



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

"A Tale of Two Declarations: Doing the Impossible"

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29 May 2022

Frederickuu.org

My youngest and I enjoy watching an animated movie "Rise of The Guardians". The movie has representations of Sandman, Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny and Santa Claus guarding children from the Boogeyman. Jack Frost is the protagonist and possible new Guardian.

My favorite theme is the concept of each character's "center". Throughout the movie the centers of wonder, hope, childhood memories, peaceful rest and fun are discussed as the protagonists and fear is the antagonist. The "center" is foundational for each character, because it is their "why?" For the characters, it is what they protect in children, their purpose and why they are called to be a guardian.

It reminds me of the question, "what is your why?" Answering that and operating from our center is when we are strongest, joyfully in our flow and most impactful.

My center, or why, is care and service, grounded in the belief that organized and dedicated people can do anything. I embody this by accompanying people through this sacred life journey. This threads through everything I am and have done with my life.

Paul Farmer, Ophelia Dahl, Jim Yong Kim, and Todd McCormick met in Haiti and Harvard. Paul and Jim become doctors to practice caring for the poor, for social justice. Each of them operated from their center and together built a non-profit that applied liberation theology in Haiti, Lima, Rawanda and more saving millions of lives.

Throughout this service and into the day, I invite you to spend some time with wonder and curiosity.

I invite you to take a minute and consider, What is your center?

We can find our way toward our center with learning, atonement, grace, forgiveness, it can be painful, joyful, inspiring... bit by bit we find our center when we find what fills us and when we face the estrangements described by Paul Tillich estrangement from ourselves, the ground of our being and each other... ¹

At times in our lives we may be closer, or farther from our center.

How does it feel when we are closer, and acting from that central core of who we are, those committed values?

At times on our journeys we can find ourselves further from our center.

How does it feel when we are farther from our center?

For me, when I drift further from my center, everything takes more energy, it is less generative, and I am more likely to slip into ways of thinking or being that do not serve me.

¹ Nancy McDonald Ladd, *After the Good News : Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism*. First [edition]. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2019), 2301 (kindle version)

What would it look like to live more fully into that generative space? To look beyond what is to what could or should be... that imagination is so important to build the world we dream of

My shorthand for operating from my center, is being a guardian. Today, this is on my mind because Dr. Paul Farmer, died this February. His lens of generosity, understanding of liberation theology, structural racism and accompaniment inspire community ministers, physicians, advocates and public health leaders around the country and the world.²

The documentary *Bending the Arc* is well worth the 100 minutes as well as the book "In the Company of the Poor". I was also influenced by my colleague Reverend Nancy McDonald Ladd's book, *After the Good News* in this sermon.

To set the stage, Haiti was a really rich French colony and was the first nation in this hemisphere to end slavery, the first nation to be led by and for black people after participating in the age of revolutions with the French and American revolutions, as described by Dr. Gregg Carr.³

Fast forward to 1978, there was a lot of hope and promise. Ministers of Health from around the world gathered at Alta Ama and made a declaration as overt colonialism was ending that the world would have Healthcare for All. The poorest countries would be first in line and the whole world would have healthcare by 2000.⁴

This would have been a type of global reparation creating "social medicine" bringing medical anthropology into public health – making healthcare a human right. Grounded in a joyful, celebratory time of plenty... this was a declaration from political leaders.⁵

² Paul Farmer and Jonathan Weigel. *To Repair the World Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2013, 17.

³ Karen Hunter and Dr. Gregg Carr, *In Class with Carr, Ep. 55: The Haitian Revolution (Then and Now)*; <https://youtu.be/N02BdTg-qKw>

⁴ Paul Farmer, Ophelia Dahl, and Jim Yong Kim. *Bending the Arc*. Austin, Texas: Tugg Educational, 2017.

⁵ Paul Farmer, *Bending the Arc*.

However, it wasn't grounded in the center, that deep spiritual place that supports true change. It was still estranged from the lives of the poor.⁶ Most importantly it didn't have accountability built in.

I think we all know that this beautiful vision and thought didn't happen. Father Gustavo Gutiérrez, the acknowledged father of liberation theology, is another leader who serves from his center and offers

"If there is no friendship with the poor and no sharing of the life of the poor, then there is no authentic commitment to liberation, because love exists only among equals."⁷

Since the Alta Ama declaration wasn't between equals, the love and vision failed when a global recession hit, and emerging economies struggled. As they were struggling their safety nets were ripped out from underneath them by predatory lending practices from the developed world.⁸ From us, in our fears of the global recession.

Beloveds, this correlates with today when we are experiencing the economic impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, COVID, supply line challenges, inflation, and all the stresses and crises that we have rolled from one to another. There is a lot of economic fear and hardship.

These could be the perfect inspiration to make big changes such as:

- true universal healthcare to address the demonstrated health disparities...
- a distributed solar network that would remove us from fossil fuels forever...

