

CELEBRATING DIVERSITY: FROM HO-HUM TO ENGAGED

Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough

Rev. Julie Stoneberg

September 14, 2014

OPENING WORDS

~ Steven Biko

Steven Biko, who died while in police custody, is known for fighting South African apartheid in the late 60s and 70s. These are his words.

We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us,

But as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life.

Come into this place where we would act deliberately to create a community of people involved in a joint quest for a just and sustainable world. You are welcome here.

STORY FOR ALL *The Enormous Turnip* - Alexei Tolstoy

In this story, an old man is unable to pull up a large turnip, and elicits the help of others.

READING from *Letter to a Law Student Interested In Social Justice*¹ ~ William P. Quigley

William Quigley is a law professor and Director of the Gillis Long Poverty Law Center at Loyola University New Orleans. These words, slightly abridged, were published as part of his *Letter to a Law Student Interested in Social Justice*:

Dear Bridgette: I am delighted to learn of your commitment to social justice law. Despite many decades practicing some form or other of social justice advocacy, I too still have much to learn. I hope some of these thoughts will help you; it helped me to write them down.

Let me start with a true story. After Hurricane Katrina, dozens of law students helped out with a case challenging the City of New Orleans' unilateral demolition of hundreds of damaged homes without notice to the owner or an opportunity to be heard. Most of these homes had been literally swept off their foundations by the brutal onrush of huge walls of water when the levees broke. Many homes were upside down, and some were sitting in the middle of the street blocks away from where they started. Regular methods of finding who owned the property were insufficient since the houses were often scattered far from where they originally sat. Since all of the homeowners were still displaced far outside of the city, they had no way of knowing that the authorities planned to demolish their homes before they could get back to either fix them up or even remove personal effects. In teams, students went to each house scheduled to be demolished to see if they could figure out who the owners were.

Then, the teams tried to contact the displaced owners to see what they wanted us

¹ https://law.duke.edu/curriculum/pdf/interested_social_justice.pdf

to do about the impending demolition. At the end of a week of round-the-clock work trying to save people's homes, a group of law students met together in one room of a neighborhood homeless center to reflect on what they had experienced. Sitting on the floor, each told what they had been engaged in and what they learned. As they went around the room, a number of students started crying.

One young woman wept as she told of her feelings when she discovered a plaster Madonna in the backyard of one of the severely damaged homes – a Madonna just like the one in her mother's backyard on the West Coast. At that moment, she realized her profound connection with the family whom she had never met. This was not just a case, she realized, it was a life – a life connected to her own.

Another student told of finding a small, hand-stitched pillow amid the ruins of a family home. The pillow was stitched with the words "Blessed Are the Meek." It told a lot about the people who lived in that small home. Not the usual sentiment celebrated in law school.

The last law student to speak had just returned from working in the destroyed neighborhood. He had been picking through a home trying to find evidence that might lead to the discovery of who owned the property. He also was on the verge of tears. The student felt that it was a privilege to be able to assist people in such great need. It reminded him, he paused for a second, of why he went to law school. He went to law school to help people and to do his part to change the world. "You know," he said quietly, "the first thing I lost in law school was the reason that I came. This will help me get back on track."

RAINBOW PRAYER

During Pride week, we gather to celebrate the diversity in our community. We celebrate that diversity and at the same time are painfully aware that it is not celebrated by everyone, everywhere. And sometimes, even as we celebrate, sometimes, even knowing that there is more work to do, we experience indifference, and even fear, in ourselves. We want to unite in the struggle, and to take a stand in solidarity, but something seems to get in our way.

Let us join in the spirit of prayer as we hear the prayers of the people of this community:

Violet: A candle of gratitude. We give thanks for the creative process of life that spreads a world of diversity before us, for it is diversity that makes possible the rainbow of loving relationships in our lives. We are especially grateful to those who teach us that love comes in many colours, and who make the effort to challenge us to deepen and grow in our understanding of one another. We are also deeply grateful for the courage all those who stand on the side of love.

