

*Creating Justice from the Inside Out: The Power of Direct Experience*

Unitarian Universalist Society of Schenectady

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It is an honor to be able to deliver this sermon to you today. This morning's service will conclude my time on the Worship Team in a meaningful and memorable way. I would like to thank our interim minister, Margret O'Neill for her skillful coaching and unending patience. I have learned so much over the last several years and am deeply grateful.

Please join me in taking a nice long deep breath and take a look around the circle at all of these wonderful faces as I read our church's mission statement:

Connecting in spiritual community-  
We celebrate life with joy  
Grow in compassion  
Create Justice.

Google says, a mission statement is a summary of the values and goals of a company, organization or individual. I have learned here at our church that a mission statement is a roadmap on how to align values with action. It serves as a guiding light that points to what we ought to say yes or no to.

So now let's consider what it means to "create justice." This is a big claim. And when I was present for the congregational vote on our mission statement a few years back, it was clear that not everyone in the room was at peace with those words. Specifically, some argued that justice is something that cannot be created. The Merriam Webster dictionary's definition of *Justice* is "just behavior or treatment," and of *Just* as "based on or behaving according to what is morally right and fair."

I remember thinking it was an interesting discussion. But there is no end to the interesting discussions available here. And as the American Mindfulness Teacher Jack Kornfield teaches, "The mind breaks things into a million pieces and the heart makes them whole." Then and now I recognize that I am hungry for a little less head and a little more heart within our fellowship and in our meetings. Ultimately, as Unitarians often do - we agreed to disagree. The mission statement was voted on and upheld as it was originally written.

Now I need to back up a little and let you know why I became a member of UU Schenectady. You see, for years I had a solitary spiritual practice of yoga and meditation. And upon becoming a mother it became clear to me that I needed a community in which to direct the fruits of my practice in service and a church family to help me raise my beloved son, Theo. So without knowing it at the time, this was my personal mission. Service and fellowship are the goals and values that have brought me here and have kept me here.

This church offers abundant opportunities to be of service in fellowship! I have taught Religious Education, worked on the Adult Program Council and the Board of Trustees, most recently on the Worship Team and will now begin to serve on the Religious Education Council. I have also been a participant and facilitator of the Wellspring Program for Spiritual Deepening. Most precious to me though, has been the privilege of leading Guided Yoga Flows and Mindfulness Meditations most Sunday mornings before the worship service. This hodge-podge of serving on

councils, committees, as a facilitator, educator, student and seeker has brought me to a place where I have discovered the possibility of creating justice from the inside out.

This idea is still formative for me. So, as writer and advocate Parker Palmer suggests, I am filled with both chutzpah and humility as I share my experience with you.

In our Unitarian Universalist faith we anchor our non-creedal religion with seven Principles and six Sources. You can find these listed on the back of your Order of Service. Rev. Kathleen Rolenz describes the essence of our sources when she writes, “Throughout history, we have moved to the rhythms of mystery and wonder, prophecy, wisdom, teachings from ancient and modern sources, and nature herself.”

The first source in Unitarian Universalism is listed as Direct Experience. To be exact: “...of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

A few years ago I attended a “Healthy Congregations” training as a Board of Trustees Representative. This is a curriculum written by the Unitarian Universalist Association that was offered at the Albany UU church. I took the training around the time we began crafting our mission statement. Upon completing this training I came to understand that the first source is a “shout out” for spiritual practice. I learned that when members of a congregation rely on a personal spiritual practice they are less likely to take on another member’s anxiety. I also learned, when church members are grounded in spiritual practice they are more likely to remain a calm presence in the face of difficult decisions and important transitions.

Now, when I refer to a personal spiritual practice, I don’t mean yoga and meditation exclusively. As Rumi reminds us - “there are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.” Yours could be gardening, cooking, reading, walking, writing, woodworking and on and on and on. When I talk about a spiritual practice I mean an activity that you can lose yourself in - a singular practice that you do regularly that removes you from the time/space continuum so that you may experience a state of flow. When I engage in my practice I regularly open to experience a sense of mystery and wonder at something bigger than myself and I draw wisdom, strength and comfort from this place of awe.

Not too long ago, after a week-long silent meditation retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre Massachusetts, I learned that in their Buddhist tradition, spiritual practice is considered a refuge. This was a revelation! Instead of considering my practice as an obligation that will make me a better person, I now regard it as a garden, a refuge, a safe place to fall. It is a loving and supportive place that will always be there waiting to receive me with open arms.

Upon completing the healthy congregations training I decided to begin offering guided yoga and mindfulness meditation sessions so that I could share the refuge of direct experience with other church members.

As a Kripalu Yogi it is customary to begin yoga practice with an intention. An intention is a quality or characteristic that I choose to cultivate within myself as a source of strength and wisdom. These intentions continue to guide me after I leave my yoga mat and continue my work in the world as a parent and teacher. When I guide others in a yoga experience, I encourage them to begin their practice with an intention also. These intentions may be peace, love, courage, clarity or any other number of qualities. Forming intentions is like planting seeds. When

I behold my life as a garden, the healthiest and most beautiful plants and flowers growing in it are the result of consciously nurturing my intentional spiritual practices.

