

We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For

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We don't know the exact origin of the phrase, "*Think Globally, Act Locally*," but it seems to have entered the public consciousness sometime in the 1970s or 1980s. While its original context may have had to do with environmental concerns, the phrase has since been adopted in many other areas of interest and urgency—economics, social justice, education, public health, and peace-building among them. But the wisdom behind it is far older than the slogan itself.

As I read earlier from Chapter 54 of the *Tao Te Ching*, the idea that our smallest actions ripple outward is something humanity has known—and perhaps needed reminding about—for at least the last two and a half thousand years. "Cultivate the self," the text says, "and virtue will be real. Cultivate the family, and virtue will overflow. Cultivate the community, and virtue will grow thick. Cultivate the world, and virtue will be universal."

This is not a call to passivity. It is not a retreat from responsibility. It is, instead, a roadmap—a reminder that change is built from the inside out, from the near to the far, from the personal to the planetary. Our smallest actions ripple out... Our individual choices are the starting point. The African American poet, June Jordan, wrote her 'Poem, for South African Women' as a tribute to the women and children who marched on Pretoria in 1956, to protest the pass system, cruelly designed to segregate the population and to restrict freedom of movement. In it she said,

*Our own shadows disappear as the feet of thousands
by the tens of thousands pound the fallow land
into new dust that rising like a marvelous pollen will be
fertile
even as the first woman whispering imagination to the trees around her made
for righteous fruit from such deliberate defense of life*

And concludes:

*And who will join this standing up
and the ones who stood without sweet company
will sing and sing
back into the mountains and
if necessary
even under the sea*

we are the ones we have been waiting for

We can apply this notion to many areas of concern. But today I want to focus on relationships. With the self. Then family—however you define it. Then community. Cities, nations and the globe follow from there.

Because relationships are where values stop being abstract and start becoming real.

We live in a time when the scale of our problems can feel overwhelming. We are inundated with news from across the planet—wars, climate disasters, humanitarian crises, political upheaval. We can witness suffering thousands of miles away in real time, often before we have had a chance to process

what is happening in our own lives. While this global awareness can deepen compassion, it can also leave us feeling helpless, anxious, or paralyzed.

I've felt that sense of hopelessness. There is a danger in that paralysis. When the problems feel too big, we may conclude—sometimes unconsciously—that our actions are too small to matter. And so, we disengage. Or we grow cynical. Or we turn inward in ways that harden rather than heal. I've been there, have you?

The wisdom traditions remind us that this is not the way forward.

Before we act in the world, we must attend to who we are being in the world. "Cultivate the self," the Tao tells us. It starts with us, June Jordan wrote. In Judaism the concept of Tikkun Olam, or repairing the world is rooted in the Mishnah, laws and teachings that stress local, concrete and everyday practices, that support a justly functioning community.

This is not self-absorption; it is self-responsibility. It is the work of noticing our habits, our reactions, our fears, and our assumptions. It is asking: *How do I show up when I am challenged? How do I treat people when I am tired, afraid, or frustrated?*

When we pay attention to the small, everyday habits and patterns we are not abdicating responsibility. We are coming back, again and again, and yet again, to the simple things that we can do. When we do get them wrong, which will, of course, we can imagine possibilities for next steps. How we speak to others, how we treat people we don't know, the care we give to simple encounters, is the starting place for all the work.

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person. That affirmation begins, but does not end, with ourselves. Self-cultivation means learning to treat ourselves with honesty and compassion—not as a way of excusing harm, but as a foundation for growth. When we understand our own wounds and triggers, we are less likely to pass them along to others. If I am full of shame or remorse, it will be very difficult, for me to move beyond my reactivity. It seems to me we all need to remember we are imperfectly perfect, and that the work of becoming our best self is likely never going to be completed. That doesn't mean we get to quit, it just means we need to extend ourselves some grace.

From there, the circle widens to family—however we define that. Family may be biological or chosen. It may be people we live with, people we grew up with, or people we found later in life. It is often where love is deepest and where tensions run highest.

Acting locally in family relationships is rarely dramatic and it is almost never simple or easy. It looks like patience. It looks like listening without interrupting. It looks like asking curious questions instead of making assumptions. It looks like accountability—acknowledging harm when we cause it and committing to do better.

