

Love as Spirit, Love as Action

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship
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Rev. Dennis Reynolds

Visiting from the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island

Your fellowship has a long tradition of activism on environmental and other justice issues. The work you do here as advocates and as allies inspires many of us in other congregations.

Unitarian Universalists engage, in many, many ways, to move us towards a true beloved community locally, nationally, and globally.

Just last month, I was at the Break Free demonstrations at the refineries in Anacortes and I talked with UU's from 12 different congregations in Washington Oregon, and Idaho.

At the rally with Native leaders on that Saturday the, 1,00 activists gathered there welcomed the Lummi canoe and heard James Jewell speak. I know that both the canoe project and James Jewell and his work as a totem carver and a spokesperson are well known to you folks.

Some of you helped the thousands of UUs gathered at General Assembly to also know about the Lummi's work and all of us stood as Allies in their now successful efforts to honor the creator and protect sacred lands and the atmosphere that nurtures all life on the planet.

Stopping the proposed cola terminal at Cherry Point was awesome and you folks get to share the credit for helping to make that happen.

Deb Cruz and Beth Brownfield and other here are exemplars to many of us in other congregations about how we can put our words into actions and seek a better world.

I was honored to share the charge to the minister for Paul installation as your minister with Rosalinda Guillen, who reportedly, joined this Fellowship because of its commitment to justice.

Working for justice, some say that's just what UUs do.

It's true many of us are activists and its not a new trend.

We count amongst our forbearers abolitionists like Theodore Parker and the godfather of civil disobedience in America Henry David Thoreau

In the 20th century in Selma Alabama when Rev. Dr. King put at a call for clergy of all faiths to come to Selma, of the 450 clergy who answered his call 150 were Unitarian Universalists. Rev James Reeb and a UU lay member Viola Liusso gave their lives to that struggle.

Many UUs have stood in solidarity with Hispanic communities opposing racist practices and cruel immigration policies

In 2012 Rev. Peter Morales, our current Association President, and others took part in civil disobedience in opposition to draconian laws in Arizona.

At General Assembly that year, 3,000 of us marched and held a candle light vigil outside the Maricopa county jail.

At GA 2015 in Portland a smaller number took to the Street proclaiming that Black Lives Matter.

Striving for justice, It' s what we do.

Why? Why is that so ?

This small faith movement, lets face it we are small (less than ¼ of a million members here in the United States, less than ½ a percent of the population) has now and has through out its history had a disproportionate participation in, and I'm proud to say a disproportionate impact on, social justice movements.

What makes this so? What fills us with such audacity and such an activist spirit ?

What truly moves us to strive so diligently and persistently to work to make our ideals real?

I think the answer to that question has two parts .

First of all we are part of broader movement or should I say coalition of faiths that are label "liberal religion

That includes progressive Catholics. People like Dorteia Day, the El Salvadoran Archbishop Romero, the anti-war activists the Berrigan brothers, and many more. Pope Francis has been an advocate for human and climate justice and a harsh critic of current environmental neglect and systems of economics.

Liberal Buddhist include the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hahn and Zen activists who for years stood vigil outside the nuclear submarine basis at Bangor, just over on the Olympic Peninsula.

Last week, I attended the arraignment of a young friend who was part of Break Free act of civil disobedience near Anacortes, I met some proud Methodist from my former hometown of Eugene, Oregon who had crossed state lines to make a stand .

Faith inspired activists include the other 300 clergy who stood with the Rev Dr King and King himself and his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that led the civil rights movement spoke of love and broad and inclusive beloved community.

The actions of such activists are "profound acts of faith. "

Acts of faith inspired by faith in human capacity;
a deep unshakable faith in human abilities to make a difference, relying not on some great power

out there but believing in our own power.

We have faith in us.

We believe that we can “Just do it.”

We believe in the core of our being that “yes we can.”

“Yes we can”

And for us its more than just a political slogan it’s core to our faith.

Such a faith in human capacity has long been part of our tradition, particularly from the Unitarian side of our family tree.

There is second theological foundation that supports and compels us to act for justice.

This core belief was particular strong amongst our Universalist ancestors. This is the foundational belief that if indeed there is a God or a Goddess or a universal Spirit of Life, he, she, or it is manifest from and through Love.

Love.

We Unitarian Universalist believe in the power of love.

You say it here every Sunday as does my home congregation on Whidbey Island

Love is the Spirit ...

Love Is The Spirit ...

When asked, many years ago, in an interview where UUs stood on equal marriage then UUA President William “Bill” Sinkford said

“We stand on the side of love.”

Unitarian Universalists Stand on the Side of Love.

