

POWER: IT'S ALL IN THE PREPOSITION

The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
April 8, 2018

OPENING WORDS ~ Julie Stoneberg

Bind our hearts this sacred hour. Fill us with faith, hope, and charity.
In this sacred hour together, may we feel the “power within” even as we speak truth to that which holds “power over.”
May we, even amidst our struggles and miseries, find “power for” seeing what is possible.
May we here embrace our “power to” by acknowledging and committing to use the great personal and communal agency that we have to support one another and to build up a new world.
May we connect to the “power with” that can be felt when we join hands in service and in common endeavor.
And may we here, now, in this sacred hour, draw “power from” the well of life, of love, and of community.
Come, let us join in this time of worship together.

STORY FOR ALL AGES Otis ~ Loren Long

(Otis is a little tractor who befriends a young calf. They spend their days together playing and working on the farm. But then the farmer buys a new big yellow tractor, and things change.)

READING Three Things ~ Jan Taddeo

The storm outside echoes the
storm raging within my soul.
So many people in need...
so much pain, so much grief.
Too many causes and campaigns
fill my mailboxes, sap my energy,
beg for my money.
Three things I must do...only three things?
You've got to be kidding – which three do I choose?
Books and letters, magnets and movies
implore me to dance as if no one is watching
learn seven habits and make four agreements
give generously, vote often, express myself!
Yet hundreds, thousands, millions live with hunger
and thirst, in poverty, enduring violence, and disease.
Did Mother Teresa, Martin and Ghandi cry out
with despair from the darkness of overwhelm?
What three things did they choose?
Three things. Three things we must do.
Is it to act in kindness, serve justice, love God and your

neighbor even as you love yourself.

But where do I start?

So much thoughtlessness,
hatred and fear.

Too little justice, too much selfishness.

Where is God? Who is my neighbor?

Three things...seven principles, ten commandments, twelve steps...
all number of things speak to us; and yet,
we must choose.

We must choose to do something, so three things
may be the right number...not too few, not too many.

But which three things shall I do? Will you do?

Here's an adage I've always liked:

Don't just do something, stand there.

Stand in the surf, or sit on a rock, or lay your
body across the earthy loam...and be quiet.

Very quiet.

Do you hear it? That still small voice, the
echo of your soul, reverberating with the call
to your own true self to emerge.

Then the calm within becomes the calm without.

The storm blows over, the sun recovers its position of strength,
And that glorious symbol of hope and unity emerges across the sky.

At the end of this rainbow, a treasure...
the three things you must do:

Go outside yourself and know the needs of the world.

Go within and discover your Life-given gifts.

Then arch yourself like a rainbow bridge between the two and
create a more beautiful world.

MESSAGE

Imagine this: an animated lesson on sentence structure that assigns each word an avatar and a role to play. The verb is a wiry, agitated character who is always on the move. The noun is grounded and firm, confidently taking up a lot of personal space. The adjectives...and there are many of them...are hard-hitting literary agents vying for position near the noun. The object is a fearful fellow, cowering in a corner, wondering what havoc will be wreaked upon him. There is an adverb or two, who, if truth be told, are a bit judgmental of the verb. The interjections are the drama queens, who make a big deal out of everything, while the conjunctions are bridge builders, hoping to make everyone get along. Because somehow, all these characters have to come together to make meaning, to make sense.

Can you picture it?

Sentence structure is not of much interest to me, but when I look at it this way, it's a fascinating exercise in systems theory...a way to see how we connect and relate to one another based on the roles we play. Systems exist in families, in communities, and in society at large,

even here at UFP, and when we better recognize the system that's at work, we better understand ourselves and how we can affect change.

That's how Martin Luther King, Jr...the 50th anniversary of whose assassination was marked this past week...defined power. Power, he said, is the ability to achieve purpose... the ability to affect change.¹ It is our capacity and willingness to act. Power is neutral, but for the way it's used in the system. Still, many of us have a negative view of power. We have learned that it is corrupt and evil. We are afraid of those with power. We are reticent to assume or wield any power, for fear of being overbearing or harmful, or just plain bossy.

When Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* in 1513, he wrote of unilateral power, exercised without regard for those affected. Unfortunately, his writing has coloured our views of power ever since. We generally see it as corrupt, brutal, immoral, and egotistical. We see power as a big machine...like a tractor... overrunning everything in its path.

But what if we could see the full range of kinds of power? There is not only power 'over' ...but also the 'power to' act, 'power through' compassion, 'power against' evil, the 'power of' love, the 'power within' to change, 'power from' the wellspring of life, 'power with' others. Power itself is not evil, but it is incumbent on us to be aware of what power we hold, and to be accountable for how we use that power in relationship.

Rev. Fred Muir, who delivered the Berry Street Address in 2012, out of a deep concern for Unitarian Universalism's future, plainly named a 'trinity of errors' that we regularly practice, which he believes lead to our general ineffectiveness as well as our inability to share our liberating message. One of those errors, Muir said, is 'refusing to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power.'²

Power has a bad rap, for sure, but the answer isn't to refuse to use it, or to disregard its presence in and among us, because without it, we cannot effect change. Again, the answer is to be accountable to it, and to use it responsibly. Because whether or not we claim our power, or even acknowledge power's presence, it exists in everything we do and in every relationship we have.

There are three laws of power. 1) it is never static...it's either increasing or decreasing, so if you're not taking action, you're being acted upon, 2) as I said, it flows through everything, and 3) it compounds. Power begets more power, and powerlessness begets more powerlessness.³ So huge imbalances of power exist when we don't take action, and when we don't act to manage power's flow.

In order to be world citizens, agents of change carrying our values with us, we need to study the use of power, and to use our power as effectively as possible. The use of our power is our greatest agency in the world. As Eric Lui⁴ has said, a great citizen is made by wedding power to character.

¹ <https://www.working-minds.com/MLKquotes.htm>

² <http://www.uuma.org/BlankCustom.asp?page=BSE2012> The other two errors named are a disturbing and disruptive commitment to individualism, and clinging to UU exceptionalism that is often insulting to others.

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_Eutci7ack

⁴ Ibid.

Take today's story.⁵ Tractors are seen as powerful things, usually...machines that transformed farming and exponentially increased one person's ability to plow the earth and harvest a crop. As the daughter of a farm boy, I grew up with a healthy respect for the power of a tractor; a boy in my school was killed when a tractor rolled over him, and we knew several people who had been seriously injured by farm implements.

But as our story told, even tractors can use their power for good. Even tractors have hearts that can make beautiful friendships with others. Power for good. Power with others.

Power: it's all in the preposition.

A preposition is a word, or group of words, that indicates the relationship between a noun and other words in a sentence. Using the earlier analogy of a sentence as a system, the preposition is the wise sage...the one who names how we are in relationship...it gives our connections meaning. And so as we look at the concept and use of power, let's critique the use of power by paying attention to the preposition it's hanging around with.

I'm told there are about 40 standard prepositions, and perhaps as many more that are used as prepositions. But we don't have to get that complex.

My study for today led me to an article written by an organization that supports community action for the common good.⁶ That article says that there are really just two kinds of power. The first is unilateral power...which is power 'over'...either through dominating power, such as brute force, or by constitution, the power of law or policy.

The second kind of power is relational power...which is power 'with.' Relational power can be mutual...that is when a fairly equal balance of power exists between two people or groups...or it can be reciprocal...that is, when all parties involved understand that everyone, regardless of the power they hold, will benefit if all authentically share the power to make decisions.

This last kind of power...that is relational and reciprocal...is the deepest kind. It is this kind of power that promises a world of justice, an equitable distribution of goods, and the elimination of poverty. It is the best way for us to organize ourselves around common values, to gather in large numbers of influence, and to get things done in the service of good. It is a power that sees the whole and includes all voices.

I'd like to ask you to do a little exercise. In your order of service, you were given a slip of coloured paper. Can you take it out now, and also find yourself a writing implement...hopefully a marker?

Write the word 'power' large across that piece of paper...P-O-W-E-R. And imagine this: within this piece of paper lies all of your personal power. The strength of your body. The resources you have. The talent you possess. The ideas you generate. The influence you hold. All of your power to act and to affect change is right there. Take a moment to simply acknowledge and claim that power.

