

Our Broken, Beautiful World

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 5, 2025

As the ancient Japanese wisdom tale suggests, long ago, an elderly woman entered a temple inquiring of the difference between heaven and hell. A monk offered, follow me, and first you will see hell. The monk led the woman to an entrance of a great hall. The table was laden with meats and vegetables and cakes and fruits. The table was lined with people who, although facing a great feast, were nonetheless thin, pale, and frustrated. In their emaciated hands they held chopsticks that were three feet long. They could reach the food but were unable to feed themselves. “Enough,” the woman proclaimed. “Let us see heaven.” The monk took her to another, identical hall, tables weighed with the same feast of meats and cakes and elongated chopsticks. The diners, however, were plump and happy, the hall rang with laughter. The old woman understood the difference. In heaven, the well-fed and cheerful diners used the chopsticks to feed each other.¹

An ancient tale so apropos for today’s political climate. We see people feeding themselves through acts of profound greed and acquisition of power, leaving the masses emaciated. We have a rise of fascism and authoritarianism leading to profound fear of what the future holds. We live alongside ICE raids that breed terror in the hearts of immigrants. We see Medicaid being stripped away, poised to leave the vulnerable among us without adequate health care. We see environmental protections revoked as catastrophic hurricanes and fires destroy our earth and take lives. This is hell, yes? And we cannot reside in heaven – whether understood as existing in this realm or the next – if any of our siblings live in hell. We cannot live in heaven if those among us in power insist upon feeding themselves.

In reflecting upon the all-consuming current events, I want to directly quote Rev. Cameron Trimble. “The barrage of cruelty, confusion, spectacle, and spin has a cumulative effect. It wears on our capacity to feel, to care, to respond with presence rather than reflex. We are

¹ *Doorways to the Soul* Edited by Elisa Davy Pearman pg. 80

being trained, through repetition, to expect harm, and then to normalize it. That is the danger of this moment—not just political collapse or climate unraveling or the erosion of public trust—but the numbing of our souls.” End quote.²

How can we be intentional in resisting this cumulative effect? To maintain the ability to feel and to care? To counter that training to both expect and normalize harm? How can we resist the numbing of our souls? We might throw up our hands proclaiming, “what can I possibly do?” It is easy to turn away and give up. And yet, I argue, we make change through the intersection between compassion and justice. It is that which allows us to feed one another despite the barrage of repeated cruelty and mass confusion. And so, I want to explore this intersection. We will then elaborate on those profound and much needed small acts of equity, followed by an exploration of our own unique calls to action and change.

Author Amanda Beam offers that compassion goes well beyond pity and sympathy for a desperate and broken soul, or collection of souls. True compassion, genuine and lived compassion, this is justice in action. It is remedying the underlying causes of suffering and distress.³ Disregard does nothing to create heaven in this earthly realm. We need action that leads to a cultural change, a shift in priorities. We need to tangibly feel that fear and isolation that inundates society and instead of responding with a dangerous indifference and inaction we respond with a compassionate initiative to create meaningful change in the lives of the masses. It is to feed the unhoused in our cities and streets. To advocate for affordable housing. To not give up on our quest for gun control to save innocent lives.

Let us reflect upon another intersection of justice and compassion. In a quest for change, we need both compassion and interconnection to heal this world. Many of us feel hopeless and helpless. This feeling comes from seeing ourselves as one individual rather than an

² “When the World Numbs, Stay Tender,” Rev. Cameron Trimble

³ “A Question of Compassion and Interconnectedness That We All Share” Amanda Beam

interconnected whole. In truth, my salvation is intimately tied to yours. My peace and wellbeing are tied to yours. Both my ancestors and my descendants, those who came before and those who are yet to come, are tied to yours. What will our legacy be? Love and hate ripple out to all, one act of compassion touching even the harm doers, one act of discrimination rippling to both the privileged and marginalized. We need to understand that we are each but a small piece of humanity. Of the spirit of life. We are but an interconnected, interdependent piece of all that is. Each act arising of compassion and justice touches each and every life. None of us are in heaven if any of us are in hell.

With these understandings of the intersections between justice and compassion, we are called to make a change in this broken and beautiful world. There are profound acts of justice, yes. The likes of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Gandhi or Mother Theresa. There are the active yet lesser-known names who organize and lead mass rallies. Those who become national spokespersons for climate activism or reproductive rights. And there are the smaller yet just as needed acts of the masses. Omkari L. Williams, author of the book *Micro Activism*, offers, quote, “It is the critical mass of people standing up for what they believe in that ultimately moves the needle towards justice. Take the unsung heroes out of the picture, and nothing changes.”⁴

Williams offers the Montgomery bus boycott as a poignant example that I imagine many of you know about. In December of 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, an oft heard act of justice occurred: Rosa Parks was arrested for her refusal to give her bus seat to a white person. Within days of this arrest, mass protests began, countering racial segregation. It was a foundational action in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s that lasted for over a year. Throughout this time, myriad Black people refused to ride the bus. Ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated buses were unconstitutional. This ruling was exceptional in the ongoing fight for racial justice.⁵