Since then we have proclaimed it, thanks to Jason Shelton in a song that Kevin tells me you sing often here

We wear that slogan proudly on our yellow T-shirts.

At GA in 2012 3,000 people wore them to march for immigration reform and in opposition to draconian jail practices in Arizona.

Scores from my congregation and others wore them proudly in Olympia to lobby for equal marriage.

At the Break Free march in Anacortes, the reason I met so many UUs was because my congregation had chosen to wear those shirts as we stood with our brand new Unitarian Universalists for Climate Justice banner.

We had gathered there between the beautiful waters and the horrific dark specter of the oil refineries to stand on the side of love of all life.

Our commitment to environment advocacy is called Commit2respond that, the foundation of that commitment is built upon love.

Peter Morales: “Climate change is the gravest danger facing humanity today. We are already experiencing its effects ... We cannot remain silent in the face of such a threat. We are compelled to respond.”

Some call our accounts of the impacts of climate change “fear mongering.” Maybe it is.

I do know that I am afraid. Sometimes fear is a healthy response to scary realities.

I am afraid of the consequences of inaction. Sometimes I am afraid that I lack the capacity to change the situation or to even change myself.

And yet, we are “compelled” to respond, to speak up, to speak out and to act, called to engage in what the Buddha would call right action.

We are called to respond not by just by fear but by something stronger than fear. Fear is seldom the most effective motivator of positive change. Fear is more likely to encourage us to pull back than to propel us forward. We are called to act and to change not out of fear, but rather out of love.

The love that this Fellowship and my home congregation affirms each Sunday calls us to not merely accept love as a feeling but to recognize it and to utilize it as a motivator of action.

How can we individuals, as a Congregation, as Unitarian Universalists, as people of faith, truly “Stand on the Side of Love” as we seek ways to respond to the call for civil liberties, economic and racial justice and climate justice ?

What might such a love look like?

The ethicist and philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore in her book Pine Island Paradox offers some guidance. In that book she writes of lessons drawn from her families’ periodic pilgrimages to a small island of the South Alaska coast.

Moore describes being alone in her kayak out on the water, notebook on her lap and pen in hand, as she was trying to understand "the beautiful, complicated ways that love for people is all mixed up with love for places. The ecology, one might say, of caring."

She writes:

" Let's put this gathered evidence in front of us and let it speak. Love has as its object: daughter, son, young woman who loves son, sudden quiet, a certain combination of smells (hemlock, saltwater,), and sights, mist swimming with light, purple kayak, fog-bound island, hidden cove. The list is, of course, incomplete. Add silver salmon. Add unexpected sun."

She made two lists - what it means to love a person and what it means to love a place – and she found them to be the same list.

Here is what she reports are the realities of such loving;

One. wanting to be near it physically,

Number two. To want to know everything about it, its story, its moods, what it looks like by moonlight,

Number three. To rejoice in the fact of it,

Number four. To fear its loss and grieve for its injuries.

Five. To protect it fiercely, mindlessly. And maybe tragically, but to be helpless to do otherwise,

Six. To be transformed in its presence – lifted, lighter on your feet, transparent, open to everything beautiful and new.

Number Seven. Wanting to be joined with it, taken in by it, lost in it.

Number Eight To want the best for it.

Number Nine "Desperately."

“Love” she continues “is an anchor line, a rope on a pulley, a taut fly line, a spruce root, a route on a map, a father teaching his daughter to tie a bowline knot, eelgrass bent to the tide, and all of these - a complicated, changing web of relationships taken together.”

“It’s not a choice,” she tells us, “or a dream, or a romantic novel. It is an empirical fact about our biological existence. We are born into relationship with people and with places.

We are born with the ability to create new relationships and to tend to them. And we are born with a powerful longing for these relationships. That complex connectedness nourishes and shapes us and gives us joy and purpose,”

Such joy and such purpose arises not out of mere self-gratification. Such joy and purpose arises not out of the accumulation of material wealth or from political and economic success.

Purpose filled joy arises from our connectedness to each other, to all life, and to the spirit of

love. It is love that compels us to commit to change within our own lives and in our world. Al Gore called climate change “An Inconvenient Truth” and it is an action to address it will create inconveniences in our lives.

Love is seldom convenient, yet it is our deep love and our deep connectedness that compels us to act.

As religious liberals we embrace such love AND we hold deep faith in human capacity to make a difference.

Dean Moore reports that she knew deep within her being that there was something missing from her love list, something she found difficult to put into words, but she did so reminding us that,

“Loving isn’t just a state of being, it’s a way of acting in the world.
Love isn’t a sort of bliss; it’s a kind of work, sometimes hard spirit testing work.
To love a person is to accept the responsibility to act lovingly toward (them) to make his (or her) needs my own needs.