My highest aspirations are most often about cultivating courage and compassion. I am learning through yoga and meditation that compassion is strong beyond measure and that this strength is needed in order to keep my heart open in this often brutal and broken world. And when I am successful in keeping my heart open to all the wonder and horribleness of the world, I am sowing the seeds of justice.

After practicing with intention and guiding other church members to do the same for some time, I organically came upon my own personal mission. It is:

To parent and teach holistically  
Share spiritual practices  
Cultivate courage

Before I had formulated this mission I found myself saying yes to pretty much everything the church asked me to do because service and fellowship are very broad categories. As you can imagine (and maybe have experienced yourself) it wasn't long before I was feeling burnt out. I am grateful to the church for offering me the experience of moving through our own mission and vision process -- and also of offering the Wellspring Program for Spiritual Deepening. Wellspring afforded me the opportunity to begin to revive the exhausted places in my heart and soul. Each session ended with an invitation to reflect on how I could take what I was learning about our liberal religion and my own soul and bring it out into the world in the form of service or "faith in action," however small or humble.

And so now when I am presented with an opportunity to serve the church, or my school or my family I pause, breathe and silently ask myself, "Does this align with my personal mission?" And I can say yes or no accordingly. I find that I say no to things I might have otherwise said yes to and say yes to some things that I would have probably said no to!

Yes to guiding the Women's Alliance in Chair Yoga, yes to offering Mindful Parenting Workshops here and at my school, yes to guiding the Neighboring Faith and Junior Youth classes in mindfulness meditation sessions, yes to offering yoga classes to my son's cross country team, yes to broadcasting mindful moments over my school's PA system, yes to beginning every faculty meeting by reciting a poem, yes, yes, yes.

But are these things I just listed really creating justice? Definitely not in a big way but I believe definitely yes in a small way. Mother Theresa is famously quoted as saying "We can only do small things with great love." And sometimes the world's problems seem so enormous that it is easy to become paralyzed at the thought of them. But intentionally doing a spiritual practice and growing that into living your personal mission is very much about creating justice one breath, one step, one day at a time.

So I keep practicing. I continue to visit that refuge, that garden, that soft space to fall, that place of awe and mystery and wonder. I continue practicing with a quality of curiosity as I work with my intentions and fine tune my personal mission. Noticing what it is that I may be afraid, and at the same time secretly thrilled, to say yes to.

So now I ask you to consider, what is your faith in action? What is your 'so what,' the small thing that you can do with great love? And now another definition of justice, this time from American philosopher and activist Cornell West, who says "justice is what love looks like in public."

What would the world be like if one heart at a time courageously opened and stayed open thanks to the power of direct experience -- and we took the love from our open hearts out into the public domain, to our place of work, with our extended families and in our leisure time. When we are driving in our cars or waiting in line with whomever and whatever we meet.

So I can't help but wonder what it could be like if in our future congregational meetings each of us had a connection to direct experience through a personal spiritual practice. What would our conversations sound like? I can only wonder. But I am certain that we have many more difficult conversations and congregational meetings in our future with hard decisions to be made. What will our love look like? Will we sow the seeds of justice together? Will we find a way to stay and work with one another through our disagreements and disappointments? Can we create a place of balance between our heads and our hearts?

I would be doing this sermon an injustice if I didn't give you an opportunity to practice... I will be guiding you in a brief guided visualization meditation. As with any mindfulness activity I guide, please know that this an invitation only. Feel free to do as much or as little of the experience as you like.

#### *Guided Meditation:*

Begin by taking a nice long deep breath in through the nose and let it out through the mouth with sound. Notice the breath in your body and follow it with a sense of curiosity.

Now begin to scan the body from head to toe noticing what feels open and easy, tight or tired - physically, emotionally and mentally. Begin to take a long loving look.

Now place your hands onto your solar plexus, above your belly and below your heart. In yoga, it is believed that there are various energy centers in the body. This energy center is associated with willfulness, determination and self esteem. Think of this part of you as your power center.

Now begin to visualize a star pulsating in this area of your body, growing bright on the inhale and radiating through the five pointed star of your body as you exhale, through the souls of the feet, fingertips and top of your head. Visualize warm golden light creating a place of spacious radiance within.

In yogic scripture there is a concept called dharma, which is roughly translated as purpose. This is a word that points to the idea that every person on the planet comes with a unique purpose to fulfill, or special gift to give, that nobody else can offer in the same way. Think about this light in your solar plexus fueling your dharma or purpose. You may have a very clear idea of your purpose or absolutely no idea. It doesn't matter. Simply trust the mystery. You can choose to believe that there is something silently drawing you to your highest and greatest good and the good of others as well.

Now plant a seed of intention into this energy center. Contemplate a quality or characteristic that you would like to embody as you move through your work in the world. It could be the quality of peace, love, clarity, calm or anything else that comes to your awareness.

Continue to breathe into your intention as your breath cultivates more and more spacious radiance within you.