

Social Action as a Spiritual Discipline

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Some years ago I was handed an invitation. It was engraved and came in an elegant envelope on a silver platter. Sadly, I did not accept the invitation. It's haunted me ever since.

Here's what happened. I responded to a post on Facebook from a Black activist I know. It was about yet another murder of yet another young Black man. Now, there were various ways I could have responded. I could have reposted it and invited my white friends to think more seriously about racist violence. I could have learned from the story and elected not to post anything but instead keep educating myself and show up for local justice work. What I actually did was respond to the post by saying that this story made me more committed to being a good white ally.

This response was apparently not quite what the Black activist had wanted, because she sent a white friend of hers, an acquaintance of mine, to message me privately on Facebook in order to school me on how inappropriate and self-centered my response had been. I wrote back and said that if the activist had something to say to me she should have said it herself rather than sending an envoy. Then I stewed, defensive, resentful, and deeply angry. If yet another gay man had been murdered, I told myself, I would have wanted my straight allies to respond by asserting their commitment to being good allies. Well, wouldn't I? Finally, literally weeks later, I admitted to myself that I had not handled the exchange as skillfully as I should have, let myself feel ashamed for a time, then got back to my self-education and social justice activities.

That may be a personal story but I think it is relevant to our lives together here. Part of the work that Dana and the Social Justice Team are currently trying to do at High Plains is to make compelling the idea that social justice is the completion of our spiritual lives and is in fact the way we should and do live out our spiritual expression. Social justice work could be understood as the heart and soul of High Plains, our very center, that which makes us a spiritually mature liberal religious community. Or we could think of social justice work as the engine of the church, that which drives us forward, both out into the world and on into the future.

Here's another metaphor. The UU book *Churchworks* describes congregations in terms of the human body: the brain would be the core documents such as policies and procedures, the ears are communication practices, the eyes are literally the vision of the congregation, the feet are outreach, the reproductive system is membership growth, and so on. The author uses the image of hands to describe both social action and spiritual growth, which I find telling. We use our hands to make a difference in the world, to sign petitions and feed homeless people in Colorado Springs and write letters to the editor and hold protest signs and build houses. And then we use our hands to hold each other when our spiritual growth and our justice work involve discomfort or pain.

One problem with the above metaphors is that they treat social justice and spiritual growth as though they were not part of the same process. So imagine instead that our experiences and growth at High Plains can be understood as the process of moving around the outside of a circle.

Imagine further that the inward spiritual journey of growth and the outward spiritual journey of social justice work are on opposite sides of the circle. As we circumnavigate the circle we focus for a time on inward spirituality and move naturally from there into a focus on outward spirituality. Then, because social justice work can be challenging, we return naturally to the part of the circle where we look inward for a while and take care of ourselves, doing personal and communal nurturing not least so we can go back out and bind up the broken and challenge social structures that break people in the first place. If we remain on the inward-focused side of the circle, we may stay safe but we won't grow. This is as true of us as a congregation as it is of us as individuals.

I think we at High Plains have a good sense about the inward spiritual journey and the outward spiritual journey as two separate processes but if the image of the circle is correct, the inward and outward spiritual work are more intertwined than we might think. Today I'd like us to reflect on some of the spiritual invitations of social justice work. Doing the individual and collective work of social justice involves spiritual disciplines that can be strenuous in the same way that regular meditation or pilgrimages are strenuous. And because our theme this month is invitation, I'd like us to contemplate what it means that we are invited to do social justice work and to grow spiritually in the doing of it. We're not guilt-tripped. We're not legally mandated. We're not emotionally manipulated. We're not required to be activists in order to be members of High Plains. No, we're invited.

Here are the spiritual aspects of social justice work that stand out to me. First, when working for justice for a group that we don't belong to we are invited to become comfortable with discomfort. This includes tolerating ambiguity, acting when we are not sure of exactly the right thing to do, and getting called on it if we say something inappropriate, however unintentionally.

Second, we are invited to be patient with ourselves and with others. For most of us, the way of thinking that goes along with social justice work is different from the way we grew up making sense of society. We'll be doing a lot of listening and a lot of learning and for some of us that can be very hard. Gentleness toward ourselves and others is a must.

Third, we are invited to develop the courage and strength of character to act in ways that don't go along with the everyday paths of least resistance. Challenging social patterns of injustice usually means taking what we might call the path of most resistance, the harder way. And we need courage and strength of character to keep at it.

Fourth, we are invited to develop a certain degree of humility. As a white person, I'm not an expert on Black lives though I can certainly educate myself to a degree. If someone else is telling the truth about their life in a situation where I'm in the privileged group and that person is not, I need to reject the idea that I'm the expert and let them be the expert about their own lives. This is one reason why, when Black people insist that Black lives matter, we who are white need to join them in that specific language, not whitewash it, so to speak, by saying all lives matter.