To love a place is to care for it, to keep it healthy, to attend to its needs as if they were my own needs, because they are my own. Responsibility grows from love. Its the natural shape of caring.”

Number 10 “To love a person or a place is to accept moral responsibility for its well-being.”

Look around you at the beloved community gathered here in this sanctuary and look out the window at the sweet community that surrounds us. When you step outside look up into the sky and savor the depth of our love for all of it .

“To love a person and a place is to accept moral responsibility for its well-being.”

Be that a person or all people.

Be that place an island like Pine Island nestled on the coast of Alaska or our own bit of coast nestled on the Salish Sea, or the round blue island nestled in space that is the earth, it is our love that calls us to accept moral responsibility for its well being.

To act out of the acceptance of such love and from love motivated moral responsibility is an act of faith.

Political action as acts of faith is also being voiced by a new generation. Amongst them is Tim DeChristopher, a young Unitarian Universalist seminarian who gained a measure of fame as Bidder 70.

In 2011, DeChristopher was found guilty on two felony charges for violation of the Federal Onshore Oil and Gas Leasing Reform Act. He was sentenced to two years in a federal prison with a \$10,000 fine, followed by three years of supervised probation.

Before receiving his sentence, he delivered an impassioned speech from the courtroom floor. At the end of the speech, he turned toward Judge Dee Benson, who presided over his trial, looked him in the eye, and said, “This is what love looks like.”

Minutes later, he was placed in handcuffs and briskly taken away.

De Christopher is currently on leave from Harvard Divinity School where he has been studying to become some day a UU minister. He has also worked with UU Service Committee to help found GROW which is an acronym for Grounded & Resilient Organizers’ Workshop. It is for young adults and youth.

As he focuses on organizing young activists, De Christopher has been deeply critical of those in my generation.

He said: “We constantly hear baby boomers saying to young people: “Stopping climate change is going to be the challenge of your generation.”

Well, that’s not really true. We’ve known about climate change for 20 years, during the time when baby boomers were holding power in this country.

Stopping climate change was the challenge of the baby boomer generation, and they failed because it would’ve meant making sacrifices and putting their children’s and grandchildren’s generations ahead of their own. They chose not to do that.

Certainly a lot of the blame falls on fossil fuel executives and politicians, but a lot of it falls on comfortable liberals who changed their light bulbs, bought organic, and sat back and patted themselves on the back.

Young people don’t have the luxury of feeling like that’s enough—like they can go to their graves content that they drove a Prius and voted Democrat, so they don’t have to feel guilty about this catastrophe.”

Wow! That’s harsh and it is unfortunately all too true.

I embrace the call to action that DeChristopher and others offer us.

Let my age cohort become the generation that is know not just by what we did in the 1960’s and 1970’s but what we did in our 60’s and our 70’s and into our 80’s as we stood in solidarity with younger activists and communities of color, like those who led ath actions in Anacortes .

What might such active love look like for us here in this community, for only some us are truly ready to go to jail as Tim De Christopher did. What is it all about for us who may not be ready to join in civil disobedience?

It IS about the cars we drive and how much we drive them,

It IS about the candidates we vote for.

It’s about the food we eat and where and how it is produced.

It's about the homes we live in and how we light and heat them.

It's also about how and how much we travel.

It's about our active advocacy and our efforts to deconstruct the current system of corporate power that benefits from the status quo.

It's about moral and financial support to those individuals who are willing to put their freedom on the line.

It's about supporting financially those organizations that through advocacy and action move us forward on a positive social and environmental agenda. Close to home for UUs, that includes the Pacific Northwest Justice Network and Washington UU Voices for Justice.

It's about committing to respond in small and significant personal ways and it's about committing to act as part of a larger movement.

Our love can be expressed by how and what we consume and how we change our lifestyles and our efforts to truly change systems that puts at risk the people we love and degrades and despoils the places we love.

We love this planet and our children and grandchildren and all the children, so we commit to repond.

As religious liberals we hold a deep faith in human capacity to make a difference, so we commit to respond

We do so not out of fear of some hellish alternative. We commit to respond out of love.

Benediction

“Loving isn't just a state of being, it's a way of acting in the world.

Love isn't a sort of bliss; it's a kind of work, sometimes hard spirit testing work.

To love humanity is to accept the responsibility to act lovingly toward all to make their needs our own needs.

To love the earth is to care for it, to keep it healthy, to attend to its needs because they are our own. Responsibility grows from love. Its the natural shape of caring.”

Amen and Blessed Be