

Paying in Sweat

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My first paying gig as a Unitarian Universalist minister was serving a very small fellowship in Stevens Point Wisconsin. It was my second year of seminary, and I would drive up to central Wisconsin from Chicago once a month to spend the weekend in Stevens Point preaching, leading an Adult RE class, and often meeting with their Board. I was also a spy. This church of about thirty people just appeared out of the blue on the District Executive's radar screen. She knew nothing about them. Part of my job was to report back to her on what the heck was going on in Stevens Point. So part of my job was also to assess how they were doing.

As I recall, they weren't doing much. They were a great group of folks and I loved them dearly, but they definitely had a fellowship mentality. Toward the end of my time with them, the District Executive asked me to give to them a little report on what I thought they needed to work on. That is never an easy task even for experienced ministers. So at the next meeting after church I told them that one of the areas that

they should be thinking about putting more effort into was social action. I will never forget the reaction of one of the old curmudgeons of the church. Like all curmudgeons he was very likeable, lovable even, once you got past his crusty exterior. He said, “You know, I have talked about social action far more than I have ever done anything about it.”

I remember I was somewhat taken aback by the statement. At the time I simply wrote it off as yet another example of a church member set in their ways, not wanting to hear about how change needed to come. As I said, not an easy thing to do even when you aren't a rookie. However, as the years have passed, I have come to see this man's response as a painfully accurate assessment of how Unitarian Universalists too often approach social action.

I am not sure when it started exactly, but somehow, somehow, Unitarian Universalists came to the mutual understanding that getting together with other Unitarian Universalists and talking about the state of the world, complaining about politicians and elections, or if they are really ambitious, debating a solution to such problems, that somehow all that talk accomplished something. We would go home from our programs and forums satisfied that the world's issues had been properly laid out and that all that we really needed was for the right people with the right kind of influence to engage in similarly well-reasoned conversation in order for the problems to be solved. It reminds me of the old cartoon, again painfully close to the tenor and spirit of us

Unitarian Universalists, in which a newly arrived soul to the pearly gates is given a choice of two doors to enter through. On the first is labeled “This way to heaven.” On the second “This way to the debate about the existence of heaven.” Sadly, that is the shadow side of our well-reasoned, intellectual, liberal religious tradition. The discussion about heaven, or truth, or our vision of a world transformed, is a safe thing we can keep at a distance. We do not have to embody that truth, and therefore it makes no difficult demands upon us because all we are doing is talking to people who already agree with us. It is also ineffective and irrelevant to the real world.

There are lots of misperceptions and misunderstandings of social action out there. One of the most prevalent is that social action is something someone else does. Usually that someone else is the minister! Make him do it, after all what do we pay him for anyway? That way the rest of us don’t have to bother with social action. It is a tempting answer particularly if you are not the minister! There are some difficulties with this approach however. The most obvious of course is that it is pretty hard for one person to single handedly represent all of the causes near and dear to the hearts of church members. Particularly in a group of UUs whose ideas vary tremendously, it would be impossible for one person to operate at every front: homelessness, racism, gay lesbian causes, environmentalism, and so on. This is a crucial lesson for us. One person by themselves is never as effective, as powerful, as

vigorous or as persistent as a group of people are. This is true of small groups of committed people, as Margaret Mead famously said, and it is particularly true of institutions. We are at our most powerful, our most effective, our most relevant, when we work together.

The idea of the covenant is the bedrock of Unitarian Universalism. A covenant is a set of promises we make together as members of a church that define our relationship. In our culture, individualism is the most prevalent and pervasive attitude today. But when we understand the ministry of the church in the context of our covenant, our promises to each other that gives shape and form to our interrelatedness, then we realize that the Unitarian Universalist church stands against the “me” first thinking we see so much of these days. Ministry is not just what Rev. Barbara and I do; it is what our church does. She and I may offer leadership, direction, training, resources, and act as a spokesperson for the tradition and in the world, but ministry is not just the two of us. It is all of us.

