

## What Can We Do?

*Perhaps everything terrible is, in its deepest being,  
something that needs our love. – Rainer Marie Rilke*

This might be an apocryphal story, but it has circulated for years among writers and aspiring writers, and it might just be true. The story says a young woman once came up to Ernest Hemingway and asked for his advice. She had just finished reading *A Farewell to Arms*, and she was so moved she overcame her shyness and pushed to the front of the room to ask her burning question: “I want to be a writer. What should I do?”

Hemingway said, “What have you written today?”

Working for justice is like that. To get better, to make a difference, you have to practice. You have to do something.

When we talk about making the world a better place, about seeking justice and working for peace and being committed to diversity, our fine Unitarian Universalist principles can provide the theological underpinning and the rationale and the motivation for justice work. We can articulate our commitment, for example, to the First Principle, “the

inherent worth and dignity of every person.” And all of that is good.

But unless we also *do* something, we are not yet a part of the solution. Fine talk is a good thing, and it is not enough. Empathy is a good and necessary thing, but unless our identification with those who are less fortunate than we are compels us to action, we risk being merely sentimental. All the tender feelings in the world by themselves have never fed anybody. The poor need food, actual calories, to quiet their hunger.

What have you done for justice today? What can anyone do?

What works? What’s enough? How *can* we become a part of the solution?

I am not going to try to convince you that the world needs to be changed. Every day we are immersed in the evil and the horrors of the world. Whenever we open a newspaper or turn on the television, we are flooded with pictures and stories of suffering: the children who die from beatings, the refugees who flee from war, the wounds inflicted by soldiers

on the enemy and on themselves, the hunger and the torture and the poverty and the greed. Indeed it's difficult to avoid these images. A person who opens her heart to these stories and feels helpless to do anything but witness them may suffer from compassion fatigue and lose heart. Seeing the images, hearing the stories, how can you not feel overwhelmed? And then the temptation is to believe that it's just too big for us. That there's nothing any one of us or even all of us can do.

One thing to notice is that this suffering is not happening to you. We are at worst voyeurs and at best privileged bystanders to most of the suffering in the world. Everybody in this room has enough to eat and a place to sleep, and despite the considerable efforts of our government and the media to convince us otherwise, we are safe here. Our water is clean. Most of us have our own doctors on whom we can call if we get sick.

Oh, all of us have trouble in our lives, and everybody suffers some, but just to keep it in perspective, we are most of us most of the time basically okay, and there is injustice and

suffering in the world, in the next town, in this town that we have never encountered and cannot imagine.

I am not trying to make you feel bad. Liberal guilt is by and large a waste of time, another emotional indulgence, unless it changes our hearts and moves us to action. So I'm not trying to make you feel bad. I'm trying to tell you the truth as I see it. If you want to be a writer, you have to write. If you want to change the injustice in the world, you have to work for justice. You have to *do* something.

The bumper sticker slogan says it well: "Want peace? Work for justice." If there is ever to be peace in the world, those of us who are well-fed and safe and privileged will have to do what we can to ease the suffering and fight the injustice in the world. Because we can. Because we have been given much.

So what can we *do*?

First, we can take care of ourselves. I believe self-care is an essential part of justice work, the beginning and the foundation. Common sense and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggest that altruism can only flower in a person

whose survival needs have been taken care of. An experiment at Princeton Theological Seminary some years ago found that students were more likely to help a person in trouble if they thought they had more than enough time (Darley- Batson Good Samaritan Experiment

[faculty.babson.edu/krollag/org\\_site/soc\\_psych/darley\\_samarit.html](http://faculty.babson.edu/krollag/org_site/soc_psych/darley_samarit.html)). I can't be patient with my grandchildren if I'm so tired I can't see straight.

We are incarnate beings, "in the flesh," and the flesh is weak. So we have to take care of ourselves, to find ways to balance our lives so that we have something left over at the end of the day. Running on empty won't change the world. Changing the world is going to be a long haul, and we will need our strength. Mark Belletini writes, in one of our favorite benedictions, "Take care of yourselves as bodies, for you are a good gift" (*SLT* #686).

Focusing on yourself may seem counterintuitive. Talking about self-care cuts against the cultural assumption that morality requires self-sacrifice. Aren't we supposed to be

suffering? Surely moral duty calls us to forget ourselves. Well, yes and no.

Tal Ben-Shahar teaches the most popular undergraduate course at Harvard, about positive psychology, and is the author of *Happier*, a book based on the course. Professor Ben-Shahar writes:

The idea that our actions should be guided by self-interest, by our own happiness, can make some people uneasy. The source of their unease is a belief—explicit or implicit—in the morality of duty.

Immanuel Kant, the influential eighteenth-century philosopher, tells us that for an act to have moral worth, it must be undertaken out of a sense of duty. When we act out of self-interest, then, we preclude the possibility of our action being a moral one. According to Kant, if a person helps another because he feels inclined to do so—because it makes him happy—what he does has no moral value.

Most of the philosophies and religions that advocate self-sacrifice as the foundation of morality, as Kant does, assume that acting in one's self-interest inevitably leads to acting against the interests of others—that if we do not fight our selfish inclinations, we will hurt others and disregard their needs.

What this worldview fails to acknowledge, however, is that we do not need to make a choice between helping others and helping ourselves. They are not mutually exclusive possibilities. In fact, as the [Unitarian Universalist] philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson explains, “It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself.” Helping one-self and helping others are inextricably intertwined: the more we help others, the

happier we become, and the happier we become, the more inclined we are to help others...

