

**Speaking Out, Creating Justice**  
**Shoreline UU Congregation**  
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In his book, *The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice*, the Reverend Dr. Richard Gilbert, retired minister of First Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York, tells the following story:

In the Roman Mass there is a frequent exchange between priest and people. One morning the liturgy in a neighborhood Catholic church went like this: “The Lord be with you,” to which the congregation replied, “and with you also.” And so it went until an ecclesiastical/technical gremlin did something to the pulpit microphone. Frustrated, the priest said, “There’s something wrong with the mike,” to which the well-trained congregation dutifully replied, “and with you also.”

Richard Gilbert adds, “There is not only something wrong with him but also with the world. Noting this, I have found deep meaning in the Hebrew phrase *Tikkun ha’olam*, repair of the world, for surely the world, wonderful as it is, is broken.” He continues, “In his essays, Emerson said there is ‘a crack in everything God has made.’ I submit that one of the central missions of the Unitarian Universalist movement is trying to fix these cracks, repairing the world and creating the Beloved Community of Love and Justice [by] sewing together spirituality and social action into a seamless garment.”

No doubt many of you are familiar with the dilemma posed by essayist E. B. White in the *New Yorker*: “If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning, torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world, and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.”

To save the world or savor it? I have shared E. B. White’s perplexity, and I am sure I am not alone. In fact, this question has nagged our liberal religious community for decades, and it is not yet resolved. Some of us long for a faith that responds to the call to justice and mercy by the Hebrew prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, or Micah, a call that creates a world in which justice flows down like water... Others of us seek a faith that offers serenity, a private refuge from the tempestuous world outside our doors.

Our congregations often reflect this dilemma: we are pulled in one direction by our personal spiritual needs, and in another by our need to make a difference in the world. To savor, or to save the world.

Gilbert is clear about his understanding of Unitarian Universalism’s most important tasks. Gilbert writes. “I submit that one of the central missions of the Unitarian Universalist movement is repairing the world and creating the Beloved Community of Love and Justice by sewing together spirituality and social action into a seamless garment.”

A humanist, Gilbert respects the power of traditional religious language, and uses that language to emphasize his point. He believes that our actions as religious people naturally

emerge from spiritual reflection, spiritual reflection that guides us in our work in this world. "The social without the spiritual is rudderless," he writes. "The spiritual without the social is vacuous." *The social without the spiritual is rudderless. The spiritual without the social is vacuous.*

Gilbert does not shrink from identifying what he sees as one of the greatest failures of liberal religion: our unwillingness to institutionalize – to *institutionalize* – our desire for lasting social change. "If liberal churches can mobilize themselves only to create more and better food kitchens and do not resolutely seek out the causes of hunger in a land of plenty," Gilbert writes, "if they fill yet more Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets and do not wonder what happens to people who must eat the whole year, then I charge they are ethically irresponsible."

Our spirituality is foundational, Gilbert argues, as we move forward to work for meaningful and systemic social change. It is in our worshipping communities – in *this* religious community – we nourish ourselves for the work of the world. At its best, worship is an expression of, but not a substitute for, social responsibility. At its best the religious life of the community in worship overflows into public ministry. As the Reverend Kate Lore said in a recent article, "Justice is what love looks like when it speaks in public."

In her book, *Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now*, the Reverend Doctor Rebecca Parker, president of the Unitarian Universalist Starr King School for the Ministry, looks at the relationship of inner religious life to activism in the world, asking, "How do we live in this world? What is our religious task?" Our task, she suggests, is to inspire hope – not hope based on the dream of the fall of evil empires and the unfolding of life into times of greater beauty and justice, but hope that confronts, in her words, "the icy, hard ground of suffering, violence, injustice, and deceit. It means savoring the sweetness of human love, ... and opening our hearts to the sources of refreshment and grace that are given to us. ... It means reconstructing from the ruins a world of hospitality and peace. It means living as one of those who, as Adrienne Rich says, 'with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.'"

But how can we create a structure that overflows into a public ministry consistent with our faith and values?

