



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“We Are a Gentle, Angry People”

© by The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

Be mindful of your duty, and do good works; and again, be mindful of your duty, and believe; and once again: be mindful of your duty, and do right. God loves the doers of good. Qur'an 5.93

We are, on most days, a hard mix of true prophet and wayward voice, a mix of your call to justice and our hope for shalom. Here we are, as we are, mixed but faithful, compromised but committed, anxious but devoted to you. Walter Brueggemann

The challenge of social justice is to evoke a sense of community that we need to make our nation a better place, just as we make it a safer place. It's a time for greatness – not for greed. It's a time for idealism – not ideology. It is a time not just for compassionate words, but compassionate action. Marian Wright Edelman, Children's Defense Fund

Anthem

“Going Over Home,” arranged by Sonja Poorman
(Based on “Poor Wayfarin’ Stranger” and “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”)

Sermon

Thank you for beautifully singing those two Spirituals. The enslaved and marginalized Africans in America who wrote spirituals truly sang for their lives. In our opening hymn we also voiced that we sing for our lives. Though ours is in a different time and place our purposes are shared.

Enslaved Africans taken to the Americas were prohibited from singing their traditional songs, drumming, and dancing. Slave owners thought Christianizing the Africans would strip them of their native identity and make them easier to manage.

Because of their forced adoption of Christianity, the enslaved developed new songs. These spirituals used the language and metaphors of Christianity to disguise their hopes for freedom. They formed laments expressing their yearning for a better life in a Promised Land of this world.

That the Bible might be a source of liberation was something Euro American masters must not have fully considered when forcing enslaved Africans to participate in Christian worship. Moses, the man who freed the Hebrews from Pharaoh's unholy grip, became a role model and frequent name for African Americans, as did the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos who declared justice would "roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." African American Spirituals blended Christianity's central beliefs about love and salvation with its stories of hope and justice, voicing their own struggles and hopes.

Justice is a central aspect of all world religions, including our own. Besides Hebrew liberation and prophetic stories, Jesus taught people to love both stranger and friend, as well as care for the poor and sick. Buddhist wisdom claims attachments lead to suffering, and suffering is the root of unhappiness. It urges right acts and compassion to end the world's suffering. Hindus understand universal justice in the form of karma and reincarnation which provides repeated opportunities for someone to live without harming another and to increase the good in the world. Islam preaches solidarity with the poor and hungry by including charity and fasting as pillars of its faith. Our shared Unitarian Universalist values demand we act for justice, too.

Religious historian Karen Armstrong writes in her book *Jerusalem*:

It is not enough to experience the divine or the transcendent; the experience must then be incarnated in our behavior towards others. All the great religions insist that the test of true spirituality is practical compassion. The Buddha once said that after experiencing enlightenment [one] must leave the mountain top and return to the market place, and there practice compassion for all living beings. [Quoted by Robert McAfee Brown in *Speaking of Christianity: Practical Compassion, Social Justice, and Other Wonders*, page v.]

Our own Unitarian Universalist Seven Principles begin with active respect for others and end by acknowledging our connection to others. The mountaintop is not for us, either. If we want to be happier, we should actively increase the overall good in the world for we will be of that better world. I believe this is our own ethic of love, with justice as its core.

If you read the Athens Banner Herald article in March about our 60th anniversary celebrations, you may have gotten the impression that justice is all we do. The article correctly highlighted UUFA's various justice related activities over the years because this is how we have, and continue to have, an impact in the local Athens community.

But what wasn't included was information about what else happens at our Fellowship. Initially, I reacted negatively to the article for conveying nothing about our values, religious diversity, open welcome to all, or our caring community. If someone new was looking for a deeply spiritual community, that person would be hard pressed to find it represented in that article.

That got me thinking about the relationship between justice and spirituality or religion in our Fellowship. Since I'm sure you don't come here solely to participate in social justice activities, what draws us?

I think you and I come to this religious community to make sense of what it means to be human and alive. In making sense of our lives, our lives become more meaningful and happier. I think we make sense of our lives and the world we find ourselves in by attempting to turn the chaos around us into a more ordered, meaningful whole. This whole explains why we're here and how we're to live. This work is deeply spiritual and religious to me because the answers depend on what matters most to each of us. Purpose and meaning don't exist out there for the taking. Each of us must discover or determine our own meaning, even if we adopt someone else's doctrine, we must individually own it.