Research by Barbara Frederickson suggests that positive emotions broaden the scope of our attention. When we're happy, then, we are more likely to see beyond our narrow, inward-looking, and self-centered perspective and focus on others' needs and wants. Research by Alice Isen and Jennifer Gold illustrates that we are more likely to help others when we feel good (126- 127).

This good news about altruism and benevolence would set our Calvinist forebears spinning in their graves. The New England Puritans of the seventeenth century, like the Taliban in our century, believe that morality requires self-sacrifice and strictness and suffering. Current research in positive psychology suggests otherwise.

One of my mentors in ministry urged me to cultivate joy in all of my work in the church for a very practical reason. "If it isn't fun," he said, "they won't come back." Dean Ornish, the physician who has pioneered using diet, exercise, meditation, and social supports to treat heart disease, encourages his patients to bring a positive attitude to the changes that could save their lives. "If we view changing our diet and lifestyle as deprivation and sacrifice, well, forget about it. You might be

able to force yourself to make some changes for a limited amount of time. However, in my experience, trying to motivate yourself to maintain these changes from the intention of deprivation and sacrifice is not sustainable...If what you gain is more than you give up, it's sustainable. Abundance is sustainable; deprivation is not. Joy is sustainable; repression is not. "It's good for me" is not sustainable; "it's fun for me" is (*Spectrum* 34, 36).

For making justice over the long haul, first take care of yourself and always cultivate joy. Although the world is in terrible trouble, changing the world need not be a grim business. We can come to the challenges of creating social justice grounded in health and happiness.

To begin the work, find your passion. The need is infinite—so much suffering—and each of us is limited and constrained, but one of the many troubles of the world will grab you if you are open. Maybe it will be a cross burning on a lawn in Cortlandt. Maybe it will be the commercial excesses of Christmas shopping while mothers in prison have nothing to give their kids. Maybe it will be the images from the Iraq war or

your reaction to what one of the candidates for president says about it.

Maybe you will have an experience like mine where outside events took me to a place I didn't expect to find myself. The first time it was to New Paltz to officiate at same-sex weddings. The next time it was a teaching job in a prison over the summer. I didn't pick either of these passions; they picked me.

Sometimes something will suddenly connect after years of the same cold response. Repeated exposure to the terrible images of suffering in the media may have dulled your natural compassionate reaction, and then one day like a faceful of cold water, you will realize those people lying in the street bleeding could be members of your family.

Harold Thurman said, "Don't ask what the world needs, ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

You may remember the story of the Buddha, who was born a prince and left his life of ease in order to understand

and then to ease the suffering of the world. One way to describe what happened to him is to say that one day he woke up.

To sustain the work of justice making, each of us has to wake up, to use our own ears and eyes and hearts to see what calls to us. Injustice and oppression can be found everywhere, and the list of problems that could benefit from our commitment to change is long: racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, war, extremes of poverty and wealth, hunger... Each of us can make his own list.

What's on yours? What are the two or three most urgent social justice issues for you? Here at the Fellowship, the Social Action Committee sponsors the food pantry, collects holiday gifts for the children and grandchildren of inmates at the women's correctional facility in Bedford, organizes a workday with Americares, and sponsors a film series and community dialogue on race. Opportunities abound here to become a part of the solution.

Allan G. Johnson is a professor of sociology whose work on the issues of social inequality has produced several books,

including *Power, Privilege, and Difference*. Professor Johnson's chapter on "What Can We Do?" inspired the title of this sermon.

I recommend the book as an excellent readable analysis of how systems of oppression and privilege fit together. Johnson says "the greatest barrier to change is that dominant groups don't see the trouble as *their* trouble, which means they don't feel obliged to do something about it (141). He says we must name the trouble, study the trouble, become a lifetime student. If this trouble were easy to fix, it wouldn't still be broken. Here are some of his other suggestions:

*Make noise, be seen.* Stand up, volunteer, speak out, write letters, sign petitions, show up. Every oppressive system feeds on silence. Don't collude in silence...

*Dare to make people feel uncomfortable, beginning with yourself.* At the next local school board meeting, for example, you can ask why principals and administrators are almost always white and male...while the teachers they supervise are mostly women and people of color... Consider asking similar kinds of questions about privilege and difference in your place of worship, workplace, and local government.

*Openly choose and model alternative paths...* Modeling new paths creates tension in a system, which moves toward resolution (like the irritated oyster). We don't have to convince anyone of anything. As Gandhi put it, the

work begins with us as we try to be the change we want to see happen in the world...

*Work with other people.* This is one of the most important principles in participating in social change. From expanding consciousness to taking risks, being in the company of people who support what you're trying to do can make all the difference in the world...The roots of the modern women's movement were in consciousness-raising groups where women did little more than talk about themselves and try to figure out how they were shaped by a patriarchal society. (158- 164)

Here in this community of justice seekers, you will find allies and support for whatever you have chosen as your justice work. One reason the Fourth Unitarian Society exists is to inspire you, to nourish you, and to prepare you for service.

The words of Richard S. Gilbert invite each of us:

Come into the circle of caring,  
Come into the community of gentleness, of justice and  
love.

Come, and you shall be refreshed.  
Let the healing power of this people penetrate you.  
Let loving kindness and joy pass through you.  
Let hope infuse you,  
And peace be the law of your heart.  
In this human circle,  
Caring is a calling.  
All of us are called.  
So come into this circle of caring.

May it be so.

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