

## **Living a life in the shape of justice**

**By Richard Keelan**

*Spirit of life, come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion. Blow in the wind, rise in the sea; move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice. Roots hold me close; wings set me free; Spirit of Life, come to me, come to me.*

This anthem of Unitarian Universalism that we sing every Sunday resonates with me. The stirrings of compassion sing in my heart every day as I strive to bring mental health services to children and their families. As a Unitarian Universalist I strive to give my life the shape of justice.

I have seen people living a life in the shape of justice in the many congregations I've joined, like Margaret Robson who I lit a candle for today. I admire and can only hope to follow people like Joan Marshal and her tireless fight for climate justice, Joyce Ramay and her efforts to create a beloved community here at All Faiths. I see Sharon Gray who is an avowed atheist and who lives the secular humanist value of service. She volunteers everywhere in our community, always helping. I see Emmy Spiller giving a lesson of what it means to be truly anti-racist.

I wonder, do you strive to live a life in the shape of justice?

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King said "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle, the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals." We have a running joke between Rev CJ and I, we always say to each other, I live to serve. As much as this is a joke it also rings very true for both of us. We both have meaning in our lives because we both live lives of service. To us as unitarian Universalist. Service is the action that is the expression of our faith. I have had a several moments that shaped me when I was younger and put me on the path of helping others or shaping justice.

When I was 18 I took a gap year before college and for half of that year I lived on a kibbutz in Israel. I remember the night I arrived on the kibbutz. It was late, maybe 9 pm, and I had taken a bus from Tel Aviv to Galilee and Kibbutz Dafna. The bus dropped me off at the entrance which was a guard shack with guard towers periodically placed along the chain link fence topped by barbed wire. It was reminiscent of a prison. I walked up to the shack with a letter from the kibbutz main office saying I was assigned to this kibbutz. I had no idea what to expect. A sweet looking elderly woman wearing a grey house dress smiled at me. She had an Ouzi sub-machine gun on her lap, a number tattooed on her arm. and in her other hand a romance novel with a very with a bare chest on the cover but the writing was Hebrew. That image has always stuck with me and even till this day it is hard what to make of all the jarring messages in the image. I did know however I was no longer in Boston where I grew up. I also took the lesson of the holocaust and to always strive to never let the voices of extremism take over a country and oppress and scapegoat a minority.

When I was 20 years old, I remember taking a course called the History and Philosophy of psychology. The course was a seminar in that each week we read an original foundational book that has shaped psychology and then discussed in a weekly three-hour class. The book that had the most profound effect on me was Viktor Frankel's *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankel a holocaust survivor, wrote that the thing that kept people alive in the camps was a reason to get up in the morning. He surmised on the simplest level that man's basic instinct was to have meaning in their lives. We live to have meaning in our lives. The seed of living a life of meaning had been planted in me.

The next experience that shaped me was the death of a friend. In my early 20's, I had a friend John. John was a troubled soul. He was tall, handsome, and charismatic. He came from a very Irish family and a long line of policemen. John also was gay and was rejected by his family when he was young. He had made a life for himself in the local gay community in Worcester Ma. John just had a dark side of that self-hatred that many gay people of my generation have had to learn to cast aside. John often would brazenly put himself in dangerous situations

particularly by being very out in not very welcoming or safe situations. John had moved to Portland Maine with another friend of mine and they both worked at a local gay bar. John left the bar one night late and then he wasn't heard from for several days. When the police found John's body it had been dismembered and was in the trunk of the car of a man who had apparently been stalking and killing gay men in Portland. One of the saddest things about the incident is that his obituary made no mention of why he was killed. It just stated he came from a long line of police officers. The funeral home had two sides that didn't mix. John's many friends and John's family and many police officers. At least both sides politely ignored each other. As most of you are aware, many gay people also died in the holocaust. Again I think of the slogan of never again and I have always spoken out against extremism on the right or left. I have also volunteered over the years at LGBTQ+ service agencies in the memory of my dear friend. For me justice is also struggling for my own right to openly love without the fear of violence.

While I was in college, I desperately needed a cheap place to live. My parents were very working class, and I went to the College of the Holy Cross. This was a very expensive school which I was paying for myself through a scholarship, student loans, and three jobs. Living in the dorms was just too expensive and my junior year I was looking for something cheaper. I answered an advertisement for live in help at a group home for developmentally disabled adults. The home was a beautiful It was an old mansion and in exchange for being present from 11 pm to 8 am Sunday through Thursday I received free room and board. I jumped at the chance. I also found my calling. I found I loved helping people and most of all I found it meaningful.

