

2004-10-10

Local or Global? Organizing for Health

Opening Words

We are here

as the trees in this season begin to glow,
that we too might find a way,
amid all of our struggles and worries,
to brighten the world of our common life.

And so we pray:

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge, deeper compassion, and hope of peace.

Sequence

I am part of you, O Truth Unfolding.

I am part of you.

I am part of a cosmos. I cannot see
either its edge or its end. How amazing!

I am part of a galaxy of a million, billion stars.

They say it's a pinwheel. How wonderful!

I am part of a system of planets that swing
around a small parent star. How strong the hands
of invisible gravity must be
to hold it all together, just so!

I am part of a planet, green and blue,
along with mountains and seas,
sponges and spores,
lichen and lava,
robins and rain,
periwinkles and perch,

centipedes and cities.

How great the variety! How astonishing the interdependence of it all!

I am part of a species that belongs to a grouping of animals called mammalia...and so is every other human being, equally so.

I am part of a political unit called a nation.

There are many nations,
each of them dear in many ways
to its local citizens.

I am part of a family with ethnicity, practice, food and love rooted in the mountains of Emilia.

I am part of a circle of friends rooted, not in ethnicity or food, but in simple redemptive love.

I am part of a climate region,
part of a state,
part of a city,
part of a neighborhood,
part of a congregation,
and part of a staff.

And I am part and parcel of this moment, this simple silence which lasts but a few breaths,
and then is gone forever.

But like cosmos, galaxy, planet, species, nation, climate, city, neighborhood, family, and circles of friendship, it is precious, a present for which I give thanks.

silence

Family and friends, the human brilliance in the midst of a vast largely empty cosmos. Remembering our connections by love and struggle, memory and meaning, we name the companions who are most with us today...alive in the world, or alive in our hearts. Aloud we say them, or quietly we think them...

naming

I give thanks for all of which I am a part.
And for this season too, when the cooling shadows grow long, and
music is made by
flowing river, blowing elm and wistful hearts.

Readings

The First Reading comes from a recent history of part of our historical stream. The Universalist Movement in America –1770-1880 by Ann Lee Bressler. She offers us an unromantic, and critical, view of our own history. Many people are surprised that we are self-critical, but what else would an honorable community do?

By mid-century, one could find Universalists involved wherever there were efforts to reform society. Yet, for the most part, this involvement merely mirrored broad trends among liberal Protestant groups. In only a few realms, most notably in the expansion of women's roles, does the evidence suggest any truly distinctive Universalist contribution. Especially for the period before 1850, determining the level of Universalist involvement in most areas of reform is difficult because most of the work was carried out in a decentralized and uncoordinated fashion. Traditionally suspicious of authority, and disdainful of the motives of evangelical reformers, Universalists had not been inclined to join organizations.

The Second Reading comes from the scroll of Melakim or Book of Kings, in the Tanakh, or Hebrew Scriptures. The character Elisha in this book is a lot like the characters Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Barbara Frietchie and George Washington and his Cherry Tree. They may have been historical characters, but a lot

of what is said about them is, well, exaggerated, yet always for the point of making a point.

The widow of a man who was a member of the Guild of the Prophets came to Elisha and said, “My husband has died, and you know how devout he was. Now, you see, a creditor has come to seize our two children as debt-slaves in his household.”

“What do you think I can do for you?” asked the prophet. She simply answered, “We have nothing left in our house except a very small flask of olive oil.” “Then go to all of your neighbors, and borrow every bowl and container you can get from here and there, and then, lock yourself up in your house, you and your children. Then start pouring from your small flask of olive oil into the containers, one bowl at a time, until they are filled to the brim. Keep on doing this till all of them are full.”

She did as the prophet suggested. She poured out ample oil into each bowl, and filled them till her eldest could find no more to fill, and only then did the flask stopped yielding the oil. She then came out of the house and told Elisha what had happened. And he said, “Sell the oil and live on what you make from that.”

Sermon

Our Universalist ancestors were an important part of American history. In this most religious nation, they once made up the sixth largest religious group in this nation, not a small thing, that. Their colleges, like Tufts and Cal Tech, are still well known. Their official ordination of Olympia Brown as the first women minister in history, all the way back at the time of the Civil War, was a milestone in the cultural life of the nation, not just for the Universalist church.