Indigo: A candle for peace. Although we try our best to love as best we can,

sometimes the way to love across difference is not clear. Sometimes love turns cold or painful. We pray for parents and children, lovers and friends, who have been separated or estranged by circumstance or choice...who are now unable to see each other clearly...now unable to hold one another in love and acceptance. May they, may we, know peace.

Blue: A candle in honour of anger. In the words of Bill Sinkford, "let us not forget our anger. May it fuel not only our commitment to compassion but also our commitment to make fundamental changes. Our vision of the Beloved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the privilege of the few to be accepted as just and even holy. Let us remember that we are, and we should be, both a gentle, and an angry people." May the glow of this light inspire and embolden us to use our anger to dismantle hate, the fear of difference and all that leads to violence.

Green: A prayer for healing. We are aware of the many places in our world where people are persecuted simply for who they are and who they love. We also know that such hatred is first and primarily damaging to the hearts in which it resides. By this candle's light, may we see the reality of that pain and be incited to work to heal what is broken...in our world, in our relationships, in our hearts.

Yellow: A candle of hope. In lighting this candle, I hope that one day everyone, everywhere...without regard to colour or socio-economic status or sexual preference...that everyone, everywhere, will be free to love, to believe, and to worship as they choose. May the religious freedom that we experience here become a given for all.

Orange: A candle for acceptance. I wish that everyone might accept and love themselves, as well as those with whom they choose to be in relationship. I would wish that such acceptance not be confined to particular isolated places, but that it would exist everywhere. And may such loving acceptance be felt and affirmed even in times of tough decisions and difficult circumstances.

Red: A candle for community. Here we are privileged to have a community that accepts and encourages us to be who we are and to grow how we can. May we be a blessing to anyone who enters here – and may those who come in as strangers teach us to grow in wisdom, in compassion, and in the joy of living. We pray for those who are, as yet, unable to connect with community in this way...that it may become a reality for all.

White: A white candle for love, for white holds all colours, just as love holds and embraces all of our difference. May we be shown love and may we show our love.

MESSAGE *From Ho-Hum to Engaged*

There'll be freedom in that land. There'll be justice in that land. There'll be singing.

"Come and Go With Me²," comes out of the African American spiritual tradition, a

² This spiritual was sung by the congregation.

musical tradition that used singing, and the words of the songs, as revolutionary countercultural strategies. Bernice Reagon Johnson³, of *Sweet Honey and the Rock*, wrote of this song: "As a child, I was sure [the land] must be heaven that we were being called to consider – no pain, no sickness, nothing but joy, no more hatred."

Heaven. Whatever heaven is or isn't, whether heaven is to be believed in or denied, heaven is not something that I, personally, am willing to ascribe to a time or location that is only attainable after death. I believe that heaven is possible to experience while living...that heaven on earth should be our goal and objective. Heaven on earth is a land, a place, a time, where there is freedom, and justice, and singing. And I'll take every piece of that heaven...if only in brief moments and infrequent places...that we can achieve.

The question for today, really, is how do we achieve that? What will it take, what does it require of us, to birth justice and freedom into being? Still speaking about the song we just sang, Johnson went on to say,

"...we are called to understand that journeying toward that land requires us to actually engage in the courageous work of creating that which we all seek – the unity of humanity." (*unquote*)

For her, 'that land' is synonymous with the unity of humanity.

Unity is the theme of this year's Peterborough Pride, and so I thought we might explore how we could UNITE in renewing our commitment to work...together...in solidarity... for a world in which each and every person can live and love with dignity.

I assume that I don't need to convince you of the need for this work. You are as aware of the need, maybe more aware of the need, than I. You hear the stories in the news, you have family members who are bullied and harassed, you have been denied freedoms, you work with people whose every day is a struggle for equality, you have felt the denial of acceptance and worthiness.

I don't have to tell you that there are places on this planet where people are killed because of who they are and who they love. I don't have to tell you that hate crimes based on sexual orientation in Canada are much more likely to be violent than hate crimes based on other kinds of discrimination. I don't have to tell you that the Courage Peterborough campaign, which has arisen out of a need to address hate crimes and harassment in this community, is one of the largest grass roots movements this town has seen of late. I assume I don't need to tell you that there still exists a need to work for freedom.