Another common misconception about social action is separating social action from “spirituality.” This one is understandable. People come to church for different reasons. We each have our own spiritual hungers that need to be fed, and it is foolish to think that one program or class would feed that hunger for everyone. Some people come to church with a hunger for meaning in their lives; they are looking to renew within. Other people come with a strong sense of loneliness and they

are looking for community—to renew among. Still others are hungry to be a part of something larger than themselves, to make a difference in the lives of other people who are hurting. These folks are looking to renew beyond. All of us are spiritually hungry for something. When you set your clocks back last night, something beneath your consciousness made you reset your alarm clock so that you would get up and come to church at the right time. What was that? What was that gnawing hunger that insisted you do that small chore?

I believe that these three hungers, for meaning, for community, and to make a difference in the world, are not separate but interrelated. We feed those hungers when we find something that helps us renew our spirit within our hearts, renew our relationships among ourselves, and calls us to service beyond our walls and our comfort zones. Now it may be that you first came to church only for one of them—for spiritual growth say. That is fine. But I invite you to consider the interrelatedness of these three things: spiritual growth, being a part of a beloved community, and working to transform the world. All three feed off of each other. You can't have one without the others.

Earlier I was pretty hard on us UUs and our tendency to want to talk and talk and talk and talk about social justice. I want to say that all that talking does have its place in the proper context. Those conversations can be very enlightening, they can help people see a new point of view or become educated on a topic they had no previous

knowledge about. That is undoubtedly a good thing. It can be part of a process of renewal within of your heart, mind, and soul. We do lots of talking in religious education and small groups such as Open Circles. It only becomes a problem when we neglect the other two: renewal among and renewal beyond. So Unitarian Universalists talking to other groups, say interfaith dialogue or forming a relationship with another institution, expands our sense of “among ourselves.” We are forging new relationships among new people who are not us. That is also a key component of social action. That relationship can be the foundation for some action, some event, beyond ourselves out in the community. It might be a demonstration or some direct assistance to some group. The more relationships we form, the more powerful our actions become.

We saw this very clearly last summer when a number of Unitarian Universalists went to Arizona to protest SB 1070, the law that gave local law enforcement the power to detain people simply for thinking they might be an illegal immigrant. Although a judge suspended the key provisions the day before, many Unitarian Universalists went to Arizona as part of our “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign. I was in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan at the time, but I heard a lot about it from colleagues. There was a huge Unitarian Universalist presence there. For those involved it was a transcendent moment of spiritual renewal. It felt like Selma Alabama all over again.

That is for a little while. Then I heard from those same colleagues, “Where is the follow up?” What do we do now? There were vague exhortations to continue the work at home, but there was no advice, no strategy, no coordination, and most importantly no relationship among the people there to nurture their spirits and produce real results. It was a great moment, but that is all it was: one moment. I learned this lesson from my community organizer friends in Nebraska. Build relationships first. Set the foundation for your big glamorous actions and demonstrations through the mundane work of talking to people, hearing from them, understanding them. Otherwise you are building your house on the sand. Your actions, events and programs will have no lasting effect.

People ask me, “What are we doing with Canaan Baptist Church?” The answer is so ordinary that they don’t capture its importance. We are doing small things. Getting together in the same room, and over a cup of coffee, learning each other names. Why? Because when you have decades and centuries of mistrust and mistaken assumptions about another group of people, be you black or white, UU or Baptist, then it takes time to overcome that history and begin to build trust. By slowly building our relationships together, then we can risk talking about the tough stuff. Then when the trust in that relationship deepens, then we can start doing the big sexy joint social action projects. Rush to the prize too soon, without building the foundation of a solid trusting

relationship, and the whole thing falls apart. It becomes one more failed effort for blacks and whites to try and understand each other. But cultivate those relationships, stand against that culture of individualism, and commit yourself to a covenant that promises to walk next to each other even when we do or say dumb stuff about race, and we can still be in relationship; now you have the power of our covenantal faith really doing something of significance in the world. Then we would be the prophetic church that Gerhardstein envisioned in our reading this morning.

