Social Justice and Equity Define Us
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The theme for February is “Justice and Equity.” This morning I plan to introduce the theme by providing some definitions and background both from the perspective of world religions and from our UU heritage. To begin, here is a basic question I asked myself and maybe some of you are asking as well; What do social justice and equity have to do with a spiritual life? Or put another way; Why is it that all the major world religions include justice as a core theological principle and practice? The answer must be at least in part, that if we regard human life as sacred and precious, not just our own, but that of all people, then it follows treating other people with justice and equity becomes a central value and requirement of a spiritual life. The book of Genesis says that humans were “created in the image of God.” The first UU Principle affirms and promotes the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” If all humans have equal inherent worth, dignity, and “godlikeness” then all deserve justice. Social psychologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm said, “I learned from the Old Testament prophets that the meaning of human existence is the struggle for justice.” Working for justice is a basic part of a religious, spiritual, or ethical life and incidentally part of this congregation’s covenant.

Despite many differences, there are some commonalities among the world’s religions, the importance of justice seeking among them, as I stated. The Latin word *religiare*, from which the word “religion” in many Western languages is derived, means “to re-unify,” “bind together,” or “make whole, again.” In Sanskrit one of the original meanings for dharma (which means eternal religion) is the same: “to bind together as one, the whole universe.” Religions evolved out of an awareness of a reality greater than self, or even greater than the sum of measurable physical, economic, political, or social dimensions. Religions attempt to reach beyond the knowable and has been characterized as the connection to “the holy” or “whole,” or “ultimate,” or “sacred.” Practicing “social justice” and “equity” are some of the ways that people of many faiths acknowledge and serve this greater dimension and includes all people in need.

Justice is about “fairness” or “equity,” and social justice pertains to how justice is manifested in society. Here is a United Nations definition of social justice:

> Social justice refers to a fair and equitable division of resources, opportunities, and privileges in society. Originally a religious concept, it has come to be conceptualized more loosely as the <u>just</u> organization of social institutions that deliver access to economic benefits. It is sometimes referred to as "distributive justice.”

As many of you know, social justice work has long been a defining part of UU. Unitarians and Universalists of the nineteenth century were in the forefront of the social issues of their time. Well known nineteenth century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker said, in a famous speech before the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Convention in 1858:

> 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.

Only a few years after these words were spoken, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

UUs have a legacy of “deeds not creeds.” Our work for a better world calls us to harness love’s power to confront oppression. From grassroots community organizing to interfaith community, state, national, and corporate advocacy; in protest marches, prayer vigils, and press conferences; in homeless shelters and in prisons, Unitarian Universalists historically have put our faith into action. We have been there in virtually all the major social justice causes of the past and present.

James Luther Adams, a leading figure in twentieth century UU, pointed to the theological importance of social justice to our faith. For Adams social justice was not simply a nice idea. Instead, what Adams called the “social action imperative” requires that we participate in the world to make a difference. Adams noted, we are not a religious tradition with a creed, but rather a religious movement that has always wedded social justice work to our connection with what is holy and sacred. Before our merger, Unitarians and Universalists strived to make the world a better place through involvement in abolition, women's suffrage, the temperance movement, prison reform, universal public education, and other causes aimed at improving the human condition. After the merger of Unitarians and Universalists in 1961, activism continued in the areas of civil rights, the peace movement, the feminist movement, gay and lesbian liberation, the ecological and climate justice movements, a woman’s right to choose, and others. Many UU congregations offered their buildings in sanctuary to draft resisters, provided staging areas for local civil rights marches, organized buses to demonstrations across the United States, and worked for the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution. Our meeting places also provided sanctuary to "aliens," both in Canada and the United States. People continue to join UU congregations first and foremost because of our liberal voice in the community on these and similar important issues of our time.

One example of social justice work by Unitarians and Universalists of the 19th Century is the Sanitary Commission. The Rev. Henry Whitney Bellows was in the pulpit, preaching to his Unitarian congregation in New York City, when word arrived that rebel forces had attacked Fort Sumter in South Carolina. The American Civil War had begun. Four days later, on April 25, 1861, a group of women, most of them members of Bellows' church gathered to organize an aid society for the volunteer soldiers who were gathering on Staten Island. As the Civil War progressed Unitarian women volunteered to address the unsanitary conditions in the soldiers' camps, where spoiled goods, open latrines, poor bedding, and vermin threatened the soldiers’ health. These women also made bandages and wrote letters for the soldiers. They helped to identify and bury dead soldiers left on the battle fields. Notable Unitarians who participated in this humanitarian work were Dorothea Dix, and Lousia May Alcott. Clara Barton who whose religious

leaning was Universalist, also participated in this work independently of a church community, and went on to establish the American Red Cross, after the Civil War. After the war as well, Dorothea Dix became a champion for the humane treatment of the hospitalized mentally ill.

