

## A Vision for Justice

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Just after New Years, I attended the January Learning Convocation, a gathering of students and professors and leaders, at our seminary in Chicago. Meadville Lombard Theological School has just moved into a new space, now sharing with Spertus Institute for Jewish Studies, in an incredibly attractive building on Michigan Avenue overlooking the lake.

It may be hard for us now to remember what kind of weather is normal in January, but it was January and it was Chicago. But one afternoon, I took a walk wearing just a long-sleeved T-shirt and a scarf. It was both invigorating and unsettling. How could this be January in Chicago? There was something very wrong, and yet I drank in with gusto, this opportunity to take a walk without the bundle of a coat.

Michigan Avenue is lined with prestigious establishments and exclusive specialty shops. The sidewalks bustle with people in swanky suits, plugged into iphones and carrying packages. I spent a leisurely hour ducking in and out of interesting shops and gazing at impressive architecture. Before heading back to the seminary, I paused on the massive stairs in front of the Art Institute of Chicago. Oh, what a beautiful city. And yet, there was something else very wrong. On nearly every corner stood, or sat, or lay, a street person...some hustling for change...some asleep in the unseasonably warm sun. The bell of injustice rang in me. This is not my vision for a just society. I was painfully aware of the injustice of the extreme gap between the haves and the have-nots...awkwardly aware of my own privilege.

I should clarify right up front that in talking about justice today I am speaking of social justice rather than criminal justice. I'm speaking of justice as the possibility of a world in each person is treated with respect and dignity and where each person's most basic needs are met. Contrary to its etymological roots, this social justice is not about right and wrong, not about judgment or punishment, but rather about a social structure that provides a floor of material well-being on which all can stand.<sup>1</sup>

Unitarian Universalists gather around a set of seven principles. For those of you who are unfamiliar with them, I'm absolutely sure that after the service, you can find some

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1 From "Economic Justice for All", a 1986 pastoral letter from the Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States.

printed material that tells of them. They are also printed near the front of our hymnal. Seven principles. The second states that we affirm “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” Our sixth principle affirms the “goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.”

Justice is a very important component of and value for Unitarian Universalism, and while I could easily spend the morning listing the many contributions made and actions taken by us as a religious movement, that is not the purpose of my talk today. I’m proud of our history, but I am also acutely aware that none of us have yet reached the mountaintop, that we cannot rest on our laurels, and that in order to continue our journey toward justice, we must be able to envision the goal.

What does justice look like? Have any of us ever really seen it? What is MY vision of a just society? What is yours? It’s pretty easy to recognize injustice when we see it, to ring that injustice bell, but we don’t have a person in special robe to come and set things right. We have to create justice ourselves, and in order to do that, we need to know what it looks like.

I am not the usual kind of facebook user; I rarely post my status or tag photos. Rather, my somewhat quirky and haphazard use of social media includes mining it for ideas, or even using it sermon research. So I recently posted a request, asking my friends to share an image or a word picture that, for them, describes ‘justice’. I also asked several colleagues that same question. Those responses have informed my words today; although I offer them without specific attribution, I share them with deep gratitude. One colleague, who serves a congregation in Virginia, suggested that the image of justice needs to be contextualized. In her context, the icon of justice would be an African-American male graduating from college...a symbol that the same opportunities are available to, and are normalized for, all people. Her icon is not unlike the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr...a dream of a world where all would be judged, not by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character.

What might our icon be? A First Nations person with a steady job as a skilled worker? A senior citizen confident of their next meal, assured of an affordable home? A child with a full stomach?

Another colleague said that balance best represents justice. She spoke of the image created by the prophet Amos...that of justice rolling down like waters, finding its way to touch all. She also expressed her belief that justice is an ethic of love...not an emotional feeling, but a moral imagination that calls us to respond to others with compassion. Talking together, we considered a Taoist image of water...water humbly seeking the lowest level, nurturing all life, reacting to changes by simply shifting and flowing to fill

in the cracks. Using this image, we might picture a diverse landscape into which water (or resources and opportunities) flow and touch and heal and embrace without prejudice for difference.

Continuing with the H<sub>2</sub>O theme, one friend played with the word 'justice' as 'justice'...an ice that freezes the hearts of those who would deny justice, a force that melts the hearts of those who are open to it, a source that refreshes those who thirst for it. His imaginings made me think of justice as a thermostat...something that has the potential to make adjustments for extremes that either burn too hot or leave us coolly dispassionate or isolated.

Clearly no one metaphor or icon can quintessentially capture social justice. Still, I believe that we need to adequately imagine justice, so that we might live it out, in small and large and daily ways.

