Justice

Like millions, I sat glued to televised coverage of the inaugural address, Barack Obama's first words to the nation as president. I waited to hear words that would become immortal, like Roosevelt's "We have nothing to fear but fear itself," or Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." I wanted that catch-phrase, that one line I could repeat as a mantra to keep moving through these difficult times.

The one that stuck for me is this: "the cynics fail to understand that the ground has shifted beneath them . . ."

_The ground has shifted._ Not exactly the comforting words I longed for, but the ones that stuck, perhaps because they ring true.

Speaking of immortal words, it was Martin Luther King, Jr. who immortalized what Unitarian Theodore Parker spoke a century and a half ago: "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Unitarian Universalists have long understood that making justice is a moral, ethical imperative. Human action keeps the arc bending.

UU theologian of our current century, Rebecca Parker, sees things differently. In a collection of her essays, _Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now_, she writes, "We need to face more honestly the conditions of devastation that we are in the midst of, here and now. . . we need to see ourselves as people living in the aftermath of cataclysmic violence . . ."

In other words, the ground has shifted. No longer can we believe it possible to bend our old ways toward something new and better. The moral and ethical imperative to work for justice is as urgent as ever. The action might be different, though.

According to Rebecca Parker, "We must notice the breakdown, sorrow, and legacies of injustice . . . we must discover how we can live among the ruins."

Theodore Parker once wrote, "There is a hole in the dim-lit public bridge, where many fall through and perish. Our mercy pulls a few out of the water; it does not stop the hole, nor light the bridge, nor warn men [sic] of the peril! We need the great Charity that palliates effects of wrong, and the greater Justice which removes the cause."

Rebecca Parker would have us recognize that the ground has shifted, the public bridge has fallen down, and now we must rebuild from amongst the ruins.

This next chapter in human history begins on shaky ground. Our second Unitarian Universalist principle links justice with compassion. Whether we are bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice, or building a new, just, and peaceable community from amongst the ruins, these are times that call for great compassion.

_The ground has shifted._ May we stand that ground together with great care for each other.

Diane
Justice and Music

This month’s topic of Justice, and how it might apply to music, made me think of the African American spiritual. The songs themselves didn’t instantly create a more just environment. In fact, had the sentiments of the songs not been coded so that the white auditors could not understand them, they might have led to retribution. But the songs bound the people who were oppressed together. Slaves had no property and no rights to family, or even friendship. Yet, they had their minds. They couldn’t easily profit from their intellectual property, but their songs couldn’t be “stolen” from them.

For example, the song “Read ‘em John” (listen to a snippet performed by the McIntosh County Shouters at: http://www.folkways.si.edu/trackdetail.aspx?itemid=11604) decried the lack of education amongst slaves. It was illegal for blacks to learn to read in many states, and so, writing became a prized possession. The ability to read, and interpret the Bible for themselves, inspired many a silent revolutionary slave to late night study. The song’s lyrics are inspired by the biblical John as described in Revelations - a book that continues to daunt Christian evangelicals, and is intimidating to most anyone, but whose many references to writing the truth inspired the slaves.

In many versions of the spiritual “Read ‘em John” (for there are as many versions of a spiritual as there are singers to sing them), the slave masters are written out of the book of life. In other words, this song that likely was heard by some slave-owning whites, suggests in its lyrics that the singers were the truly favored by a just God, and that all that would oppress them, and deny them the ability to read, would likely be forgotten about by God at the end of time – the ultimate injustice. It’s unclear if the song’s lyrics will eventually become true, that those that practice injustice will suffer worse than the suffering that they have caused. But, it seems certain that many a tired and inquisitive slave was comforted to know that their search for truth and knowledge was valued by others, who joined with them to sing “Read ‘em John.”

I don’t believe that music can create justice. Even songs like the gospel song “We shall overcome” didn’t lead to equality, so much as bind people together who sought the ideal of equality. It tied like-minded people together in a quest for justice in a way that, perhaps, no other communal activity than singing could accomplish. Such songs tell us that we are not alone in our attempts to leave the world better than we found it.

Brian Moon

Many Flavors of Justice

Justice is all the rage, it’s the latest buzzword. The word clings to a variety of issues—environmental justice, social justice, food justice. As we become aware of different struggles for justice, how do we engage in a meaningful way? While I support all the different flavors of justice, I always try to monitor my own contribution to these causes to make sure it’s more than a token gesture. It leads me to something I call “authentic justice.”

If we are concerned about global warming, what are we doing at home to lower our energy consumption? If we are to have compassion for those struggling for a living around the world, what are we doing to avoid buying sweatshop-made goods? How can we have good intentions with actions that match?

These are hard questions without easy answers, but we shouldn’t avoid them. If we are contributing to the problems we want to see solved, then I don’t believe we can say that we are doing justice.

As our congregation deepens its commitment to various justice issues, I think we need to tackle them from all angles. It’s one thing to watch a film, listen to a speaker and read some literature. It’s quite another to drive less, eat more local foods or stop buying unnecessary things. Or, if we push ourselves further, to get rid of a car, grow more of our own food, move into a smaller house.

I often think to myself, if I ever met face-to-face with the factory worker who made whatever trinket I’m buying, would it be enough to tell that person “I believe in economic justice, I saw a movie about it.” Or if I had to shake the hand of the farmer who lives in complete poverty for me to have fresh produce, what words would come out of my mouth?

Justice issues are complex and significant. They can be uncomfortable and challenging for us to act upon. We must be willing to engage beyond words, and do it with conviction and thoughtfulness. Whatever insert-cause-here justice you feel drawn towards, dive in and take it on, and make it authentic.

