

## **Wisdom from Our Sources**

Excerpt from “A People So Bold” By Rev. Victoria Safford

On those occasions when the weight of the world is closing in and the evidence against hope mounts as I read the news, when I start confusing cynicism with pragmatism and begin muttering miserable, unrepeatable things as the radio, when I sigh, “I’m so tired, I’m so discouraged”

at those times, my partner, Ross, will say, in the kindest possible way, “What kind of self-indulgent whining is this? What kind of entitled grandiosity of privilege is this, to think that you or I or anyone has the right to sever the bright thread of hope, the tradition of dedication to the common good and faith in people’s power to imagine great change, to imagine and take great risks?”

There is a beautiful, proud history of work for human rights and freedom, for social change and peace and protection of the earth. This is the story in which we choose to stand. This is not the story of oppression and imperialism and militarism and corporate greed and plunder, but that alternative story, equally true, of those who lived their lives and gave their lives for love, for a difficult and truly patriotic ideal – liberty and justice for all.

This is an ideal that is gradually gathering up everyone – women and slaves and indigenous people; children and elders and the poor and the sick; the mentally ill; the workers, the farmers, the immigrants; those fighting for human rights and civil rights, for public schools and pluralism; every person, gay or straight, who would sit at the welcome table. We’re only here to pass this story on,”

Ross tells me. “all you have to do is keep the fire burning for a little while, stoke it with your life, don’t allow it to go out, and pass it on. You have no right to put it out.” Not in so many words- but that’s about what Ross will say.

**UU Justice Work: What Does it Look Like?**  
**Rev. Laura Shennum**  
**9/27/15**

What does it mean when we say Unitarian Universalism calls us to live a life of peace and justice? We talked about peace last Sunday and one way we could be called from our first and seventh principles.

Today, we will focus on the justice part of that question. Unitarian Universalists have a long rich history associated with social justice work. Throughout our history, we have been at the forefront in working for equal rights for women, minorities, the LGBTQ communities, immigrant populations, racial justice to name a few. We have done this work both in the U.S. and abroad.

Even our chalice, the symbol we use to identify as UUs, comes from an Austrian Artist who created the symbol for the Unitarian Service Committee. The symbol in its early years was used to help Jews find communities that would help them escape Germany during WWII.

This work has taken many forms from public witness to education; to being advocates to being allies. UUs have signed petitions; worked to get petitions signed; marched to raise awareness; and witnessed silently in support of others.

We, as UUs, have a truth to speak to our communities and to our world. However, oftentimes, we choose to speak from a secular place rather than a religious place. It is important to make this distinction for the reason Paul Rasor states in his book, "Prophetic Witness"

*Religious liberals today may also be reluctant to speak religiously in public contexts because they don't want to seem "too religious." Over the past quarter century, the most visible and vocal religious groups in the United States have been those of the religious right. Many of these groups aggressively link conservative or fundamentalist theologies to conservative political agendas that liberals rightly perceive as creating threats to basic liberties, including religious liberty. Religious liberals can all too easily buy into the widespread but erroneous assumption that if you're religious, you must be conservative. Religious liberals understandably want to avoid being perceived as conservative, so they keep quiet about their faith...*

*...[In addition, religious liberals] are heirs of the philosophical tradition that separates religion and politics. Some people think that this tradition requires not only the institutional separation of church and state but also a kind of intellectual separation of religious ideas and political deliberation...The danger is that delegitimizing public religious discourse encourages religious liberals to disguise their religious commitments and rationalizes their reluctance to speak publicly using religious language, thus undermining both clarity and the conviction of their message, and in turn weakening the liberal prophetic voice.*

When we do not speak from a place grounded in our faith and principles, then we lose the ability to illustrate there are other voices in the public sphere. This week, we had the example of Pope Francis speaking grounded in his faith in a public sphere.