This work matters more than we often admit. Families are where many of us first learn what power looks like, what love feels like, and how conflict is handled. Some of us need to put the whole sloppy mess of family dynamics under a microscope and ask ourselves, what needs repair or how can I do better. For unless we do, the patterns formed in our families will not stay neatly contained; they echo outward into workplaces, communities, and institutions, and their all-consuming swamp of disfunction will affect almost everything we do. So yes, we need to attend to the near, before we can repair the world.

From family, we move into community. For us, that includes this congregation. In a world increasingly shaped by isolation and ideological sorting, choosing to belong to a community like this is itself an act of hope, defiance and it is, somewhat surprisingly, counter-cultural. It is counter-cultural, because we, unlike earlier generations, have a choice. There was a time, in the not-so-distant past that not attending regular religious services was an invitation to social suspicion. As I think about the suburban neighbourhood of my childhood, the Sunday morning picture is almost comical. As if on cue, at the designated hour, front doors would open and men in ties and jackets and women with hats, followed by mini versions of the parents would exit the homes, climb into the very large family car, and then carefully back out of the driveway. It was almost like a parade... cars driving up the street, but then branching out, each to attend their own congregation. The Anglicans went straight at the intersection at the top of the street, the United Church families turned right, and the Roman Catholics and Presbyterians turned left. A smaller parade might have occurred in other neighbourhoods on other days of the week as the Jewish and Seventh Day Adventist families made their, at least weekly, visits. But today the weekly journeys that some still undertake is radical. Turning on your computer, waiting for the streetcar, walking, cycling or driving to this, or any congregation is unusual. In the last census, only 1/3 of Canadians indicated they attended religious services monthly. If I were a betting person, I'd feel confident that was likely over reported. Almost another third report no religious affiliation at all. Unitarian Universalists are, we can conclude, a very small – definitely less than 1% - of the total Canadian population. It is so good to be here today, with you, my fellow counter-cultural outliers! *Weirdos!!* And yet, we choose to gather, as an act of hope and a belief that being together is important. It is important for a number of reasons, but as James Luther Adams (a Unitarian theologian of the last century) said, "Church is where we practice being human"

Here, we practice living with difference. We learn how to disagree without demonizing. We learn how to hold one another accountable while still holding one another in care. These skills are not incidental; they are essential. Democracy does not survive without them. Justice does not advance without them.

When we serve one another here—bringing meals, making phone calls, showing up in times of grief or celebration—we are not just being nice. We are rehearsing the world we want to live in. We are strengthening the muscles of compassion, cooperation, and mutual responsibility.

What we learn here is that we are the people that make things happen. Yes, you have a paid staff, that do many things, that make much possible. But the reality is that most of the mental and physical labour of making this congregation function is not done by staff. The people who moved chairs for the solstice service, the people who work as worship leaders, the Board members... I could go on. You, not me, not Dallas, not Mary Anne or Angela or Alex or Matt are the congregation. Here, together, in all the messy human imperfection that is part of every community, you are practicing living, being human, imagining the world you – we dream of. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

We are the ones that all our communities, cities, countries, and the world have been waiting for. This congregation is one ring of ripples in a pond of care and concern. And this congregation is, by design a place where we can be restored when that is what we need, and challenged, when that is what we need. What we do here, what we practice can be a practice ground, reminding us that what we are part of an interdependent web.

Our small choices can remind us where our agency begins. It lives in how we are with one another, how we spend our money. In how we use our voices. In who we show up for. In what we are willing to challenge—and what we are willing to change in ourselves.

There is a profound humility in this approach, but also a deep hope. We are not required to fix everything. We are required to take responsibility for what is ours to tend.

The world will not be healed all at once. The beloved community will not be created, completely and finally at once. The work will happen in fragments—in conversations that restore dignity, in communities that choose inclusion, in families that practice forgiveness, in individuals who refuse to give up on compassion.

So may we think globally. May we stay awake to the beauty and suffering of this fragile world. And may we act locally—with intention, with courage, and with love. May we tend, carefully to this beautiful practice ground we call the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto.

Because the small acts are not small at all. They are how the world is made new. We begin with ourselves, we begin here. We care for ourselves, we care for one another and we do are part in the work of Repairing the World. Tikkun Olam