Today's exploration also contains several other assumptions... perhaps most basic, that a land where every person can live and love with dignity is indeed a land we want to help to create...but also an assumption that you feel a personal need, a commitment, to work for such a world...and that we desire to do this work together, united. I trust that each of these assumptions is appropriate to make in this company.

³ <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupCulturalAid.asp?LRID=42>

But, what I fear is that we don't quite believe that a way to this land, a '*how*,' actually exists.

Paula read earlier the introduction to, "Letter to a Law Student Interested in Social Justice,"⁴ and Quigley writes beautifully in the article that follows about how a person with high ideals might navigate chaos, failure and criticism in a societal system in which working for justice means taking the path of most resistance, swimming upstream. You...who are social justice advocates....does you experience it that way? Quigley writes to offer moral support to new law students, to guide them in maintaining their commitment to justice, and to offer his hand and heart in solidarity. And so I speak to you this morning in the style of Quigley, to encourage you, to support you, and to act in solidarity with you in this work, you dear Unitarians and Peterborough-ians who so desire social justice.

This faith, this beloved tradition, has at its very foundation the Unitarian ideal of oneness, the interconnectedness of all creation, and the Universalist primacy of universal love. Indeed, this faith, this beloved tradition, Unitarian Universalism, has much to offer to us in this work. We a covenantal religion⁵, which has at its core, a theology of engagement. We draw inspiration and truth from experiencing each other and the world around us, which means that we necessarily witness both the beauty and the brokenness of our world. We come together to create meaning and to build relationships that are based on equality and justice. We come together to be challenged to be personally transformed in the process. We come together to learn from one another through engagement and conversation, to be renewed in spirit, that we might go back out into our lives, holding hands, with strength and courage anew.

Our theme for September is renewal, so let me belabour this point. Our non-fiction book club is currently reading "The Brain that Changes Itself"⁶; the brain being a great example of our ability for renewal. The author, Dr. Norman Doidge, makes the point that change requires new and repetitive patterns of movement, or behaviour, or perception...repetitions until a new neuron pathway or synapse is created in our brain. And, we have to keep using that new pathway in order for it to continue to exist. I got to thinking about what that implies for spiritual practice, or a commitment to social justice, or a desire to deepen our focus on any particular moral issue. For me, it would seem to imply that we need to continually renew our commitments...and strengthen our social justice muscle. I believe that this Fellowship can play a part in that...sort of like becoming a social justice gym. And like the normal kind of gym, we have to keep coming and practicing, and working out.

So, to take this analogy further, what kind of equipment or resources do we need in our social justice gym?

⁴ https://law.duke.edu/curriculum/pdf/interested_social_justice.pdf

⁵ Drawn from the UUA's Social Justice Empowerment Program Handbook, pp 1-4;
<http://www.uua.org/action/empowerment/28030.shtml>

⁶ <http://www.normandoidge.com/normandoidge.com/MAIN.html>

First I think we need to be willing to enter the locker room and suit up...we need a willingness to be changed...knowing that even being in the social justice gym will be uncomfortable and might even be painful.

We need a visionary 'trainer'...something that keeps that picture of a better world in front of us. We need a vision that inspires and motivates us, a vision that encourages us when we are dejected and discouraged. This week, Peterborough Pride, is all about reminding us of that vision....that picture of 'heaven on earth.' With a clear vision as our trainer, we receive energy, and hope.

Suited up, inspired, we enter the gym, and the first thing we do is to get down on a mat and stretch. As we stretch, we feel our tight muscles of ego and hubris, and recognize how much more we have to learn and grow. Being down on that mat, we practice humility, which is pretty crucial to doing social justice work. From that position, we recognize that we can't do it all, and we can't do it alone.

From there, we move to a cardio-machine....a way to build our resilience and our stamina. In our social justice gym, the cardio-machine is the practice of reflection, both individually and together. Paulo Friere, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argued that we learn best from conversations with each other.⁷ Reflection is one side of social justice cross-training... a time to ground ourselves in our values and re-connect to our passion. We ask why we are doing this work, what has worked and hasn't work, and listen to the experience of others. We reflect, then we engage, and then we reflect again...building up our heart muscle for further work...and in that process, making a real difference in what we're able to do.