To illustrate how we can do this, I want to share some examples Kathleen McTigue, a UU Minister, shared during a workshop at the 2015 UU General Assembly:

The scenario was a UU was at a public demonstration and CNN reporter approached the person and asked for a one sentence statement of why the person was there.

The first sentence shared is what we typically do as UUs from a secular voice. The person said, "I am here to protest the subsidies that enrich the oil and gas industries and to demand more investment in renewable energy."

The second sentence is one grounded in UU faith:

"I am here to bear witness to the unfairness that gives public money to oil and gas companies at the expense of the poor and the health of our planet because my faith requires me to stand up against injustice."

When we are called to a life of justice by our UU faith, then we need to find ways to articulate it that express our faith values. By doing this, we bring into our statements and our actions the history of our faith; we make it more personal; we step deeper into our moral grounding; and we give ourselves a sustaining reason to do the work we are passionate about.

Take a moment, look at the front of your order of service and read the principles. Ask yourself the question, where do I ground the justice work I am passionate about? If you are currently looking for a place to do justice work, look at those principles and ask yourself, which of these principles moves me to want to make a difference in the world?

We so often want to do that we forget to stop to reflect why we want to act and how we want to act.

Starting from this place, I want to share with you how UUs show up in justice work around the world. As I share these different ways of engaging, before you raise your hand and say you want to sign up, ask yourself: why – why do you feel passionate about it and how does being a UU inform that passion?

Currently, we have four organizations that coordinate and provide resources to congregations and individuals who identify as UUs.

The Unitarian Universalist Association provides a place for our associated congregations to make public statements; to take public action; and to provide education and guidance in exploring social justice issues.

This past June in Portland at the UU General Assembly delegates selected from our association of congregations voted on two public statements to be studied and for congregations to act upon. The first was a statement about reproductive justice and the second was a statement on Black Lives Matter. This means the UUA will develop resources for congregations to educate themselves on these matters as well as resources for action. I will be preaching on these two issues separately in the near future. I will talk about Black Lives Matters in October and Reproductive Justice in November.

The UUA also creates curriculum and book study guides for congregations to develop a better understanding of issues. Each year, a book is selected to be a UU Common Read, which congregations have the choice to read and study during the year. This year, the book is *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson. It speaks to the justice, mercy, and compassion themes of concern to us as Unitarian Universalists and as human beings. This book will be part of our Social Justice Discussion Group this year.

In addition to this work, the UUA has organized at each General Assembly a public witness event. This past June, there were two: one for climate change and one for racial justice.

The UUA provides the collective public voice of our faith and ways for us to realize it at a congregational level and a national level.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is the organization that puts our faith values into action. Their focus is primarily human rights and ensuring basic human rights are available to everyone worldwide. They specifically work in the

areas of economic justice, environmental justice, and protecting rights at risk. In addition, they provide aid during a humanitarian crisis, such as natural disasters or human made disasters.

They are specifically working in three areas (from their website):

**Compassionate Consumption:** engages people in owning their power as values-driven consumers, acting to protect workers' rights, and joining a movement for economic justice.

**Sustainable Recovery in Haiti:** In the wake of the 2010 earthquake, UUSC has made a long-term commitment to creating a recovery that advances justice for Haitians.

**Human Right to Water:** on the cutting edge of ensuring that all people — no matter their skin color or bank account — have access to safe, affordable water.

The UUSC does this work in many different ways through: grassroots collaboration, promoting innovation, and mobilization.

Individuals can get involved in this work by going on their website to look at the different petitions to add your name to as well as donating funds to help the work be sustained.

UUSC puts our faith into compassionate action nationally and globally. They are the group that ensures everyone's worth and dignity is brought to human rights conversations.

In 2012, the UUA and the UUSC partnered to create the UU College of Social Justice. This organization makes it possible for individuals and congregations to put faith into action by organizing trips for on-the-ground experiences in promoting social justice.

