



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

An Irresistible Sense of Mission
Rev. Kathleen McTigue, Guest Minister
February 8, 2015

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Meditation

In this silence we hold together,
we make a small space within our over-filled lives,
a moment or two carved out and stilled, held away from restless motion.
Our only movement is a conscious breathing in and breathing out,
guided by the pulse of our heartbeat,
the constant rhythm that shapes our living.

To listen to the heartbeat or the breath
leads us to listen more deeply to the meaning of our lives
We remember that there is a purpose here,
purpose in the beating of our hearts and in the working of our breath.

For even God is helpless
without these lives now breathing on the planet.
Whatever goodness is shaped in the world
will be made by these hands and minds,
sustained by these beating hearts and breathing lungs,
by us, and by others just like us --
as frail and as courageous.

Let us notice the miracle,
as we breathe, as we listen.

Let us keep silence together.

-- Kathleen McTigue

An Irresistible Sense of Mission

Rev. Kathleen McTigue

I'm very glad to be with you this morning, and to have this chance to explore the intersection between our inner lives of spirituality and our outer lives of social justice.

During the course of my parish ministry — which spanned 25 years spent mostly in just one church, the UU Society of New Haven — I came to realize that there is actually a rather limited menu of themes that we revisit again and again in our worship services. Though the topic of the sermon changes all the time, in one way or another, week after week we land on our questions about *meaning*. What is it that makes a life most worth living? How is it that we make a difference in our world? Who are we meant to be, and how do we live into our potential?

We revisit these large questions over and over again, not because we're slow learners or fond of repetition, and not even because the questions are enormous ones, though they surely are. We come back to them again and again because the answers and insight we find are ephemeral. We don't ever get the satisfaction of a clear road map we can follow. It's more like a path that unwinds through dense fog: at each step, we ask and look and search again.

This isn't how we're used to thinking about "progress," which we tend to envision as a pretty linear process, one step following another. We take Spanish 101 and then graduate to Spanish 102. But in so many of the huge arenas of our lives — like our spiritual lives, or what it means to really become mature human beings — this is not in fact how progress is made. And that's because the nature of what we're learning is ephemeral: we have to learn it again and again.

I've come to believe that justice-making is also one of these arenas, where we do well to revise our linear thinking. The work of justice is not ephemeral in the same sense as spiritual growth. We do, after all, try to make some very concrete things happen: raise the minimum wage, ensure an equal right to marriage, push our government into accords on climate change. We look to these very real markers to show us signs of progress or give us a sense of the work still to be done.

But if we shift our perspective a little and step back into the long view, we're reminded that social change has always been made in a spiral motion. That's because the work of shifting our world toward justice is not a matter of a particular issue or campaign, but has to do with how many thousands of us live out our lives.

In that sense, social change isn't only about what we *do* but about *who we are*. It includes a kind of listening for who we are called to be, in this fleeting life, so that our lives can be lived with deep meaning. And to live this way requires of us patience, courage and, above all, perseverance.

In an essay I read some years ago, Shawnthea Monroe recounted an interaction she had with her children one day, when they were driving home from the movie theater. Her son and daughter began debating which superpower they would choose, if they could have any of them. They argued about the benefits and drawbacks of being able to fly versus becoming invisible, of telepathy versus magic, laser vision versus X-ray vision.

Finally one of them asked her: "Which super power would you choose, Mom?" She thought about it for a minute and then, a bit to her own surprise, found herself saying, "Perseverance." Of course her children hooted and claimed that that wasn't a superpower, and then went back to ignoring her. But it left her pondering her own answer, as she realized how often that ordinary, essential human capacity is missing in our culture of instant gratification.

So, how do we cultivate perseverance in our own time, in our own efforts? It is, after all, a core religious virtue, just like the ones we more commonly name, like patience or compassion. And therefore, it isn't something we feel, but something we *enact*. The great Jewish theologian,

Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote, "The beginning of faith is not a *feeling* for the mystery of living or a sense of awe... The root of religion is the question *what to do* with [these feelings]... Religion begins with a consciousness that something is asked of us..."

Religion begins with the consciousness that something is asked of us. This is not a foreign idea for us as Unitarian Universalists. We are the ones, after all, who make our home on the slice of the religious spectrum most thoroughly grounded in this world, in this one life. We're the religious descendants of people who rejected the idea that God had a hell waiting for us after death. Instead, they pointed to ways we human beings *create* hell for each other, right here on earth. Their faith asked them to do something about that very real and present hell. Our faith -- the same faith -- is asking still.

At the heart of the Unitarian Universalism we proclaim is the vivid image of the intricate web of existence. Any time we review or recite our Purposes and Principles, we reaffirm our awareness that this web links us to everything that is. Sometimes we imagine it as a thing of shimmering beauty, like the perfect work of an orb spider shining in the summer sun. But that's not a complete picture.

The interdependent web links us, in its fierce strength, not just to the sweetness of our earth, but also to its pain. The web connects us to the fear and despair of immigrants lost in detention. It ties us to people in Bangladesh and the Philippines who already feel the catastrophe of climate change. It binds us to the grotesque chasm between people who live in an excess of comfort and those who are trapped in rank poverty.