What are those moments in your life that have evoked a passion for justice? As UU's we put our faith into action we don't rely on thoughts and prayers. If you don't have any cause currently, I encourage you to join one of All Faiths action teams. Join the struggle for climate justice, Racial Justice, Housing Justice, against hunger, or for the rights of our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters.

I have had a very varied professional life over the years and had moved on from assisting folks with developmental disabilities to working with and advocating for children. I worked at UMass Medical school in various positions for over ten years and even had a thriving private practice as a therapist for children and adolescents. I have also at different times volunteered in the LGBTQ community always with my friend John in the back of my mind.

I chose long ago to shape my professional life as a life of service. I am too old to give a list of meaningful positions and jobs I have had over the years, but I'd rather talk about the gift that coming to Fort Myers and SWFL has been for me. I was the right person at the right time and have been able to do some of my best work here. I took, in essence, what was an entry level position in the Child Advocacy Department at Golisano Children's Hospital I have been doing various forms of child advocacy for years. Child Advocacy exists in children's hospitals across the country. The work in hospitals is about prevention. Before I came on board child advocacy worked on child passenger safety (I a certified child passenger safety technician), drowning prevention, and a host of other community prevention and education work to keep children safe and healthy. I was hired to bring a mental health focus. My supervisor knew that this was going to be a new area for the hospital and wanted the department to be part of that new initiative. At the same time I was hired, a couple from Bonita Springs had started fundraising and founded a new part of the Leehealth Foundation called Kids Minds Matter. Kids Minds Matter's goal was to raise funds to improve the pediatric behavioral health system in SWFL. I have met this couple and the wife in particular Susan Goldy is a kindred soul. Kids Minds Matter has funded all of our work. I have loved starting something from scratch. I became certified to teach Mental Health First Aide which is just like first aid or CPR but for Mental Health issues. I am now certified to teach the adult, youth, Fire EMS and higher education versions. I became certified to teach the nurturing parent, a parenting curriculum. We now have 4 of us who teach in our KMM funded public education department and have trained thousands across the region and are able to offer a course that's valued at \$175 per person for free. Each of this new Mental Health First aiders has become an anti-stigma activist and by now I can only imagine how

many people living with mental health challenges they have helped. We just certified a class here at All Faiths last week. Many of you have probably seen me on a TV locally advertising and getting the mental wellness message out.

During that first year Paul Simeone the VP of Behavioral Health was hired, and it was funny because 6 months into his job he asked what my position was because he was seeing me constantly and people always mentioned me. I said Paul I'm just good at getting invited to the right rooms. Three years ago, Paul and I met with the leaders of Mental Health services at the Lee County school district. He asked if there was anything Kids Minds Matter could do for them what might it be. They described a problem not a task. They said they had families and children that they worked with that despite all of their best efforts that they seemed to make no progress. They would set up appointments, they provided school services but nothing was working. While I was at UMass I had worked in a SAMSHA project that addressed just this population using a method called wrap around. The pilot project I was a part of become a model that was rolled out across the state. It involves intensive care coordination, peer specialists, and flexible funds. Since that initial meeting we now have 8 staff providing wrap around in Lee and Collier County School as well as the Health Care Network in Immokalee. We have been able to assist approximately 200 of the neediest and most at risk children in SWFL. We have seen 50 percent increases in school attendance, increase in grades by 2 letter grades, as well as clinically significant reduction in behavioral incidents. I can proudly say we are making a difference.

I also have been on the board of Visuality the local LGBTQ service agency. When I joined the board, the organization was on the verge of closing. I have served as the treasurer for the last two years. We now actually have staff for the first time and are on the verge of having a building for an LGBTQ Community Center here in Lee County. We have a thriving youth program providing a safe place for our LGBTQ+ youth to gather as they can no longer do so in our schools as a result of the don't say gay bill.

I need to clearly say none of these things have I accomplished alone but I know I am proud to say it has been a gift to be here and to have made a meaningful

difference. I have done this work in memory of my friend John and for my community LGBTQ+ people who are under threat here in Florida. I remember the words I saw at Yad Vashem, the holocaust museum in Israel. Never again! When you enter the museum, the outside is the same dessert landscape you see in much of Israel. When you leave the Museum in the back you look on a valley which is a forest of trees. The museum is planting a tree for every victim of the holocaust. The contrast is startling and powerful. Let us all remember never again.

For me as a Unitarian Universalist, I live to serve. Service has brought meaning to my life and a reason to get up in the morning and a reason to cause good trouble as John Lewis said. L. Griswold Williams said "Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest for truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer".

May all  
our prayers of service be heard and make a difference.  
May it be so