

Social Justice as a Spiritual Practice
By Laura Wagner LICSW

Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. UU Mass Action is the UU State Action Network for Massachusetts. We are a non-profit organization supported primarily by the commitment and generosity of individual UU's and UU congregations.

There are 22 other State Action Networks in the US. The mission of UU Mass Action is to organize and mobilize UU's around issues of Social Justice; it is how we put our values into action. As the director of UU Mass Action, I am accountable to you - this is our organization for statewide action.

I'd like to begin today by acknowledging whose land we are on. We do this because we need to understand the impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and how it has shaped our national identity. We must go back to the beginning in order to understand our present.

The people who preceded the European settlers and called this region home were the ___ people. We cannot truly engage in justice as a spiritual practice without acknowledging the crimes perpetrated by the European settlers that took place on this land during the early formation of this country. It is important to acknowledge the original crimes by offering a prayer to the First Nations who suffered and died at the hands of the settlers.

We honor you, the people of the First Nations,
who lived during the time of first contact and through the suffering that followed.
We honor you by learning to see and hear the voices of your descendants
and by learning to live together, in right relations, today.

Paying attention is a first step towards working for justice, followed by compassion. Compassion requires us to step out of our own shoes and put on those of another. We are called to ask ourselves, "What might it be like to be that person? What does it feel like to be hungry, or scared or alone?"

Sometimes we can make that compassionate connection because we, ourselves, have felt this suffering and know what it feels like. Maybe you are struggling in your life right now - and you are here today. You have reached out to connect with other human beings.

For others, life is good. You have your health, your material needs are met; you have moved past survival and are able to ask yourself bigger questions; trying to understand this life we live. And you, too, are here today - trying to connect with other human beings.

It has been said that we are all broken.

Our wholeness comes,
when we gather together.

That sense of connection we all seek comes when we gather with others and experience attunement. We long to feel understood; to be seen, to be heard. Attunement brings us comfort and comfort helps us to feel safe. Once we feel safe and grounded our inward gaze often turns outward. It is here where we can find new growth.

At GA this year our UUA moderator, Jim Key said, "Our values as UU's are not a statement. They are a practice and a practice is a struggle." Thinking about our values as a practice helps us to understand that there is no "end point." Our seven UU principles don't offer something to achieve, but rather, they define the values of our journey.

Our principles are empty and meaningless when we are isolated. We need each other to practice our values, to call each other to our best selves and to hold each other accountable when we fall short. That last part requires a loving environment that honors each individual, and supports growth without shaming or passing judgment.

Our values are also meaningless without action. Each of us has some degree of power to confront the injustices in our community and it's up to you find your passion and determine how you will honor what you care most about.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said:

“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

His words eloquently express that loving this world is an active process. Taking action helps us to feel alive and present; agents of love and justice rather than powerless victims.

I know your heart can break when you see how hard life is for many of us in this world. I ask you to reflect on the words you heard today by Barbara Ford and allow your heart to break wide open. Identify what you can do and then do it. You do not have to be a lead organizer on every issue. Trust that others care as you do and are also taking action. Our power does not flow from individuals, but in how we work together in collaboration, with each of us taking part in loving this world no matter how small you think your contribution may be.

In order to both care for ourselves and heal our world, we need to embrace the complexity of holding many conflicting ideas and feelings at once. I often become angry at the words and actions of those who bring suffering to others. As a UU, I know I am called to honor the worth and dignity of every person. It’s a challenge to hold both anger and compassion at the same time.

As people of faith, our challenge is to always chose the “both - and,” rather than the “either - or.” This is a difficult challenge in our current culture. Much of what we see and hear is polarized, “Yes or no, in or out, with me or against me.”

We are also awash in a sea of information which can become overwhelming at times. There is so much work to do in this world and, as Unitarian Universalists, we are a people who are drawn towards justice. We want to put our values into action through building relationships, witnessing and movement building. To do so, we need to be grounded in knowing who we are and what we believe. Our values become our rudder as we toss about that sea of information. It’s also crucial that we understand the qualities of resiliency and put them into practice.

Dr. Eric Gentry described the five main qualities found in the resilient person in the following way:

1. Emotional self regulation - paying attention to how you feel and knowing how to regain a calm, relaxed body.
2. Intentionality - Value based vs. demand driven.
3. Self Validation - Reaction and validation from others does not determine the resilient person's behaviors
4. Connections - Ability to develop and utilize a support network
5. Self care - Having a consistent practice of caring for your physical self

Practicing resiliency skills protects us from burnout. Sometimes, people are not even aware that what they are feeling is related to burnout. Do any of the following statements resonate with you?

1. I feel overwhelmed by daily life and I want my church experience to be a refuge or retreat from the cares of the world
1. I feel overwhelmed by what I see as a multitude of issues that need attention. I don't even know where to start and I feel stuck in inaction.
1. I see the problems that exist in the world but I feel powerless to do anything about it.

These feelings are all manifestations of burnout; when anger or frustration is combined with a sense of powerlessness, you end up feeling despair. When a person feels despair they tend to turn away from others and isolate themselves. Sometimes as a faith community I've found that we become misguided by a false dichotomy. We separate what we understand as our spiritual practice from how we think of social justice. However, when you come to see social justice as a spiritual practice you are able to turn away from despair and nurture your broken heart.

Have you ever thought, "I have such a hard week. I just want to come to church and have a spiritual experience; I don't want to hear about social justice." What might change for you if

you stop drawing that distinction and you begin to see social justice as giving meaning to your spiritual practice?

