

To Be An Effective, Justice-Seeking People

A response to Reverend John A. Buehrens' Minns lecture

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Minns forum

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“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?” ~ Micah 6:8 NRSV

The greatest gift we give one another is our very presence. John, it is an honor to be in your presence as we celebrate your 40 years of ministry. Paige, your very presence lights up every room.

I see myself in this context as a warrior who has been on a vision quest, returning to this large circle of elders to ground myself in the ways of the tribe. Reading the Minns lectures that have come before, discerning the struggles that lay ahead, one truth continues to emerge: we are called to shape the image of justice into the image of our most private words and sculpt this vision into the image of our most public deeds.¹

What is, therefore, required? One translation of Micah says that we must do justice and love kindness. I interpret this to mean that what is required is that we *do* justice and *be* kind. This passage nurtures my most private wish for our public deeds. My hope is that each time a Unitarian Universalist walks into a room, those present will exhale and say, “Oh good, the UUs have arrived.” That’s my wish.

I remember being at a town hall meeting where people were at each other’s throats. Just then a Buddhist walked into the room. People exhaled and said, “Oh good, the Buddhist has arrived.” I remember being in a heated city council meeting observing fellow citizens using the microphone to – what’s the best way to say it – magnify their opinions. Then a man approached the mic and said, “As a Quaker...” Everyone exhaled: “Oh good, the Quaker has arrived.”

What effect do we, as Unitarian Universalists, carry with us? What taste do we leave in people’s mouths while in the public square? What kind of responses do we get when elected officials and heads of corporations watch the UUs walk into the room?

One way to measure our effectiveness is to not simply tally the things we are *doing* but to ground ourselves in a generative way of *being*.

Lovers of kindness, keepers of the dream, let us take up the age-old invitation to lead by being. When we lead by being we become known, first, for our kindness. This is what is required of us to be an effective, justice-seeking people.

¹ Inspired by Maya Angelou’s poem, *On the Pulse of Morning*: “Women, children, men, / Take it into the palms of your hands. / Mold it into the shape of your most Private need. / Sculpt it into The image of your most public self. / Lift up your hearts / Each new hour holds new chances / For new beginnings.”

John, in your talk, you use your direct experience as a primary source to proclaim a bold charge: for Unitarian Universalists to collectively claim our power through a relational ministry rooted in the disciplines of compassion, humility, and understanding. I intend to use my direct experience by telling three stories which illustrate how the vision we share can become a way of life. I'll frame these stories with a song. *We fall down, but we get up. For we're people with a vision. Who fall down and get up.*²

I was in the last month of my ministerial internship, when the following email arrived, "How can you possibly say that Romans 1:27 doesn't refer to homosexuality?" That was the entire email. Romans 1:27 reads "In the same way that men abandoned natural relations with women they were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men..."(NIV).

What was this about? Maybe the author was referring to one of my marriage-equality speeches. There was a signature: Jay G. Smith, a senior executive for Operation Blessing International, a company founded by Pat Robertson – an evangelical minister who vehemently opposed gay rights. Why would Pat Robertson's senior executive write me, a ministerial intern?

In lies the dilemma of this first story: what does justice-making look like, feel like, when we receive hostile communication? Are we hostile in return? Or is something else required of us? What we choose to do is a reflection of who we believe ourselves to be. It all depends on our beliefs about power.

I once believed it to be powerful to condemn wrongdoers. I believed it right to tear down another's unexamined assumptions and vaporize those whose presence was not worthy of my attention. I believed that others were the cause of my aggression: others were to blame for my feelings of despair, disappointment and rage. Rather than anger being used as a signal it became the solution to all my problems. It felt good to fuel the addiction of righteousness. I was doing justice. I was doing justice. But! I was being an asshole.

I am merely five years into my ministry and have long since mastered the art of being an asshole. I have spent far too much energy using the public forum as a battlefield, annihilating those perceived to be my enemy. I have armed myself with faithful friends, so that each time we walked into a room, those present would shade their gaze and whisper in dread, "The UUs have arrived."

I used to believe that being feared was powerful. I used to believe it was my duty to free the oppressed, but when reacting with righteous anger, guess who became the oppressor? Thich Nhat Hahn says, "I came to set the prisoner free only to realize the prisoner was me."