Here is the original language on Justice in the second of the 7 UU Principles: “We covenant to affirm and promote, justice, equity, and compassion in our congregations and in the world at large.” The Article II revision of the 7 Principles to 7 values, under consideration now, includes “justice” and “equity” as separate “petals.” The flower’s center or pistil is “love.” As Shannon noted in her talk on love, love is the foundation upon which the other 6 values in the proposed revision stand. This is the proposed language in the Article II revision on Justice:

> We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.

And here is the Article II revision language on Equity which states:

> We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

The second of our 6 Sources states we seek inspiration from: “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Cal spoke last Sunday about the transforming power of love.

It could not be any clearer that working for a more just and equitable sociality is what defies us as UUs.

It would be an omission not to mention the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King in a talk about justice and equity. This is especially true because King worked closely with UU’s and UU’s participated in the civil rights protests of the 1960’s that King led. King spoke at the General Assembly of the UUA in 1966. There he called upon our community to recognize the struggle for human rights is a worldwide one because our world is growing ever more interdependent. Communities of faith have a responsibility to affirm the right of justice and equity for all. King asserted that for one group to oppress another or to declare superiority over another is morally wrong. He quoted from Genesis, as I did above, that all are “created in the image of God,” thus all must be treated with equity and justice. He said our various faith communities must work together to change the laws that promote inequity. I quote Dr. King:

> I'm thinking not of *eros*, or of friendship as expressed in (the Latin word) *filio*, but of *agape*, which is understanding, creative, redemptive good will for all [people]

> an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return. When one rises to love on this level, [one] loves a person who does the evil deed while hating the deed.

King ended his talk to the UUA with the following which gives me hope in this era of disinformation:

> And we can sing *We Shall Overcome*, because somehow we know the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right—"no lie can live forever." We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right—"truth crushed, will rise again."

On “Bloody Sunday” in Selma marchers came from a chorus of faiths that included priests and nuns, Episcopal seminarians, high-profile UUs like Rev. James Reeb of Wyoming, who was murdered days later, as well as Jewish leaders like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Complementing his Black Church upbringing, King was inspired by wisdom across continents and cultures, from Gandhi to Buddhist leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh. Despite their differing creeds, he hoped leaders from across the religious spectrum and those of no particular faith would join efforts to promote economic and social justice. King asserted that all persons and all faiths live in an interconnected web. “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” King declared. He wanted people to embrace the highest forms of their own religion and morality. Religion at its best, he taught, promoted peace, understanding, love and good will.

For Peter Morales, former president of the UUA, practice in the form of social action to confront injustice is more important than any particular creed or belief. He came here from Boston for our building dedication about 12 years ago and he gave a sermon he called “Religion Beyond Belief.” Despite differing beliefs and dogma, members of differing liberal faiths can band together in justice work, much as King practiced. Action in the service of social justice is more important than belief, for UUs. Here is a quote:

> In my own time as president, I have stood hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder with religious liberals from many faiths as we have born witness for environmental justice, voting rights, anti-racism, immigration reform, and marriage equality. We have marched together, and we have gone to jail together. The truth is that religious liberals get along easily together. Religious reactionaries reject all others and seek to destroy them.

Among Christians, social justice takes on a meaning grounded in divine love or *agape,* that King referred to. In the New Testament, social justice is ordained by Jesus and is modeled by his actions and ministry. Social justice is not simply based on feeling of compassion but also dedication and practice. Christians are commanded to always love thy neighbor, not only when it feels right. The parable of the Good Samaritan is used to illustrate that the commandment to love your neighbor applies to anyone in need of

help, including a stranger. I think of the work of Mother Thresa helping the improvised and ailing people of India as her dedicated ministry.

