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“Community Organizer”

*“My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
So much has been destroyed I have to cast **my** lot with those who, age after age,  
perversely (stubbornly, ignoring the evidence), with no extraordinary power, reconstitute  
the world.”* #463 Adrienne Rich

I have chosen Adrienne Rich’s affirmation for us this morning, because in my mind, that’s what community organizers do. They reconstitute the world. Not only do they reconstitute the world, but they secure the connections in our interdependent web. Our sacred symbol, the interdependent web of all existence can become frayed and fragile when we turn our backs on it, when we fail to see, and act. It needs our attention to make firm our connections to others, both within our church community and outside it. Community organizer --- a way to lead and make strong our connections to each other.

And so, **how do we address the needs of the poor, the marginalized?** It is so huge. There are so many problems. So much has been a destroyed. Our city, our nation, our world is in a disastrous condition. All we need to do is open the paper or listen to the news to see the multitudes who are suffering. Do we have a moral obligation to act? Why should we even care, if **we** are okay ourselves?

And, we can’t **all** be community organizers. We don’t have the time. We don’t have the energy. Maybe we should just take care of ourselves, and hope that each person can do the same. Hope is a good thing, an important part of the good life. And yet, maybe there is another way.

We are not the only ones who have been challenged by these questions, these feelings of powerlessness in the face of overwhelming problems.

This morning I want to tell you about Joseph Tuckerman and the world he was living in 200 years ago. My source for his story is the very fine book by David Robinson, the Unitarians and the Universalists. Although Tuckerman had come from a wealthy family, he developed a concern for those who were not so fortunate. At this time, in the early 1800s there developed huge changes in the economy. He wanted to create a new way of looking at the problems created by this change, that is, **the problem of growing poverty**. We would like to think that such Unitarian agitation was a threat to the established economic order in America, but that would be an over statement. Still, his impulses to reform **were the seeds** of social progress at that time. The seeds that are planted for the purpose of reconstituting the world **are important**. His efforts spawned other efforts not only in Boston, but also in New York and in the West, where they fell into place as part of a general Unitarian missionary effort. Today, the UUA

continues to value and support those in our ministry who choose, not the parish, but the community to bring their spiritual values and energies into the world at large. Hospital chaplains, prison chaplains, those who serve non-profit agencies are part of our UU family and urban ministries. This was the movement begun by Joseph Tuckerman. Whether you are a professional, or a parishioner yourself, **our** belief in working for justice and equity is an important part of who we are, as UUs. The action that Tuckerman took and was so good at, is the same attitude that gives us UUs the label, "more about deed than creed."

We believe in a faith that is nurtured in our home community, and then carried out of the sanctuary into action for change.

Tuckerman thought that preaching was much less important than personal visitation and counseling. He took on **all** the urban poor as his parish. He was the first called to be a full time minister at large. His job was to address the needs of the poor and educate the sometimes-obtuse Unitarian clergy and laity about urban poverty. He pioneered a form of urban social work.

He believed that such a ministry, if practiced on a wide enough scale, would in fact unify the classes, even if it did not equalize them. He, of course, as others of his time who saw "how much had been destroyed", was aware of the facts of poverty and attempted to be an **awakener!!** His heart was moved...and he made his own attempt to reconstitute the world he lived in.

Tuckerman's story begins when he **noticed** others in his community. He decided to look at his world in a new way, a way of engaging his gifts, and to do a new thing.

Do we have a moral obligation to change the world? It's a big job. Perhaps a new story begins with noticing. Perhaps each of us can connect **one new thread** in our interdependent web.

This thought reminds me of another community organizer, Dorothy Day, whose thoughts are expressed this way:

*"People say, what is the sense of our **small** effort.  
They cannot see that we **must** lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.  
A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions.  
Each one of our thoughts, words and deeds is like that.  
No one has a right to sit down and feel hopeless.  
There's too much work to do."*

The problem, it seems is to feel overwhelmed by all we cannot do. I am only one, what can I do? What difference do I make? The world is in such a mess; can **any action** make a difference?

I want to share a personal story here, not because I am an example of what Tuckerman did in beginning an entire movement, but my experience was to follow my instincts, with no idea of where they would lead. Early in my adult life, I had an experience of living in the Philippines, where everyone speaks four

or five languages. This thought totally amazed me. And it also shocked me. I realized I was so deficient in languages, even though I had studied in both high school and college. But could I really speak another language? No way. So when my children became old enough, I made many attempts to at least expose them to different languages. They started into Elementary School; I became an active Mom, joined the PTA, became part of the leadership in the PTA...you know how that works. These are **my** children, and **I've** got ideas about how to improve education!!