Those desires, and occasional pleas, for the big sexy social action project that everyone sees and knows us for in the community, always reminds me of the opening sequence to the show Fame. Anyone remember the 80s show Fame? It was in its day what “Glee” is now. In the beginning there was the trademark theme music, and in the middle of the song Debbie Allen addresses her dance students. She says, “You want Fame? Well fame costs, and right here is where you start paying—in sweat.” You want to be THE activist church in town? Do you want to really make a difference in people’s lives in the city of Wilmington and not just talk about it? Do you want to transform our community into a just, loving and sustainable one in keeping with Unitarian Universalist values? If you want all of those things, as badly as I want all of those things, I am here to tell you my friends it costs. And right now is when we start paying in sweat.

How? Well this morning I am pleased to announce a new program at First Unitarian Church called “The Ministry of Compassionate Action.” You have met the folks who are a part of this new program already during our commissioning service. This is what was once called social action or social justice. Now it is compassionate action, within, among, and beyond ourselves.

Basically it is a program based on groups. No single individual causes here. This is covenant based social action. If you have something that is near and dear to your heart, something you care about deeply, or some group that your heart breaks for, then all you need to do is find three other people who share your vision. A ministry equals four people who care deeply about something or someone. You could form a group concerned about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered youth following Rev. Barbara’s service a few weeks ago. Fill out an application and a covenant form, both of which are now online and will be available at a table during coffee hour today, and turn it in. The Executive Team reviews these with some help from a lay person, and if you are approved you are off and running. Our church has, as of a few moments ago, already commissioned the inaugural class of the Ministry of Compassionate Action. We will be having some meetings later in the year to do some spiritual reflection together with all of the groups that are a part of the Ministry of Compassionate Action. This ensures that our vision for compassionate action informs the work of the various

groups. They then evaluate and integrate those experiences into their understanding of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, and then revise their vision into something new. Thus there we create an ongoing cycle of mission-based, spiritually nurturing social action that is active in visioning, acting, evaluating, integrating, and then re-visioning how to engage the world to be the most benefit. Actually this is no longer social action, it is now compassionate action because it includes all three elements of renewal within, among and beyond ourselves.

In our ancient reading this morning, the Bodhisattva “Hearer of the World’s Cries” becomes whatever living beings need to end their suffering. “Hearer of the World’s Cries” is more commonly known by the female Chinese version: Kwan Yin, the bodhisattva of infinite compassion. This particular passage inspired a well known subgenre of Buddhist art called “The One Thousand Armed Kwan Yin.” Kwan Yin has one thousand arms so that she can be of help in any situation. As the reading said, if you need a Buddha, she is a Buddha. If you need a beggar, she is a beggar. Some take this literally, and treat Kwan Yin as some sort of genie who fulfills wishes. I don’t believe that. I think the thousand arms of Kwan Yin are us; each and every one of us. We all have the capacity to be a compassionate presence to someone who is suffering in the world. People need us, all of you and me, to be willing to have our hearts break a little bit at the sounds of their cries. They need us to listen, and to respond, not just out of that broken place of

empathy but out of wisdom too. That is why relationship is so crucial. We cannot wait for someone else to do it. No one can do our spiritual homework for us. We are the arms of Kwan Yin, and we are at our most effective when we band together, even if it is just four of us, and bring our wisdom and compassion to bear on the world. When all of us, individually and collectively, are willing to pay out a little sweat then we can truly effect lasting change and our work will make a difference.

Join me in transforming Wilmington into a just, loving, and sustainable community. Join me in transforming First Unitarian Church into a beloved community that helps people renew within, among, and beyond themselves. Join me in daring to transform yourself and myself into someone who not only preaches the truth, or knows what they believe, but embodies that truth in their everyday lives. Join me in being one of Kwan Yin's arms of compassionate action. Join me in making a difference in the world together doing the ministry of this church. Creating a world transformed by our religious vision will not be easy nor glorious all of the time, but let us not hesitate to pay for it with our sweat. Amen Blessed Be.