

Sermon – 2022 9-4

Honoring the Working Class – By Joyce Ramay

In life, we have to focus on how we decide what actions are ours to do. Francis of Assisi said on his deathbed, “I have done what is mine; may you be taught what is yours!”

We’ve got the world in our hands!

We are all put here to do our share as co-creators of our world.

What is your role? What is my role?

How do we participate in this ongoing creation of the Universe?

How do we appreciate that every working person is doing his or her part in sustaining our lives, and that each is to be honored for his or her contribution to the greater good?

On this Labor Day weekend, let us consider what is needed for workers to gain their rights against the greater strength of the company boss.

History tells us many stories about our human condition, and where we are on our journey towards creating a better world for everyone.

The story of Unions is their long struggle for justice.

One of the earliest stories of the labor movement began in ancient Egypt, where migrant workers were enslaved and oppressed by Pharaoh.

Moses, the orphan who had been raised in Pharaoh’s palace, organized the Jewish slaves and told Pharaoh – Let My People Go!

With some encouragement by plagues, eventually Pharaoh agreed – but like others in high places, he soon changed his mind and sent his troops to pursue the Israelites.

Remember - those in power always seek to retain or regain their power over others.

Yet the oppressed continue to rise up.

Our recent Covid 19 pandemic has again created motivation among the working class for seeking better working conditions and more fair compensation.

These are not just economic issues - they are true moral imperatives.

In the 1930’s my father was an organizer of the union at Josten’s Manufacturing – the company that makes class rings, championship rings and yearbooks – you may have one of them!

He was on the negotiating team for many years.

The owner of the company, who was Treasurer of the National Republic Party in the 1950’s, told me that he always respected my father, because he was a straight shooter who stayed on target of getting fair living wages and benefits for all the workers. “When he spoke, I had to listen!”

While progress has been made, a huge proportion of working families continue to struggle for the most basic necessities of life.

Unfortunately, the union movement has declined in power due to automation, globalization, and changes in the kinds of work that people do.

Organized workers’ movements are still necessary – to draw attention to their plight and to counter the power of big corporations and institutions.

We have seen some uprisings against Amazon and Starbucks.

I regret that our political leaders mostly talk about making lives better for the **middle class**. They seldom mention or pass laws to benefit the **working class and their families** – the people who grow the food that we eat, make all the things that we buy, serve us at stores and restaurants, and build our houses and our roads. Without them, we could not have the comfortable lives that we enjoy. How often do you say thank you to the garbage collectors that remove your trash? How often do you warmly greet check-out clerks and call them by name? One of my favorites at Publix is named Angela – I call her Angel. When she sees me come, her face lights up with a beaming smile.

Today, let's consider some Methods of Resistance and Transformation. Hopefully, you may be inspired to engage in efforts for social justice, particularly on behalf of our working families. The work of improving the human condition is never finished. No one can complete the job, but each of us can make a meaningful contribution. As individuals, we have different capacities and different methods, but our goals can be shared. While some things are possible when we are young and strong, other things can still be accomplished when we reach our saging years. Leaders of Movements of Social Transformation come in many forms, and utilize at least three strategies: the Prophetic, the Parallel and the Institutional. You might think of them as Outside, Inside, and Side by Side.

First, Prophetic voices speak from **outside**, against unfair established laws, organizations, and practices.

Prophets seek to eliminate corrupt old systems and replace them with new ones.

They have strong visions of a better future.

Prophets often are marginalized or considered ahead of their time.

They are viewed as rabble rousers, eccentrics, and perhaps a little bit crazy. They are like Isaiah, or Don Quixote, or my late husband Haneef Ramay in pursuit of "Impossible Dreams".

They speak truth to power.

They oppose unjust rulers, without regard to their personal safety or benefit.

They are creative, imaginative and courageous.

They not only critique what is wrong, but also propose how to make it right.

Second, Parallel voices are advocates for **alternatives** to the established structures.

They build a new system that can stand **side by side** with, or replace that which is deemed inadequate.

They see a void and fill it.

These might be **The Field of Dreams** kind of people. Build it and they will come.

That is what we did when I planned and helped found Hajvery University in Pakistan.

Some innovations that I introduced to the country were new degrees like Computer Science, and new courses in Environmental Responsibility and Business Ethics – dealing with the necessity of protecting people and the planet.

I organized the first programs to provide night-classes for working students to obtain college degrees.

Third, Institutional voices are those who work **inside existing organizations** to bring change and have a positive impact on society.

They work within churches, business, government, or NGO's. Speaking from a strong platform of a group, they use their connections to influence others.

These are usually **reformers**.

They start from what is there already and make changes for the better.

Good example of this would be Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal.