Jay Smith's email came at a formative time in my life. I had just begun to experiment with the *moral imagination* as a spiritual practice. Rather than my usual knee-jerk reaction another way of being was revealed. I can be curious rather than be furious. I did some online research and learned that Jay Smith served as a Baptist pastor for eleven years; spent six years in the U.S. Navy; and three years in the Air Force. He had been married for over 30 years, had four

² I was inspired by Donnie McClurkin to write this version of "We Fall Down." The tune is different and so are the lyrics, the original being "For a Saint is just a sinner who falls down and gets up."

children and lived in Virginia. As for the organization he served, the mission of Operation Blessing was “to exemplify Christian compassion and benevolence while conforming to the highest standards of integrity...”

I was advised by my colleagues to ignore him and “Hit delete.” Others said, “Tell him he’s a bigot.” I knew, however, that those responses would say more about me than him. I began to experiment with another kind of reply.

Dear Rev. Smith, Please accept my apology. I am sorry if my interpretation was offensive. I will respectfully respond to your email to, first, clarify my understanding of the Greek translation and, second, to ask for your advice. I meant to convey that, my interpretation of Romans 1:27 refers to pagan orgies, promiscuity, infidelity and deceit. I understand these words to hold a different meaning to fidelity between consenting adults.

Regardless of my interpretation, my intention is to understand your position. After reading your bio online, it is clear that your expertise as a minister and humanitarian has enhanced your biblical scholarship. In this context, my hope is to seek your advice about the continuation of the passage, line 1:32, that reads, ‘... those who do such things deserve death’ (NIV)? I ask this question in the context of my own story. Last Valentine's Day while on the New York City subway a feeling of peace came over as my partner offered me a gift. He gave me a single red rose. We were then approached by a man in a suit who spat on us.

I continued, saying, I moved to New York City because my home state, Nevada denied me adoption. I did not meet the state’s definition of family. I told him that my experience with discrimination is not bound by any one state, for “I was at a blood bank in Manhattan the other day and discovered a federal law that prohibits gay men from donating blood. How did it come to be that my life-giving blood could not be used to save another's life? Instead, Rev. Smith, some people read the Bible as giving them permission to take my life. Is death deserved for engaging in a loving relationship that is celebrated with the passing of a rose? I want to find refuge in the mission of your organization that makes the pledge “to break the cycle of suffering.” Do you have any advice on how to live this mission? As a religious leader, do you have any suggestions on how to address the hostility and violence that is experienced in my everyday life? Thank you for your time to write. I look forward to future dialogue. Faithfully, Nate

I pressed send while humming, We fall down but we get up. For we’re people with a vision who fall down and get up.

Within two hours he replied. Nate: You ask some very good questions... My jaw fell to the keyboard. I will give it my best to formulate an answer. However, I can't take time from work to do that. Let me also say I'm sorry for the ridicule... you've been subjected to. My eyes welled with tears. I thanked him for his quick reply. Years have passed. I have not yet heard from him.

This experiment in leading by being taught me that it is possible to be both strong and caring. By showing empathy to another empathy may be given in return. What could have been a firestorm of righteousness became an opportunity to do justice by being kind.

Would such a method save me from the skinheads who were about to come to our church in force? How’s that for an introduction to the second story?

You may know this story because some of you may have received the following viral email from a group called Anti-Racist Action. It read: *The First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia hosts racist, homophobic, [anti-immigrant] hardcore band... There is no doubt that the Keystone State Skinheads (KSS)...will be attending the show in force... Reverend Nate Walker... is fully aware of this show but stated that the church would not “censor its tenants.”* The email went on to ask the reader to call my cell phone and to email nine congregational leaders, whose contact information was also listed, and *tell them to shut down the show.*

This battle cry was sent to hundreds of ministers and social justice leaders in countless congregations through the country. Within a 48-hour period, the following organizations called me personally: the Philadelphia and Pennsylvania State Commissions on Human Relations, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and two detectives from Homeland Security.

In lies the dilemma of this second story: what does justice-making look like, feel like, when one among us is portrayed as unjust? Is it “just” to treat a mass email as the holy grail? Is it just to email and call me to make threats and cast insults? Countless UU ministers sure did, believing that that justice comes first through punishment - act now and question later. As one distinguished colleague said, “Censorship is merely a façade when you profit from hate-speech.”

Oh no, “The UU’s have arrived.”

How should a rookie minister have responded to such a firestorm? My belief was simple: conflicts are resolved through communication. I therefore plastered my cell phone all over the internet and held over two-dozen public conference calls within 48 hours.

