

One Plus Seven Equals Great

As one of Unitarian Universalists' great prophets, Mary Oliver, wrote, "my work is loving the world." We care a great deal about our mission to nurture our own spirits and help heal the world.

Our commitment goes back a long way. In the nineteenth century, many Unitarians and Universalists worked in the anti-slavery movement, in prison reform, and education reform. In the twentieth century, many Unitarian Universalists worked for desegregation and civil rights in the 1960s, and two Unitarian Universalists gave their lives in this – Viola Liuzzo, a lay person from Michigan, mother of five, who was murdered on the last day of the March to Selma, Alabama, and James Reeb, a minister from the northeast who was killed during the period. We have been leaders in the movement for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights beginning in the 1970s, and our denomination strongly supports the respectful treatment of undocumented immigrants in the US today.

Most of us are proud of our progressive commitment to seeing love and justice more fully realized in the world, and we've codified this commitment in Unitarian Universalism's seven principles, especially in the first and seventh principles.

Our first principle – that every person has inherent worth and dignity – is the center of our faith and the value underlying all our progressive social and political action.

Our seventh, and newest, principle – respect for the interdependent web of existence – calls us to work on behalf of the earth and the beautiful creation on which we as a species are having a major negative impact.

But everything has its season, each church has its own rhythms of life. And when we look at social action in our own church, it may feel a little like autumn, the autumn we see in nature around us.

Outside, many leaves have turned and fallen. We've had a couple frosts and in the gardens, some perennials have been cut back. At church, it happened without fanfare – our Social Action Committee has been dormant since the chair moved away.

Don't misunderstand – individual church members continue to do the same worthy deeds to serve others. Some of you go to the UU Urban Ministry regularly in Boston to tutor. Others make the annual Walk for Hunger, help out with Family Promise Metrowest, or contribute to the Medfield Food Cupboard. The Green Sanctuary Committee is alive, kicking and very active. And you called a lesbian minister, that's faith in action!

But, there is no longer an organized group that actively works to engage the rest of the congregation in this work. That is a diminishment. But, it is also simply another season in the life of this church's social action commitment, and it is a great opportunity.

As the Autumn mash-up reading noted,

“Autumn is a season of great beauty, but it is also a season of decline: Faced with inevitable winter, what does nature do in autumn? She scatters seeds that will bring new growth in the spring – and she scatters them with amazing abandon.

In retrospect, I can see what I could not see at the time – how the job I lost helped me find work I needed to do, how the ‘road closed’ sign turned me toward terrain I needed to travel, how losses that felt irredeemable forced me to discern meanings I needed to know. On the surface it seemed that life was lessening, but silently and lavishly the seeds of new life were always being sown.”

Seeds of new life for our work for social justice and social action are being sown even now – I come not to bury the committee but to praise it ☺.

I want to help stimulate a conversation among you about what it means to be church without a social action committee, a conversation about why we might want to bring social action into the heart of what it means for us to ‘do church,’ and especially a conversation about new ways we might experiment with doing this.

At many pastoral-sized churches, Social Action Committees are a small group of hard-working individuals. They often have special passions and unite in an ongoing committee to organize volunteering, fund-raising, and lobbying in support of these issues and groups of people.

And in many church members’ minds, “social action” means whatever the Social Action Committee does to support justice or serve people in our society.

Non-committee members usually get involved in one-off events, but mostly non-members feel little pull to participate, unless it is something they feel personally passionate about, because they trust the committee to take care of that.

Because of this trust, and the perfectly reasonable sense that there are many other things that need to be done and few people to do them all, most of us in these smaller congregations with a social action committee often feel that the best way to participate is to donate money, rather than our time and labor.

For most members social action probably isn’t a long-term personal commitment to regular service or justice action. It isn’t grounded in a church-wide expectation that all (or almost all) of us, including *our own selves*, will personally participate simply as a natural part of being a member of the faith community.

Now, this traditional committee model of doing social justice and social service work has some important benefits. It is very flexible, decentralized, and provides a place (when there is a committee) for everyone to work on the issues about which they care deeply.

But, there are other models for ensuring the outward mission is well integrated into the church's life.

First, though, we **can** trust that although “on the surface it seem[s] that life [i]s lessening, silently and lavishly the seeds of new life [are] being sown.”

Trusting this, what might we do now, in this autumnal period, to prepare the ground for the renewed engagement we know will come in working outside our congregation to serve and to advocate for others?

Most importantly, we can recognize and name the reality, we can sit with the perhaps uncomfortable truth that we really do not currently have a core generating energy for social service and social action, while also knowing that this is not a permanent state of affairs.

We can ask ourselves, how does this fit with who I want to be as a person, and who we want to be as a faith community? How does this fit with who our values of love, compassion and commitment to justice call us to be? If our principles require of us “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly” as the Jewish prophet Micah said, then what role do *we* really want social action and service to have in our lives as a faith community, in our religious education program, in our mission as a church? I hope that your answer will be, “a central one.”