I was watching a new *Cosmos* show currently on television. Its host, Neil deGrasse Tyson, spoke about pattern-making in one episode. Ancient people looked up to the night skies and saw random points of light. They made sense of these lights by connecting them into constellations and telling stories about the people and creatures they imagined. When they saw a comet streak across the sky, they made sense of it by calling it a harbinger of death and destruction. Disaster means 'ill starred'.

Today we make sense of stars and comets through scientific knowledge, but we still don't know everything about the cosmos or life's origin. Like the ancients, we search for answers in an attempt to make sense of our existence. We still ask why people behave badly. We still ask why nations can't get along. We still ask if peace will come for all. Our need for meaning in the face of chaos and uncertainty gives rise to religious answers. Whether we consider ourselves particularly religious or not, we attempt to give our lives meaning by reaching some conclusion, by finding some answers.

Now, as you stepped out of your house this morning you probably didn't say to yourself, "I'm coming to UUFA to create order out of chaos," or "I'm going to make sense of the world this morning." Did anyone? I didn't think so.

Even if you don't think it or say it, a religious community provides a place for us to explore the chaos, to seek answers to our questions, and maybe create some order. Our Fourth Principle affirms this as our responsible search for truth and meaning. This search takes place in four general ways or ministries here.

We come together to learn and grow, to share ideas, and be challenged in new ways. This is the rabbinic or teaching ministry we share.

We come together to be known, to have our worth affirmed, to care and be cared for in shared pastoral ministry.

We come together to celebrate the events of our lives – the births, deaths and all that comes in between. We worship together to remind ourselves what is most important to us. We sing, dance, cry, laugh, hope and pray together in shared priestly ministry.

Last, we come together to speak truth to power, to name whatever prevents us from happiness, from creating paradise on earth. Once we name injustice, we act to eliminate it in shared prophetic ministry.

A biblical prophet was one who prophesied, or predicted, that if you didn't act in accord with God's wishes, then something dire would happen. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke for God and told the people when they were straying from their covenant with God. But people rarely want to be judged. Ancient prophets who spoke truth and demanded change were laughed at as fools, stoned for their dissent, or martyred. Modern prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr., fare no better.

I titled this service, "We Are a Gentle, Angry People" because it expresses the paradox of our lives. We are gentle and loving, wishing for the world peace and harmony. But we are angry because the world is not peaceful yet. Our lives and our neighbor's lives are not as we would like. This anger fuels our commitment to love and to change. Our vision of a just world for all as articulated in our Seven Principles must stand against the power and privilege of the few.

We come to this community not only singing for our lives, but shouting and protesting and working for all our lives. Here we are reminded of what the world could be; hope is rekindled with every lighting of the chalice. We know in our hearts that every act of compassion, goodness, and justice makes a difference.

I believe my own sense of well-being, my own spiritual health is inextricably tied to the health of the world. When I see the worth and dignity of another being denied, I suffer and I know my own worth is threatened. I know justice-making is the natural consequence of my beliefs and hopes.

Congregational life includes opportunities for learning, caring, worshiping, experiencing our connections to something greater than ourselves, and deepening our commitment to our values and vision. But without justice-making, these paths lead nowhere. Without justice we would live in a cocoon, ignoring the world as it really is. If you and I write our values on our hearts, fully commit to our Seven Principles, how can we not act?

I know lives are full and saying it's not enough to affirm our values or experience personal spirituality may feel overwhelming. I'm not trying to lay on you some UU guilt. But as you are able, please engage in all these many ways we can be in community and change our world for the better. It is yours and it is my world and we can make a difference. Your involvement may be as little as promising each day to be good and do more good. This can be as easy as supporting a Cause of the Month with your treasure to making sandwiches for hungry children.

Please don't neglect any of our ministry opportunities. Take a class. Read a book. Lead a class. Join a small group. Attend worship. When we volunteer in this community, in big or small ways, our spirits are served and our world made whole and healthy.

Let us be gentle, angry people singing for our lives.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Do you feel 'living out your values' is in conflict with 'deepening your spirituality'? Share.
2. Does the injustice of the world affect your spirit or sense of well-being? Please explain.
3. What would you like your spiritual commitments to look like? How will you realize them?
4. What aspect of your beliefs and/or congregational life calls you most deeply? Please share.