

Encounters with Social Justice

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When I first visited Second Unitarian Church of Chicago during the summer of 1992, it was an experiment. I was consciously and intentionally trying to find a particular type of community, one populated with people who were working to become their best selves (or at least their better selves). I don't think that in 1992 I would have used those words to describe what I was looking for, but I did have a sense that the people with whom I associated could make a very significant difference in who I was – who I was, at the very least, on the surface, but probably well beyond the surface.

I has begun to notice something about myself. When I hung out with people who enjoyed making cynical and snarky comments about others, I fed the cynicism and snarkiness within me. When I hung out with people who were kind and generous, I fed my kindness and generosity. I hope that this insight may seem obvious to all of you, but in 1992 it was, for me, an intuition rather than an obvious fact.

Now I don't mean to suggest that Second Unitarian – “2U” as it referred to itself – was any kind of utopian community in 1992. It was not filled with saints and bodhisattvas, each one of them on the edge of perfection. Rather, it was a lot like this Fellowship today, filled with human beings who are both good and imperfect, who hope to live our UU principles a little better today than yesterday, and a little better tomorrow than today.

Looking back now, with the advantage of 25 years of hindsight, that's what I think I was looking for when I first visited 2U in July, 1992. And, acknowledging the imperfections present there (my own as well as those of others), I can say that that's pretty much what I found . . . but also found quite a bit else. Gifts were present in abundance, and so were challenges. 2U was filled with opportunities for everything from worship and to carpentry, from improvisational dance to congregational governance, from fundraising to social justice, from Religious Education to memorial services, and the list could go on and on.

Some of these possibilities I had expected – 2U was a church, after all, so it seemed natural to me to

find worship and Religious Education present there. Improv dance was more of a surprise, but it connected somewhat in that the group danced in a worship service, working with the concept “generosity” to the music of Scott Joplin’s “Maple Leaf Rag.” That worship service kicked off the congregation’s annual pledge or fundraising campaign, and it was in that campaign that I met a 2U member named Martha.

Martha coordinated 2U’s monthly dinner for the homeless; one Sunday evening each month, folks from 2U provided dinner for 40 to 60 people at a local homeless shelter. It was somewhat similar to the way that this Fellowship cooks and serves each month at “Feed My Sheep.” Martha encouraged people to sign up on the schedule, and provided information about suggested types of food, where to bring it, and how the system worked. Occasionally, no one would sign up to cook, and when that happened, Martha did something that reminds me of the Stone Soup story. She would invite about 25 or 30 people to a potluck dinner at her place, assigning half of them to bring something for the potluck, and half to bring something for the homeless shelter dinner. It wasn’t too long until I was invited to one of those potlucks, and one of the people whom I met there was Kathy O’Laughlin. Later Kathy and I cooked for the shelter ourselves, and remembering that we had been able to pull that off gave me the confidence to say “yes” when Pastor Rick Jackson of Bethel AME Church first asked whether our Fellowship might be willing to cook once a month at “Feed My Sheep.”

Just out of curiosity – how many of you have ever cooked, served, or delivered at “Feed My Sheep?”
Can I have a show of hands? Wow, that’s great! Thank you!

Thinking about the question of the month, I’d say that’s at least part of what it means to be a people of abundance: that we share what we have with others in need.

So I have encountered social justice at a potluck, and I have encountered it in several church basements, such as Bethel AME where food is served to the hungry, and at Carbondale’s Church of the Good Shepherd, where a group of 10 or 15 of us showed up during the summer of 2000 to plan for a group in Carbondale that would provide support to GLBTQ youth and their allies. Out of that work, coming just after this congregation had voted to become a Welcoming Congregation, Rainbow Cafe was formed, giving us the opportunity to “walk our talk.” During its first year, Rainbow Cafe met in that same

church basement. While I did serve as a volunteer at youth meetings, most of my support for Rainbow Cafe came in the form of organizing meetings, writing grant applications, serving as its treasurer for several years, and fundraising – a task one might not always think of as a form of social justice work. But fundraising for an organization like Rainbow Cafe provides the foundation on which its programs depend. And I know that over the years, many of us have “showed up” for Rainbow Cafe, either through gifts of our time and talent, or by donating funds to help. Thank you, once again! My role as Treasurer of the UU Advocacy Network of Illinois is a somewhat similar to my work on behalf of Rainbow Cafe – it’s mainly “institutional,” but it makes much of the program work possible.