I ask you today to think of your spiritual experience as an active practice, something that takes place both internally and externally. For example, many of us feel a spiritual connection to the earth. We love the natural, beautiful places on this planet. But our planet is suffering. Human activity has damaged our planet and it's going to take human activity to heal it. You don't have to quit your job and join Green Peace to make a difference but it will take all of us to make the changes that are needed.

We are way beyond shutting off lights and recycling. It's going to take major energy policy changes to make an impact on climate change. Energy policy is heavily influenced by powerful economic and corporate interests. No one individual can fight this power. If we stand on the sidelines and watch our planet burn, how does this honor our values and nurture our spiritual self? All that we hold as precious, meaningful and real will be lost if we don't protect it.

If you think of engaging in social justice as giving of yourself until there is nothing left, you're not practicing self care and you are destined to burn out. This helps no one. If you consider it a spiritual practice, self-care will be a fundamental part of that practice. We will always be working for changes to make the world a more loving place or protecting the changes that have already been made. Justice work is a marathon, not a sprint.

We must love our world and ourselves at the same time. Love grows when we are challenged, does it not? It's easy to love when there is no conflict or stress, but when our loved ones anger us or break our heart, and we hang in there and work through the conflict, that's when the roots of our love truly deepen. Growth comes when we challenge our self; this is a beautifully spiritual experience.

Another place that we get stuck at times is the notion that we, either as an individual or a congregation, think we can be neutral and just live our lives without regard to the struggles that surround us. This is an illusion. Not only do we fail our fellow human beings, we fail to connect with our own spiritual wholeness. Remaining in isolation, we fail to grow as spiritual beings and we lose the opportunity to give meaning to our values. Our inaction only serves the oppressive powers and this means that we, too, are not free.

Remember after Hurricane Katrina we began to hear the phrase, “compassion fatigue?” If you find yourself thinking how much more can I possibly give or do, it’s time to change your perspective.

Let’s consider a question here - Why is there so much suffering beyond what you might expect from the natural world? The answer is quite simple from my perspective - there is an imbalance of power with too few people making decisions that have a detrimental effect on the vast majority of people. That relentless power can grind people down to the extent they succumb to apathy and become hopeless. They don’t see change as being possible any more. Others are driven by fear and anger to see their fellow human beings as threats and they resolve to just take care of themselves and those whom they love.

The resistance to oppressive power is always difficult; we will always need each other in that resistance. As it is said in the environmental movement, “It is going to take everyone to change everything.”

Try not to ask yourself, “What can I do?” it’s easy to get lost in ideas of what you think should happen. UU’s like to identify what we think is the problem and then plunge in, full speed ahead. When we do this our focus is on goals and actions and we sometimes miss the most important step - Building relationships. Relationships that give meaning to our spiritual practice, our values and community.

My spiritual practice begins with a very basic question; “How do I want to live my values?” I cannot live my values, have a spiritual practice, or be a spiritually whole person without engaging in justice work. If I integrate that with the important qualities of resiliency, I begin to learn how to hold everything at once. If you are able to do this you may see changes such as:

- You care about the suffering in our world and recognize you can’t personally fix everything
- You take care of yourself so that you may be strong enough to endure the challenges of long-term commitments

- You take responsibility for your own actions while holding others accountable for their behavior as well, all while practicing loving kindness
- You take time to ask yourself, “What is important to me and what fuels my passion? You then make space in your life for what matters to you
- You seek others and build a community, remembering the old saying, with two ears and one mouth, we should listen twice and much as we speak

I’m hoping to invite you to a different place this morning. I’m hoping that instead of seeing multiple issues of injustice that may overwhelm you, you instead see that the justice issues we struggle with are really manifestation of one issue - the imbalance of power I spoke about before.

Your job is to listen to your heart and figure out what speaks to you. What’s your passion? There will likely always be an unfair imbalance of power in any society; we will never permanently solve that and our vigilance will always be needed. Tuning in to the world you live in, your local community, allows you to practice your values, your faith, your religion. Your engagement allows you to grow. You can nurture yourself and build the solidarity movement at the same time.

Your involvement, your spiritually centered social justice practice, does not have to be more than you can handle. Our lives are very different from one another’s and that means the way we choose to engage will be very different, as well.

At UU Mass Action we work to organize UU’s in our Commonwealth and help us to work smarter, not harder. Together, we build relationships with other committed social justice organizers and transform social justice work from feeling burdensome and overwhelming to being a joyful, spiritual practice. Momentum is building in our state and we are poised to see real changes in Immigrant Rights, Ending Mass Incarceration, Economic Justice and in deepening our commitment to addressing Climate Change. This won’t happen unless all people with shared values are working together.

All the changes to improve the lives of so many people in our communities have been won or are currently being fought for through countless hours of organizing and movement building.

This is not emotionally draining work - it's exhilarating. Spiritually grounded justice work helps the energy flow in both directions.

I call on you today to find your path.

How is social justice a part of your spiritual practice?

Remember, there are many different paths but we all need to be on the journey.

Do you feel that intoxicating connection to all that is good in humanity?

If you do, share it with others.

If you don't, it's time to reach out to others and allow your heart to break wide open.

Each ocean wave is made up of countless drops of water. The wind helps them to come together and have a profound impact on the shoreline. Sometimes, their impact makes changes at an imperceptibly slow pace, but change is always happening. At other times, a seismic shift occurs and it can't be missed.

You are already surrounded by countless drops of water. Look around you and turn towards the wind that will take you to where you want to go.