

Change the World

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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Many years ago, when I was still in seminary, I gave a New Years Day sermon in which I announced to those gathered that I was giving up New Year's resolutions that were too difficult for me to keep and instead had settled on one I was sure I could follow through on: To change the world. Not surprisingly, the seeming immodesty of my resolution generated some laughter from the pews. Laughter, of course, can be a great ice breaker, but it can also be used to mask or disguise unease. Laughter rather than serious commitment is likely the more common response to anyone who talks about changing the world. It is not difficult to see why.

Every day we are bombarded with news of war, disease, greed, and violence, stories highlighting our inhumanity towards one another, stories of injustice and suffering that weigh on our hearts and minds. And as our spirits are worn thin by the sheer magnitude of the world's problems, we find ourselves doubly pained by the pang of our own perceived powerlessness and an unsettling sense of inertia. We hunger for inspiration to break the bonds of despair and inaction.

Enter Ralph Waldo Emerson. With keen insight that transcends the age in which he lived, Emerson reminds us, "A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming." It is worth noting here that Emerson is not speaking of worship as bowing down to or pleasing some supernatural deity; rather he is drawing from the Old English root of the word, actually two words combined – worth ship- which means to ascribe value to something.

Looking out into the world, what it is that we worship...that we value as a society? And I don't mean what we say we value - I'm not interested in campaign speeches here. Judging by what appears in the news, on television, and to whom our politicians pander, it seems we tend to value self interest; competition; wealth; production; convenience; technology; celebrity; youth; fame...and I could go on...but I won't. Now, it's not that these things are bad or problematic in and of themselves... but if looking at the state of the world, we honestly assess the extent to which we value these things and at what cost...we find that in worshipping these things...in assigning them too much value, we are becoming increasingly isolated beings on this planet of 8 billion... and counting... people.

“Not valid if detached.” This is the warning printed on a tag that the Rev. Robbie Walsh writes about in a reflection on human nature he wrote decades ago. In that reflection Walsh does not talk about attachment versus detachment in the Buddhist sense; instead he talks about detachment as a denial of our common humanity...a sort of solitary confinement, leading to indifference and chronic self-absorption; a place where, as we gorge ourselves on diet of me, myself, and I, we slowly starve to death, while pushing away what might truly fulfill...truly... save us. “Not valid if detached” is a warning for a world that values self interest at the expense of the common good; competition over cooperation; production over people; and convenience at the expense of justice.

And now I hear the voice of my preaching instructor, the Rev. Kim Crawford-Harvie echoing from semesters past saying, “Don’t forget the ladder.” Kim would tell us when our truth telling puts people in a hole we have send down a ladder...a vision...an offering of hope they can use to climb out. So here goes...

In 2011 I traveled to Mexico and the American southwest with a delegation of religious leaders and seminarians. There I met with the Rev. John Fife, a retired Presbyterian minister and one of the co-founders of the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980’s which, in defiance of US law, helped Central American refugees fleeing the violence in their homelands to find shelter in the US. I asked Fife where he thought the best hope for positive change rests in this country.

“In the churches,” he said, adding, “The politicians have no reason to change anything.” Then, gesturing to all of us sitting around him, he said “You’ve got your work cut out for you, but what exciting work it is.”

Exciting?

I’ll be honest, that’s wasn’t the first word that popped into my head at that moment, but as I recall a service from my time as Intern Minister At First Parish in Concord MA where we celebrated and sung the music of Pete Seeger, I’m inspired by what I hear as a call to challenge...and to change... the world. Indeed, in Seeger’s “Old One Hundred” he speaks of both a challenge and a vision for the world ...”Sing peace between the old and young, “Tween every faith and every tongue.” Seeger, like John Fife, places hope in a mature spirituality, an ever deepening engagement with life’s wonder and mystery, a celebration of human potential and resilience, and an appreciation of our struggles and frailties.

This is why I too believe that churches hold the greatest hope of effecting positive change in the world. How might SUUS be an agent of change in the world? Once again, Emerson’s words point us towards a path, “That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts,” he wrote, “will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.”

