these are issues of life, spirit, and justice.

And then there are the increases to a military budget already bloated to pay for unneeded new weapon systems, maintain standing military forces, and keep the military-industrial complex thriving at the expense of all domestic programs. When our nation spends more on the military than the next several nations combined, it is not our national security that is benefitting, but the makers of weapon systems and warships and missiles. No nation poses a serious threat to our nation, and yet the fear-mongering by certain millionaires and billionaires continues and the nations of the world fear and hate us. These are issues of international justice, matters of life and spirit that we must address.

To treat Justice as a Spiritual Practice, we must keep ourselves well-informed as to these matters currently afflicting our world. We must speak up and speak out and demonstrate and march to let those in power know that we will not sit idly by as this world is destroyed by those with wealth and power. We must make ourselves aware, looking beyond the news created by politicians and promulgated by corporate media, to discover what is really happening in the world.

Climate Change is not a hoax, and the impacts are becoming greater each year as too little is done to mitigate the effects of rising temperatures. People in low-lying coastal areas around the world are seeing oceans rise and storms intensify. Air pollution is causing more and more children to suffer from asthma. Elders are at risk from rising temperatures during the hot months, especially if they cannot afford air conditioning. These are just a few of the early stages of climate change, but those scientists and others who have been paid to deny climate change by the wealthy and their corporations are becoming less and less credible as parts of the world become uninhabitable. These clearly are matters of justice, life, and spirit that cannot go unanswered. We are called to engage in the struggle for the environment and to protect our mother earth.

Now that a Special Prosecutor has been named to look into Trump's dealings with Russia, I am a little more hopeful that the world will not blow up, but even if Trump is Impeached, Convicted, and Removed from office, we will still need to deal with Pence, Ryan, McConnell and the Republican Congress. The Climate Deniers are in charge and will likely remain in power for at least one term. Many will suffer if the Affordable Care Act is replaced with the Trump doesn't Care Act. But you all know the problems we face, so where do we find hope to make Justice work spiritual?

Reminding ourselves of our values, the importance of each person, the interconnections and interdependence of our world, and the hope of a strengthened United Nations organization that can help to shape a world community, can all help to ground us the spiritual practice of justice.

The most important spiritual experiences I have had were the ones that reminded me of the interconnections between all beings, of our ultimate oneness. I have been blessed to stand on the sides or tops of mountains to see the world spread before me, and to know that what happens to any of us happens to all of us, to see cities and fields, hawks and eagles and vultures and know that each has a place in the world. The natural world has been so thrown out of balance by humans that it is easy to feel the spiritual quest that lies behind justice work around the environment.

Similarly the work of healing is a spiritual work as well as a science that has become a misguided source of profit for corporations. Returning compassion and spirituality to the work of healing and caring for those who are sick or injured will go a long way toward fixing what is wrong with health care in our nation today.

A few among the super-wealthy have promised to spend on or bequeath their fortunes to good causes rather than just passing everything down to their offspring. This is a good start to redistributing wealth and re-balancing classes in our society. A 90% tax on Corporations such as existed under Republican President Eisenhower would go a long way toward funding healthcare, a social safety net, and rebuilding infrastructure. One facet of many spiritual practices is accountability to another, and that would help us all be accountable to each other!

Remember that catchy saying, “No Man is an Island?” Justice becomes a spiritual practice when we remember that we are all connected, that we all can succeed on this beautiful planet we share, if only we also reach out to each other and practice respect for each other, for other living things, and for the Earth. May our spiritual practice and quest for justice help to re-shape our world before it is too late!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!