⁴ *Micro Activism: How You Can Make a Difference in the World (Without a Bullhorn)* by Omkari L. Williams pg. 22

⁵ Ibid pg. 21

This example is of note because of the many unsung heroes that made this happen; it was a profound communal effort that could only succeed from the sacrifice of the many. No matter how hot or cold or rainy it was, myriad Black people did not take the bus. No matter how far they lived from their job, they found other, often very inconvenient, forms of transportation. The community arranged carpools or took cabs. Other folks walked for hours each day. Each person, every individual who regularly walked miles to get to work, who weathered the freezing snow and the intense heat, each person who sacrificed health and time in order to create profound change, these unnamed champions created a crucial win in the cause for racial justice. Each individual sacrificial act mattered. And this is not unique but one story among many.⁶

Several weeks ago, I attended a charity dinner for the organization Luminus. After a shared meal of chili and cornbread, I was presented with another facet to this idea of crucial yet smaller acts of justice. Luminous is a local organization that offers legal services to immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The spokesperson in attendance shared harrowing tales of the plights of immigrants in this nation, especially under today's political leadership. She taught us what to do if we see ICE harassing an immigrant. She taught about the work of the organization to teach immigrants what to do if they are approached by ICE. She spoke about how the organization provides affordable legal services to those who have been apprehended. The organization is small, and the number of immigrants they are able to help may be seemingly small, but the spokesperson referenced a well-known story about starfish. A beach is filled with stranded starfish. A young boy walks through the sand, throwing the starfish back into the water one at a time. An old man walks past him and abruptly asks, "what on earth are you doing? You cannot possibly make a difference this way." The boy knelt, threw another starfish into the ocean, and replied, "I made a difference to that one."

⁶ *Micro Activism: How You Can Make a Difference in the World (Without a Bullhorn)* by Omkari L. Williams pg. 21

We cannot do everything, but we can each do something. We can refuse to ride a bus or help but one precious life. It is that crucial combination of authentic compassion intersected with a call to justice. Omkari L. Williams offers, “what is needed ... is for each of us to take on one thing that speaks most strongly to us.”⁷ We are called to channel our energy towards that which resonates most deeply with our soul. She writes that these acts often come from origin stories – profound experiences that craft an individual call to justice.⁸ Perhaps we had an abortion, so we focus on reproductive rights. Maybe we survived a devastating hurricane and as such we have a passion to counter the climate crisis. Perhaps we lived in poverty and so our cause for justice is affordable housing. The list is endless – immigrant rights, gun violence, LGBTQ rights. There is so much that is broken and needs change. And you can be that change. Williams continues, “The key is to uncover your unique gift and then use it alongside other people to make the difference that only you can make.”⁹ Use your unique strengths to do that of which only you can do. Perhaps you are imbued with abundant compassion. With experienced solidarity. With a gift for artwork or music. Perhaps you are an attentive listener or find purpose in administrative work. Maybe you have a passion for teaching or for caring for young children. Or science or technology or the trades. Each and every skill and passion can serve as a tool for equity.

And so, I conclude with the call of our faith. We are carried through sorrow and pain and injustice on a river of hope and love and compassion that keeps us forever afloat. We do what the spirit calls us to do. How can we heed this call? How can we listen to holy whispers? It is in connecting with that still, small voice within, and from all we hold divine. We elevate our Unitarian Universalist prophets, King and Mandela and Susan B. Anthony. At the center of our faith is love – love from which all of our values stem. Love that guides us in interdependence and equity and transformation. It is a liberal theology found in the history of our faith with God residing with the marginalized, with healing the ostracized through acts of love. It is faith. Justice and compassion are born of deep, prolific, lasting, and grounding faith. They are born of

⁷ *Micro Activism: How You Can Make a Difference in the World (Without a Bullhorn)* by Omkari L. Williams pg. 16

⁸ Ibid pg. 42

⁹ Ibid pg. 17

tenets of dignity and worthiness and love and hope. We live and love and thrive as we feed one another with those elongated chopsticks, feasting together in abundance and in joy.

Contact politicians. Advocate for the unheard and unseen at community meetings. Attend protests and rallies. Donate generously to worthy causes. Volunteer to teach or feed or offer basic support. Organize a donation drive. Make care packages. Use your unique gifts! Be but one small act among many that serves to make profound change. Hold compassion in one hand and justice in the other and see where they meet. Do not let current events numb your soul or desensitize you to harm or wear on your capacity to feel and heal.¹⁰ We are interconnected in profound and needed ways. I am not free until all are free. None of us can reside in heaven if but one lost and lonely soul is trapped in hell. So, make a difference. Feed your neighbors with those chopsticks. Heal but one piece of this world. Fix what is broken. Feed your soul.

May it be so, and Amen.

¹⁰ "When the World Numbs, Stay Tender," Rev. Cameron Trimble