And yet they weren't quite the leaders in social reform that we often claim that they were. Our historian, Ann Lee Bessler, makes this embarrassingly clear. They were so caught up in issues of authority, and so suspicious of their evangelical neighbors, that they preferred to go it alone, without organization, and without alliances in the community.

Part of it was not their fault, of course. Many of the Christian abolitionists from even liberal evangelical churches would not work with the Universalists because of their theology. They were Unitarian, for one, teaching that God was one, not three, and Jesus, a mortal. They had a way too optimistic view of the human race, also, it was said, and they denied the doctrine of Eternal Hellfire.

"If there is no Hell," some of the Methodist circuit-riders would ask the local Universalist preacher, "why would anyone be good?"

The Universalist preachers would just shrug, totally knocked flat about such a question. "What," they would ask, "is it only the threat of fire that keeps you from looting and pillaging?" Then they would shake their heads, perplexed why people preferred to put their faith in threats instead of the Love that won't let you go.

But because the sinfulness of human nature *was* an important doctrine in so many Protestant churches, many of these congregations *were* actually at *the forefront* of the anti-slavery movement, as well as other movements of social advocacy, such as penal reform, literacy and temperance. Slave-holding was a sin, said their leaders, unequivocally; the Universalists, holding no doctrine of Hell, and thus being somewhat less impressed by the notion of sin; and being by nature rather suspicious of authority, had to approach all of these social reform movements by a different theological path. And eventually they did. They reasoned, "If there is no final Hell after death, it makes sense that we should also work to abolish the hells we have here on earth: inequality

between the genders, prisons, and slavery.” And in time, the Universalists made some very significant headway, especially, as our reading testifies, on the equality of the genders.

But they did not go as far as we, their spiritual descendants, might wish, we who are usually so proud of our remarkable history. For you see, their anti-authoritarian nature and fear of organization had a down side, which made them overly cautious. Yes, it’s true, things *can* get so organized that the structure of the organization itself can become a system which distorts the community. And yes, authority *can* easily degenerate into mere authoritarianism. *But*, without any organization at all, little gets done. And without the ability to speak with some authority, the truth about things will never surface, and society will remain unreformed, the unjust status quo holding sway like some sort of occupation force.

In the twenty-first century, Universalists, and their merger-sibling, the Unitarians, are still rather suspicious of authority, and there are still fears about organization. But Methodists are usually not taunting us about our theology anymore, and we are invited to join interfaith groups without being belittled for our religion, or having our authenticity called into question. And we are less and less afraid of at least some organization, knowing that for our undeniably high-minded words to take real form in the world, we have to work in *some* structured way. And moreover, especially because we are such a small movement number-wise, we really have to work *with others*, allies not in theology, but in true concern for justice in the world.

This is why, I suppose, so many of us support the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. This is why, I suppose, many of us work with the RESULTS organization, or the local Coalition for Reproductive Freedom. And this is why many, many of us work with BREAD, our local interfaith social justice organization.

And, make no doubt about it, BREAD *is* organized. Meetings are timed, down to the word. There is no impulsive talk-back from the floor, and no running over. All speakers and guests freely agree to time limits before the meeting. Thus, when they break that time limit, they are cut off. Since they know in advance this will happen, when they do so, their clear rudeness works against them, not for them. There are rehearsals, preparations, and serious research teams meeting for months before each meeting. Facts are checked and cross checked. Details are honed. Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Unitarian Universalist...all working together, organizing for justice. Because they all agree that when you organize, something good has a fighting chance of being accomplished. And when you *don't* organize, well, then, it all comes down to luck, I guess.

Protestant, Catholic, Jew, and Unitarian Universalist, all joining together to speak with shared authority, because if you don't learn to agitate with authority, you just end up going around in circles, with unresolved issues dominating everything, keeping forward movement at bay.

I hope that when the history of our era is written, it will read differently than our 19th century history. I hope it will point out that modern day Universalists *joined* organizations and worked with others to make our locales better, more just places to live. Yes, it's true, we may be ahead of our brother and sister congregations in areas like women in leadership, and sexual politics and support; but we are neck and neck with all the rest in terms of housing issues, and health issues. And that, folks, is just fine with me. What matters is *not that we are ahead of everyone else in all things*; what matters is that all good things actually are accomplished.

What things? Well, at the meeting next Monday night, we will be looking at housing issues, and health issues. And it's local health issues that I want to focus on this morning a bit.

