

Social Justice

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By Marsha Bates

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My name is Marsha Bates. My husband, Chris Stotler, and I have attended All Faiths for about 10 years. Many of you may have previously heard some of the stories I am about to tell ... and I apologize for being repetitive... but these are stories that shaped my transition into a passionate social justice person.

So, what is social justice? Per Merriam-Webster, justice is a state or doctrine of egalitarianism ... a belief in human equality especially with respect to social, political, and economic affairs.

That definition certainly meshes with my belief that all humans have inherent worth and dignity and that all should be treated equitably and with respect.

When Joyce Ramay asked that I speak about 'Why am I passionate about Social Justice', my first thought was 'Well, that's easy. I was married to a Black man for 12 years, I have 2 bi-racial children from that marriage, and I have witnessed the injustices they have experienced due to their skin color.'

But as I thought more about it, I realized from an early age I had started questioning unjust beliefs and treatment of those who were different.

I was raised a Baptist ... the first few years in an independent Baptist Church where I heard the minister preach 'hellfire and damnation' sermons. He railed about sin and God's intent to condemn any non-Christian to that eternal pit of fire. (Thinking back on those sermons, I realize he was selling 'fire insurance'.)

When I was in upper elementary school, we started attending an American Baptist Church ... which taught that God is a loving God ... not an angry, vengeful God. I started questioning whether that loving God would really damn people in Africa or Asia who had never heard of

Christ. (I had never heard of Unitarians or Universalists at that point in my life. Now I realize I had embraced the Universalists' concept that God is too good to damn people ... which, in my 11-year-old mind, especially applied to people who had never heard of Christ.)

So my first step on the social justice path was questioning ... questioning the institution that decreed that there was only one path to God ...

Although I rejected the idea that Christ is the only path to God, I embraced other lessons from my Baptist upbringing:

- Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.
- `Love thy neighbor as thyself'. . . basic tenets of Christ's teachings

One New Testament parable greatly influenced me: the story of the Good Samaritan.

Remember that one? A Jewish man traveling along a dangerous stretch of road was set upon by robbers who beat him, stripped him, and left him for dead. When a rabbi passed by, he crossed to the other side of the road to avoid the injured man. A little while later, a Levite (a Jewish holy man) did the same.

Then a Samaritan passed by. Understand that Jews considered Samaritans to be socially inferior because Samaritans married pagans and did not abide by Jewish laws. And the feeling was pretty mutual ... Samaritans avoided Jews. However, this Samaritan bound the injured man's wounds and took him to an inn where the Samaritan further cared for the Jew's injuries. When leaving, he paid the innkeeper to look after the man and promised to pay more the next time he passed through if those funds were insufficient.

That story shaped my belief that you don't ignore the plight of others ... no matter their race or religious beliefs.

Although I grew up in a small southeastern Ohio town, I was fortunate to get a glimpse into other cultures. When I was 9 or 10 years old, the Ohio Farm Bureau sponsored an agricultural exchange program with India. My parents hosted an Indian farmer in our home while he toured various local farms, learning about practices used to enhance crop yield. J'ai B'hari Lau was exotic ... dark skinned, spoke with a thick accent ... and he was kind. He had children so he paid attention to us younger Bates'. I learned first-hand that people from other countries were nice people ... even if they practiced a different religion!

I must confess that my beliefs didn't sit well with many in the Baptist faith. When I was in my upper teens, I was selected to sit on the State Board of the Girls' Guild, an organization for

teenaged Baptist girls. When I was home for Spring break my freshman year of college, I attended a Board meeting where we were planning the program for the November in-gathering of Baptist girls from across the state. I made a passionate case about non-Christian religions having value and said we could promote religious tolerance if our fall program included sessions about the beliefs of various non-Christian religions. Well, within a day of returning home from that planning session, I was told that I was no longer acceptable to serve on the Girls Guild State Board: I didn't have the appropriate attitude or beliefs. The idea that I would want to showcase non-Christian religions was blasphemous according to the woman who was the advisor for the State Board.

