

The phrase social justice is bandied about quite often, and it means different things to different people. So I would like to share with you a story that I think really explains it quite clearly. I first heard this story when I was a young man. I had joined the Ethical Culture Society in New York, and similar to our Pathway to Membership class they had an introduction to Ethical Culture. And this is the story they told me during my first class there, and it has stuck with me ever since. One day a villager took a break from harvesting food and noticed a baby floating down the river toward the village. They couldn't believe Their eyes! They jumped in the river and pulled the baby from the river. The next day, they were keeping a closer eye on the river wondering if babies had always been floating down the river and they had never noticed. This day they saw that there were two babies floating down the river. They jumped in and pulled both out. The next day there were four babies floating down the river and they realized they could not pull all four out by themselves, so they called a friend over to help get the four babies out of the river. Each day the number of babies floating down the river kept increasing.

With so many babies they had to organize themselves. Watchtowers were built on both sides of the shore and swimmers were coordinated to maintain shifts of rescue teams that maintained 24-hour surveillance of the river. They had one group of people for medical care, others to provide clothing, others to build housing. They grew more food to feed all the babies. Then one day another villager asked, "But where are all these babies coming from?" "No one knows," said another villager. So the person said, "Lets organize a team to go upstream and find how who's throwing these babies in the river." Not everyone was in agreement. "If we send someone up stream, we may not be able to catch all the babies coming down the river, or have people to cook and care for them so if we spend our time going upstream, some may die. And we don't even know if we can change what is up the river. We should just worry about what we know. And so the ethical question that was posed to me and the entire group in the class was, would we sacrifice the life of some of the babies, in order to search for the unknown cause of the problem. Should we go upstream?

So staying downstream is what I would call social service, a direct rendering of service to those in need. Going upstream as I like to call it, is what I would call Social Action, working for systemic change to the causes of injustice rather than just dealing with the symptoms. This would involve, education, which in the story was even realizing that there were babies in the river. How often are we not even aware of social justice issues in the world. Social action could include public witness which is a way to make an injustice known to the entire public, such as the Occupy Movement has done so successfully. Social Action would also include community organizing such as Quad Cities Interfaith does such a good job at, and working on changing the policies and systems that lead to injustice. All of these actions both social service and social actions fall under the larger term social justice for me. So I can tell you that not everyone in the room at that Ethical Culture class was in agreement on the answer to that question as to whether to sacrifice some babies lives. And I ask you in the week to come to ponder that question as well. But no one said, just do nothing, no one said, just let all the babies float down the river. If we truly believe in our Unitarian Universalist Principles and our congregational mission and vision, if they are to be anything other than just words on a paper, then we cannot just turn away when we see suffering.

The inherent worth and dignity of each person, justice equity and compassion in human relations, the interdependent web of existence of which we are all apart should be something that we internalize into our being and externalize in our actions in the world. And we continue to explore to find that balance between the internal and external. And we need to find the balance between Social Service and Social Action It is my hope to engage the congregation in social justice work. For it is only by becoming engaged, by doing the work to alleviate and to change injustice, that we are changed as people. The first source from which we draw inspiration is the "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;" It is through direct experiences with others that we learn of others lives, and are changed by them, only by direct experience...

Not the experience, of watching it on television, not the experience of reading it in a book, but the direct experience of being with, sharing with and understanding someone who is different from us. Only then can we understand the wholeness and oneness of all existence. We may express things culturally in a very different way, we may act in a different way due to the different circumstances of our upbringing, but I often say, if not but for the grace of the universe, there go I. If I had grown up under different circumstances, in different places, with different parents, How different would I be. So we explore and search for the sacred and the oneness of all things.

I can tell you that for me I answered that question of whether to send someone upstream fairly quickly and it has always guided my religious and spiritual life. Although we don't know what we will find by going upstream, but I was willing to sacrifice a few and take that chance, because without going upstream, we will never find a long term solution so that **one day** no babies will ever have to float down the river. So that one day there will be justice in the world for everyone. Sacrifice. Often to achieve anything in this world requires sacrifice. Sacrifice, of time, sacrifice of other things we might do with our time, sacrifice of money, sacrifice of careers, sacrifice of ideas that have been long held. I always like to ask myself, is the path I am taking for the greater long term good? How would I want to be treated if I was in someone else's shoes.

So I constantly go upstream. Constantly challenge myself and others. We out of our common humanity, cannot ignore the downstream, we cannot ignore the suffering, but if we never go upstream, the amount of suffering, will one day become unsustainable to care for until the situation implodes, and then many many more will suffer. And if we do not upstream, how can we hope to change the people who are causing the suffering. And this process also involves hope. Do we really believe that we can make a difference. Do we really believe that we can transform the way people live and think and act. Do we really believe we can transform the world. And as I said last week, we have to believe we can. And if we believe it then we have to act.