We need to do some heavy lifting in our gym...to study and honestly critique social, political, and cultural systems that both create and perpetuate injustice. Lifting these weights, we feel the heaviness of injustice and oppression. Lifting weights, we test our resistance and our strength, and sharpen our minds to the issues before us.

What else? I think we need music in our gym. Music to sing together songs of equality, justice, and freedom. Music to sing together songs of courage and inspiration. But we also need to hear, and listen to, what we have not yet heard...the voices of those who are oppressed and suffering...the voices that are so often marginalized and silenced. The 'musak' in our gym would play those voices.

We need a mirror in our social justice gym. We need to see the progress we've made, and take some time to celebrate. And we need to see where we're still a little flabby. Bernice Reagon Johnson said, "So much of what is destructive in our society is created by concepts of differences that not only separate, but also seem to provide increased opportunities to name 'the other' as the source of all problems. This not only creates problems for the group that is perceived as different, but it keeps the holder of the perception from turning the light onto her and his own contributions to the problems." (*unquote*) We need a mirror that turns the light on us, so we can examine our own

⁷ UUA's Social Justice Empowerment Program Handbook, p 1

hearts.

Come to think of it, let's make it a 3-way mirror, because that might offer us new perspectives...which are always a good thing in this work. Friday night I helped to host a neighbourhood BBQ. As darkness fell, I was standing, facing the backyard, and talking with a woman who lives behind me and a few doors down. Suddenly she said, "Wow, whose house is that?" pointing toward a house where lights glowed warmly in the windows. "Yours," I said. She was shocked. "Really? I've never seen it from this angle before." We need mirrors that show us new angles, new perspectives.

Finally, I think we need a big open space...like a school gym...a school gym without the dirty socks smell, that is. We need a big open space that will foster interaction and understanding and acceptance. Social justice work is a team sport, one that requires relationships and partnerships, because a just world is like that huge sweet turnip⁸...we have to work together to bring it into being.

Yes, our gym needs to be big, and warm, and inviting, and welcoming...and at the same time, we need to be willing to go work-out in other gyms. In Quigley's letter, he writes, "Seek out people and organizations trying to stand up for justice. Build relationships with them. Work with them. Eat with them. Recreate with them. Walk with them. Learn from them. If you are humble and patient," he says (and this was the point of the story about New Orleans that Paula read earlier,) "over time people will embrace you and you will embrace them, and together you will be on the road to solidarity and community." (*unquote*)

I believe we can create this kind of social justice gym here, do you? I believe that if we continue to create this space, and to use it, that we will see that indeed there a way, a *how*, to get to a land where there is freedom, and justice, and equality. Working out in this gym, individually, and with most importantly with others, we can build a world in which each and every person can live and love with dignity...each and every person...of whatever faith, of whatever heritage, of whatever race or colour, of whatever gender identity or sexual orientation, of whatever age...a world where each and every person is affirmed, and embraced, for their inherent worth.

There is a way to this land. It is not by using brute force to return evil for evil or injustice for injustice. It is not by atrophying, by ignoring hard realities and looking the other way. The way is by going to our social justice gym, where we grow in understanding, and where we learn to respond to evil and injustice with love. Love, practiced regularly and given repeatedly, is truly the only path to transformation. Come and go with me to this gym. And together, may we renew our commitment to create a way that leads to the land of which we dream.

So be it. Amen.

READING *UFP's 2008 Resolution*

WE DO HEREBY RESOLVE TO:

⁸ Today's "Story for all Ages" was *The Enormous Turnip*.

- Be inclusive and expressive of the concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, and
- Nurture ongoing dialogue among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and heterosexual persons and to create deeper trust and sharing, and
- Celebrate the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and all people and our diverse ways of expressing love for each other, and
- Advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and to promote justice, freedom, and equality in the larger society,

And therefore declare our intention to be known as a welcoming congregation.

*** CLOSING WORDS**

~ Kathy A. Huff

Our time in this place may have ended, but our connection to each other and this community remains.

Together may we walk the path of justice, speak words of love, live the selfless deed, tread gently upon the earth, and fill the world with compassion.

Until we meet again, blessed be.