

To Be An Effective, Justice-Seeking People

A response to Reverend John A. Buehrens' Minns lecture

By Paige Getty

Minns forum

Saturday, November 5, 2011

Kings Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts

Thank you, John – and the Minns Lecture Committee – for this opportunity to reflect on what is required of us as faithful Unitarian Universalists. John, I especially appreciate your reminders about how self-righteousness and finger-pointing and setting-ourselves-apart get in the way of truly meaningful work – for justice and otherwise. I'm reminded of other prophetic leaders who have insisted that our outrage is justified... but that our arrogance is not.

Our congregation in Columbia, Maryland, wrote its congregational covenant a few years ago. The process was positive and community-building, and much of the content came easily to us as a group. But we experienced the most vocal debate over a single line which ultimately would read that we promise to “struggle together on our spiritual journeys.” The word in contention was “struggle” – some among us thought it was too negative, too pessimistic, not hopeful enough. But ultimately we agreed to keep the word in the covenant – a reminder that real religious and spiritual work often *is* a struggle. Many of the most important things in life *are*. But our congregational covenant says we will not struggle alone – it says that we come into this particular religious community because we trust one another with those struggles, and we will struggle not alone, but *together*.

We could talk for a lifetime (and we probably will) about what is required of us Unitarian Universalists if we are to be an effective, justice-seeking people. But the one point I want to contribute today is that we must do it together – as individuals we need one another; as congregations we need other congregations; and as a people of faith we need other peoples of faith. We don't just need each other's company. We must trust one another. We must trust one another with our hopes, with our vulnerabilities, with our questions, with our struggles, and with our successes. And we must be *trustworthy* in holding one another's most precious truths and misgivings, without ridicule or scorn.

No one of us – not one person, not one congregation, not one denomination or association – has all the answers, or all the perspective that's necessary in this work. But when we share our *real* experiences – even the ones that aren't perfect and don't turn out the way we hoped – there's a much greater likelihood that we'll collectively see the way forward.

Most of us can recite the paraphrased version of Theodore Parker's moral arc statement – but that statement is even more powerful in its entirety. In a sermon in 1853, the Rev. Parker said,

“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

I do not pretend to understand it... my eye reaches but little ways.

It feels almost cliché to say that we are on a journey – a life journey, a spiritual journey, a journey toward wholeness – and yet the cliché makes it no less true or valid an image. The most meaningful efforts we undertake are often ones for which the endpoint is not clear, and yet the effort itself – and its imperfect progress – is still necessary, meaningful, and transformative.

John suggests that I have “engaged a suburban congregation at multiple levels in social justice work.” I hope that it is true, even as I find myself wondering if I as a leader and we as a congregation are fully living our mission to be a religious community that acts in the world to make it better. Mostly though, I find hope in the ways we struggle together – within our congregation and with others of different faiths in our community – to live out that mission.

One of the things we’re trying to do is to be more open about our questions, our shame, our vulnerabilities, and our missteps. One small group in our congregation has chosen to talk openly and candidly with each other about issues of race and racism. In these conversations, we talk about things like how we have experienced racial profiling in our own lives. Because I have participated in these conversations, I watch myself in more deliberate ways, in a more aware kind of way... noticing my own thoughts and reactions and biases with a new level of insight.

In that context, I can reflect with trusted companions on how I know I received better treatment – probably unfairly better treatment – in a recent interaction with a bank employee who didn’t know me, but took my word for it. Because I am white, and well-groomed, and usually competent-looking. And I can share candidly about my own gut reaction to a jogger on my street who seemed “out of place” to me – only to realize later that I felt that way because he was not white. I do not recognize every person who jogs on the sidewalks in our neighborhood, and Columbia has a population that is quite diverse ethnically and culturally. But I never question whether a *white* person is out of place or not. I hate seeing this in myself. And I found it still important to say it out loud.

I hate having even to think about whether it is right that a white, well-groomed, nearly-middle-aged woman got what she wanted just because she looked trustworthy. Is there any way that a person of color would have received the same treatment? What about someone who appeared younger, or less professional, or less confident? I’ve been reading for years about white privilege, and this experience only reaffirmed it. How much privilege am I carrying around with me everywhere I go? How much benefit of the doubt do I take for granted? How much assumption-of-innocence, or assumption-of-safety, or assumption-of-authority? It’s a *lot*.

But I am at least glad to be more aware of these dynamics than I was ten years ago, or even five years ago. I’d like to think that someday I’ll be completely unprejudiced, and certainly not racist... but not yet, and likely never *completely* so. But am I closer to that goal than I would be if I weren’t engaged in intentional dialogue in a community that I can trust with my vulnerability.

And yet – *of course* – the reflection and dialogue are not enough on their own. Our justice-seeking mission is not fulfilled merely by talking about personal experiences. But the “work” must be grounded in real lives – our lives, our ancestors’ lives, our neighbors’ lives. Honest dialogue grounds us in the work of justice, growth, transformation. The more we talk honestly with each other, the more we are self-aware about personal and institutional oppression. The more self-aware we are as individuals, the more likely is the institution itself to be poised to dismantle oppression, by confronting conscious and unconscious attitudes and practices that exist in our system.

