

Rev. Dr. Stephan Papa
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SERMON: "To Savor the World or Save it? Social Action or Spirituality"?

Like Richard Gilbert in the reading, "I arise in the morning torn between the desire to save the world and to savor it." Personally, I am savoring it alright, but wish I were doing more saving. I hold back because of doubts that my efforts would make much of a difference, and because I am afraid; I need inspiration; I hope to find the faith, the spiritual strength that would empower me to do something beyond what I already do, or the courage to just go do it.

I volunteer building religious community, fighting for women's reproductive rights, and as a restorative justice facilitator in the Denver Public Schools; I march and speak out, but it never seems like I am doing enough to "save the world." In all honesty, I don't do much spiritual development anymore either. I am lacking faith in their efficacy, such that the question for me is not just between spirituality or social action; I don't do enough of either; my challenge is to do more of both.

William Sloan Coffin, a cleric and social activist, described Unitarian Universalism as having "a thick ethic, but a thin theology." His comment refers to the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of life and how religion should develop both the theological depth of our relationship with the source of existence, our very being, and the ethical breadth of our relationship with other human beings, and life on the planet. In my opinion our congregations need to develop both of these dimensions: the spiritual, and our social activism.

Religion serves the purpose of bringing the disparate parts of our lives and of the world together in two related ways: by trying to bring spiritual sustenance to those in need, and by eliciting our courage and compassion moving us to action. Religion helps people affirm that life is good, no matter what happens, and that as part of that goodness we can and should make ours a more just society. Most traditional religious communities have done a better job of the first task than the second; most have been set up as sanctuaries from the real world.

But, you cannot separate yourself from the world for the purpose of being safe from its influence, nor for the purpose of changing it. We are a part of it. We need both spiritual and ethical development; they complement one another, and I believe, you can't do one effectively without developing the other. We need to develop the spirit within, and go out into the world, where we will see the spirit there too. We need to be spiritually sustained and inspired social activists, which includes being "the change we want to see" as Gandhi said; that is, both our character and behavior must reflect our vision.

But this approach of keeping connected means and ends, spirituality and social action is not the norm. For example, in our polarized society people seem so enamored of their views and goals that they excuse means that belie their ends. Some people were so focused on "making America Great Again" that they voted to take away people's medical coverage, which would make them "sick again." Some people voted to make America hate again. And, I have met people whose number one priority was making society more just and peaceful, but who were so myopic and overbearing that no one wanted to be in the same room with them let alone work for peace with them. Years ago I started a group called Spirituality for Social Activists. Attendance was low,

and after a few sessions we disbanded. Most people tend to be either/or, partisan or apathetic, spiritual seekers or social activists.

To maintain one's commitment to the life long work of peace and justice it is necessary to believe in something beyond the apparent; that means something spiritual; something that you believe in but can't prove. Such faith is an integral aspect of motivation. But, as James Luther Adams, the great UU theologian and social ethicist, wrote, "We do not live by spirit alone. A purely spiritual religion is a purely spurious religion; it is one that exempts its believer from surrender to the sustaining, transforming reality that demands the community of justice and love." We need develop both.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. provides a great illustration of a productive relationship between spirituality and social activism, the vertical and horizontal dimensions. A number of years ago, I took a trip to see some of the sites of the civil rights movement. In Birmingham I saw the church where four young girls were killed in a bombing, the park where protesters were attacked by police dogs, and a civil rights museum documenting the years of atrocities African-Americans and their religious allies endured. In Selma I saw where James Reeb, a UU minister, was murdered after marching to support Dr. King and the movement; and I saw where Viola Liuzzo, a UU layperson, who drove marchers back and forth to the airport, was killed. In Montgomery I toured the church Dr. King served. The sanctuary was clearly a place of spirituality, of comfort and hope, but equally inspirational was the social hall beneath it where the meetings were held to organize the bus boycotts and the courageous marches that changed our country for the better; sanctuary and social hall were connected, two sides of the same structure. Dr. King's activism grew out of his faith. In what do we have faith?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr said, "A religion that ends with the individual, ends." So what are our religious communities about? What are their ends? Are they social clubs for intellectuals? Are we just practicing pietism, saving ourselves through individual aesthetic and spiritual experiences? Or, are we modeling, serving, something more? Dallas Willard, an Islamic Scholar wrote, "In a pluralistic world, a religion is valued by the benefits it brings to its non-adherents." Shouldn't our congregations be more than a "feel good fellowship" as Jack Mendelsohn, one of our ministers, put it?

