

Justice and Inclusion

Sermon by Carla Kapeskas, July 7, 2019

Why is Social Justice so important to me?

I have neither suffered great injustice nor deprivation in my life. A few minor things I can recall are:

- I can recall visiting some well off relatives and my mom saying I could not spend the night because I did not have nice clothes to stay over;
- When I was in college I had a real hard time because as an English Major most of my peers had an upper hand on me because they had had the chance to travel and study abroad and I did not; I also remember being assaulted on buses riding back and forth from college by men that thought they could get away with it;
- Then when I entered the job market I had to deal with sexual harassment in more than one occasion; and on top of that, and already working in the US I found out that a man 10 years my junior had been hired to a more junior position making literally \$30,000 more than me annually;
- In a sudden twist of life, I became an immigrant, a guest in someone else's land. When you speak with an accent people tend to assume you think with an accent. And that is uncomfortable and unjust at times.

But let's get real. I am white, my mom has a graduate degree, I come from low middle class, but through hard work and with the right support I was able to overcome most of the injustices life presented me. Sure, I cannot and do not want to change the fact that I am a woman, but overall I have navigated those waters with some success.

So I can't say Social Justice is my calling because of all the injustices I have suffered. That would be minimizing and belittling real injustice.

What makes my heart beat faster, like it was at the moment I started to reflect on this is, the arrogance and ignorance of man that believe they are better than others because of the color of their skin, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or economic status. That makes me boil inside. Because it is wrong! Plain and simple wrong! We cant stand here in 2019 and witness immense injustice and do NOTHING! And it is in our immense previledge that we have to find the strength to fight for others that cannot fight for themselves.

Hellen Keller said: "Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other's welfare, social justice can never be attained."

The UUA website says the following about the UU standing when it comes to social justice:

“We have a legacy of “deeds not creeds.” Our work for a better world calls us to unexpected places as we harness love’s power to stop oppression. From grassroots community organizing to interfaith state, national, and corporate advocacy; in protest marches, prayer vigils, and press conferences; in homeless shelters and in prisons, Unitarian Universalists put our faith into action.

Our justice efforts are grounded in our congregationally-driven [social justice statements](#) and our call to break down divisions, heal isolation, and honor the interconnectedness of all life and all justice issues. We model these commitments by creating just, welcoming, and inclusive congregations. We act in partnership with groups and communities most impacted by injustice on [local](#), [state](#), [national](#), and [international](#) levels.

In our Me To We visioning process in the last 7 months, with congregational input, we agreed on UUMAN values to be: Love, Wonder/Awe, Connection, Courage and Justice!

For Justice we agreed on the following covenant:

- Recognizing that our individual differences make us collectively stronger, we partner beyond our wall to build a just society. (REPEAT)

It is within this covenant that our Social Justice initiatives should operate.

1. The covenant says “OUR DIFFERENCES MAKE US COLLECTIVELY STRONGER”. One of the reasons we are at a UU church today is because we believe in the “deed not creed” approach. We believe that beyond these walls there is incredible injustice, we believe the world to be beautiful and promising, but we also believe that we can be the voices of people that have been silenced. We believe nobody to be better than anyone else, not because of race, gender, sex orientation, zip code, place of birth. We also believe that it is in our capacity to make the lives of others better. We believe in Environmental Justice, because as UUs we believe in the Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. It is right there, the 7th principle in your order of service.

At UUMAN We have put our principles into action:

- We have participated in marches for Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights, womens rights ...
- IMMIGRANT ISSUES: We have worked on immigration issues by visiting El Refugio, if you recall el refugio is a ministry of hospitality and visitation serving the immigrants at Stewart Detention Center and their loved ones. Following up on that work, on July 28 we will be hosting The New Sanctuary Movement of Atlanta Metro North, which we are active members at. We are assembling Care

Packages that will benefit detainee families at El Refugio, we are doing that with our friends from Roswell Community Masjid, UU Emerson and Temple Beth Tikvah. More details on this in the handout you have in the green sheets.