Speaking on the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a few years ago, then-Senator Barack Obama reminded his listeners that, yes, “...the arc of the moral universe...

bends towards justice, but here is the thing: it does not bend on its own. It bends because each of us in our own ways put our hand on that arc and we bend it in the direction of justice....” (Howe)

Each of us in her own way puts her hand on that arc.

I serve a congregation in a Maryland suburb between Washington, DC, and Baltimore, where at least one of our elected officials is proud to proclaim regularly that we are one of the wealthiest counties in one of the wealthiest states in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. It is not always entirely clear what are the great needs of this disproportionately privileged community where our elected officials – and many of us who live there – work hard to disguise and hide those needs.

But we know that doesn’t mean they aren’t there. So we must be deliberate in asking ourselves where to place our particular hands on the arc.

A couple of years ago, we were part of an effort to secure more robust legal protections for a small community in our county – mobile homes. The work didn’t happen fast. First, we built relationships through the slow, deliberate process of getting to know one another. We crossed the real and contrived barriers of class, religion, race. We took the time to move beyond knee-jerk reactivity and superficial sound bites. We developed leaders within communities that had long since decided that other people had all the power, and always would.

A year earlier, it had been essentially inconceivable that these residents would transform from powerless victims at the mercy of an unjust system into the potential masters of their own destiny. They were following a script that had been written for them by other persons with financial and organizational power... a script that said mobile home parks are disreputable, unworthy, undignified... a script that said the poor have no voice in our society. They were victims also of their own fear and isolation from one another. And now, they’ve told their stories before crowds of hundreds; they’ve formed their own community association; they’ve garnered the support of elected officials; they have appeared before the state legislature; and because of the testimony of one resident during one hearing, they influenced the legislation so that the right-of-first-refusal bill became stronger than it was as initially drafted. But that one resident was never standing alone.

It’s like the “real” story of Rosa Parks, who didn’t simply decide she was tired and refuse to give up her bus seat one day. Before that day, “Parks had been active for twelve years in the local NAACP chapter... [She] had attended a ten-day training session at Tennessee’s labor and civil rights organizing school... [She] had met an older generation of civil rights activists...”

[One historian explains that the] conventional portrayal suggests that social activists come out of nowhere, to suddenly take dramatic stands. It implies that we act with the greatest impact when we act alone, at least initially. And that change occurs instantly, as opposed to building on a series of often-invisible actions. The myth of Parks as lone activist reinforces a notion that anyone who takes a committed public stand, or at least an effective one, has to be a larger-than-life figure—someone with more time, energy, courage, vision, or knowledge than any normal person could ever possess. This belief pervades our society, in part because the media tends not to represent historical change as the work of ordinary human beings, which it almost always is. (Paul Rogat Loeb)

That script says that ordinary human beings are not initiators of historical change. It says it’s only the Rosa Parks’s, and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, and Mother Theresa’s, and Nelson Mandela’s, and Dalai Lama’s, and Jesus of Nazareth’s, who actually impact real change in the world. But the truth

behind all of their stories is that those individuals did have individual character and charisma... But they had *power* by virtue of their connections, their relationships; and with those relationships, they could rewrite the historical scripts. Scripts that said the separate-but-equal doctrine was just; that the dark-skinned person is less human than a lighter-skinned person; that poverty-stricken families should just pull themselves up by their bootstraps because their circumstances are of their own doing; that the law of the biblical prophets was unchanging and immutable.

Our congregation in suburban Maryland is part of an organization of faith communities that helped harness the power of a relatively small group of mobile-home owners in our state. It wasn't a sexy issue to fight for. It will never make national news. But it mattered. It mattered that we helped give several thousand families in our state a stronger sense of security in their homes. It mattered that through the process we learned how to build power through relationships and with actions that are often invisible. It mattered that we joined hands with people we didn't previously know and then placed them together on the arc of the moral universe.

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways... from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

When I compare what I see of that arc to what you see, and we compare it to what they see, the arc's form begins to take shape. I need you. We need each other. And we need to all put our hands on that arc together. Then we do have the power to bend it toward justice.

We must remember that the kingdom – the commonwealth – of God is not merely *at hand*. It is *in our hands*.

Amen.

Bibliography

Getty, Paige. "Empowering Our Power." Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia. April 25, 2004.

Getty, Paige. "A Journey Toward Wholeness." Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia. January 10, 2010.

Getty, Paige. "Whose Script Are We Following?" Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia. February 17, 2008.

Howe, Arthur. "The Arc of the Universe Is Long But It Bends Towards Justice." OpenSalon. January 19, 2009. January 9, 2010.

http://open.salon.com/blog/arthur_howe/2009/01/18/the_arc_of_the_universe_is_long_but_it_bends_towards_justice.

Loeb, Paul Rogat. "The Real Rosa Parks." Published by CommonDreams.org, October 31, 2005, February 16, 2008, <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/1031-32.htm>.