What is your life about? Is it about more than enjoying your personal privilege? How much effort do you put into developing your spirituality, or into social activism? Dr. King said, "Our hope for creative living lies in our ability to reestablish the spiritual ends of our lives in personal character and social justice."

We can "reestablish the spiritual ends of our lives" by finding something more to believe in such as that "transforming reality" James Luther Adams called God, or the humanistic valuing of "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," or our own abilities, or the power of love and reason to transform our lives and our society. We can deepen and expand our faith so it is evident in our character, in how we treat other people, but treating individuals well is not enough as MLK said; we have a responsibility to be involved in the work of social transformation as society has an influence on everyone—for good or for ill.

William Sloan Coffin was right modern Unitarian Universalism is thin on theology, on spirituality; religious study and spiritual practices such as meditation can help us with our motivation for savoring, and for saving. What more can your fellowship do to help you with your spiritual development? How can we deepen our theology when we hardly

talk about it? And how can our thick ethic, our call to action, inspire us more than the traditional religious admonition of you “should”?

When Richard Gilbert in the reading asks the “God of Justice” to forgive him and make him whole, he is encouraging us not to be so concerned with our own lives, but rather to be more active serving others. He is saying that you cannot avoid the God of Justice in your search to be whole. I don’t think we will ever feel completely whole; we will always be torn between “savoring and saving the world,” if we are concerned about “the spiritual ends of our lives....” But our way in religion insists that we question how much effort we are putting into the various aspects of our lives: our personal pleasures, our family and friends, our communities, our spiritual lives, and our efforts of social service and change. The percentages do not have to be equal, but they need to be more than zero; each one demands some effort, because they are each important, and inter-related. As Gilbert says, “To savor one must serve.” And as I say, if we are to claim any morality, we need to serve something more than ourselves.

We have to decide which side of the revolution we are on. Bonaro Overstreet said, “You say the little efforts that I make will do no good; they will never prevail to tip the hovering scale where justice hangs in the balance; I don’t think I ever thought they would; but, I’m prejudiced beyond debate in favor of my right to choose which side shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.”

Rabbi Tarfon in the Talmud wrote: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Walk humbly, now. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Christine Organ, a UU from Illinois, wrote in the UU World magazine, “I don’t necessarily consider myself a political activist; rather...I am a spiritual activist. Spiritual activism is a hallmark of the Unitarian Universalist faith.... We recognize that the resistance isn’t just about advocating, protesting, and fighting for our rights and the rights of others; the resistance is also about connecting and tending to our own spirits so that we have the energy to keep fighting for others.” She concludes, “Hope and compassion would be my rebellion; love would be my resistance. It takes courage to muster up hope and maintain an unwavering love for humanity when the world appears to be collapsing all around you. It takes strength, resilience, and a faith that, despite all evidence to the contrary, life is good and the world is a beautiful place.”

So what will your role be in the rebellion? Being a bystander is not enough. Complaining about President Trump, President Obrador, the Republicans, or the Democrats is not enough. But, there are many ways to serve the revolution. Like MLK you can be “a drum major for justice....a drum major for peace....” Like Christine Organ you can, “breed love, hope and generosity... [as] rebellious acts of protest.” You can develop your own spiritual strength and help others develop theirs, and our effectiveness as social activists. You can get involved, march, conserve, work to stop climate change. You can support an undocumented immigrant in their battle for human rights. You can fund a local NGO that is providing needed social services; you can become an Anti-racist, and you can fight for social justice.

What is your next step in building your spiritual activism? What would being more of a rebel in terms of your social activism look like for you? Will you, affirming the worth and dignity of everyone, engage with those who are oppressed to strengthen your connection with them to find there the motivation to action you felt missing? Will you,

like James Luther Adams, “surrender to the sustaining, transforming reality that demands the community of justice and love”? Will you save as well as savor? Will you make your life more whole, balanced? What will your role be in the revolution?

There is an old story about William Penn. He invited a friend to attend Quaker meeting with him, and after a long time of sitting there with nothing but silence, the friend asked, “When does the service begin?” To which Penn replied, “The service begins when the meeting ends.” Let us turn inward and toward one another to find support for our own lives, and to become stronger, more committed, to making ours a more just and peaceful world for others. Amen.