I began to notice that there were a number of Spanish speaking families at our school. This was a different situation from the one that is now the culture of LA. My mind started turning. They can speak Spanish, but we have no foreign language program in our school and none on the horizon, as far as the Board is concerned. Mmmm. So what to do? Because I was on the PTA board, I could get access to the names of the parents of the Spanish speaking families. I started with a Mexican American woman who was a leader of a Girl Scout troop. I figured she had already shown her ability for leadership. Maybe she would be open to a talk. As we talked, we dreamed up an after school program, so as not to interfere with regular school schedule. Yes, she would cooperate. I contacted another woman who had shown leadership. We made a plan about how many lessons we would create that could be fun for beginning elementary school kids. I got the names of other mothers. Some were quite reluctant. They would want to check with their husbands. Okay, but this is **really** important and **you**, who speak Spanish, must be the teachers. At last I got six mothers to agree. I would act as the substitute teacher when needed. We made the lesson plans, which were developed by the Spanish-speaking Moms.

**We were ready!!** The information went out to students. 100 kids signed up. Yikes. That's a lot of kids. That's a lot of planning. **That's a lot of interest!!**

Many mistakes were made along the way, but none so great that the program fell through. On the last day, we had planned a fiesta to celebrate our learning. I will never forget the image of this lovely young woman from Puerto Rico who had volunteered to bring watermelon punch. I had no idea what to expect. She came to school, pulling a little red wagon, with two very large buckets full of home made watermelon punch. It was simply delicious!!

I don't know what happened the next year, as our family moved to the Northwest. I **had** been a community organizer. I had been selfish. I wanted my children exposed to the Spanish language spoken by native Spanish speakers, not by me. Do I imagine that I started the whole language-immersion program we have today in schools? No way. So what **did** I do? I believe I strengthened our beloved interdependent web of all existence. I reached out to women in the community in a new way. I honored their skills as teachers and their language. I knew this skill was important for our English-speaking students. I sowed a few seeds. These were seeds based on my impulse to reform our educational system, to increase our connection to our Spanish-speaking community members.

I had empowered some who had little power, who were then the marginalized. I don't know what happened to those seeds. Now, would they laugh at me for starting an after school Spanish program? Yes. Spanish is spoken everywhere in Los Angeles!! But **my heart** became a little bit bigger from that experience.

Some of you at Rainier valley have reached out to folks around the world. You sowed the seeds from a feeling you had. Some of you have felt the call of justice and done things in the community to keep our social structure more balanced. And some of you have extended yourself within your church, to keep the heart, the community's heart warmed so there is a place to go when we need to be at home.

As I learn of all the actions taken here to make the world a better place, I am reminded of this story by Anne Lamott.

I have just finished reading her book, Bird by Bird, p. 159 She is describing a group of students who have decided to form a writing group, instead of going it alone. In this situation, she says, "They end up giving the new students rousing pep talks about how great it is to be part of a writing group, how much **they've come to care** for one another, how it helps them get their work done. They've gone on from being four tense, slightly conceited, lonely people who wanted to write about one of those weird little families we fashion out of whoever's around us. **They're very tender with one another.** They all look a lot less slick and cool than they did when they were in my class, because **helping each other** has made their hearts get bigger. A big heart is both a clunky and a delicate thing; it doesn't protect itself and it doesn't hide. It stands out, like a baby's fontanel, where you can see the soul pulse through. You can see this pulse in them now!!" She says fondly of her writing students.

Maybe you could even say that "as **we** reconstitute the world, we also reconstitute ourselves.:" Our hearts become bigger. Can you feel your heart? Can you feel the soul pulse through? It feels good to be here all together, growing the heart of this church. We can notice each other, we can act on what we see and hear. It's really very selfish. My heart is bigger, your heart is bigger, and the heart of our community is bigger. With no extraordinary power, we reconstitute the world.

The world is better off because of the work done by many of our UU members. Do you remember William Schultz, former president of the UUA and director of Amnesty International? He wrote one of our UUA leaflets, entitled "engagement with the world, a personal perspective of faith in Action. These are **his** words:

"Go all the way back to the Counter Reformation, to the earliest anti-Trinitarian debate, and you find a faith, our Unitarian faith, that calls for **engagement** with the world, **not retreat.**

But what are the true odds of succeeding at saving the world? For every victory of justice, we can cite a dozen instances of its defeat. Do our actions in the face of wrong and tragedy truly make a difference?

My religion has taught me that the meaning of history is still in the making, that **tomorrow is not set**. There is no such thing as fate. "The future lasts a long time," and "each day of it can be shaped"

What is the good news? We can stand with Adrienne Rich as she says, "I have to cast **my** lot with those who, age after age, perversely, stubbornly, ignoring all evidence, with **no extraordinary power**, reconstitute the world. #463

A leader is someone who notices the mess that is around. A community organizer is one who chooses, with no extraordinary power, to use her or his own gifts to rethink the situation. A leader is someone who does **one thing** to strengthen the interdependent web of all existence. Whether you have the ability to lead a large organization as William Shultz has, whether you begin new social services as Joseph Tuckerman did, whether you teach a group of students, inspiring them to connect as Ann Lamott did, whether you share your gifts of language as the Spanish speaking women did.

Whoever you are, wherever you are, you too can participate in reconstituting the world, and feel your heart grow bigger.

We will close with these words of Langston Hughes:

Hold fast to dreams            For if dreams die  
Life is a broken-winged bird            that cannot fly.  
Hold fast to dreams            for when dreams go  
Life is a barren field            frozen in the snow.