⁶ Michael P. Griffin, Jennie Weiss. Block, and Michael P. (Michael Patrick) Griffin. *In the Company of the Poor : Conversations Between Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez.* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 160-161.

⁷ Griffin, 22

⁸ Paul Farmer, Ophelia Dahl, and Jim Yong Kim. *Bending the Arc.* Austin, Texas: Tugg Educational, 2017

- and other changes that move us toward justice.... a basic living income, quality jobs, and so much more removing estrangements and moving us individually and collectively toward our centers.

Instead, in another white supremacy culture backlash, we see regressive attacks on voting, our trans children, women – first abortion and now birth control.

Naming the pattern, seeing the pattern, helps to identify the root... fear – like the antagonist in the opening story. In fear – people value economy over people. Ironically, this damages the connection, kindness, and soul leading to despair and fear that more change... the change many of us dream of... is coming.

Naming can also help us find ways to respond to these stresses from our center, our deep core values in connection to ourselves, life, and each other. There are so many ways to fight fear... there are so many ways to honor humanity, human rights, and atone for past wrongs... honoring intergenerational trauma and choosing our own path as Sabrina shared and invited us to join her in reflection.

Our UU values is a great place to start. Remembering that fear and rage are normal in the face of injustice... it tells us what is important... it means we are open, connected and aware.

Paul and Father Gutiérrez collaboratively describe three ways to address poverty, suffering and sickness– charity, development and social justice.⁹ They offer that

charity is not between equals... the opening declaration was grounded in charity.... yet, when the wealth is supported by a system of extraction from the poor and marginalized, charity of some of the gains to the poor can never result in justice.

⁹ Michael P. Griffin, Jennie Weiss. Block, and Michael P. (Michael Patrick) Griffin. *In the Company of the Poor : Conversations Between Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 64.

development can invite us to soaring new heights with innovation. Costs and benefits are often unevenly distributed. Consequently, it commonly and paradoxically worsens the outcome gap. At its worst, development can support extraction...

The site Paul, Olivia, Jim and Todd started to work at was a prosperous rural village in Haiti until a development project built a dam that flooded their homes, farms, and devastated a community.¹⁰

Only social justice is grounded in love, true equity, and when pursued from a deep spirituality also guides us toward our center and sustained change.

As Paul Farmer, Ophelia Dahl, Jim Yong Kim, and Todd McCormick pursued social justice through a non-profit Partners in Health, the circle of friends lived their values from their center, individually and collectively. Remember the story I opened with, none of the Guardians fought fear alone. It is by necessity a collaborative effort.

In this collaboration, they embodied Margaret Mead's famous quote, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."¹¹

Each brought their gifts to support and up-lift each other.

Is that not what we are called to do today?

To bring our gifts and uplift each other.

To gather with people who choose to act for peace and justice.

To honor the humanity of people with marginalized identities with presence, service, and centering their lived experience and needs.

¹⁰ Paul Farmer, Ophelia Dahl, and Jim Yong Kim. *Bending the Arc*. Austin, Texas: Tugg Educational, 2017

¹¹ Mary Bowman-Kruhm. *Margaret Mead : a Biography*. Pbk. ed. (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2011).

To stop harm, make our societal structures work for everyone, and atone for the many ways we have both individually and collectively fallen short.

We are currently facing an emerging infectious disease that revealed the dramatic health disparities in our society. This is the latest in a long line of infectious diseases, Tuberculosis, HIV, HPV that have “a preferential option for the poor” – we call this health disparities.

Rebuilding our structures to have “a preferential option for the poor” as Paul and Father Gutiérrez advocated for our medical systems would be applied liberation theology. It is a call to radical imagination of the possible...

a demand that we fix our systems,

honor the worth and dignity of everyone... center the voices of the marginalized.

No one is left behind.

What would this look like? I have two examples.

When patients in Haiti died of Tuberculosis, (which was curable with a complicated and expensive medical regimen) they didn't blame the patient for non-compliance. They didn't blame the poverty, the situation, the community, the travel or the distance for care. They did none of these things.¹²

What did they do? They FIXED THEIR SYSTEM.

They changed how they did medicine. They brought the medicine to the patients with food... they built a hospital and places for people to stay while they received treatment. They asked people, “what do you need to heal”, and listened... and built it.¹³

¹² Farmer, Paul, Ophelia Dahl, and Jim Yong Kim. *Bending the Arc*. Austin, Texas: Tugg Educational, 2017

¹³ Farmer, Paul. *Bending the Arc*.

Finally, and most impactfully, they trained community health workers. Members of the community to accompany patients until the patients felt they didn't need accompaniment anymore.

Paul described

Accompaniment is to go somewhere with someone, to break bread together, to be present on a journey from beginning to end with elements of mystery, openness and trust. The accompagnateur agrees to explore the other persons journey with them, it isn't known and share their fate for a while – until whatever initiated this is deemed completed by the person being accompanied.¹⁴

This program was theologically grounded in addressing the estrangements that we described earlier: estrangement from ourselves, the ground of our being and each other.