In these words I hear both a warning and a call for the church...for this society. I hear a warning against idolatry ...something echoed in another Pete Seeger song Where Have All the Flowers Gone...when, mournfully, he asks..."Oh, when will they ever learn?"

The call I hear is for spiritual maturity, for the church to be, in a sense, counter-cultural...to not only resist idolatry within, but to counter the often idolatrous ways of the world...ways that dehumanize and demonize others, ways that breed injustice and violence, ways that twist freedom into tyrannical individualism; and ways that tolerate intolerance, to name but a few.

The church as counter-cultural seeks not only to resist all of these, but also to lift up... to give voice to... and to live into a hope-filled vision... a way of being in the world that affirms human dignity, recognizes and celebrates diversity, increases justice, and banishes violence. In this sense, the church is more than a place we gather on Sunday mornings, it is an attitude we carry in our hearts and minds, a way of living and being in relationship that is fundamentally different from the ways of the world.

If you attend regularly, you may have noticed I offer the same benediction at the close of each service on Sundays. This benediction is a counter-cultural statement. It reflects a way of being very different from the ways of the world. In a world ravaged by war and violence...we say go out in peace! Have courage, we say...courage in a world where fear reigns supreme. Return to no person evil for evil...imagine such a world. Support the weak...Honor all beings...certainly not a major concern in the halls of congress as budgets are debated. But it is our concern. How shall we respond? How will we commit to and support positive change within this church...this house of hope... and the world beyond its walls? And here I want to lift up the work of social action communities and organizations, like CONECT, as a shining example of some of the ways we might respond to these questions.

Of course, Gandhi (or words long attributed to him anyway), said it best, "Be the change you want to see in the world." This, to my mind, is the essence of Emerson's warning and call concerning worship, of John Fife's faith in the church as an agent of change...Be- the- change! And it only follows that if you or I or someone else wants to change the world...we stand a much greater chance of doing so when we join together in community with others. An individual makes an activist...and thank goodness people choose to be activists...but it takes a group of activists...like you...and like me... to make a movement, a movement that can shape an era, influence an age, and chart a new course going forward.

"One man's hands can't tear a prison down- But if two and two and fifty make a million- We'll see that day come round." So goes another Pete Seeger Song. This is a role this church...this community... has... and can still play in the world...to

bring people together to tear down the prison walls and open the gates of paradise from which humankind has banished itself for too long. And when things get tough, as they surely will, when, time and fear... pain and hate come around...this church is a place...a community that “gathers ‘round” to care for, nurture, and restore us.

In her book Traveling Mercies, novelist Anne Lamott explains why she brings her son Sam to church, “The main reason [I make him go] is that I want to give him what I found..., which is to say, a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want, which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy, are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community who pray or practice their faith, they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians, people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle, they are part of something beautiful.”

When we choose to come together, to care for each other, to encourage each other, and to nurture each other we create something beautiful and when we carry what we have created out into the world and express it by way of our words and deeds, we join our strand with others seeking to bind up this weary world that, in the words from our responsive reading, “everywhere will be called Eden again.”

Working together, Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists have always had a wider impact on the world than our numbers would suggest possible, giving weight to Margaret Mead’s conviction that a “small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world.” Time and again we have offered a different vision for the world and although we’ve stumbled along the way and at times our commitment has been less than what is called for, we continue to hold up a vision that is infinitely more hopeful, more loving, more grateful, and more just than what the dominant culture is willing to risk.

And we have not only held up this vision, but we have pursued it throughout the generations by honoring those who came before us, responding to the present, and building an inheritance for those who will come after us.

And so let us, in the spirit of Kenneth Patton’s Universalist vision,...”build temples, and adorn them with intimations of longer journeys we cannot take, and images of countries we may never enter...a place where later generations will put their carvings beside ours, and light candles long after ours have burned away....and where in their celebrations there will be a lingering of our questions and solicitations. The rafters and the pillars will remember our dreams...and... the children will discover the beauty of our ancient hands.”

May we, together, then, make of this faith a place to love and to learn, to discover hope and inspire action. May it be a place to nurture and grow our souls and our common dreams that we might feed one another and the world. May it be a place where we, by working together, change the world!

Amen and Blessed Be