My own working image of justice was inspired by a gift. A friend gave me a beautiful scarf, one with a loose weave in variations of colour and texture. But, in wearing it, I found that it caught on everything...earrings, watchband, coat zipper...and quickly it has become riddled with snags and even holes. As I pondered justice within our interconnected web of existence, I kept fingering this scarf, trying to relieve the snags, and repair the holes. At first glance, it's beautiful, but on further investigation, its construction is weak. It got me thinking of justice as the underlying structure for the weaving of beloved community...justice as the warp threads... the threads that create a foundation for security and connection.

Those of you who have done any weaving can imagine this...no matter the length, strength, composition, or colour of the weft threads, it is the warp that lays the foundation for the entire fabric.

I would suggest that the warp threads of a just society must be resilient and evenly distributed. The warp threads are our basic human rights; the UN Declaration of Human Rights<sup>2</sup> proclaims that each person is entitled to dignity, life, liberty, security, equal treatment under the law, privacy, and the right to marry. Each person should have the right to work and to rest, and to have an adequate standard of living. Each person should also have the right to an education and to participate in the arts and sciences. This is not a complete list, but imagine if each right on this list, and more, was a warp thread in our society...a foundation on which to create and weave and connect the life of every person. Image a social fabric like that.

The weft, the threads that symbolize each individual, will never be identical. Some will

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2 <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

be long, some will be short. Some will be bold in colour, others less noticeable. Some will be coarse, others fine. Some will be weak, even broken, and yet to the degree possible, the warp will provide a constant support, so that no where are there holes that cannot be repaired or compensated for by other connecting threads. I like this image, although I recognize that like all metaphors, it has its limits.

So here's another one. Someone suggested that justice is an ideal that can never be reached, that rather it is a journey that we walk together. Rev. Paul Beedle<sup>3</sup> tells us to remember that if the path of justice feels like it's leading up a mountain too tall and too wide, that the first step is simply for somebody – and then several somebodies – to try to climb it. It may be a hard climb, but they explore, they find footholds, they blaze a trail, taking one more step to make a way out of no way. They come back and teach others about the climb, and tell of the view from the top. Then more hikers follow the newly-blazed trails making the trails well-worn. It may still be a rough road, but there are now markers on the trail and no one is climbing it alone. Some look for a place where the path can be broadened and evened out, believing that the road to justice should not require hiking gear, and that it should be possible for us to all walk together. The vision, beginning with the first hikers, and continuing with every person who follows the trail, makes it possible to build the road. The vision gives us resilience and inspiration, moving us forward on this journey toward justice.

Now I think that my image of a weaving is too static. Justice must be in motion, and must also require something of us. And so, justice for me, is not only a fabric where the warp threads are strong and available to all, but it is also a fabric in which strong or capable individual weft threads are obligated to look for ways to use their potential to interweave a strong tapestry of community...to support the weak, to tie up the broken, to fill in the gaps.

I don't know about you, but one of the most difficult things for me in conceptualizing justice is figuring out how justice is to be distributed. I have been unable to be reconciled with my default assumption, which is that any justice must be distributive justice, where all get an equal portion of resources and opportunities. I have been unable to be reconciled with this assumption because, not only is it an impossible task to create equal shares, but it runs contrary to the character of creation itself, a creation in which everything is unique and diverse and unpredictable. Because equal portions are

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3 Paul Beedle, "Bending Toward Justice: One More Step"  
<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermons/submissions/128669.shtml>

impossible, what we need instead is a theological and moral and restorative justice, one that builds and restores strong threads of support and dignity and opportunity, one that recognizes our diversity as a strength within which we share and help one another and treat each other with equal respect,<sup>4</sup> a justice that calls us to take the next step, and when we fall, to get up again, knowing that there are other threads there to support us. The prophet Micah has reminded us that what is required of us is to DO justice.<sup>5</sup> Justice is an action, an ethic of love, a vision. Justice is never static, it is in motion, rolling down like waters. It is a tapestry of rights through which we weave our best efforts at courage, compassion, forgiveness, joy, resilience, hope, respect.

And why? There's no better answer for this than found in these words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "All I'm saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."<sup>6</sup>

Our world's harsh disparities between rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged, comfortable and struggling, have created the illusion that it is possible to avoid our inescapable mutuality. Our advantage distances us from seeing that extreme inequalities are a threat to the solidarity of the human community, for great disparities only lead to snags and holes, to deep social divisions and conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

May we, instead, commit to a vision of justice that motivates us and inspires us, and then may we use our deeds and our resources to sculpt that vision into reality. We must ring the bell, walk the path, climb the mountain, share the journey with others, and weave our destiny into a beautiful garment of compassion and joy and belonging and belovedness. For all.

And then, then, will justice roll down like waters. Ahhh.....

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4 Paul Beedle, "Bending Toward Justice: One More Step"  
<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermons/submissions/128669.shtml>

5 Micah 6:8

6 Warren, Mervyn A.; Taylor, Gardner C. (2008). *King Came Preaching: The Pulpit Power of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* InterVarsity Press. p. 174.

7 From "Economic Justice for All", a 1986 pastoral letter from the Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States.