We can also acknowledge some of the limitations of the social action committee model – for example, it was easy to not get involved when there was a committee because “they took care of that.” With the committee gone, maybe we can see that there is no “they” responsible for doing the work of love and justice we believe in, no “they,” just “us.”

Another gift of reflecting on this situation is that we can get comfortable with the reality that we are not in an all-or-nothing situation. The choices are far broader than 1. either we have a social action committee, or 2. we don't live up to our shared mission of helping to heal the world. When we understand this, we realize that we don't need to feel inadequate or guilty about the situation, and can begin to explore what we might want to do.

I invite you to begin talking with each other about how and who does social action at the church, because whatever happens will eventually grow out of a process where we develop a clearer shared sense about what it means to be a member of this church.

We can explore what kinds of commitments to social action we want to make, individually but especially as a community. I'd like to suggest to you three related ideas to mull over and maybe try out. And I have invited Ron Yates to speak with us after the service, because his organization is one that might work for us in terms of these three ideas.

First, what would it be like if the church *as a whole* joined in a long-term social action project? This would certainly feel very different from the old model of several individuals pursuing their own passions through a small committee, and then feeling alone and stretched when few others joined them in their work.

Second, what it would be like to be committed as a faith community to a local project where we could reasonably expect ourselves to give time and labor rather than just money.

And third, would it be possible to combine our growing environmental awareness with our commitment to improving people's lives in ways that still honor the importance of people's current suffering and social marginalization?

I think if we tried out doing social action in these new ways, we might find some wonderful benefits:

If we made a commitment as a whole church to a local, ongoing social justice or service project, and therefore most of us became involved in some way or another with it,

- we would build great fellowship and bonds with each other, we'd get to know each other better, we'd grow together! We'd share something with others in the church that's really important to our living lives in accord with our values. And in doing this we would "create community," which is one of the things we value most in church

If we made a commitment as a whole church to a local, ongoing social justice or service project, and therefore most of us became involved in some way or another with it,

- we would grow as members of a community of faith because our individual understandings about justice and love would increasingly be shared and deepened in conversation with each other based on our common experience.

If we made a commitment to a local, ongoing social justice or service project as a whole church, and therefore most of us had some involvement or another with it,

- we *could* commit ourselves to working personally, rather than primarily by writing generous checks. If we did this, not only would those we serve benefit from our work, **but so would we**. This is a selfish reason to make a change, but it is very real.

You see, when we write a check, but lack a personal or physical engagement with others we want to help, **we aren't** changed. We need the chance to work with others who are different in some ways, in order to stretch ourselves. And when we commit to physically help out in a local ministry or justice action, we put ourselves in a place where we can be touched, changed, even transformed. We can keep learning and growing rather than coasting along in our generally pretty comfortable worlds....

If we made a commitment to a local, ongoing social justice or service project as a whole church, and therefore most of us had some involvement with it,

- we can actually have greater impact on what we want to impact because we would be **focusing** our energies. We'd have to give up having a little impact on a lot of things, but maybe the tradeoff is a worthy one.

In addition, if we worked to find ways to combine environmental commitment and personal action to serve individuals who are in need or marginalized in some way, if we could marry two of our most important principles, perhaps we would find that one plus seven no longer equals eight, but really equals “great.”

However, these ideas will face challenges.

They could run aground on a strong sense of loss on the part of people who were used to trying to mobilize people in support of their particular passions, because there would be decreased energy on the part of the congregation for those.

They could run aground on the strong inward focus that is characteristic of most pastoral-sized congregations like this one.

And, by the way, this is a huge challenge for smaller churches (those of up to 150 members) who want to do meaningful social action work – the strong tendency of the organization to focus on the needs and happiness of its members, rather than on nurturing the whole mission of the church, which involves not only the nurture of members’ spirits but also its specific work to help heal the world.

Exploring, experimenting with these different ways of approaching social action could also run aground on this – the fear so many of us have of acknowledging that we are not all we could be, that we can always grow in life-changing ways, no matter where we are in life!! For some reason, it is easy for us to equate a need or desire to learn and transform with being inadequate or a failure. But that is a limited way to look at things!! Paradox is our friend – we are both good and adequate, and can benefit from learning more about what it means to love others and our world.

I hope that the idea that we can and even should do an ever better job of learning to love our neighbor is something we can all be blessed with, for this allows us to nurture openness, and a desire and willingness to be changed.

It is autumn, the seeds are being scattered, we don’t know what will eventually grow, bud and bloom. We do know that “our work is loving the world,” that preparing the ground for renewed growth is worthy work. In retrospect, we will see what we may not see now, that the road that seems closed may be turning us toward new terrain we need to travel. It may be turning us toward new ways to act on our values in the world beyond our doors and thus towards living with greater joy and integrity.

May we have fruitful conversations!

Amen. And blessed be.

*A sermon delivered by Rev. Meg Soens at
First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church of Medfield.*