The messianic vision in Judaism anticipates a time when society will be ordered according to principles based in caring for one's neighbor and the stranger. It is a vision of a society where the "haves" understand their obligations, both to the have-nots and to the entire community. It is a society in which citizens not only obey the law but understand the need to go above and beyond the law to create a truly covenantal social order including justice and equity. In a verse from the book of Amos made famous by Dr. King, the prophet challenges the people: "Let justice well up like water, and righteousness like a flowing stream." In Judaism there are two words for justice, one referring to the legal system and one to society at large; both are considered essential parts of Jewish observance. The book of Micha says we are asked to "do justly, love mercy and walk humbly." Jews are taught to practice *"Tekun Olam"* the repair of the world, through acts of justice seeking and mercy.

Some observers may associate Buddhism, and especially Buddhist meditation, with turning inward, away from the world. However, the Buddhist tradition, with its emphasis on seeing clearly into the nature of suffering and, thus, cultivating compassion, has a strong impetus for active involvement in the world's struggles for justice. This activist stream of Buddhism came to be called "Engaged Buddhism"—Buddhism energetically engaged with social concerns.Among the first to speak of Engaged Buddhism in the United States was the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Hanh came to the United States during the Vietnam War to explain the meaning of Buddhist-led protests and demonstrations against the American-supported Saigon government and to offer a peace proposal.

Social justice plays an essential role in Islam and Hinduism, but time does not permit me to elaborate.

The best recent example of public witness for UUs that I can recall is when UUs gathered in Phoenix a few years ago in protest of Sheriff Joe Arpaio's policy of profiling Latinos. Peter Morales and other UU's and some non UU's were arrested. Among the programs that our UUA promotes are "Side With Love" which seeks to harness the power of love to end oppression. The "Love Resists" campaign, a joint effort with the UU Service Committee, activates people of faith and conscience to resist the harm inflicted by criminalization. The "UU the Vote" partners with other organizations and seeks to mobilize voters in support of justice and equity at the ballot box. One example is organizing voters when reproductive justice is on the ballot.

Dan Balz, writer for the Washington Post, tells the story of a woman from Michigan, who woke up one morning deciding to "take on" gerrymandering in her state. She was 27 years old at the time in 2016 and had little experience with politics. She just put a message out on FB asking for help. Many people responded. Long story short, a petition was created that resulted in a ballot initiative which passed. An independent

“citizens commission” was then established resulting in the election results the following year more accurately reflecting the makeup of Michigan voters. This story illustrates the power of one person deciding to make a difference and then banding together with others.

It is not surprising that many in this fellowship regularly engage in social action and in working towards social justice. Our beloved and much missed Janelle led a coalition in opposition to a legislative imposed abortion ban that several of us participated in. Several members including Kris, Shannon, Ronn and others have contributed a lot and continue to work for environmental justice. Cal, Sue, and Ramona have worked on suicide prevention. Cal, Bill, and others supported the “Empty Bowl” project to reduce hanger in our city. Several are helping with the “Lunch Together” program also. Many from this fellowship marched in protest of the murder of George Floyd, even in the face of counter-protesters brandishing weapons. I know I am leaving people and causes out. My point is that social action is a big part of who we are as a faith community in Sheridan.

As you all know the instances injustice and inequity in our current world are many. I will name a few. Our global climate is reaching a tipping point, and many people are suffering the impacts of a warming planet. The people of Gaza have little to no food or fresh water, and no shelter. Those living in Myanmar, Yemen, Syria, and many other places are experiencing similar dire circumstances. Oppression of women exists in Afghanistan, Iran and elsewhere in the Moslem world. A woman’s right to choose is denied in many places here and globally. LGBTQ are denied rights of freedom to be themselves and love whom they wish. Racism and antisemitism are on the rise. Democratic rights and institutions are declining globally and here in the USA. There is much that is broken. However, many who have worked for social justice and equity have made a difference. By example we can make a difference too.

What I hope I have shown here this morning is that working for social justice and equity is part of a spiritual life and an essential part of what defines us as UUs and as people of “faith.” We do this work in concert with other UUs and people of other faith communities across the country and across the world. We do this as an expression of our values and our spirituality.

I believe that working for social justice and equity is part of a spiritual life and that action is more important than belief or creed. It is an essential part of what defines us as UUs and as “people of faith.” I also think it helps to have whatever belief you choose that inspires you to social action and in support of justice and equity. For example, if you believe that all human life is sacred, it will lead you to act accordingly.