Together we reviewed the facts: the Anti-Racist Action called to warn me about the show but there was no evidence that it was being held at our church. I explained that if they were indeed scheduled to play, we would need time to consult with our tenant and to discuss whether or not we had the legal authority to censor the activities of our tenants.

I made the rhetorical statement, “can we tell the daycare centers that rent from our church what they can teach or what guest preachers can preach or what lyrics guest musicians can sing?” These, of course, became the fateful words that were used to make it look as if the church was “determined to host” a hate group, which the minister “refused to censor.”

When it became clear that the band was indeed trying to play at our church, my strategy changed. I said bring it: but on our terms. I welcomed the band, not to play their music, but to attend a public media forum to talk openly about racism, homophobia, and xenophobia. I wanted them to talk with me and a camera crew about the differences between free-speech and hate-speech. Why? I believe something about the nature of conflict: *conflict is an opportunity for deeper intimacy.*

Intimacy is necessary to build trusting, authentic relationships. This ministerial philosophy is made simple: being in relationship heals racism and homophobia and xenophobia; refusing to be in relationship perpetuates fear and judgment.

Said another way, by quickly demonizing people we have never met, or know very little about, we use our fear to justify their elimination. But through relationships we gain a new kind of power.

How is this made possible? When kindness, coupled with justice, brings a punk band, skinheads, and radical activists to meet face to face with little ole me, an openly gay minister who is in an interracial relationship with an immigrant who just got his Green Card.

I'll never forget when a leader of the Keystone State Skinheads entered my office. He started the meeting by asking, "Reverend Nate, were you afraid to meet with me?" I said, "No, were you afraid to meet with me?" We spoke of his police record, his deep concerns about multiculturalism and illegal immigration. He even used my computer to log into a White Pride chat room to show me the varying opinions on homosexuality.

He assured me that the skinheads would not be showing up in force. Before shaking my hand and hugging me, he expressed his respect for the church and said "thank you for not making me out to be a monster."

I spoke with the band the next morning and asked about their racist lyrics. They laughed. I asked, "What's so funny?" and they replied, "We have a Turkish singer, a Russian-Arab guitarist and a Jewish drummer." They explained the irony of how they have been made out to be this hate group when the reality is that they are all in their late-forties, with kids and full time jobs who put out an album 12 years earlier with lyrics that do not reflect their current beliefs.

I specifically asked them about the lyrics of one song that started by screaming the word "Fag" followed by the sound of a machine gun. They said they were just trying to get a reaction out of those "liberal fascists." We had a long talk about liberal fundamentalism, how when those of us take pride in being open minded close our minds – when we become what we set out against.

I explained that their lyrics, the sounds of their machine guns, did not shock me. I then read to them a passage in the Christian New Testament that says homosexuals deserve death. I explained that whether such a message is in scripture or in punk lyrics, it is my responsibility to study the words and to understand their context.

I asked if they understood the consequences of hate speech, which could be seen as inviting others to behave violently. I told them about the man who opened fire on our sister congregations in Knoxville, TN, because of his hatred for liberals and for a church that welcomes gays. I asked them if they intended to use their music to provoke others to do the same.

I asked, "Why would you want to come to our church. "Because *Rolling Stone* says your church is one of the top punk venues in the country." I then took the advice my UUA colleague, Keith Kron, and asked, "Would you agree to donate the proceeds of this public forum to the Human Rights Campaign and the Freedom to Marry fund?" I told them that this could be a great opportunity to publicly explain how their beliefs have evolved. They replied, "Man, we'd do anything for you Reverend Nate, anything, *but...* the thing is if we clear our name then people won't think we're crazy." I said, "That's the point!"

They explained that the more fear people had about the band, the more popular they became. I then asked, “Well, then why in the pursuit of fame would you want to defame the church – the organization that would be viewed as giving a bullhorn to oppression?” They said, “That’s why we need to cancel the show. We’ll cancel it,” they said, “ You have shown us respect so we’ll respect the church.”

What is, therefore, required of us? Justice is the quality of being fair and well founded; justice without kindness can lead us to become what we set out against. If we can truly lead by being, we can use the moral imagination to empathize, to sympathize, and to understand. Let me be clear: understanding need not imply agreement. Justice will not come when everyone in the world agrees with me. Justice, however, may one day reign when the energy we spend condemning an unjust position is matched with comparable efforts to understand how others came to hold their positions.

