

## **The Impossible Will Take a Little While**

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The other night I met with the YAMS group – our 18-24 year old group and we had an interesting discussion about ministry. One of the things they wanted to know was about how I came up with sermon topics and the process of sermons and writing them. What I forgot to include was frustrating it can be to come up (especially weeks and even months in advance) with sermon titles. So this morning - it's true. I took the title for this sermon from a book with the same title.<sup>1</sup> I can do that because titles cannot be copyrighted. I also did it because this sermon and that book have much in common (or at least I hope so) for both deal with social justice, hope and courage. There are some great authors in the book and some inspiring stories and essays.

And while this isn't a UU published book, one of our own is included: the Unitarian Universalist Rev. Victoria Safford who tells this story, originally told by Ian Frazier in his book, On the Rez. It seems a while back, in South Dakota, there was a girls' basketball team on the Pine Ridge Reservation. "The Pine Ridge girls' basketball team played an away game in Lead, South Dakota. It was one of those times when the host gym was dense with anti-Indian hostility. Lead fans waved food stamps, yelling fake Indian war cries and epithets like 'squaw' and 'gut-eater.' Usually, the Pine Ridge girls made their entrances according to height, led by the tallest seniors. When they hesitated to face the hostile crowd, a fourteen-year-old freshman named SuAnne offered to go first. She surprised her teammates and silenced the crowd by performing the Lakota shawl dance and then singing in Lakota – 'graceful and modest and show-offy all at the same

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<sup>1</sup> The Impossible Will Take a Little While by Paul Loeb

time,' in Frazier's words. She managed to reverse the crowd's hostility – until they even cheered and applauded. 'Of course, Pine Ridge went on to win the game.'"<sup>2</sup>

There is something about hearing these kinds of stories that stir our hearts. And we need to hear these kinds of stories for they offer hope and courage – they inspire action in our own lives. It seems to me that human beings are born with a capacity for fairness, for justice and we want to see that lived out in the world around us. Some of us even choose to believe that the long arc of the universe does in fact bend towards justice. That idea and those words are attributed to Martin Luther King Jr. as well as to our own theologian Theodore Parker and I'm sure there are others. It matters not to me who originated the phrase for its truth is universal.

I believe we have, deep within us, a longing to do some action that will serve the greater good, the larger community. And our faith, and this church offer opportunities to do just that. Last month I was talking with a new member about how she came into this congregation. She told me about her parents who are very involved in another faith community. I wondered if there was tension because she was changing faiths. "No," she said, "in fact, her parents knew a neighbor who was a Unitarian Universalist who lived down the street. And that person was always busy doing something to help others. This knowledge made it okay for their daughter to move into this faith.

And yes, we do things – we are a busy people. Why? Because our values, our principles – especially the second one that affirms justice, equity and compassion in human relations, with the others compel us into action – for deep down we need one another more than we know; and that freedom and justice for one means freedom and justice for all. So we stay very busy – helping the homeless, bringing in food for food

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, page 183.

banks, active in demonstrations against war, studying and working toward living peacefully, becoming a green sanctuary and practicing living with the model of reuse and recycle. We attend committee meetings and events that promote freedom for all, including immigrants, people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender; we organize for justice, promote fair banking and keep reproductive choices and the health care system information before the congregation; we promote living simply and participate in the state-wide organization UU Legislative Ministry.

It wasn't that long ago that the Social Justice Ministry Team chose to be busy in their work, to do their work differently and a new framework was created. This new framework outlined a positive vision for social justice here at First *and* a way of being together in our work. Rather than competing for limited resources and people, a spirit of support and respect, cooperation grew and is becoming the norm. We wanted to ground our work in the spiritual of Life and Love, not in the anger or bitterness that living with injustice can create. We want our work to be motivated by Love and concern for humanity and this planet, not motivated by our frustration because "those" people in "that" administration are doing us wrong. We are taking to heart and trying to live the poem by W. H. Auden who wrote: "All I have is a voice to undo the folded lie, the romantic lie in the brain of the sensual man-in-the-street and the lie of authority whose buildings grope the sky; there is no such thing as the state and no one exists alone; hunger allows no choice to the citizen or the police; we must love one another or die..."<sup>3</sup>

This is deep spiritual work; it is maturing work we have engaged in and continue to learn how to do. We light a chalice and have opening words that center us and introduce us to each other in a deeper way; we listen and speak respectfully and we sing.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., page 58.

Social justice work always needs music – like the songs this morning, for within the music there is power – to soften a heart, to energize a soul, to bring folks together.

All of this have been part of who we are and who we are becoming. AND we continue to ask how we might deepen our work and encourage and inspire others to join with us. The why we do justice work is easy and the "how" we do it – grounded in the spirit of our faith, is our future focus. In his important book, The Prophetic Imperative, the Rev. Richard Gilbert lays out four lenses through which we see and can do social justice. These lenses or ways of doing are exciting to me because they challenge us to broaden our "how". It seems like we've been stuck doing justice work the same way for years...out on the patio with clipboards, signing up folks – with opportunities limited to being a certain kind of activist, out on the street. And that style has been effective for some but not many. Often, many people have been left on the sidelines – of wanting to do something but thinking or feeling that because that's been the only model, there's no room for them to be involved. Gilbert's lenses, I think, create a place for more involvement by more people with other talents and gifts. The four lenses are:

**1. Social Service** (direct service/hands-on) a direct rendering of service to those in need. At its best, social service is not merely charity; if done well, a real empathy with those presumed to be society's losers can develop. Those who take service seriously begin to raise questions: Why, in this land of plenty and opportunity, are there people who do not know where their next meal is coming from or where they will spend the night? We do some of this through the homeless shelter, food bank and other projects like this.

