

Within the Web

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 4, 2024

The young Buddha lived a privileged life, born into wealth, abundance, excess. He remained sheltered from the world within the confines of his palace walls, knowing nothing of the plight of the vulnerable and the marginalized. And yet one day, he ventured into the outside world. In his short time immersed in the world of the lower classes, he encountered three universal human ailments he had not previously been exposed to: old age, disease, and death. He was close to pain and vulnerability – and as such rededicated his life towards relieving the suffering inherent in the human condition, serving as a religious leader of a faith tradition that prevails to this day.

We have another religious leader whose teachings were those of nearness, faith, and love. Believed to have been born himself vulnerable and marginalized within the confines of a stable, Jesus taught universal love. He touched the untouchable, he held compassion for the condemned, he healed the outcasts. Lepers were cured¹, a withered hand restored², a hemorrhaging woman made healthy once more³ – simply by an authentic and caring presence and touch. By treating those deemed unworthy as worthy, he healed ailments of the body and the mind. He served as a model of a life of faith: immerse oneself in the world of the vulnerable, love those who have never known love, and as such help heal the broken. Know their struggles, offer companionship, and allow any judgment, hate, or animosity to fall to the wayside.

What is the common theme in the stories of these faith leaders? Proximity to the vulnerable, the marginalized. This offered the Buddha insight to the human condition, as it may with us. This created deep, healing love for Jesus, as it may with us.

¹ Mark 1:40-45

² Mark 3:1-6

³ Mark 5:35-34

This month we enter the theme of Justice and Equity. What is this difference between justice and equity, and what does this mean to those of the Unitarian Universalist faith? To those of our faith, equity means that “every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.”⁴ We address cultural imbalances. Justice means that we work to build a multicultural, diverse Beloved Community – one where those of any race, class, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity – can thrive.⁵ It means changing systems. How do we make these values into lived actions? For equity - we use the resources we have - that of time, wisdom, talent, passion, and, if applicable, privilege or monetary means - to create communities that are fully accessible and inclusive. When we engage with justice, we create this Beloved Community by working together as a faith movement to eliminate the systemic oppression that plagues our world. This stems from the core of our faith - love. This is how we live love in the world.

I note that we hold in this space beloveds with many identities, some of them marginalized. May we hold this in love in the words ahead creating, not a disconnect, but a unity.

How can we establish peace, love, justice, and equity? Leader in justice work, Bryan Stevenson, offers four successive practices each of us can implement, which I elaborate upon with my own sentiments. The first? Get proximate with the marginalized.⁶ The wealthy with the poor, the healthy with the ill, the housed with the unhoused, the nonincarcerated with the prisoner, the law makers with the drug addicts. The judgmental with the truly suffering. We replace assumptions with fact, judgements with truth. It is then when we see one another as fully human and worthy, which then sparks the call for true justice work to begin. May those on the bottom not be encumbered with isolation, stigma, indifference, and pity. Instead, may they know they are not alone – as one by one we, those who are not marginalized, approach them with curiosity, compassion, and care. As one by one we shrink the difference between each other by meeting person to person. As one by one we offer compassion and care instead of

⁴ <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/final-proposed-revision-article-ii>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vI7UPuCUrE>

disregard or disdain. Let us grasp hands, and ask, “Beloved, what do you need?” and affirm, “dear one, you are not alone.” The plight of the marginalized becomes our own as the dehumanized become our sisters, the condemned become our brothers.

The second step: change the narrative from one of fear and anger.⁷ If drug addicts are seen as criminals and not individuals suffering from detrimental illness, incarceration becomes easy. If Black men are seen as inherently dangerous and violent instead of compassionate, caring, and hardworking, it becomes easy to live in fear and react as such which is often extremely detrimental. If the impoverished are seen as lazy, indifference appears logical. When we are governed by fear and anger, we tolerate what should never be tolerated, we accept that which should never be accepted. Fear and anger make hate, imprisonment, punishment, isolation, and violence justifiable. So, what can we do as a people of faith and love? Seek out these vulnerable people, these marginalized people, these broken people, not with fear, not with anger, but with love, and curiosity. Change the narrative one action at a time.

Our third step: stay hopeful about creating justice, even when it’s complicated.⁸ It may seem unfeasible as we see numerous Black men in handcuffs, our trans beloveds the victims of violence, the mentally ill unhoused in the streets, immigrants detained simply for wanting a better life for their family. It is easy to throw up our hands and cry “impossible!” Yet let us see the world through the lens of hope. Hope allows us to believe change is possible, even if it seems way beyond our grasp. Jesus created a faith movement healing one body at a time. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. created a justice revolution one rally, one march, at a time. The arch of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice. If we lose hope, we lose resolve, determination, passion. If we lose hope, we lose a movement.

