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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves

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21 August 2022

frederickuu.org

I suspect we could all make a long list of the major problems facing us today—from threats to democracy at home, to global climate change, and so much more. As the author and activist Grace Lee Boggs used to say, “**Another world is *necessary*.**” But she didn’t stop there. She would add, “**Another world is *possible*.**” Then she would go one step further: “**Another world is *happening*.**”

What do you think about that three-part claim? Is a better world not only necessary and possible, but also *happening*? The Indian author and activist Arundhati Roy has similarly said, “**Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.**” If we pause for a moment, can you feel that right now, in real time, in this moment?

Maybe you can. Maybe you can’t. I’d like to believe that it is so, but given the very real problems and threats facing our society, is that hope merely wishful thinking? What I know for sure is that the better world we dream about will definitely *not* emerge if we do nothing. To have any chance of “turning our dreams into deeds,” we must each do what we can within our various spheres of influence.

In that spirit, I would like to equip us with some tools that may be able to help, from a book titled ***The Four Pivots: Reimagining Justice, Reimagining Ourselves*** by **Shawn Ginwright**. Dr. Ginwright is a professor of education in the Africana Studies Department at San Francisco State University. He is also the founder and CEO of

Flourish Agenda, whose mission is to design strategies that unlock the power of healing to transform schools and communities (249).

After spending many years researching what does and doesn't work at the intersection of personal and social change, Ginwright identified the importance of four pivots:

1. From lens to *mirror*
2. From transactional to *transformative*
3. From problem to *possibility*
4. From hustle to *flow*

I would like to invite us to spend a few minutes with each in turn. I should emphasize that you needn't feel any pressure to do all four pivots at once. Instead, notice if there are one or more of these pivots that particularly resonate with you in this season of your life.

Let's begin with the first pivot, from lens to *mirror*. Like in a pair of eye glasses — a lens is an optical device we look through to view objects in the world. With this pivot, Dr. Ginwright is challenging us to *reverse* our focus, from looking through a lens to focus on all the problems “out there,” to risking looking deeply into a mirror at our own reflection?

If any of you are wondering, we should stipulate that there *are* real problems out there in the world, irrespective of what is happening internally within us. And Dr. Ginwright is all for making systemic change. But he also has become convinced that every individual can benefit from periodically taking a hard look in the mirror to own the responsibility we each have to change ourselves.

Let me give you a story from Dr. Ginwright's research about what it can look like to pivot from lens to mirror. He was attending a community meeting filled with conflict about lack of funding, insufficient volunteers, and various interpersonal disputes. In the midst of this chaos, a longtime member of the community stood up, and named how familiar this dynamic felt. He said, “*Twenty* years ago, we had a meeting like this one, where we blamed a local business for not providing us with enough funding. *Ten* years ago we had a community meeting about how the government needed to do more in our community. I wonder *who we will be pointing a finger at twenty years from now!*”

For Ginwright, this was a classic moment—when a shift from lens to mirror interrupted a pattern when individuals and communities felt stuck.

Again, let me be clear: there may well also be real *external* problems: genuine need for help from local businesses, the government, or other sources. But this longtime community member is making a critical observation: that external help may or may not be coming anytime soon. In the meantime, if we want to do everything in our power to avoid repeating this same conversation for another twenty years, what can we do differently? He suggests that one option is to look in a mirror, and “**hold ourselves accountable for working better together**” (33).

There’s an old saying that, “**We don't see the world as *it is*; we see it as *we are*.**” Mirrors challenge us to start with ourselves. And on the other side of personal growth work, we may find ourselves showing up in the world differently. “We don't see the world as *it is*; we see it as *we are*.” And as *we* change, we may find our experience of the world changing as well. Previously unforeseen possibilities may be to emerge.

Some of you may recall Jon Kabat-Zinn’s bestselling book titled ***Wherever You Go, There You Are***. Now, don’t get me wrong: if you are in a uniquely toxic relationship or situation, sometimes the grass really is greener somewhere else. Other times, we are challenged to ask: what patterns am I bringing with me? What am I replicating, wherever I go? What might open up if I spent some serious time looking in a mirror at myself, my habits, and my motivations?

This first pivot of shifting from an *external* focus (lens) to an *internal* focus (mirror) is directly connected to the second pivot: from transactional to *transformational*. If I am only interested in you because of what you can do for me, that’s a *transactional* relationship. It’s what lawyers call a *quid pro quo*, “something for something.” I’ll do something for you, but only if you do something for me.

The pivot from transactional to *transformational* is about a radically different way of being in the world. To say more, Ginwright uses a provocative quote: “**The wrong first question is, ‘What do we need to do?’ The right first question is, who do we need to become**” (91). That’s really worth thinking about. I will confess that I’ve spent a lot of time over the years on that so-called “wrong” first question: What do I

need to *do*? What do *you* need to *do*? What do *we* need to *do*? We UUs and other social progressives who want to take action and change the world are understandably drawn to this question of what should we *do*.

And as with our first pivot, it's not that a lens looking out on the world is never useful or that we never need to take action to change things there. Rather, Ginwright is inviting us first to consider that when we find ourselves stuck or endlessly repeating the same old ineffectual patterns, these four pivots can help us reimagine both ourselves and our ways of seeking justice.