In regard to question of the need to act, as I mentioned before about public witness, I have been thinking deeply about the Occupy Movement. I attended the rally in Davenport last month with many of you, and spoke at the rally to add my support. And although I know many people would like the Occupy Movement to have more specific goals, they are there as a public witness to what they see as injustice, sharing ideas, and expressing their feeling of alienation from the political process. If nothing else they have had this country talking about our values as a country, and as human beings. As I said at the rally, this is ultimately a moral issue. How do we treat people when they are down. Do we kick them, or do we give them a helping hand to lift them up, Do we abandon them, or do we walk with them in their time of trial. Now I have also seen a demonizing of business and businesspeople throughout this Occupy process. Not all business are evil. Capitalism has often provided the incentive for tremendous creativity and invention in this country. I do believe there is a purpose for responsible capitalism. The goal of most business' though is to maximize profits. This however must be balanced by the common good of society. Business' has shown consistently throughout our history that they are unable to regulate themselves. Therefore the only recourse for the citizens is for the government to be a counter measure to business so as to protect the citizens from the excesses of business. The pendulum in this country has continued to swing back and forth throughout its history. We never seem to find a balance.

It just keeps swinging from one extreme of business run rampant (child labor, unsafe working conditions, no concern for the environment, fraudulent financial practices etc.) to the other extreme of regulations that have diminished business' creativity and inventiveness. We need to find a balance. A balance where the workers rights and rewards and the needs of the greater society are balanced against and linked to business' risks and rewards. In our current climate of fear and recession, business' were using this as an opportunity to take advantage of the workers and taxpayers of this country.

As Theodore Parker, a Unitarian Minister in the 19th century said:

“The idea that all people have unalienable rights; that in respect thereof, all *people* are created equal; and that government is to be established and sustained for the purpose of giving every

person an opportunity for the enjoyment and development of all these unalienable rights. **This idea demands, as the proximate organization thereof, a democracy, , a democracy, that is, a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people;**
Yes, I know you think that was Abraham Lincoln, but he took the statement from Parker.

If we are to survive, we need to avoid excesses and find balance. I would say that is true in all areas of our life. The pendulum has swung too far. The Occupy movement I feel is the step to bring us back into balance, so that the voice of the people can be heard. This is why I will support the Occupy movement. To create a Government, by of and for the people, not a government by of and for the corporation. The Occupy movement shows us that change can happen, it has awakened something deep within the soul of this country for justice. And because I believe in my heart that change can happen and we as a religious organization can act to make it happen, to awaken within ourselves and the larger community the need for compassion and justice.

This need is one reason that one of my first projects I decided to work on when I started here was to work on a social justice discernment for the congregation. We had a committed group of people who showed up week after week. Committed to seeing that we as a congregation take on a social justice project as a congregation. I would like to ask if any of the people who attended the group would be willing to stand. One important step we took was to create a Social Justice Council. So if you are new here, and you want to know how to get involved, you can see one of these people, or see me. We also looked to discern, what one topic we could work on. We looked at eight proposals submitted. We viewed them based on four criteria, 1) what was the grounding of the topic in relation to our mission and vision and was it something the group and something that we felt the congregation could become passionate about. 2) we looked at what impact we could have on any problem. Was there a definable goal and would it if we were successful have a positive impact on conditions in the Quad Cities. 3) we asked was it a good fit for our group's and the congregation's strengths and resources and 4) what are our chances of success. So after a 10 week period and a democratic iterative process the Social Justice Council has chosen the challenge of Teen Homelessness.

Research has already started as to the causes of the issue, and research into the resources in the community already working on the problem. I encourage you to become engaged, to share your knowledge and wisdom in this area so we as a congregation can have direct experience in this area and help overcome this challenge to our community. There is no limit to what we can do if we put our minds and hearts and bodies working together as one. Let us improve lives in the Quad Cities, and by doing so, improve ourselves.

Throughout human history people have been driven to explore ways to improve themselves. I believe it is part of our evolutionary makeup. There is something deep in the well of our being that makes us want to improve both individually and societally. To explore what is just and to fight injustice wherever it is found, both within and without. It starts when we make that connection with the burning flame we have within, the thing that gives meaning to our life. And even though I wasn't a boy scout growing up, (either literally or figuratively) even I know when you have a regular campfire the fire needs to be tended to or it will go out. So we keep working on this meaning making that we find within these walls as a way to keep the fire within burning strong and burning long. And I encourage you to share that light.

To not just let it burn on the inside, or it will burn you up...but to let it out, to bring that light to others, and to combine it with the light of others as we work together to build a just and compassionate life and world. Come, come join us at the river, in the river, downstream, and upstream, help us transform the world and in doing so transform your world. It is through this work that we remember that we are a part of the greater whole, that we are interdependent to all that is, and that creates a wholeness within us.

And that to me, this creating wholeness is what the religious life should lead to. A wholeness or oneness not only for ourselves with ourselves, but a wholeness/oneness between ourselves and others, a wholeness/oneness between ourselves and the environment, A wholeness, a oneness with all of the universe. May it be so.