In the middle of the 19th century, in Boston, the renegade Unitarian minister Theodore Parker—best known for keeping a gun in his desk to protect the people he was helping to remain free from the slave owners who sought to re-enslave them—penned what would become his most famous words. He wrote:

Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of right. I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.\(^1\)

More than a century later, a more concise version of these words was frequently quoted by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the form more familiar to many of us today:

We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.\(^2\)

When Barack Obama became the U.S. president, he had these very words weaved into the edge of the rug in the Oval Office.

(Though it’s common for new presidents to redecorate, it’s no surprise the next occupant of that office had the rug removed.)

My question to you this morning is: do you buy it?

Do you believe that the arc of the moral universe does actually bend towards justice?

Do you believe it in your bones?
Or in your head, or your heart, or your gut?

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\(^1\) Theodore Parker, *Ten Sermons of Religion*, 1852.
\(^2\) Martin Luther King Jr., “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution.” Speech given at the National Cathedral, March 31, 1968.
There are at least two ways to come at this question.

The first is evidence-based and requires us to look at how things have changed over time.

To turn our gaze back to some point in history and then try to gauge whether and how things have improved since.

The second approach is, I think, a question of faith.

It is a deeply theological question that gets to the heart of our beliefs about humanity’s capacity for progress, about the meaning and purpose of our lives on this earth, and about whether there is a divine hand involved—be it that of a deity we know by name, or the always-evolving sense of justice that we humans have developed and refined across time.

As for the first approach, I believe the historical record ultimately shows a pattern of genuine progress, though there have been twists and turns, advances and set-backs, and, of course, devastatingly shameful chapters that have shattered every definition of human decency.

It seems fair to say that the curve of the arc of the moral universe is not always a sure and steady thing.

Progress can be precarious.

The advance of love and justice can be undermined.

I think of visiting historical sites in Berlin a few years ago. Coming to really appreciate how bold and vibrant was the emerging queer scene in that city between the World Wars.

And then the next day walking through Sachsenhausen, the concentration camp outside Berlin, where so many of those same queer people were tortured, worked to death, or executed a short time later.

I think today of women losing ground
in having authority over their own bodies
in places like Texas and Afghanistan.

And I think of the waning democratic rights of the citizens of Hong Kong.

In these few instances and so many more, we are reminded
that the pendulum of progress can swing both directions.

Though it must also be said that, thankfully,
there has been an almost constant counterpoint of human goodness
that has emerged in the face of so much human horror.

People of conscience who in ways great and small,
bold or behind the scenes, have acted,
sometimes at grave risk to their lives or their own well-being,
to resist evil, to overcome injustice,
to alleviate suffering, and to help usher in healing and peace.

In other words, to bend the arc of the moral universe
by whatever means they could.

So, it seems to me, the historical approach shows
that the arc of history has generally bent in the direction of a more just world.

But do we dare trust that that continues to be true?

When we turn our faces to the future, do we believe
we are on a greater and growing path towards justice?

Let me be the first to say that there are days when I have my doubts.
And serious ones at that.

Days when unbridled human greed
and a lack of basic empathy
threaten the future of all life on this planet.

Days when the denial of our real history
undermines our efforts to bring about a world
of true equality for all.

It is in the face of such doubts
that the question about the bending arc of the moral universe
becomes a matter of faith.
Sometimes faith arises in spite of evidence to the contrary.

For me, it is a deeply abiding trust that we will, somehow, continue to struggle on towards the day when our aspirations for justice are more fully realized.

I believe it is that best part of who we are that listens for the longing of the heart, over and above the demands of our own egos, for a world that is ever-more fair, just, and at peace.

The promise of such a better world depends, and arguably even demands, that we put our faith into action.

That our belief in the possibility of progress is given substance through our words and our deeds.

Increasing the sum total of love and justice in the world isn’t something that just happens on its own.

It isn’t something that happens in a passive way—you know, by those other people, over there.

It starts with our very selves.

And it is an invitation into a transformative way of life.

An invitation, in Gandhi’s words, to be the change we seek in the world around us.

There’s a story told by Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams that gets at this. That gets at just how very personal this work can sometimes be.

As he tells it:

[Back in the 50s,] in the First Unitarian Church of Chicago we started a program some of us called “aggressive love” to try to desegregate that Gothic cathedral [of a church].