When we elevate the virtue of perseverance, we remember the constancy of that web of connection, and the truth that the tug of its strands demands something of us, as long as we breathe the air of this sweet earth. It infuses within us an irresistible sense of mission because it compels us to look up and away from ourselves, to follow the strands out from the lucky place we stand, to all the places where our sisters and brothers are imperiled.

Our religion is not about a private feeling of happiness or well-being, of gratitude or reverence, but what we *do* with those feelings: how they lead us to turn our gaze toward a fractured world and put the weight of our lives on the side of its mending.

The UU College of Social Justice, which I lead as Director, was created to help us in that large imperative of our faith. Founded jointly by the UUA and UUSC, the College is a whole new level of collaboration between the two institutions. Its programs revolve around experiential learning: the idea that the most powerful kind of learning -- the kind that sometimes leads us to literally change our lives -- comes not from books or films or lectures or sermons, but from first-hand experience.

So we bring groups of people on short-term journeys, which are pilgrimages of faith and solidarity, linking us to people on the front lines of justice struggles in our own country and abroad. Along with these short journeys to Mexico, India, Haiti and locations within our own

country, we offer intensive justice trainings for high school youth, to help them manifest our faith through their own involvement in justice work.

We arrange summer-long internships for college age young adults, within the US and as far afield as Ghana and India. And we are creating a matrix of connection, aimed particularly at people in or near retirement, who have skills and time to give, and want to put themselves to work with one of our partner organizations around the world.

All these programs are grounded in three core convictions. The first is that in any kind of service learning journey, we should be aware that the true service we render comes not on the journey but once we return home. All of our programs are designed to help us learn not only about the places we visit but about our own position in the matrix of privilege and power, and how we can leverage the place we stand in ways that bring more justice into the world.

The second core conviction is that our action in the world should be connected to spiritual practice. Contemplative practices help center and sustain us. They remind us to turn ourselves toward the mysterious immensity of life -- whether or not we call that enormity "God", or call it anything at all. They let us drink from the deep wells that sustain our work in the world, they balance our spirits, and they help us see our small efforts linked into the grand story of human striving.

But spiritual practices are also essential because they engage us in a kind of deep looking that allows us to see our own shadows. Think, for a moment, about the words in the grand old hymn we sang together this morning, "God of Grace and God of Glory." So often, our justice songs are full of the steady confidence that we are always the good guys, the change agents. In one of my favorites, written by Carolyn McDade, we sing, "We'll build a land where we bind up the broken, we'll build a land where the captives go free..." It's a great song!

But listen to what a different feeling is evoked by the lyrics Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote well over a century ago: "Cure thy children's warring madness, bend our pride to thy control; shame our wanton, selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul..." Try not to trip over the theology, and listen not to what those words say about God, but instead what they imply about us: Cure *our* madness. Bend *our* pride. Shame *our* selfishness. Heal *our* wounds. And then grant us wisdom, and courage.

When our justice work is grounded in spirituality, it helps us remember that the things that have to be changed "out there" are the same kinds of things that have to be changed *in here* -- in us. How shall we be peacemakers and work against war, if we carry within us hearts filled with rage? How shall we struggle against the vast, unjust chasm between wealth and poverty, if we carry within us hearts filled with greed? Without the deep looking of spiritual practice, we can fall prey to the entrapments of egotism, righteousness and the kind of us-against-them mentality that tilts so easily toward violence.

And the third core conviction grounding the College of Social Justice is that the interdependent

web of our faith really contains the entire power and urgency of the mission to which we are all called. The truth our web proclaims is that we rise and fall together -- all things that live, all things that suffer. So we must wake up from the delusion of separateness, and find ways both small and mighty to step over the boundaries that have trained us to think in terms of "us" and "them".

This faith of ours, in which we so often proclaim the goodness of diversity, calls us to this work — calls us to honor the lines of difference while refusing to allow those lines to become barriers. It challenges us to practice true diversity within our own walls: to engage one another from a stance of glad curiosity, to help one another into speech by the loving quality of our listening. And then we can bring that with us out into the world that needs it so desperately — that celebration of difference, that capacity to prevent difference from becoming barrier.

In this way we become true allies to those who are most vulnerable around us. In this way we find the power of solidarity. In this way, each gesture we make toward compassion, generosity and justice bears witness not only to the world we hope to create, but to the human beings we wish to be. I believe we want to be people whose faith speaks not only to us — within these walls — but to the world we inhabit. We want to be those who will try to live, within ourselves, the changes we dream of making out in the world.

We want to be people who will study our sometimes-hostile hearts for the seeds of compassion we can water; those who, like Gandhi, refuse to make our adversaries into our enemies. Most fundamentally, we want to be people who make a difference in our world's healing. When we come to the end of these fleeting lives of ours, as Ann Lamott put it in our reading, we want to know that our single lives, like letters of the alphabet, have been part of spelling out a great meaning.

May it be so: Amen.