Both Gilbert and Parker believe it requires both personal and congregational engagement in the affairs of the world. Parker says that for her, "Social activism becomes a spiritual practice by which I reclaim my humanity and refuse to accept my cultivation into numbness and disengagement.... Hope lies in our ability to renew our citizenship through engaged action."

Parker adds, we do not have time to be cynical about the world, as tempting as that may be. No doubt many of us, at one time or another, would agree with Woody Allen, who once said, "If there is a God, clearly this God is an underachiever."

If at times God seems to be an underachiever, then perhaps we should step forward to help her out.

Richard Gilbert likes to tell this Hasidic story:

A disciple said to the Rebbe Menahkem-Mendl of Kotzk:

"God, who is perfect, took six days to create a world that is not perfect. How is that possible?"

The Rebbe scolded him: "Could you have done better?"

"Yes, I think so," stammered the disciple.

"You could have done better?" the Rebbe cried out. "Then what are you waiting for? You don't have a minute to waste. Go ahead, start working!"

As a religious community we have ways in which we are working. Unitarian Universalist congregations can, and do, provide the base through which we come together to address the social issues in our communities. For many of us, our congregations are the primary institutional setting for addressing unjust practices locally and nationally.

Many of us recall First Unitarian Church of Portland's acts supporting same sex couples' rights, including wrapping the church, which covers one city block, with ribbon and hanging a three-story banner to face the freeway, a public testimony to the church's standing on the side of love for all couples. At my home church, the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation offered sanctuary to a tent city when it was faced with immediate removal from city property by the police. The congregation then organized with other faith communities a system to host the tent city on a rotating basis, and worked with city government and camp residents as they developed the structure that continues to shape their community's life. In their work for justice for the houseless members of their community, many congregational members received an unexpected gift: they found their lives enriched as they worked hand in hand with their new neighbors.

When we as people of faith engage in social action, we become participatory citizens and agents of history. Our engaged presence is needed – it is *essential* – if we are to make history instead of being pushed around by it. As a religious community we must speak out to identify the sins – the injustices – in this world, then work to right those sins – one step at a time, one tent city at a time, one discriminatory law at a time, to build the beloved community of love and justice.

Here in Washington, that is the mission of Washington State Unitarian Universalist Voices for Justice, the statewide legislative advocacy network which I am privileged to serve as coordinator. Many of you at Shoreline receive our newsletters and work with us to help bring our liberal religious perspective to social, economic, and environmental justice issues in our state legislature in Olympia.

UU Voices, founded six years ago, is one of more than 12 established and emerging legislative networks in state capitals around the country. Our parent organization was the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which recognized the growing need for our values to be heard in our states. UU Voices and the other states' networks maintain a close relationship with the UUSC and UUA, and with the Washington, DC UU Office on Advocacy as we collaborate on issues that transcend state boundaries: quality health care access for all, environmental stewardship and climate change reversal.

As coordinator of Washington State UU Voices for Justice and its registered lobbyist, my role is to stay on top of state legislation related to our legislative agenda, and to engage congregations and individuals in our mission of creating a more just world. Our goal is to bring UUs together in the work for social justice, and provide the necessary tools to be effective.

Each year UU Voices members and supporters come together at a fall legislative conference to establish our legislative agenda. This year, representatives selected three 2010 session priorities:

Restorative justice, an umbrella that includes abolition of the death penalty, 3 strikes sentencing reform, and the prohibition of sentencing juveniles to life without parole.

Environmental protection, including three specific 2010 bills that call for investment in clean water, mandate safe baby bottles, and support sustainable agriculture.

Tax equity, including the elimination of tax exemptions, development of a revenue package to prevent an all-cuts budget, and reform of the tax structure to include a state income tax.

Most of these issues will not be solved in the 60 days of the 2010 session; however, groundwork is developed that will keep these economic, social and environmental justice issues before the legislature and the public not only this year, but each year.

UU Voices keeps you informed through weekly email updates about the issues on our legislative agenda, provides information about lobby days and rallies, and offers talking points for contacting your legislators.