**2. Social Education** – we need to begin to understand what happened to people and why.

What are the social and moral conditions that create poverty in the midst of plenty? We examine economic forces, political factors and general absence of the poor from the voting booth. Education becomes a tool for social change. Real social education, radical education digs to the roots of our problems and reveals pictures that are often unpleasant for those in power to view. It is the process by which persons learn about social issues in the light of a religious tradition, involving both a discussion of their context and an interpretation of this content in the context of ethical principles. A big part of our work includes this lens.

**3. Social Witness** – making public by words and/or deed the convictions of an individual or a group on specific social issues. Resolutions, fasts, sermons, street theater, marches and picketing are all acts of social witness calling attention to an injustice. Witness is advocacy but as long as it is isolated and not part of an organized effort to bring about social change, it remains witness. I think this happens through our demonstration work – through Peace and Democracy, Peace-making study and action issue among others.

**4. Social Action** – it is organized, it attempts to influence policy makers and decision makers. It involves concentration on the causes rather than the symptoms of injustice; it means going beyond the Band-Aid. We do this through Organizing for Justice and our own UU Legislative Ministry.

In a recent social justice ministry team meeting, our nine action and nine affiliate groups went through an exercise of determining where most of their time, their energy was spent in which lens. While some included a couple of them, most focused on social education. What we are growing into and it is our challenge and chance – to have opportunities for justice work in all four lenses within each action ad affiliate group. It is a way to invite more people into the experience of doing justice work. A way of living our values and faith into action. A way for more people to be creativity engaged with the issues.

The Impossible Will take a Little While – this was never more true than the recent Supreme Court decision about marriage equality and the freedom to marry. Growing up, I never thought that in my lifetime I would ever have the chance to legally marry a woman I loved. I never thought I would actually see same gendered couples treated as full citizens under the law and have access to the privileges and responsibilities of being a legally recognized married couple. For decades people who were lesbian, gay and especially bisexual and transgender were harassed, arrested, their livelihoods threatened and some were even killed because of fear and hate; few ever dreamed that one day we would be in this place – this place of acceptance in a faith community that respects all; in this place where we might be protected from acts of bigotry and prejudice; in a place where we would be seen and treated as equals under the law. It seemed impossible...but some believed and dared to dream it possible. Some fought and demanded and took risks and participated in acts of civil disobedience; some studied and learned and asked the question "Why?" when prejudice was apparent. Some challenged the system and challenged the discrimination that kept people from living in some neighborhoods,

working in some careers, loving and adopting children and creating a loving family. Over the years gay and straight people acted together to challenge and question and kept on "keeping on" – some knew and lived the truth that "even if the struggle outlives us, even if it's impossible to envision a time when it will end, they knew that conviction matters."<sup>4</sup> And in living this – they helped bring the impossible into reality. One of the things about the recent Decline to Sign Campaign was that it involved everyone, whatever their strengths and talents, all could participate in this action – doing everything from routine office work to researching facts, to writing legal briefs, to getting signatures on a pledge form to talking with others about the meaning of marriage – everyone could participate in this action. I believe we are in this place of possibility because there was and continue to be ways for everyone to be involved. And now we have 14 UU ministers in this county who are getting organized to stand witness at five county clerk offices, ready to offer their services to officiate weddings for all loving couples – showing that there are people of faith who believe in and stand on the side of love.

Imagine what could happen next with other justice issues if such an approach were taken. How might homelessness, peace-making, and policy change work (to name a few) broaden and change if we could be creative enough to include new ways of being and doing? There is a new opportunity before us that encompasses such a way – such an approach. Bill James has been attending this church for a while now and he works for the County of San Diego in the foster care system. He has a passion for youth and especially those youth who tend to be forgotten; there is an opportunity to become a mentor to a foster kid left in a system that was never meant to be a family. And there are multiple

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., page 10.

ways to be involved in this work – to participate in some way that is meaningful to all involved. Among the many tables on the patio today – find Bill's table and talk with him about this work; there's a place for you there – whatever your talent or strength.

Our junior high youth recently finished their OWL program – Our Whole Lives. It's a sexuality curriculum that teaches respect and thoughtful engagement with others and being in a relationship that is based in shared values, as well as giving good information. The class was made up of youth from our church as well as from a local Society of Friends congregation. In the class one day there was an activity in which the class was divided into groups and the groups had to discuss an issue and come to some agreement about it. The conversation in the small groups began and after a short amount of time one group was finished talking and quietly waiting for the other groups to finish. A leader couldn't believe the group finished the assignment already and went over to prod them along. The leader emphasized that the whole group need to be in agreement over the issue. A student looked up and said, "yea, we are. We're the Quakers – we know how to do consensus."

We are Unitarian Universalists and we may never come to consensus on limiting our work or focus on one or two justice issues – there is too much work to be done. But we can create a focus, a way that allows for more to be involved so we can have a greater effect, a larger impact for the greater good. We can learn and study, we can be involved in direct service, we can be a witness for and find ways to advocate for systematic change for all the issues we're involved in to create more justice for all. We can find a way for more people to work for justice from their strengths and create change for the better. SuAnne, that freshman basketball player danced her truth on the court that night, in the

face of bigotry and fear; she was true to herself and did what she knew to do – she acted when others couldn't. And we can too – what is calling your name? What is the Spirit calling you to do? May you answer with Yes! And help heal this hurting world. Let it be so.