Now, as we've said, power is neutral and is best used in relationships of common care and purpose. But we are not used to sharing power in this way, so if we are to become proficient in

⁵ Otis, by Loren Long. The story of an old tractor who befriends a young calf. But when the old tractor is 'put out to pasture', he loses his power...temporarily.

⁶ <http://www.icon-iaf.org/resources/what-is-power/>

the sharing of power in mutually beneficial ways, we need to practice the act of giving and receiving of power.

Okay, tear your paper into three pieces. You are still holding your power, but now it's in sharable form. Here are your instructions. Ask someone else to take a piece of the power you hold, and in turn, graciously receive some of their power. Get up and move around, or to just turn to your neighbour. And after you've done that, pair up with someone else and offer and receive again. Do that about three times.⁷ Now, share your power. (*Bell rings at end of exercise.*)

How did it feel to offer a part of your power in this way?

How did it feel to be offered someone else's power and to receive it?

What does it look like to see the power that is now in your hands?

You know, we talk a lot here about shared ministry. Sharing the work. Sharing the vision. Sharing the decisions. Sharing the care for one another. Sharing the power of community at its best. My belief in the power this community holds is what motivates me each day. We have the power to tell stories of healing and transformation, the power to inspire one another to a wider and wider circle of inclusion, the ability to empower one another to get out of the stuck places. We have the power to create a space of both belonging and challenge, the power to act outside of these walls for a just society, the power to provide a new home here for those fleeing from oppressive governments, the power to influence our local politics...we hold the persuasive power of love.

And we can use that power most effectively by practicing reciprocal, relational power in the service of good. We need to share the power we have, and step up to hold the power that others offer to us. We need to practice a kind of mutuality and humility that leaves no one out, that deeply knows that it takes all of us to show up for all of us, that none of us can experience freedom as long as any one of us is not free. We need to share power in pro-social ways so that what we do benefits everyone, not just a few. This is the only way that we, together, with all of our separate roles and voices, can make sense of what it means to be human.

We are called to use our power, collectively, reciprocally, to bring our values out in the open, and to give them form... what Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams called 'social incarnation.' In other words, good things will only happen if we use our agency as human beings to make them happen.⁸

You hold this power. We hold this power. And as we become more and more fluent in the workings of power, using the appropriately just prepositions, we are more able to flex our power for change.

I close with the words of Bonaro W. Overstreet:

"You say the efforts that I make
will do no good;
they will never prevail
to tip the hovering scale
where justice hangs in the balance.
I don't think

⁷ Exercise courtesy of Trina C. Olson, Co-Founder & Principal, Team Dynamics LLC

⁸ Rev. Galen Guengerich, as quoted by Karen G. Johnston: <http://blog.awakeandwitness.net/wp/2017/01/you-are-the-sixth-the-five-smooth-stones-of-liberal-religion-sermon4494/>

I ever thought they would,
but I am prejudiced beyond debate
in favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight."

Each of us has the right to choose to use our power to stand on the side of love and justice, to choose to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder, to serve the spirit of freedom, with one another.

So may it be! Amen.

RESPONSIVE READING

Beginners #648

~ Denise Levertov

But we have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life
__How could we tire of hope? -- so much is in bud.
How can desire fail?-we have only begun to imagine justice and mercy,
__Only begun to envision how it might be to live as siblings with beast and flower, not as oppressors.
Surely our river cannot already be hastening into the sea of nonbeing?
__Surely it cannot drag, in the silt, all that is innocent?
Not yet, not yet -- there is too much broken that must be mended,
__Too much hurt that we have done to each other that cannot yet be forgiven.
We have only begun to know the power that is in us if we would join our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
__So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture, so much is in bud.

CLOSING WORDS

~ Tom Schade

My friends,
There is a power at work in the universe.
It works through human hands,
but it was not made by human hands.
It is a creative, sustaining, and transforming power
and we can trust that power with our lives
[and with our ministries].
It will sustain us whenever we take a stand on the side of love;
whenever we take a stand for peace and justice;
whenever we take a risk.
Trust in that power.
We are, together, held by that power.
Amen. Blessed be.