We also help you speak out on issues as a Unitarian Universalist. I know that many of you are experienced political advocates, working on campaigns for candidates and issues. You have written and called your legislators. You have supported groups like Planned Parenthood, People for Puget Sound, the successful Yes on Referendum 71 campaign.

When you sent your emails or made those phone calls, how many times did you identify yourself as a person of faith – a Unitarian Universalist? This is what WA State UU Voices for Justice is about: bringing our Unitarian Universalist values – our unabashedly liberal religious voices – into the political arena. It's about working together as a faith community to address systemic injustice – poverty, discrimination, degradation of this Earth's environment – and to support positive social change.

Our legislative agenda reflects this commitment. We are consistent supporters of marriage equality, bringing our religious values to support rights of all Washington families. We were instrumental in the passage of domestic partnership benefits in 2007, and in the expansion of those benefits in 2008 and 2009. In my testimony before the House and Senate committees hearing that bill, I spoke as a Unitarian Universalist minister advocating for a society of inclusion, not exclusion. Last fall We actively advocated for Referendum 71 through workshops around the state, letting our neighbors know that UU's stand on the side of love and support equal rights for all people in our state.

The 2009 legislative session was a difficult one, not only for justice advocates, but for our hard-working legislators; 2010 is equally difficult. The state faces a projected \$2.6 billion budget deficit, on top of last year's \$9 billion deficit; but our neighbors – particularly the poor and vulnerable – still face the need for life-saving programs and services.

UU Voices is working to preserve funding for very low-income housing and health care coverage for children and adults receiving public assistance. We are strong supporters of payday lending regulation. Low income persons are often trapped in a mountain of accumulating debt and sky-high interest rate with these loans. In 2009, legislation passed that limits the number of loans and requires that borrowers be offered repayment options. Efforts continue in this session to regulate interest rates, despite very strong opposition by the payday lending industry to defeat regulation.

Fortunately, UU Voices is not alone in our work for justice in Olympia. As an active member of the Religious Coalition for the Common Good, which includes representatives from the Quaker Public Policy, Lutheran Public Policy, the Washington Association of Churches, two Jewish advocacy organizations, and a group of Catholic women religious, we bring our faith voices to meetings with Governor Chris Gregoire, Senator Lisa Brown, House Speaker Frank

Chopp, and the chairs of budget committees to urge continued funding for life-sustaining public services for the poorest and most vulnerable people in our state.

Undoubtedly we do not speak for all UU's in Washington. You may not agree with our positions on all issues or with WA UU Voices' legislative agenda. I urge you to attend our workshops and the November legislative conference, to make your views known. I urge you to pick up one of our brochures in the entry, and sign the list there to receive our newsletter. We want your perspectives on the critical issues facing our state.

UU Voices' goal is to provide a way for all UUs in Washington to speak out on justice issues – to be heard as citizens, and as members of this religious community. Our goal is to unabashedly say, I am a Unitarian Universalist who believes that accessible health care is a justice issue, a right, not a privilege; who believes in a society of inclusion, not exclusion; who maintains that each one of us has a responsibility to preserve the environment and the health of this planet.

WA UU Voices invites you to expand our justice work and to advocate for state legislation that brings about effective, systemic social change.

As Richard Gilbert says, "To seek justice, to work for the Beloved Community, is simply part of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist." Bringing our collective voices to this task strengthens our work for the Beloved Community. At Washington State UU Voices for Justice we believe deeply that our political work is religious work, work that reflects our Unitarian Universalist values of the inherent worth and dignity of each person, of the right to participate in the democratic process, of the sacredness of this earth on which we live and for which we share responsibility. Together, we can be part of this life-saving and life-giving work.

So may it be.

**Benediction:**

As we go forth from this sacred community,  
may the spirit that leads us in our search for truth and justice –  
that spirit that has impelled men and women to commit themselves  
to truth, freedom, and equality for all –  
may that spirit be alive and renewed in each of us  
now and into our coming days and years.

*Amen, shalom, and blessed be.*

Robert Senghas (adapted)