Walt Staton
UUCT Supports Mata Ortiz Potters

Because of reports of border violence in the press, the 400 potters of Mata Ortiz, Chihuahua, Mexico have had fewer customers in the past months. Ana Trillo, one of these potters, visited UUCT on Jan. 24-25, bringing pots made by many women in Mata Ortiz, and some men as well. Members of our church and our community turned out in a wonderful show of support to learn more about the founding of the pottery industry in what was a dying lumber town in Mexico, and to buy many of the beautiful pots.

Our support for the people of Mata Ortiz enables them to make a sustainable life for their families in their own hometown in Mexico. But this is not a one-way street. To express her appreciation for our sponsoring the film, sale and pottery demonstration, Ana donated the beautiful pot in the photo to the right for our church auction. This pot with traditional designs is valued at $300, so the bidding should be lively as many vie to take home this work of art.

Because so much more understanding and goodwill is possible when we meet people of other cultures face-to-face, we hope to sponsor another trip to Mata Ortiz in October or November. This would also be a fundraiser for UUCT. If you would be interested in visiting the village with us, contact Julia Mehrer or Carolyn Saunders and get your name put on our email list.

From ADVOCACY NEWS: A Newsletter of the UUA's Advocacy & Witness Staff Group

Millions of people heard Rev. Rick Warren deliver the Invocation at the inauguration of President Barack Hussein Obama on Tuesday. As many of you know, Warren vocally supported the passage of Proposition 8 in California, which took away the rights of same-sex couples to legally marry. Fewer people saw the “We Are One” inaugural concert that took place at the Lincoln Memorial on Sunday. And even if you followed on radio or watched it on tv, you would not have seen Bishop Gene Robinson's opening prayer because HBO and NPR chose not to air it. As many of you know, Robinson is the first openly gay bishop of the Episcopal Church. Below is his prayer:

Opening Inaugural Event
Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC
January 18, 2009

Delivered by the Right Reverend V. Gene Robinson:

Welcome to Washington! The fun is about to begin, but first, please join me in pausing for a moment, to ask God's blessing upon our nation and our next president.

O God of our many understandings, we pray that you will:

Bless us with tears - for a world in which over a billion people exist on less than a dollar a day, where young women from many lands are beaten and raped for wanting an education, and thousands die daily from malnutrition, malaria, and AIDS.

Bless us with anger - at discrimination, at home and abroad, against refugees and immigrants, women, people of color, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

Bless us with discomfort - at the easy, simplistic "answers" we've preferred to hear from our politicians, instead of the truth, about ourselves and the world, which we need to face if we are going to rise to the challenges of the future.

Bless us with patience - and the knowledge that none of what ails us will be "fixed" anytime soon, and the understanding that our new president is a human being, not a messiah.

Bless us with humility - open to understanding that our own needs must always be balanced with those of the world.

Bless us with freedom from mere tolerance - replacing it with a genuine respect and warm embrace of our differences, and an understanding
that in our diversity, we are stronger.

Bless us with compassion and generosity - remembering that every religion's God judges us by the way we care for the most vulnerable in the human community, whether across town or across the world.

And God, we give you thanks for your child Barack, as he assumes the office of President of the United States.

Give him wisdom beyond his years, and inspire him with Lincoln's reconciling leadership style, President Kennedy's ability to enlist our best efforts, and Dr. King's dream of a nation for ALL the people.

Give him a quiet heart, for our Ship of State needs a steady, calm captain in these times.

Give him stirring words, for we will need to be inspired and motivated to make the personal and common sacrifices necessary to facing the challenges ahead.

Make him color-blind, reminding him of his own words that under his leadership, there will be neither red nor blue states, but the United States.

Help him remember his own oppression as a minority, drawing on that experience of discrimination, that he might seek to change the lives of those who are still its victims.

Give him the strength to find family time and privacy, and help him remember that even though he is president, a father only gets one shot at his daughters' childhoods.

And please, God, keep him safe. We know we ask too much of our presidents, and we're asking FAR too much of this one. We know the risk he and his wife are taking for all of us, and we implore you, O good and great God, to keep him safe. Hold him in the palm of your hand - that he might do the work we have called him to do, that he might find joy in this impossible calling, and that in the end, he might lead us as a nation to a place of integrity, prosperity and peace.

AMEN

To subscribe to the UU Washington Office for Advocacy's Justice Action News Lists go to their website at www.uua.org/socialjustice. You will find a link to their staff blog, Inspired Faith, Effective Action at that website as well.

This event at St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church is of special interest to Unitarian Universalists. The presentation is based on the ground-breaking book *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, co-authored by Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock. Parker is president of our UU seminary, Starr King School for the Ministry.

**Saving Paradise:**

*How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*

Rev. Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, noted speaker on progressive Christianity and a critically acclaimed author, will conduct a series of events at St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church based on her latest book, *Saving Paradise*.

**Friday night, Feb 20, 7:30 p.m.**

Presentation with Images in St. Mark's sanctuary on “Saving Paradise: Re-Imagining a Life-Affirming Christianity of Joy and Beauty" All are welcome, no charge, child care available.

**Saturday, February 21, 10 a.m.—3 p.m.**

Workshop in Geneva Hall at St. Mark's. Refreshments and gathering at 9:30 a.m. Pre-registration required: $10 registration includes lunch, $5 for students.

**Sunday, February 22**

9:45 a.m.—Adult class in Geneva Hall on “Saving Paradise.”

11:00 a.m.—Worship service with Rev. Dr. Nakashima Brock preaching.

St. Mark’s Presbyterian Church
3809 E. 3rd Street
(1 block west of Alvernon on 3rd Street)
www.stmarkspresbyterian.org
325-1001