Finally, we are invited to become willing to make a certain kind of sacrifice in the name of justice. If we are in a socially valued group, if we're white or heterosexual or male or wealthy, for example, we've probably learned to dominate others without thinking about it. We're

probably used to being the center of attention, getting our way, being presumed innocent or normal or better than others. We don't even realize all the things we don't have to worry about: where our next meal will come from, whether we will be arrested for driving while white, whether we'll be raped or gaybashed before we get home. Once the benefits of being in a valued social group come to light we have to ask ourselves honestly: are we willing not to have some of these benefits so that everyone can be treated equally? Are we willing to work actively to give them up if that's even possible?

Here's a quick example: I confess that sometimes I speed when I drive, unlike all the rest of you. When I'm hitting 50 on Union on the way to church I can be almost sure that I won't be pulled over even if I see an officer. In a truly racially fair society, I would be ticketed for speeding and perhaps even have my car searched just as often as a Black person. Am I willing to have that experience? If I care about racial justice, I guess I'd better be willing. Would it make my life a little harder, a little less comfortable? Of course. But that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make, and it would probably lead to a little less speeding on Union. (Or not...)

So, this is some of the spiritual work of social justice. Everyone has joys and sorrows; they are part of what it means to be human. But I hope it's safe to say that we as Unitarian Universalists care about social justice in part because we want all people's lives to be as full of joy as possible and we want to minimize unnecessary sorrows. Some sorrows are inevitable, of course. For example, the eventual death of our parents is part of life in our society; it's an unavoidable sorrow for most of us. But no one in our society should have to worry that their children will be killed by police officers or vigilantes or the violence that comes along with living in segregation and grinding poverty. We want, I hope, to live in a society where burying one's child is exceedingly rare. And so we care about racism in part because its various forms and complications lead to far too many black families suffering the unnecessary sorrow of burying their children. And we care about other forms of inequality for the same basic reason even if the specifics differ: we want to live in a world with less sorrow and more joy for every last person.

So we care. But that's actually the easiest part. It doesn't ask much of us except to feel what we already feel. Here's where we get working, where we get down to the spiritual discipline part.

For me, being comfortable with discomfort is the absolute first requirement of social justice work, and so that's what I'll focus on for the rest of our time today. It's uncomfortable to discover the damaging and sometimes fatal effects of inequality on people. It's uncomfortable to realize that society doesn't work the way we thought, that we are not merely a random bunch of individuals but that our lives are bound up together and that the suffering of some is necessarily tied to the benefits enjoyed by others. It's horribly uncomfortable to realize that my privilege and power as a white upper-middle-class person is not unrelated to the struggles of poor people of color but is directly connected. Their penalties are my benefits.

Racial segregation, with its many harmful effects, is a particularly good example of how white people in the US have benefitted from the suffering of BIPOC people. Read enough about the history of segregation and this becomes patently clear: white people got to move to the suburbs and develop equity in their homes because FHA and VA loans were legally forbidden to BIPOC people. Fast-forward to the present and we have brutal segregation, terrible schools in poor

neighborhoods because there is no tax base to support them, little access to networks that can provide job leads, and the clear, infuriating message that white America is content to leave racial segregation in place. Now, none of us in this room who are white chose this history, which began more than 100 years ago. I don't think any of us would have, given the choice. But social inequality is never about the intentions of individuals. It's always bigger, and it always implicates all of us one way or another. To understand that the great life I have bears some relationship to the lousy lives a lot of other people have, to know that given enough time and study I could see that relationship directly, is powerfully uncomfortable. But necessary.

There are other aspects of discomfort. If we really believe that our society is meritocratic and whoever does the best was the best we'll be disturbed to learn how much discrimination is out there – both against certain people and for certain other people. Quick example: which social group benefits the most from affirmative action in admission to college? Legacies. Applicants whose parents attended the school, are wealthy, and donate a lot of money to the school. There is some amazing research about the process of selecting a student body and admitting a number of intellectually weak students because of the financial benefit they bring. It's not illegal. But it's not meritocracy.

So far I've only talked about the work we do alone, educating ourselves, thinking about these issues, striving to let our hearts stay open in the face of discomfort. But then there are the interactions we have with others, and these can be a prime source of discomfort as well. I still remember a profoundly uncomfortable experience I had on a bus in Boston as a young adult when some middle schoolers nearby started talking loudly about “faggot” this and “homo” that. I actually interrupted them and asked them why they needed to use language that demeaned a group of people. I don't remember their answer but it wasn't pleasant. At least, however, I knew I was not likely to see them again and I was proud of myself for speaking up.