Local health issues. Not issues of AIDS in Africa, Russia, India and Thailand, although I assure you, those realities are changing the world drastically, even as I speak. Not the critical health issue of starvation in Sudan, although that is compelling, certainly. Not changes in socialist medical practice in Canada or Europe, although those changes are noted. But I am talking about health right here in Central Ohio.

Health concerns themselves, of course, touch us all in Columbus and its environs. Colds or broken bones, flus or fibro myalgia, cancer or heart disease, skin rashes or gynecological concerns, bipolar diagnoses and aging factors, dental work and diabetic diets...health issues are with us daily. All of us, without any exceptions.

Health *costs* touch us all, too. New terms like “co-pays” or old terms like “depleted savings.” Bills and collection letters. I know it certainly affects me. I have relatively good insurance, I suppose. But I still shelled out over twelve hundred dollars this summer for the *portions* of things my insurance simply refuses to cover...a sleep study in a hospital, various blood tests, and a tooth extraction.

I have a friend who has been out of a job for a while, and who has thus come to live in a homeless shelter, Faith Mission, for which our congregation often provides a good meal on Fridays. He’s a healthy guy as things go, with the fit and glowing body of an athlete. But yesterday, while just walking down the sidewalk near Grant Hospital, he coughed up blood, and fell to the ground. Today he is in that hospital with tubes in every opening. Who will pay for his stay there, and his treatment, whatever that will be? Not me. Not him, either. And, of course, he has no insurance at all.

But neither do 130,000 other people in Franklin County, a significant percentage of the population. Why don't people have insurance? Part time work doesn't offer such perks, and a part-time salary is hardly going to give you the money you need to buy your own. *If* the insurance companies take you. If you don't work at all, you certainly can't afford insurance... children can't buy it for themselves, for example. And if you are working for a minimum wage job, you are likely to need your whole tiny salary for rent and groceries, with nothing left over for dental care or flu shots.

If someone without insurance gets cloudy vision or feels an increasingly sharp pain in their abdomen, they could go to an emergency room at Grant, I suppose. Or Mt. Carmel. Or Riverside. Many do, since those emergency rooms are crowded day and night with people who have simple flus, not broken bones from a car accident.

Or they could go to a CNHC, that is, one of several Columbus Neighborhood Health Centers, which treat people regardless of ability to pay. But as it stands now, they can see only 20% of those who seek their care. 20% of 130,000 is a rather appalling percentage, I'd say.

The BREAD Organization, after years of research and study, has decided to focus its local pressure on one small, doable thing... building one, new, and larger health center on the west side. Not on the east side. Not the south side. Not in Westerville. Not near the church. Just one, in a particular location, on the west side. BREAD asked Mayor Coleman and the City Council to include four million dollars for such a center in the proposed bond package for November. BREAD is organizing to get a commitment to allocate this money quickly so that the health center can be built within a year or two, *if* the bond passes. BREAD is also working to include money set aside in the 2003 county budget for "community health initiatives." Three million was set aside; only one million of

that package was spent. Two million remains unspent in a community where access to health care for all people is clearly in crisis. BREAD has invited Franklin County Commissioner candidates to its meeting on October 18th to ask them to commit to help expand our health center systems in Columbus in other ways.

This is not Hollywood dazzle, this work. It will not be a great miracle if we succeed. No parting seas here, or raisings from the dead. No thunder and lightning. Just children, and widows and widowers, and laborers, and family members, and mothers and fathers and grandparents walking through a door to find some semblance of health care that was not there before. Health care in a society that claims in its founding documents that everyone is “equal,” but which has never found a way to organize so as to make its high-minded words real.

If BREAD or a group of Unitarian Universalists like us waited until the elected government itself organized equal access to health care, we’d be waiting, I think you know, a very long time. No, we have to do it ourselves, exactly like we dealt with the AIDS crisis. Because, as the folk-tale from ancient times reminds us, that’s the way things usually have to be done. And the famous dictum (borrowed by Abraham Lincoln from a sermon by the Unitarian preacher Theodore Parker: “By the people, of the people, and for the people” is about exactly what it says it’s about: the people. Us. And our neighbors.

Now many people describe the biblical folktale I recounted to you this morning, as a miracle story. Do you know what that miracle was?