Well, I have encountered social justice at potlucks and in church basements, and I have encountered it on the streets, as well. Maybe that’s the first place we expect to find it. As an undergraduate, I was part of a campus protest of the student killings at Kent State University, and earlier this year I participated in the Carbondale Women’s March. But of the various experiences of social justice in the streets, one stands out for me.

In June, 1997, Kathy and I marched with a contingent of UUs in the Chicago Gay Pride parade. As it turned out, I wound up carrying the banner of Second Unitarian, which led the UU contingent. As we approached a particular location on the route, I could hear a commotion unlike the general excitement that the parade created. Something was going on up ahead, and as we got closer, I saw a police cordon around a group of anti-gay protesters from a conservative church. While there may have been 40 of them, there were thousands of GLBTQ supporters all around them, and as our group turned the corner, a huge roar of support went up from the supporting crowd. In essence, it affirmed the importance of our UU religious witness in support of respect for the worth and dignity of all people, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity. I don’t think I will ever forget that sense of the importance of our religious work on behalf of justice, as long as I live . . .

But today, I don’t have to hit the streets. I seem to encounter issues of social justice just by opening my email. At least once a day, I receive an invitation from some organization to sign their online petition on behalf of some social or environmental or political cause. Once a week, I receive one from the UU Advocacy Network of Illinois. I try to add my name to one of the petitions I receive on a daily basis. I recognize that the petition itself, let alone my name on it, may have little or no impact . . . but then

again, maybe it will have an impact. And how will I know unless I try? At the very least, at the end of each day, whatever else may have filled the other 23 hours and 55 minutes of the day, I can go to bed feeling that I did at least something for the cause of justice as I understand it. I may only have showed up online for an email, but at least I did that.

How have these encounters changed me? I have definitely learned a lot, about myself, about congregations as agents of social justice, about how to write letters to the editor, and about how to motivate participation in and support for these efforts. But I can learn things without changing at a deeper level, and that deeper level is where the changes I consider most significant might be present. That deeper level is what I want to speak about.

The first of these changes is an awareness of a moral imperative, a recognition that I, as a member of a real religious community, have both the capability and the duty to do the work for justice that appears before me today. That might be answering an email, or cooking for a homeless shelter, or spending six hours on the road to show up for a rally in Springfield, or making enough phone calls to schedule a meeting with an elected legislator. It might be running a payroll system as Treasurer of UUANI, or showing up at the Peace Coalition vigil by the Carbondale Pavilion. In me, it feels like the awareness of this moral imperative has been growing for a long time. It has called me to show up at the candlelight vigil in Phoenix and in Springfield for Marriage Equality, and it calls me to do the social justice work that I can do each day. Some days I can do more; other days it feels hard to squeeze the email petition response in. In response to that imperative, I try to do what I can each day, knowing that it is certainly not going to be enough.

Second, I have realized that I do not have to do everything, which frankly, is a relief. I know that I cannot accomplish all that needs to be done, but that knowledge is balanced by the fact that I am not alone. I know that as a member of this Fellowship, and as part of UUANI, and as a UU. I don't have to do everything, because others are also working for justice. There is a collective dimension of social justice capability and duty, and my small efforts take on greater significance as part of these larger ones. I was part of something much larger than myself in a Black Lives Matter parade in St Louis, in a candlelight vigil at General Assembly in Phoenix, and in that rally in front of the Statehouse in Springfield. And this collective duty extends far beyond the limits of Unitarian Universalism. People of

other faith traditions, and all people of morals – all who believe in an ethic beyond their own convenience and pleasure – have some part in this collective responsibility. We show up in numbers at the open house at the Carbondale mosque and at vigils at the Labyrinth. I don't feel that I'm alone, and I'm glad that I'm not alone!

Today especially, I can see an abundance of issues where justice is at risk. It may feel easy to despair, because our society and nation seem to be moving toward greater inequality and prejudice. Sometimes I find it overwhelming, and perhaps sometimes you do, too. We can see very clearly an abundance of injustice, both actually present and potentially growing, throughout our society. But I don't despair, because I know that I possess a very modest abundance of justice-making capabilities, and I know that you do, too. I don't know of a single person here who cannot send an email or make a phone call or show up – in some real way – in the cause of justice. Each of us here today possesses an abundance of justice-making possibility, and we are only a small part of a far, far greater abundance of justice-makers extending well beyond these walls.

Individually and collectively, you and I (or you, you, and I) have the capacity to make justice more present in our town, our region, our nation, and our world. It begins to happen when we show up.