This is applied liberation theology.

When I spoke of development before, I said it can worsen the outcome gap. Paul was very critical of the differential care standards based on wealth and inherent commodification of medicine and "cost benefit analysis". Following that method, people died of preventable disease.¹⁵

My second example, the Rwanda Minister of Health collaborated with Paul and the team to build a community health worker network.

They tripled life expectancy as the country recovered from war and addressed a different infectious disease public health crisis, Human Papiloma virus and cervical cancer. They immunized 93% of the population with

¹⁴ Michael P. Griffin, Jennie Weiss. Block, and Michael P. (Michael Patrick) Griffin. *In the Company of the Poor : Conversations Between Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013, 132.

¹⁵ Paul Farmer and Jonathan Weigel. *To Repair the World Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2013, 21.

Gardasil, preventing the infection, and thus cancer, saving thousands of lives.

It was painful to watch white leaders without relationship or living the life of the poor criticizing the Rwandans for caring for their people in the way that made sense to them. A theme of health disparities recognizes the wisdom of the community. Communities know what they need to heal.

Both examples used the accompanagtuers, grounded in community and care, to accomplish what was literally considered impossible.

A 100% cure rate for simple Tuberculosis in a poverty setting,
an 85% cure rate for multi-drug resistant Tuberculosis,
to treat HIV in a low income setting and
prevent cervical cancer¹⁶

These are beautiful examples of:

- 1) caring for people
- 2) centering the needs and wants of the community
- 3) partnering in design of care and service; with patients and community

This was a "Preferential Option for the Poor".

I invite you to explore this with me for a minute...

Imagine what accompaniment would feel like. To be sick and accompanied, supported, given your medicine and food until you deemed yourself well.

Father Gutiérrez offered he wanted "to fight for liberation from a deeper place. I began to appreciate not only that one fights for liberation but how

¹⁶ Paul Farmer, Ophelia Dahl, and Jim Yong Kim. *Bending the Arc*. Austin, Texas: Tugg Educational, 2017.

one does it. I was drawn particularly to those whose fight for justice emerged from a quality of soul and deep spirituality.”

In summary, all the really significant impacts came with cultural humility, connection to life, a lens or hermeneutic of generosity and centering the voices of the people living the events.

I opened with a declaration that was empty. In contrast, I will close with a declaration and organized people who changed the world. The full text is on the Partners in Health website.

Currently, HIV is a chronic disease and people have near normal life expectancies as long as they are diagnosed and have treatment.

In the 1980s, it was very different. HIV was a mysterious plague that appeared out of nowhere. It was a death sentence blamed first on Africa, then on the LGBTQ population.

Medicines were prohibitively expensive, complicated and paternalistically all International Aid was limited to prevention measures only for YEARS.

The AIDS activist community was an international force, people were desperate, showing up, protesting and demanding a seat at the table. They put pressure on governments around the world to DO SOMETHING.

Activists are great at instigating change and motion in systems. Governments are great at scale, resourcing, and rights. Advocates and government at their best are both grounded in the communities with lived experience.

Partners in Health, proved that treating people with HIV in rural low income settings could be done.

The patients who survived due to that care gave this declaration to the world, speaking from their lived experience, our first source. I want to summarize some key thoughts...

They spoke with gratitude for the care and service they received, the accompaniment through their illness, how their humanity, families and communities were honored through that care.

They named how poverty and profiteering challenged their humanity, claimed their inherent worth and dignity naming structural violence as poor people. They offered solidarity with those without treatment access.

Unlike the opening declaration, this one, grounded in lived experience supported by the global protest movement and providers who refused to accept that care was impossible... This imagining reached the public sector and CHANGED THE WORLD.

A global fund for HIV treatment supported global treatment saving millions of lives. Treatment options grew, simplified, and now we treat to prevent HIV.

This deep commitment to care through tragedy and love in community, friendship with the poor and operating from our center with imagination of what COULD be allowed us to do hard things...we have done impossible things... and WE WILL DO THEM AGAIN.

We know how to build and re-build structures.

We know how to build partnerships with expertise, advocates, the public sector and those with lived experience.

We know how to obtain or restore human rights.

We do this operating from our center...

bringing our gifts and uplift each other

accompanying each other

fighting for justice from a soulful and deep spirituality.

This community knows organized and dedicated people can do anything.

While I highlighted Margret Mead's famous quote earlier... and to some extent it is true, Partners in Health, the Southern Leadership Conference, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee... yet...

they are also able to do what they did because the power of the people was with them. The people of Haiti supported Partners in Health, Millions marched for Dr. King, and SNCC drew college students from around the country.

It does not matter whether we serve justice with time, treasure or talent; We work for justice with what we have to give in this season of our lives, and the time is now.

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