They have the following trips they coordinate (from their website):

**Borderlinks: U.S. - Mexico Border**

This trip is a chance to delve into various on-the-ground aspects of immigration. Through education, partner meetings, service opportunities, and theological reflection, a person will explore immigration through the Borderlinks program and return home informed and inspired to be a leader for immigration justice.

## Beyond Just Recovery: Haiti

On this week long trip, participants will learn firsthand about the impacts of climate change on the global south, the environmental damage caused by decades of colonial exploitation, and the leadership of rural peasant movements in advancing climate justice and global sustainability. They will work with members of the Papaye Peasant Movement (MPP) on “agroecology” projects such as building tire gardens, making natural insecticides, and helping in the seed nursery.

## Justice for Women and Marginalized Communities in India

Join the UU Holdeen India Program (UUHIP) and the UU College of Social Justice for an 11-day pilgrimage to India. This journey will take participants to the western state of Gujarat, where people will witness firsthand the struggles that UUHIP grassroots partners are waging for social justice.

## Climate Justice: Hurricane Sandy Recovery

This journey offer participants hands-on opportunities to help with essential reconstruction and recovery in some of the most vulnerable neighborhoods of New York. At the same time, these journeys offer the chance to look beneath the surface and see how different communities are impacted by natural disasters – and by the unnatural distribution of resources in the aftermath.

## Solidarity with Original Nations and Peoples

Join us for an eight day intensive in understanding the past, present, and future of a sovereign People through engagement with Lummi Nation in Northwest Washington State. Participants will begin by grounding themselves in an understanding of the Doctrine of Christian Discovery, and the Laws, Acts and Policies’ harmful dominating effects of that doctrine that underlie current realities. Through excursions, interdisciplinary activities, cross-cultural experiences, and dialogue with Lummi leaders and department staff, people will gain an understanding of how their Nation’s government, and traditional culture endures.

Each of these trips are designed to ground people in their UU faith and then act out of the grounded place to make change in the world. These trips are available on an individual basis and a congregational basis. There are some different programs for teens as well. It is one of my goals to have CUUF participate as a congregation in one of these programs within the next two years.

Finally, the last organization is Standing on the Side of Love Campaign. This campaign is sponsored by the UUA to be an interfaith effort in proclaiming love's power in stopping oppression. It was born out of the shooting that took place in a UU Congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee in 2008. When that shooting happened, the Tennessee Valley UU Congregation was surrounded by love from interfaith communities throughout their area.

It was this idea of creating a movement of love which crossed faith boundaries that has kept the campaign going. They have led movements in addressing Immigration Reform; Marriage Equality; Climate Justice; and this year, their focus is on Racial Justice.

From January 16 through February 14, 2016, they will sponsor their yearly congregational campaign called 30 Days of Love. Did you know we had a similar campaign as the 40 Days of Life folks? Ours is focused on love.

This year the focus is on Racial Justice. For 30 days, they will provide guidance for ways for each of us to show up for racial justice. This could be signing a petition; meeting with the chief of police; writing a reflection; attending a workshop. An intentional effort is made for you to live out your faith in your daily life for 30 days. This year, I hope we can participate as a congregation. Materials will be made available as soon as they are published.

In addition to these organizations, we have our own congregational activities. We have our share the plate program which is connected to a community service project every month. This year, we have a social justice discussion group, which will be reading books or articles or watching videos to become aware of issues and give us some foundation for that why question. In October, we will be reading *Between the World and Me* available at Costco for \$13.99.

My hope is you are here in this community because you believe in the principles and the values we uphold as UUs. I also hope you find a way to live those values beyond our walls. Kathleen McTigue in her workshop talked about how for many years of our UU History we believed in the idea we are a faith community that does not need to check our intellect at the door. She also believes we are a people who checked our faith at the door when we left.

Remember, *We're only here to pass this story on, all we have to do is keep the fire burning for a little while, stoke it with our lives, don't allow it to go out, and pass it on. We have no right to put it out.*