- INTERFAITH INITIATIVES: our minister Dave Dunn has been instrumental in working with UUA, Emerson UU in these interfaith and community coalition initiatives. In January we organized an interfaith potluck dinner at RCM. We had more than 100 in attendance, several from UUMAN. At my table I 2 UU representatives, a Muslim couple from Egypt, a Muslim man from Syria and another lady from Temple Beth Tikvah. We are talking about a potluck dinner is Roswell GA!! My kids get to grow up knowing these people and these different faiths and not thinking that difference equals threat.
- ECONOMIC JUSTICE: We continue to volunteer at North Fulton Community Charities (NFCC) once a month. On the 24th we a group from UUMAN worked in the Thrift Shop. The Thrift Shop is the only source of income for NFCC and, along with donations, it sustains their entire operation. The Thrift Shop generates 1.3 million dollars in revenue a year with 3 full time employees. That is a ratio any for profit company would be proud of. If you would like to join us we will be helping put back packs together for the beginning of the school year on 7/29 at 12:30. Youth are invited to join us.
- Family Promise is another great congregational-wide effort in the ECONOMIC JUSTICE realm. Family Promise is important because after the age of 12 a boy would not be allowed to stay with his family in a homeless shelter in the state of GA. He would have to stay together with other adult males. In the span of 2.5 years we have helped roughly 10 families (some of them more than once) and about 30 children to remain together with their families.
- 50/50: Michelle Lierbergesell has been doing a great job with this initiative and together we are working on finalizing the list of organizations that will benefit from the 50/50 collection for the second half of the year; these organizations reflect our ideals, such as Lost N Found youth which targets LGBTQ youth; Refugee women network that enables refugee women to start their own business; BLUU Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism and more.
- Lastly, but closest to my heart is the work we are doing in the racial justice arena. In January around 50 UUMAN members visited the Peace and Justice Memorial and Museum in Montgomery. That was an important first step. Bryan Stevenson, the force behind the Equal Justice Initiative says that part of this process is to feel uncomfortable and have hope. I would say DISCOMFORT AND HOPE SHOULD BE FOLLOWED BY ACTION.
- And ACT some of us did! We got involved with the FULTON COUNTY REMEMBRANCE COALITION. As you might know Fulton lynched 37 black men as part of a narrative of racial terror. FCRC started the work to honor and

remember those men. During the first half of this year we collected soil from the 37 lynching sites. Today those soil jars are in permanent display at the Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in downtown Atlanta.

Now we have just kicked off the second part of this initiative. We are working to bring to Roswell the Mack Brown Historical Marker.

On the night of November 13, 1936, Mack Brown, a black man who worked as a janitor in an Atlanta apartment building, disappeared from his apartment. Several weeks later, on December 23, 1936, a white woman discovered Mr. Brown's dead body floating in the Chattahoochee River; he had been shot, and he was handcuffed and bound at the feet.

At a later coroner's inquest, witnesses revealed that, just days before Mr. Brown's disappearance, a white woman who lived in the apartment complex where Mr. Brown worked had reported that he had kissed her on the hand after she asked him what she owed him for fixing a shade in her apartment. The woman told her husband, who then told the police and the apartment building agent. And that is the reason why Mr. Brown was lynched.

So we are working to bring Mr. Brown's Historical Marker back to Roswell, where he was lynched. We want to honor and remember his life. That will require community involvement and buy in. We hope to count on those of you who have connections in the city of Roswell to get this done.

- Edmund Bukke said in the 1700's "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evils is for good men to do nothing". I don't think standing by in an option any longer. Our discomfort should be moved to action! Get involved. For Mr. Brown and so many others who have had their voice silenced too soon and in such unjust manner.

But right now I know what you are thinking, you are thinking "how do we get this woman to stop talking!"

The Social Justice Committee needs you! Take action! Get involved! If we are not working on a cause that you are passionate about, initiate that discussion. Find like-minded people. The SJ committee has a small budget that might help you! Or embrace one of the other causes you heard about today.

Please see the insert in your Order of Service.

Nuremberg Prosecutor Ben Ferencz, who is 97 years of age says "What keeps me going is I know I am right". He also says, "It takes courage not to be discouraged."

Be brave!