So I became a disgraced Baptist ... which I considered to be an honor!

The summer before my Junior year of college, I worked at an electric utility in Columbus, Ohio. I hung out with other college kids working there ... including a certain electrical engineering student who happened to be black. Unlike the other students whose purpose for working was to fulfill an academic internship requirement, Robert and I were self-financing our educations ... we had to work to pay tuition and room and board. We understood each other. By the end of the summer, we had become a couple and married a few years later. Robert worked as an electrical engineer for the utility where we had met and, after graduating, I started my environmental scientist career.

After a year of marriage, Robert was transferred to a power plant located in rural Ohio ... more than an hour away from Columbus and our network of liberal college friends. We started searching for an apartment in a town of about 30,000 that was a half-hour commute from the generating station. We scoured the real estate section of the local newspaper, circling the ads that indicated apartments were available.

I was seven months pregnant at the time ... at an awkward stage where climbing in and out of Robert's small car was difficult ... so Robert would go into the rental office to inquire about the availability of a unit. However, at every agency, he was told that all the apartments were rented ... no vacancies. After having no luck at three or four agencies, we back-tracked and I went into the same offices where Robert had inquired about apartments earlier in the day. Lo and behold, there would be units available when I asked about apartments.

But rather than renting, we purchased a small house in a nice neighborhood. It belonged to a corporation that had transferred the previous owner to another city ... so we didn't have to deal

with owners who didn't want to sell to a bi-racial family. The first night we stayed there, we left my little VW Beetle parked on the driveway. When we got up the next morning, there were racial slurs written all over the car. I remember scrubbing those hateful words off the car ... wondering what we had done ... tears streaming down my face. (Remember... I was 7 months pregnant so my hormones were raging...)

But our baby boy was adorable ... he was our 'ambassador' with the neighbors ... and as the neighbors got to know us, most were accepting.

I could tell many stories about racial injustice that I learned about from my in-laws or experienced first hand:

- Robert's father served in the Navy during World War II. After finishing his basic training, he was assigned to one of the first Navy ships that being racially integrated. For three weeks, Melvin and the other black sailors had to sleep on deck ... exposed to the elements ... because the person who assigned sleeping quarters refused to give them a bunk.
- Fast-forward about three decades. It was probably 1979 the night Robert and I were returning home from a social event when we were pulled over by a State Highway patrolman. We hadn't been speeding ... and all our taillights were intact; we didn't know why we were being stopped. Besides asking to see Robert's ID and vehicle registration, he asked Robert what his occupation was...probably assuming the car was stolen since in his mind, a Black man certainly couldn't afford a turbo-charged Porche. Then the officer asked me if I knew this man ... gesturing toward Robert. I quite indignantly replied, 'He's my husband!' The officer never apologized ... simply gave Robert his license and registration and walked away. Robert's 'crime': Driving an expensive sports car while Black.
- Fast forward again to 2018: I was in a nice department store with my daughter, who is darker skinned than me and obviously bi-racial. After a bit, I realized that a store employee was following us as we moved from one area of the store to another. When I pointed out to my daughter that we were being tailed, Robyn simply replied 'Welcome to my world, Mom.' It happens to her frequently.

Those incidents ... and many others ... intensified my disgust and concern about the racial injustices in this country.

My reaction to social injustices evolved over time. Initially, I simply felt concern for victims of unjust treatment. I would vent my feelings about disturbing situations to like-minded friends ... bewailing the institutions of power whose policies created and sustained the social inequities.

Once I was financially able, I donated to organizations that operated food banks, or provided safe havens for children to interact, or served the homeless ... and I still do.

Then my actions became more political. I started writing letters to senators, representatives, and other officials to call them out for enacting unjust laws or creating policies that harm everyday citizens. (Here in Florida there has been ample opportunity to do that ... especially recently!)