Much more recently, when my father went off on the Black women who shut down a Bernie Sanders rally and I tried to talk with him about it, that was amazingly uncomfortable. For context, Dad's a progressive leftist environmentalist. He's a huge Bernie fan and couldn't see why anyone would want to interrupt one of his rallies or how it could do Black people any good. He said, Bernie's the most progressive one out there. Why are they picking on him? I tried to provide a plausible answer. He said he felt like part of Bernie's tribe and sometimes you just feel the need to defend your tribe. Ouch. By the time he said that, clearly indicating that nothing I'd said had had any effect, I switched the topic to how the Mets were doing, a conversation that went much better.

Dad's part of my social group, a well-intentioned white guy who has some sense of what inequality's about but also a lot of unexamined privilege. If I seriously want to invite him to think differently about inequality, that involves a lot of uncomfortable interaction: interrupting racist or sexist or homophobic statements, talking with him about what I'm learning in my self-education on these issues, raising the occasional awkward question. Sometimes it's the right time for that but sometimes it's better for us to talk about sports or Broadway or gardening or our pets. So discernment also plays a large role: when is it the right moment to be uncomfortable in the service of inviting someone else into a social justice analysis?

Then there's working directly with people of color, which is an important piece of the puzzle but which brings its own forms of discomfort. I can't speak for the experience of others, but mine has been straightforward enough: God forbid I say the wrong thing and signal that my understanding of racism isn't solid or that I don't care enough about the issues. And honestly, I don't think this is about self-censorship or some mythical PC police. I think it's my attempt to be respectful in a society where white people have rarely been taught to be respectful to BIPOC people and too often are not. If I'm in the room in solidarity, I should be helpful, not harmful. Seems reasonable enough, but again, it involves a certain degree of nervousness. I welcome the nervousness. It means I really care and really want to be useful.

Finally, there's the question of whether, how, and when to engage with someone who sees these issues completely differently because of their experiences and assumptions. It may be a person who believes herself to be colorblind or someone who has a strictly individualistic understanding of how the world works. It may be someone who has interpreted his experiences in a way that confirms his assumptions that Black people are thugs, women are sluts, poor people are lazy, and queer people are immoral. This individual has exactly as much inherent worth and dignity as I do. I strive to wish for this person all the joy I wish for all the devalued people in the world, for everyone in the world. But that doesn't change the question of when and how to talk about social inequality, if at all. The conversation, if I have it, can be wildly uncomfortable, and in my experience has often been wildly unproductive. Understanding each other better is a good thing but it doesn't help a single person suffering needlessly from inequality. And yet, sooner or later, if I'm not just preaching to the choir I ought to identify people who see the issues differently and see whether there is any common ground, or at the very least have the other person and I both surface our starting assumptions. I'll freely admit that this one is still a growing edge for me. I hope some of you who do social justice work have been braver than me in your conversations across political and social difference.

So these are some of the invitations that we might encounter if we care about binding up the broken, fighting the good fight, struggling for justice, and making right what is wrong. If you're like me you'll encounter these invitations over and over again: in someone's overheard comment, on the editorial page, in the news of the day, in that new book you picked up to read, in a Facebook post, in the quiet place in your heart that no one else ever visits. And, again, these are invitations. We can reject them forever, or for a time, or for a day. We can ignore them, though if we read the paper or surf the web that may get harder. We can resent them as unwanted intruders.

But perhaps at some point we will accept an invitation to step into discomfort, to cultivate patience and courage and humility, to realize that we have unearned benefits that everyone should have. If that day comes we will revisit the questions asked by Rev. Rebecca Parker: What will you do with your gifts? Will you bless or curse? Will you comply with injustice or bring justice? And we will stand up and say, I will use my gifts for healing, well-being, and joy. I will use my gifts to bless. I will use my gifts to bring justice. I'll be the one to make the difference. And in doing this my own healing, well-being, and joy will deepen. And I will be blessed. And I will understand what it means to live out justice. And the difference I make will restore me as it restores others. And if we say this together, as a community, our community will be healed and blessed and restored as well.

My friends, the invitations await. They are not invitations to a birthday party, a rock concert, or a beach vacation. But they offer us the opportunity to trade safety for wholeness, to start the engine of the church and shift it into fourth gear, to get our congregational heart pumping strongly and our congregational soul giving thanks. May we, individually and collectively, take these invitations seriously, read them carefully, and when we are ready, accept one of them secure in the knowledge that we are here to take care of each other through the many forms of growth available to us. Amen and blessed be.