So what would it look like to begin with what Ginwright calls the "*right* first question—who do we need to *become*"? This particular pivot echoes what we explored last Sunday in "[Six Ways to Meditate](#)." A lot of what awakening is about is the realization that we are not — and never have been — isolated separate egos. All of reality, including us, is less a noun than a *verb*. Reality is *process and relationship*—all the way down. And beginning the work of justice from a shared, felt sense of interdependence can be a powerful starting point.

I should clarify, however, that Ginwright's primary point of reference is not Buddhism. Instead, he grounds his worldview in the related African philosophy of *ubuntu*, "**I am because we are**" (124). Can you feel the difference that particular pivot can make—from the two of us as separate egos negotiating with each other in a transactional way, to a sense that whatever happens, *we are interdependent*? From this perspective, even if I cheat you or you cheat me — and even when one of us comes out on top in the short run — we are still both caught up in the ramifications.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it this way, "**Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.**"

Here's an even sharper way of making this point from an Indigenous perspective: "**If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.**" Can you feel that pivot—from "what do we need to *do*" to "what do we

need to *become*?” But we may well not be ready to do the work of justice in an authentic way if we haven’t done the transformational work of reimagining ourselves as deeply connected — what our UU 7th Principle calls “the interdependent web of all existence.”

Listen to that passage of Indigenous wisdom one more time: “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” In many ways, that quote embodies the second pivot, from transactional to *transformational*.

The third pivot is the move from problem to *possibility*. This junction connects back to where we began, with the sense that another world is possible. When the depressing headlines keep piling up, it can be easy to feel like the ways things are is the way they will always be. But that’s just not so. As the science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin once said, “**We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings.**” That’s the pivot Ginwright is talking about, the move from problem to *possibility*.

In particular, I appreciate Ginwright’s thought exercise, the one he often challenges his graduate students to experiment with. He asks them first to pick the social problem that they feel most passionate about: racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, climate change, etc. Then he asks them to write about creating social change without using words like resist, defend, disrupt, demand, fight, struggle, confront, destroy, deconstruct, or related synonyms. Instead, he invites them to move from problem to possibility by **centering words like reimagine, dream, discover, create, design, play, invent, visualize, and build** (176).

If you, like me, are an unabashed social justice warrior, I invite you to give this practice a try in the coming days or weeks. How might your work for social justice shift from problem to possibility through letting go — if only temporarily — of a focus on all that you are *against*; what might emerge if you focus instead on all that you are *for* — giving yourself time and space for reimagining, dreaming, discovering, creating, designing, playing, inventing, visualizing, and building?

In working with groups to implement these pivots, Ginwright particularly remembers one participant’s comment:

When I began this journey, I was only walking by faith, not by sight, because I just couldn't see where we were going. Now it's like the fog is clearing, and I can see through the foggy mist in the distance a mountain. That's where we are headed, but **even though I don't know how the hell we are going to climb that mountain, I know that I won't be climbing it alone.** (185)

I appreciate the amazing power of the shared perspective of “possibility” in that sentiment.

These pivots will not give us all the answers. Even if we use them, we may still not know how the heck we're going to summit the peak of all these massive interlocking social problems. But the fog may begin to clear a little. Even more importantly, we can move ahead knowing that we *aren't climbing alone*. As you have heard me say before, **“If you are feeling overwhelmed as one person, stop being one person.”** Join a network of activists oriented toward positive, creative—possible—perspectives. We are stronger together!

The fourth and final pivot is from hustle to *flow*. This shift is about getting really honest about our finitude. As some of you will recall from our New Year's Sunday Service back in January, for us humans who are around long enough to blow out candles on our 80th birthday cake, we will have lived just over four thousand weeks. Our time on this earth is short and precious; nevertheless, we humans — individually and collectively — can and have accomplished incredible, mind-blowing feats of social change. We can and must continue to do so in the present and the future. None of us can do all of the ten thousand things that needs to be done. Alone, we don't have the time, skills, or interest. The shift from hustle to flow is about discerning where *you* are most authentically called to focus.

In the coming months, I will say more about this point in two upcoming sermons. The first will be on the Sunday before Labor Day, in a sermon on “Insights from the People Who Brought You the Weekend.” The second will be in December, in a sermon on “Rest Is Resistance.” For this morning, I'll address just one piece of the latter sermon.

I have been holding in my heart that on Monday, the influential writer, preacher, and minister Frederick Buechner died at the age of 96. His career spanned more than six decades and he published thirty-nine books. His novel *Godric* was a finalist for the 1981 Pulitzer Prize.

Related to pivoting from hustle to *flow*, I invite you to hear perhaps Buechner's most famous quote, which is a definition of the word, "calling" — that place where we can best find our flow. He wrote, "Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. **[You are called to] the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.**" What might that look like for you? Where is that place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet?

There is much more to say about each of these pivots, but as I move toward my conclusion, I invite you to consider if one or more of the four is particularly resonating with you in this season of your life. In the coming days, are you feeling led to move from lens to *mirror*, from transactional to *transformative*, from problem to *possibility*, or from hustle to *flow*?

For now, I'll give the last words to Dr. Ginwright from the conclusion to his book, *The Four Pivots*:

In our journey to create a more just world, all of us must learn to be more human and lean into the courage to create a world based in love and justice. Now let's go into the wild, together without fear, knowing that collectively we are destined to find that there was never a wilderness at all. (234-235)