Such a method, which couples the act of doing justice with the art of being kind, laid the framework for my encounter with executives of one of the most feared companies in the world. Before this final story is shared, let me remember that, *We fall down but we get up. For we’re people with a vision who fall down and get up.*

I jokingly told the assembled, “And the skinhead walked into my office and said, ‘Reverend Nate, were you afraid to meet with me?.’ I said, ‘No, were you afraid to meet with me?’” Their laughter stopped when they heard me say, “If the meeting with the skinhead went well, then surely our meeting will go well.” Looking across the cherry wood conference table were a dozen senior executives of Monsanto.

Monsanto, which helped develop the atom bomb. Monsanto, which produced DDT and Agent Orange used in the Vietnam War to defoliate the environment. Monsanto, whose spin-off corporation agreed to a \$700 million dollar settlement because of the environmental damage caused when 45 tons of PCB pollutants and mercury were dumped into the local creeks of Anniston, Alabama. Monsanto, now known as a multinational agricultural biotechnology corporation that produces over 90 percent of the world’s genetically engineered seeds.

In lies the dilemma of this final story: what does justice-making look like, feel like, when you have gained access to power? Who do we imagine ourselves to *be* when in a room with the CEO, members of the Board of Directors and over 14 senior executives of one of the most influential corporations in the world?

I told them, “I don’t mean to compare you to skinheads. It’s just that experience taught me something that my faith challenges me on a daily basis. I don’t want to be someone who vilifies people. I did not come to St. Louis to storm the Monsanto castle and use my words to demean you. I have come to make meaning together by watering the seed within us all, which asks *are you sure? Are you sure?*”

Six months earlier, doubt, as a spiritual practice, put me in a curious state of being. Members of my congregation cultivated my curiosity by taking up the UUA’s charge to study ethical eating. We met for weeks, discerning the complexities of this vast subject. I offered a sermon in the form of a letter to the CEO of Monsanto, which asked a series of moral questions,

which led Monsanto to invite us for a two-hour meeting. It was more than two hours. It was four days of enriching discussions about the ethics of biotechnology.

They welcomed me to their annual stockholder meeting and the CEO introduced me to members of the Board of Trustees. One senior scientist said, “In the 14 years of talking with stakeholders this is the most captivating conversation we’ve had.” Why?

Because we came not only with questions about what we were against, but we knew what we were for: the creation of an oath. We asked them, if they would help develop a code of ethics for entire field of biotechnology to vow to *do no harm*.

Later, two executives flew to Philadelphia to continue the discussions over dinner. I won’t go any further because Michelle Bates Deakin masterfully describes this event in *UU World*. But let me close this talk by saying that this encounter with Monsanto taught me something about power.

Questions can generate invitations. Kindness can be used to cultivate relationships. Relationships can give us access to influential people. Visions can captivate the moral imagination of people in power. Such encounters can become seeds to lasting change. Isn’t that what effective justice-making looks like, feels like: to captivate the imagination of all those entangled in conflict? For each conflict is an opportunity for intimacy.

And so next time we receive hostile emails, will we be hostile in return or curious about the person behind the screen? Will we be willing to learn the stories of those whom we perceive to be the object of our fears? Whether skinheads, or punk musicians, or anti-racist activists, it is required of us to first understand the story of those with whom we are in conflict. And understanding does not imply agreement. A senior executive of Monsanto believes with all her heart that the organic moment will destroy our world: not being able to provide enough food for the world’s hungry. I can understand her perspective and yet still disagree. Disagreements need not breed hostility.

What is required of us to lead this next great chapter of our faith? We, as one strong body, are required to lead by being. When we feel the impulse to be the *interrogator* we must choose to be the *generator* of visions larger than ourselves. When we feel the impulse to be *enraged* we must accept the invitation to be *empathetic* and no longer make people the object of our aggression. When we feel the impulse to be *righteous* we must make the choice to transform our soapbox into a music box and lead the people by being powerfully playful.

Let us, therefore, couple the urgency for justice with the art of being kind and collectively lay the foundation to be an effective, justice-seeking people. In doing so, each time we walk into a room, those present will exhale with relief and say, “Oh good, the UU’s have arrived.”

John, Paige, Stephen, friends, colleagues, all those present: as we minister together, if ever you see me stoop to hostility, if you witness me plummet into bigotry, if you see me use my power to harm, my hope is that you will kindly take my hand, look me in the eye and say, *We fall down but we get up. For we’re people with a vision who fall down and get up.*