Today we will consider three prominent Unitarian Universalists who represent these three strategies.

First, a **Prophetic** example, **Henry David Thoreau who lived from 1817 to 1862**. Those of us who were active in social justice movements in the 1960's and 1970's can recall how frequently Thoreau was cited. His essay on **Civil Disobedience** was an inspiration for the Civil Rights, Women's Rights, and Peace Movements. Thoreau provided one of the earliest rationales for civil resistance to corrupt and unfair institutions.

He inspired Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. to develop their forms of non-violent resistance to promote justice.

Thoreau believed that we are morally bound to oppose an unjust state. Thoreau opposed slavery.

When he protested the Mexican American War by refusing to pay taxes, he went to jail.

He practiced what he preached!

Thoreau's book **Walden** was like a Bible to those who sought to protect our land, our water and our air. His stress on simplicity and living close to nature caused many of us to work for conservation. I remember working with the Sierra Club in the Environmental movement, when we took on Minnesota's big power and mining industries and organized the first Earth Day at the University of Minnesota.

In his own day, Thoreau was not hailed as a revolutionary social prophet. He was often considered to be an eccentric individual who followed his own conscience.

Today, we do recognize his prophetic role.

Like many of his time, he died young from tuberculosis at the age of 44. When he was on his death bed, his Aunt Louisa asked if he had made his peace with God.

Thoreau replied, "I did not know we had ever quarreled."

Next - Parallel Alternative Example: Margaret Fuller (1810-1850) Margaret Fuller wrote the **first feminist book** in America, called **Women of the Nineteenth Century**.

She was part of the group known as the Transcendentalists – which included Thoreau and Emerson, and was Editor of their publication.

She realized that if you cannot do things one way, then arrange for another way to achieve it!

Since women could not attend institutions of higher learning, she organized salons where women could study and discuss many topics.

She was an ardent advocate for women's education **and right to employment in any line of work they might choose – even that of a ship's captain.**

She was a strong opponent of slave labor and a supporter of emancipation.

As a writer for the New York Tribune, she was a frequent voice for Social Justice. In 1846 the Tribune sent her to Europe as **the first female foreign correspondent.**

She influenced many women who followed her, including Susan B. Anthony.

Third - Institutional Voices, Working Inside exemplified by Rev. A. Powell Davies – 1902 – 1957 - 55 years – Davies was born and raised in England, where he became a Methodist minister.

When he came to America, he became Unitarian in 1933.

Davies used his influence from within his church, **All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C.**

He was a strong proponent for Unitarians to be something other than "just another Protestant denomination".

He wanted them to be truly a "universal church".

He practiced racial desegregation within his church.
He had many important friends in government, including Supreme Court Justices.
He was an early advocate for civil rights, and women's rights.
Although he was a strong anti-Communist, Davies opposed McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee at a time when so many were being swept away by the paranoia of the early Cold War years.
In those years, efforts were made to associate union activity with communism.
When very few were willing to speak out against the oppressive measures of our congress, Davies did.
He knew how to use his pulpit and his influence effectively.

Those were three UU individuals with voices calling for change.
Since then, people are still motivated by their examples to organize into mass movements to bring about social transformation.

So what does this mean to us today?

What is the relevance to our lives and our mission here: *All Faiths Unitarian Congregation is committed to Justice, Equity and Compassion.*

Take a moment to think about some of the causes that you have promoted. How did you do it?
Were you a lonely prophet, speaking truth to power, envisioning a vastly improved social order?
Did you see a void and fill it, by providing opportunity or services where there were none?
Did you use the pulpit or your position of influence within an established institution to make a difference?
Or perhaps it was a combination of all three.

Now - how could you make a difference today?
Are you helping to provide services for people left out of the system?
Are you bringing about constructive change within a company where you work? Or within a club? Or a homeowner's association?
Are you promoting cleaner and safer working conditions, processes or products?
Are you offering living wages – particularly to those who take care of your lawns or clean your houses?
Do you give them regular raises, or are they still being paid the same as for or five years ago?
Do you speak truth to Power?
How can you serve? How can you inspire?
How can you make a difference?
Every little thing helps. Never discount the work of one person.
But also remember the power of working together – organizing like unions! Uniting can balance the power! You are not alone!

Here at All Faiths you have many opportunities to participate with our own Heart for the Homeless Team, Climate Action Team, Racial Equity Team, Rainbow Connection Team, Operation Joy, and to help McGregor Clinic and Pet Shelters!

In conclusion, I would like to share with you my favorite passage from Thoreau's Walden:

“I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

“He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings.

“In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. **If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.**”

May it be so!

Closing Words

I Hear America Singing by [Walt Whitman](#) - 1819-1892

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.