

**Justice Work as Spiritual Practice**  
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**August 6, 2023**

When I was a Boy Scout in Atlanta, I remember a particular camping trip one weekend where the troop held its own Sunday worship service. As a Unitarian, I was excused, and I walked down to Lake Lanier where I sat and took in the scenery. I found myself communing with nature, appreciating the beauty of everything around me. It inspired in me a feeling of awe – amazement at the wonders of the world and the universe beyond. I have returned to this spiritual practice many times since then, including one memorable occasion when I was traveled in Europe and found myself sitting at the top of a fjord in Norway. Afterwards, I went back to my hotel room and wrote a letter to my old Scoutmaster back home, thanking him for helping me to see the beauty of nature. I can truly say I was “full of the spirit” in the sense described by Rev. Dr. Peter Lanzillotta as “an active orientation toward the deep self and the gracious affirmation of the connections to the deepest parts of all humanity and the all of Creation.”<sup>1</sup> I felt connected – not only to nature, but to other people, the human part of nature, and I was deeply grateful. But even more, it motivated me to act, to express my gratitude, and to make the experience part of my core, my spirit from then on.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Peter E. Lanzillotta, PhD., *Spirit, Time, and The Future: An Inclusive Transpersonal and Theological Inquiry into the Spirit for Our Times*, Outskirts Press, 2011.

But why do we think of spiritual practice as something that we only do alone, in private, through prayer or meditation. Is it the images of ascetic yogis sitting atop a mountain, denying themselves material comforts in order to reach deeper understanding? The Buddha did that when he first sought spirituality, but he found that too extreme and too removed from the daily life of people. Maybe the answer today is based on our individualistic, consumer-driven society. We follow self-help books and courses that market themselves as providing all we need to be successful, happy, and free of need. We are told that we are entitled to individual happiness, and all we have to do is buy their solution. Are we being misled about the nature of spirituality?

In the now classic book “Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life,” UU minister, Rev. Scott Alexander makes this seemingly simple statement:

“In our faith every individual is expected, with the help of clergy and community, to nurture and tend the garden of his or her own religious life each and every day.”<sup>2</sup>

Let’s look at those words. They contain ideas of expectation, the involvement of others, and daily discipline. The "spiritual life" takes work, and we cannot do it alone. So, clergy and community also play a role, and maybe family and friends. In the words of Rev. Lanzillotta:

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<sup>2</sup> *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, Ed. Scott W. Alexander, Skinner House Books, Boston, 1999, p. 6.

“Spirituality . . . contains a deep resonance with ethics and justice; spirituality also holds us accountable. One cannot be a dilettante or an impostor and truly be connected to an authentic spiritually inspired life. Spirituality is intimately connected to our sustaining sense of community. If there are no shared ideals, nothing held or believed in common, community disappears and spirituality is understood as absent.”

“Spirituality propels us on our individual quest; it also forms the feelings bond of affiliation and affection that hold communities together. That which is of the Spirit, then, can be defined as whatever is deemed sacred, true, love and respect-worthy for the individual, for their community, and for their world. To be spiritual is to pay reverent attention to the holy within, between, among and beyond us all.”<sup>3</sup>

Others have discovered that service and justice work can be a spiritual practice. Former UUA President Rev. Peter Morales wrote:

“[I]f prayer is the word we use to describe connecting to what is sacred, I think service may be the best form of prayer. And if the purpose of a spiritual practice is spiritual growth, service is a powerful spiritual discipline. I have seen again and again how service transforms people. No one who commits herself to service remains unchanged by the experience. When we serve we become more

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<sup>3</sup> *A Metaphysical Musing: What Is Spirituality?*, Rev. Peter Lanzillotta, quoting John P. Gorsuch, *An Invitation to the Spiritual Journey*, Paulist Press, 1990.

compassionate, more sensitive, more understanding, and more aware. We are reminded of how precious and fragile life is. We experience our vulnerability and our deep need for one another. When we serve we experience what love can do.”<sup>4</sup>

One way or another, all of the great religious and spiritual traditions humans have ever developed reach the conclusion that absolutely requires us to care for one another. As UU minister Rev. Morrison-Reed says:

"The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice.”<sup>5</sup>

The words from Amos that we opened this service with are powerful words, words of courage spoken boldly to the powerful rulers of that time. Justice and righteousness were at the center. “Let justice roll down like waters And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”<sup>6</sup>

“That is a part of the ancient tradition that Unitarians and Universalists have upheld. We are not interested in a world of dominance, where the chosen are blessed and included, where the wealthy and powerful inherit more privilege and opportunity, and where the rest are left to find their own

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Peter Morales, “Service is Our Prayer,” *UU World, Fall 2010*, Unitarian Universalist Association.

<sup>5</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition*, Reading #580, UUA, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Book of Amos, 5-24.

way. For the past two centuries, the founders of our faith have called us to be prophets, to work for justice, to protect the poor and disadvantaged, to speak out against those who seek wealth and power for themselves.

“That is our Unitarian Universalist birthright. That is our Unitarian Universalist challenge, our calling. It is a standard by which to measure our lives. . . . It is our mandate. It is our vision of the future. It is a foundation of our liberal faith.”<sup>7</sup>

So, if social justice work is an important, integral part of UU spirituality, how are we living into it. The Winter 2017 edition of the *UU World Magazine* contained an article entitled “Do you have to be an activist to be a Unitarian Universalist? Six leaders reflect on activism and religious identity in a racially and politically charged era.”