Let me unwrap the story for you. First, the woman in that folktale was a part of an organization. Her late husband had been a practitioner, perhaps with her, in the Guild of the Prophets, that is, the guild of spiritual agitators. The word “navi” (prophet) in

Hebrew means exactly that...not someone who predicts the future, but someone who agitates for a more just future.

Second, the story tells us this woman is a widow. And I hope I don't have to tell you that in those days, there was no social security system, no savings banks, no IRAs or credit unions. And prophets, as you might expect, didn't get paid very much anyway...agitation is not the easy way to wealth. So the woman, and her children with her, are in deep, deep trouble, socially and economically. But Elisha the prophet, when he hears of her problem, does not hand her a check, does he? He does not immediately make shekels appear in the air, or cause gold nuggets to fall at her feet.

Instead, he asks her to use what she has (a little bit of olive oil), and then to approach her neighbors, so that she might borrow some of their empty vessels. I wonder. Do you imagine she just borrowed the bowl and didn't stop to chat and kvetch a bit? Do you imagine she took pains to hide her abject misery, and that not a single neighbor noticed the circles sagging under her eyes from lack of sleep and constant tears? Do you think no one saw the fear in her eyes?

I think this ancient folk tale tells me a lot about an organization like BREAD. It says that any local, achievable goal of social justice begins with the organization of authentic community, where we each offer, both our empty vessels to each other, and a little bit of our "oil" to fill those vessels. Remember that in the story, the magic cruet of oil stopped working only when there were *no more borrowed vessels to fill*. That's clearly because it was the *relational* aspect of this story that is the real miracle, the real wonder, not the magic of an overflowing flask. If that were the true meaning of the story, a mere magic trick, the storyteller would have made Elisha tell the widow to go dig an Olympic size swimming pool in her backyard, and fill the whole fool thing with

oil...you know, complete self-reliance, boot-straps and all that. Instead, *Elisha has her borrow empty vessels from her neighbors, empty vessels that I would interpret as honest stories of loss, desolation, illness, and recovery that people exchange with one another when they are trying to make sense of an unjust world.*

I think BREAD does this kind of agitation work excellently.

No, I'm not saying BREAD organizing won't fix the world. It won't fix Ohio, or Delaware County, or Licking County. It won't fix all health problems in Central Ohio, or even in Columbus. It won't even fix health issues on the West Side of Columbus. It won't actually be able to "fix" anything, for the health crisis in our nation is not a problem like a cracked chair-leg that might be fixed, at least temporarily, by a piece of duct-tape. No, we are a long way from final redemption in this area.

But by focusing on the unglamorous task of local agitation for local progress on a focused issue, BREAD, like the ancient guilds of the prophets before it, is trying to move the world incrementally along the road toward that goal that we in our congregation might fairly and theologically call Universalism...the Universalism that says that all people have a right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," and that all people, because they are just that, people, have a right to equal access to healthcare, regardless of fortune or lack of it, station, neighborhood area, fame, gender, orientation, color, class or language. Locally first. Piece by piece, painstakingly and ploddingly, with every homely political tool we have at hand. Locally we organize, joining hands with people who are our neighbors, each of whom has an empty vessel to share, each of whom has some small bit of oil to pour. And eventually with patience, faithfulness, and the unending rise and fall of generations, the real and final miracle will be upon our children's children's children at last, access to health care, universally, around the globe for every single child of earth.

Offertory

Our congregational budget relies on the pledges members and friends make to support the church. The offertory is a time when these and other gifts are gratefully given and received, so that our promises may be kept, and our commitments are supported with care.

New Universalist Prayer

Unknown Singer of All Realty,
Mystery beyond both singing and song,
I say this: Everyone. Absolutely everyone.
Those who can afford it and those who can't.
Those who live with pain, and those who don't.
Those who believe God stoops to heal the faithful, and those who believe that healing happens quite well enough without god.
But I do mean everyone. Absolutely everyone.
Those who grew up in solid families and those who grew up with sad families or none at all.
Those who eat the flesh of animals and those who eat only grain and greens. Those who are warriors and those who sit peacefully before tanks rolling toward them. Everyone. People who dream of blowing themselves up, and people who spend their whole long lives at the negotiating table. People who love, and people who find it hard to love, and people who stew and rage and sing and dance and sit and act out and hold it all in. Everyone. No exception. Ever. No matter what. Human, human, human.
Steadfast Singer we can neither name nor know, we join now in the chorus of creation of which we are all part...