We had two members of the Board objecting.

Unitarianism has no creed, they said, and we were making [racial] desegregation a creed.
It was a gentle but firm disagreement and a couple of us kept pressing.

“Well, what do you say is the purpose of this church” we asked, and we kept it up until 1:30 in the morning.

We were all worn out, when finally this man made one of the great statements, for my money, in the history of religion.

“Oh, Jim. The purpose of this church . . . well, the purpose of this church is to get hold of people like me and change them!”³

And, so it is.

If the arc of the moral universe is to bend, that means something must change.

The bending is the change.
The change is the bending.

And as is almost always the case, that bending first takes place in the people’s hearts and minds, when injustice is recognized and understood, and then is later addressed through the changing of attitudes and behaviours, policies and laws.

While this process of bending the proverbial arc may seem straightforward, it is not.

Aside from the predictable pendulum swings, even those who are agreed on goals around justice or equality can sometimes vehemently disagree when it comes to strategy.

That is what I see unfolding both within and beyond Unitarian Universalism right now.

There are growing tensions among UUs and among people who generally fall on the left of the political spectrum, as we struggle over how we work for more justice in our world.

³ As told by Reverend George K. Beach, in a 1999 Minns Lecture.
These tensions in more liberal and progressive circles are, of course, playing out within a wider conflict with far more conservative voices, resulting in an increasingly polarized society.

As worrying as that is, I’m more deeply grieved by what I see happening on the left, in general, and, more specifically, within parts of our own tradition.

There is growing division and distrust.

Less tolerance and less compassion.

We seem to be losing the ability to hear views we do not share.

And we are squandering precious time that the world does not have to solve some of the most entrenched problems we face on this planet.

We cannot on any level afford a civil war on the left right now.

It’s been said that any preacher really only has one or two sermons that they ever preach.

I have to admit that that is true.

Though I have now delivered some 500 sermons from our pulpit, they all pretty much boil down to one message.

In case you’ve not yet picked it up, here it is:

This is it.

This one life we have to live is short and not always sweet.

And what we have to work with is ourselves and our companions on the journey.

So we might as well get along, and we might do well to even try to love one another, while we still have the chance.

If we are to be about the business of bending the moral arc of the universe in ways that bring more love and justice to our world, we must cooperate.

We must seek and build upon common ground.
And while I believe this to be true for humanity at large,
I believe that as UUs we must hold ourselves to a higher standard.

Our principles call us to deep respect for one another.
And they call us to an ongoing practice of acceptance and compassion.

Such a way of being calls us into loving relationship with one another.

And it opens up the possibility of change,
because we humans create change
to uphold and protect what we most dearly love.

This is not in any way to diminish the real differences that exist among us.

Those differences are often about the ways we go about working for justice.

They are about the goals,
and they are about the speed at which we move to reach them.

And while we might sometimes wish for more perfect partners in all of this,
we who are companions on this Blue Boat Home of ours,
are who we have to work with.

Real progress happens at the speed of relationship.
And at the speed of trust.

My prayer, then, my deepest hope for us all,
is that the practice of our faith helps each of us
to expand our heart’s capacity for humility and understanding,
deepening our compassion for others
and our reverence for life.

This is a faith that calls us to stretch and grow and change.

In contrast to the do-whatever-you-want faith we sometimes make it out to be,
our tradition invites us to take up the examined life.

It asks that we look closely at the workings of our own hearts
to see if love is carrying the day.

It asks us to take stock of our behaviour
to gauge whether we practice what we preach,
whether ours is a life of integrity,
in how we live, and move, and have our being in this world.
This doesn’t mean that any of us is perfect, or even trying to be. Far from it.

What it means is that we need to be working steadily, with what we have, and with all deliberate speed, to be a force for change in the world, letting that force work through us, through our hands and our feet, in what we say and what we do, to help bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice, with the relentless power of love.

Now, this path does not appeal to everyone.

It’s harder than it looks. It involves stumbles and roadblocks. The way is littered, at times, with disappointment and failure.

And, yet.

Such is the way that leads on to the real work of this world: towards meaning and purpose, towards healing and reconciliation, towards justice and towards peace.

May we give ourselves to the bending, until our work is done.

Blessed Be.