The Introduction to the article began: “Unitarian Universalism’s public focus has shifted notably in the last [few] years . . . While it’s true that UUs have been active in justice movements for decades, it seems to us that UU leaders and many congregations have embraced justice work as central to our movement in ways not seen in a long time—and in ways that some UUs are experiencing as unsettling or disruptive. [S]ome UUs are responding to this new focus with excitement, some with relief that we are finally living out what they see as our calling. Others are expressing caution, frustration, or alarm.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dr. Charlie Clements, President of Unitarian Universalists Service Committee, Justice Sunday, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> *UU World*, Winter 2017, Unitarian Universalist Association.

The reason for the concern from many UUs likely comes from our historical emphasis on individual freedom of thought and belief. In the 1800s, the United States was searching for its own identity and attempting to break free from the long-established authority of European structures, that dictated beliefs and thoughts. Unitarians like Emerson were giving Americans permission to think for themselves and use personal experience rather than official doctrine as the foundation of beliefs. Mostly, this was a matter of freedom of the mind and spirit, not freedom from responsibilities that come from living within a community.

Even today, many UUs have come to this faith after feeling the oppression of other religions. They are glad to be in a place of worship that doesn't dictate what its members must believe. But after enjoying the mental and spiritual freedom here, we need to put away any lasting animosities towards our prior faiths and engage in the work of contributing to our community, our common values, our UU movement. We don't have to accept the deification of individualism and allow it to govern every aspect of our lives, our economy and our society.

In the words of Rev. Fred Muir, the former minister of the UU Congregation of Annapolis: "While individualism may have been a bold and appealing way to create and build a nation and its institutions and to grow Unitarian Universalism (it might have felt even natural or God-given), it is not sustaining. Individualism will not serve the greater good, a principle to which we have committed

ourselves. Little to nothing about the ideology and theology of individualism encourages people to work and live together, to create and support institutions that serve common aspirations and beloved principles.”<sup>9</sup>

Luckily, our denomination has a countervailing theme that unites us and binds us together as a movement, the covenant of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) that says: “As free congregations we promise to one another our mutual trust and support.” We are a covenantal religion, and we support each other in our individual searches for truth and meaning. Upon this, a community may be created, one that aspires toward the Beloved Community. It is the community that supports, nurtures and helps to define each person’s individuality, and those individuals create, support and constantly redefine the community.

And now, changes are being made at the national level in our denomination. We are in the middle of a periodic process of reviewing and updating Article II of the UUA bylaws which contains the primary statements that guide the members of our faith, our seven (or eight) principles and sources.

In the words of the Article II Commission’s report: “The [current] principles express a shared ethic and imply a certain theology—one that values the individual, growth, the natural world, and diversity. But it does not name these

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<sup>9</sup> Frederic Muir, Ed. *Turning Point, Essays on a New Unitarian Universalism* (Skinner House Books, 2016), p. 9.

values explicitly, nor does it name many other values important to us collectively. It also gives no guidance on how we might approach living out these values in our congregations and the world. It declares itself to be a covenant, but the only actions it asks of congregations are to ‘affirm and promote’ certain concepts. We believe we should expect more from a covenant. As one member put it, ‘we need more verbs.’”<sup>10</sup>

This year, at the UUA’s General Assembly in Pittsburgh, we gave preliminary approval to the Commission’s proposal to rethink our traditional “Seven Principles” approach to one that asserts “that our deepest common theological grounding and value is this: Love.”

Surrounding love are six other shared values that are inseparable from one another: interdependence, pluralism, generosity, transformation, equity, and justice. About this last value, the recommended language says: “We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all Thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.”<sup>11</sup>

This is a statement of covenant and commitment to act. And so it should be.

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<sup>10</sup> Article II Study Report - 200212023, UUA, 2023, p. 15

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.



The Commission's report states: "We see love called out as what demands that we be active in our justice work and justice-making." After all, as Dr. Cornel West has said that "justice is what love looks like in public."<sup>12</sup>

And so, my friends, we see that social and environmental justice are an integral part of our theology. We should embrace them as essential to our spiritual wellbeing and find ways to engage in this important work as a spiritual practice.

As one of the founders of the UU Legislative Ministry of Maryland, I can bear witness to how personally uplifting this work can be.

Every year since 2006, the UULM-MD has pursued a number of issues before the state legislature, often with significant success. UUs all over the state have become informed about important issues, and participated in the democratic process by testifying, attending rallies and press conferences, and advocating directly with lawmakers. In 2012, we even helped convince voters to support referenda on marriage equality and in-state tuition for undocumented youth, Maryland's DREAM Act, so we have experience engaging with our fellow citizens on matters of consequence. And most recently, our participation in UU the Vote activities has provided opportunities to engage with voters on the social and environmental issues that inspire us and motivate us to

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

express our shared values (the very ones outlined in our new Article II).

Starting with the grounding of our positions in these values, our justice work involves a cycle of action and reflection. We act, we reflect on the action, we act again with our new understanding, we reflect on that new experience, and so on. This process assures that we stay true to our values and helps each of us deepen our spiritual and theological beliefs.

This is how we can heal our wounded world and promote a sustainable future. And just as many of us feel in communing with nature, I find a deep connection with and an appreciation for those who work for justice, causing me to fill with gratitude and I “experience . . . that transcending mystery and wonder, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”<sup>13</sup> If that isn’t spiritual, I don’t know what is.

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<sup>13</sup> Sources of our Living Tradition, Unitarian Universalist Association.