The fourth and final step: be willing to do what is uncomfortable and inconvenient.⁹ Think of the Buddha, immersed in a palace of privilege, exposed to the woes of the masses. His life

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vi7UPuCUrE>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

changed as he became dedicated to eradicating suffering. It is easy to remain in the bubble of privilege, never traveling beyond the comfortable, the known, the easy – the suburbs or Manhattan. It is uncomfortable – one with excess meets those who cannot even afford basic food. It's inconvenient to realize – these people I may have largely ignored, they are fathers and sisters and friends with basic, fundamental needs – they are suffering. It is uncomfortable to contrast one's own excess with another's detrimental lack, or to leave one's home and one's community and step into the unknown and possibly feared. And yet remaining in places of power and privilege only exacerbates our growing wealth gap and fuels animosity and indifference. Move beyond comfort and convenience, both in mind and in proximity, realize harsh discrepancies, and make a difference. No great change has ever occurred within the confines of comfort and convenience.

I want to lift up another crucial insight – we are each more than the worst thing we have done. We are so much more. Someone addicted to drugs is not just his drugs, someone who has done a crime is not just her crime. We need to realize he is a beloved father, a mentor, a being of hope and compassion, who succumbed to one of the great hardships of life – drugs. We need to understand she is a dedicated worker, a cherished sister, an inspiration to those around her, who found herself in a desperate situation, and did that crime.¹⁰ We need to know all of this before we judge. This is what we learn when we become proximate.

Let us return to the quote by Stevenson we heard earlier. “When you're trying to change the world ... get close enough to wrap your arms around [the vulnerable] and affirm their humanity and their dignity.” The suffering. Those in pain. The “discarded and disfavored.”¹¹ How much dignity can be mustered while in a jail cell, or while covered in cardboard on the street? How can one feel one's dignity when one's most treasured companion is a needle? What a lonely, terrifying, isolating world. Let the marginalized be held in a metaphorical embrace. Let us say, you are not alone. Let us articulate, you have dignity and worthiness inherently. Let us show

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vi7UPuCUrE>

¹¹ From *Soul Matters Worship Resources 2024*

them this dignity and worthiness through conversation, compassion, care, and sincere interest. You are worthy of love.

Perhaps what people really need is friendship, companionship, and love. What does it mean to say, “you are not alone?” It means, I am your sibling, and I will journey with you. Your suffering is now my suffering. Let us reflect on the words we heard in our Story for All Ages, a young girl ostracized for her illness. She offers, “Right now the medicine I need most is your friendship. The prayer I need most is for you to simply be with me. And the magic I need most is your love.”¹² May we reach out to the vulnerable, the marginalized, and simply offer friendship, presence, and love.

To wrap our arms around a suffering sibling is to realize they need help. Yet instead of assuming what is needed, let us ask the vulnerable what is needed and respond as such. And often, it may be uncomfortable or inconvenient. Do the unhoused solely need a check that one can simply sign, or do they need assistance finding an equitable job? Do the hungry solely need a sandwich one can easily hand out, or do they need assistance creating a community garden? Think beyond the simple, make oneself vulnerable, get close, and create change. Hold all of humanity in a loving embrace.

This transitions smoothly into his next quote, “We cannot make progress in creating a more just society, healthier communities, if we allow ourselves to be disconnected from the people who are most vulnerable.”¹³ How can we create police reform if we have never encountered the inner city? How can we find ways to feed the hungry if we have never had a conversation with one who desperately lacks food? How can we counter homelessness if we have never spoken to the unhoused? It is empty and imagined, not full and truly compassionate and based on understanding of the lived experience. We cannot make progress if we are disconnected.

We began with the stories of Buddhism and Christianity. I challenge us to view this work through the lens of our own faith. We know who we are. We are committed to equity – to that

¹² “The Cure,” by Christopher Buice

¹³ From *Soul Matters Worship Resources 2024*

inherent worthiness of all – and we are committed to justice – towards building a Beloved Community. It is woven throughout our principles – the way we covenant to be in this world. We are challenged to ask ourselves: How do we actively affirm the full worthiness and dignity – both publicly and through personal interactions – of those who sleep on a sidewalk, who make means through prostitution, who are addiction to hard drugs – how do we, personally and publicly, affirm their worthiness and dignity? How can we keep one from being excluded from the Beloved Community, because of incarceration, criminal record, or untreated, severe mental illness? Those are the queries I pose to us as a people of faith. We have the roadmap: Proximity comes first. We are further called to disengage from fear, to maintain hope, to lean into discomfort. Furthermore, as Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all life. Through our interdependence, we are embraced in the siblinghood of all humanity. We cannot let our sister succumb to heroin, our brother slip into the world of the unhoused, our nonbinary sibling get lost in the endless maze of the incarcerated. It tears apart our interdependence at the core. We become a disjointed mass of suffering individuals. Instead, we are called to get proximate. Instead, we are called to embrace one another – with love, compassion, friendship, and presence. No matter how vulnerable, how marginalized. You are not alone but held in the embrace of all humanity; let us grasp hands and journey together.

May it be so, and Amen.