Through All Faiths, I became aware of Lee Interfaith for Empowerment (LIFE). For those of you who aren't familiar, LIFE is a group of 15 churches that work together to influence Lee County officials to legislate laws or adopt policies that make our community a more just place to live.

I have learned many things from LIFE:

At one of the first LIFE gatherings I attended, the speaker talked about 'righteous anger'. At first, I was taken aback. I was raised in a quiet, Midwestern family ... and was taught that 'anger is bad'. But the minister explained that righteous anger is anger that is spurred by an unjust situation. I have learned that righteous anger is a good thing. That anger tells us that something is wrong and should be fixed. It motivates us to ACT.

I also learned about 'good trouble'. One of the clergymen who often speaks at LIFE events defines 'good trouble' as actions that might be considered troublesome by some people ... but are necessary to engender a change to an unjust situation. This isn't a new concept: Bayard (*bai-erd*) Rustin, a Civil Rights activist who worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, once said: "We need in every bay and community a group of angelic troublemakers". Angelic troublemakers ... I like that term!

I learned that LIFE defines justice as speaking truth to power and holding institutions of power and money accountable. They point out that there are two sources of power: organized money and organized people. Large numbers of organized people get the attention of lawmakers and large corporations...and sometimes the media. By motivating large numbers of people, LIFE demonstrates to those in power that many of their constituents are demanding change to remediate an unjust situation, law, or policy. Large numbers of organized people can speak more loudly than a lone social justice warrior or a lone organization.

Examples of LIFE's accomplishments in the past 13 years include:

- Influencing the Lee County Board of Education to train its staff in anti-bullying tactics ... and provide anti-bullying programs for students.
- Getting the County Commissioners to provide \$1.6 million to expand services for children.
- Convincing the City of Ft Myers to revise their applications for employment to remove the box asking whether the applicant had ever been arrested.

These victories have been accomplished through people power! In 2020, more than a thousand people joined LIFE's Nehemiah Action that, due to COVID, was held via zoom! That night, Sheriff Marceno committed to have mental health professionals from NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) provide crisis intervention training to Lee County deputies. After seeing the positive results from training deputies, he also had NAMI train his dispatchers and other staff. Families who have members with mental health issues have reported that law enforcement's interactions with their loved one have been much more positive since that training was completed.

I want to point out that successful Social Justice Warriors are not people who dwell only in a negative space ... growing frustrated and bitter at the world's injustices. Although they see the injustice, they have the capability to envision a better world...they have hope. Think about Dr. Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream Speech': he urged the crowd that had gathered for the March on Washington 'not to wallow in despair' ... and he went on to talk about his dream for America...hoping that one day the nation would live out the true meaning of its creed that all men are created equal ... and that his children would live in a nation where they would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

You can live life quietly loving your neighbor and sympathizing with those who are less fortunate and feeling angry about institutions that victimize other human beings. But anger isn't enough...you have to ACT on your righteous anger. Anger without action can become detrimental ... it can make one cynical and bitter.

And there are plenty of things that arouse 'righteous anger' in me:

- The plight of the homeless
- Florida's 'Don't say gay' laws...
- Politicians who want to control women's lives by taking away their freedom to choose

My list goes on and on ... and I suspect you each have a list of things that anger you. The question becomes: What do you do with that anger?

We have many opportunities at All Faiths to work on social justice issues ... Heart for the Homeless, Racial Equity Team, Climate Action Team, Rainbow Connection, Operation Joy, and, of course, LIFE. I challenge you to become involved ... to take action to make Lee County a more just place to live.

Before I close, I want to draw attention to Edmund Burke's quote that is printed at the top of this week's Order of Service. Edmund Burke was an Irish politician who lived in the 1700's ... but his words still are relevant today. He said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." (Repeat the quote)

I also would like us to embrace Bayard Rustin's idea that every community needs a band of 'troublesome angels'. I propose that we have a 'band of troublesome angels' right here at All Faiths!

May it be so!