

## Giving Life the Shape of Justice

### Readings

#### Standing

*In honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.*

By Tess Baumberger

When a black man rose  
to teach me of tolerance  
and treating respectfully  
all my brothers and sisters,  
I stood with him  
flushed with rage  
at those who can not,  
will not, do not,  
see as equal  
all other people.

He freed my feet  
and as I walked  
shoulder to shoulder  
with hallowed humanity  
that hot holy ruby  
rose again to my face,  
coloring my voice to proclaim  
the rights of every one,  
the challenge of democracy,  
the claims of freedom,  
and the tasks of true liberty,  
which will not sit with us all  
until it stands for us each.

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#### **In his hands are justice**

By Tess Baumberger

*This is a poem I wrote about a man at the homeless shelter where I served as a volunteer chaplain during my seminary training.*

Quiet man with slightly graying hair,  
well-groomed, simply dressed,  
a vortex of power mostly undetected,  
holding tight to dignity  
with his bald hands,  
he stands with shoulders relaxed,

compared with furrowed intensity of brow.

He tells a tale of fighting for his rights,  
reclaiming the vehicle, also his home,  
confiscated by the government.

I picture him, armor-clad,  
astride a fiery horse,  
tilting with city council giants.

As he talks the frank gestures  
of his expressive hands  
are like my farmer father's,  
and his brow unfurls with surprise  
as he holds up war trophies,  
purple heart checks,  
and iron cross registration,  
symbols of his home returned to him.

And this lonely victory  
lengthens his spine  
and his bearing becomes pride  
and there is honor in his eyes,  
and in his hands are justice.

## **Giving Life the Shape of Justice**

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Dr. Tess Baumberger  
Unity Church of North Easton  
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Did you know that research indicates fairness might be hardwired into our brains? A study published in the well-respected scientific journal “Nature” reports that Capuchin monkeys seem to have an aversion to inequality. On the basis of this fact and others, researchers suggest that, “ideas of fairness and justice may be instinctual in nature.”

This seems startling at first, especially when we consider how many people act in unjust ways. If fairness is an instinct you wouldn’t expect such variation. But perhaps influences around us account for the differences between us. In other ways the idea of fairness as instinctual makes sense. Really young kids sure yell if they feel they’ve been short changed. Besides, justice as instinct this may explain why we can easily recognize something that scholars seem to have so much trouble defining clearly. As a concept, justice is kind of slippery.

Instead of giving you a scholarly lecture on the virtue of justice today, I’d like to contemplate how an instinct for fairness could be shaped into a lasting commitment to justice. In my life, personal experience, and the witness of faith, and the work of the local church all played a part. So I’ll proceed in that order, talking first about personal experience, then about justice in our tradition. Lastly, I’ll share a couple thoughts about how we might build on Unity Church’s historic justice commitments to shape a focused justice ministry for the future.

Let me start with my own experience, not because I see myself as a paragon of justice, but because mine is the story I know best. Fairness has always been important to me. A certain memory comes to mind - when I was a kid, it was a big treat to have a soda. When my mom gave us two cans to split three ways, my two younger brothers usually asked me to do the splitting. So I would choose three glasses of the same shape and size, line them up on the kitchen counter, and pour until they were as even as possible. I have this vivid memory of looking at those fizzing surfaces and smelling the sweetness of the treat, with one brother on either side, monitoring closely.

My parents, my family, and the faith of my childhood all played important roles in shaping my instinct toward fairness. They did so perhaps more powerfully through actions than through words. For instance, from early on I saw my parents kindly helping poor people in our community.

Our church, St. Peter's Catholic Church in Colman, South Dakota, was lovingly built by humble farmer hands. The Christianity preached and lived inside it emphasized the compassion Jesus had for the poor and the downtrodden, the ill and the weak, the outcast and the stranger.

Ironically enough, as a young adult the sense of fairness nurtured in that church led me to reject the faith of my childhood. I could not stand its unfair treatment of women or the way the church had historically treated First Peoples – undermining and destroying religions, languages, and cultures in ways that did not seem fair or “Christian” to me.

My sense of justice led me to join protests against my college's investments in apartheid. We took over the campus administrative building until the trustees came to discuss dis-investing. At that time I learned many of the protest songs that later I would sing at rallies and marches protesting various wars.

The most life-altering thing my sense of justice led me to do was to volunteer to act as chaplain in a day shelter for homeless people. That was the fall of 2001, when I was serving as a ministerial intern in a church in the wealthy suburb of Walnut Creek, CA. It was quite a study in contrasts, serving that church and ministering to homeless people in Berkeley at the same time.

The first time I walked into the Multi-Agency Service Center in Berkeley, I had a theoretical understanding of racial and economic injustice. That should have prepared me for the high proportion of people of color there. It did not. I was shocked, and as it sunk in, I felt both sad and outraged.

At first it was really hard to get myself to the center for that one afternoon a week. In fact, it was never easy. It was difficult to meet people whose lives were so desperate, who were living in survival mode. It was hard to witness the reality of poverty at such close hand, and to hear how people ended up there.

Over time I learned to recognize the look of a newly homeless person. It was a look of terror, and disbelief that life could be this way. I learned to go sit by those people and listen to their stories, offering sympathy and understanding, for what it was worth. I learned to pray with them if they asked, often using theologies that were very different from my own.

There I discovered stories and personalities that did not fit into my preconceived notions about homeless people. One man was a former Black Panther, who chose to be homeless because he wanted to live outside a system he considered to be unjust. He had struggled with addiction in the past, but was clean and sober and had been for some time.

Another man chose to be homeless so he could devote his life to advocacy. He was diabetic and had cancer. There was no center that provided palliative care for homeless people, so he slept on the streets, when he could. The police targeted him because of his activism, making him move several times a night. He was exhausted as well as ill and in pain.

There was a man from Africa who chose to be homeless so he could send more money home to his family. He worked as a day laborer on construction sites. Several people I met there worked, but at minimum wage they had to choose between necessities. They could feed and clothe themselves and their kids, or they could have a home, but not both.

I did meet people who were mentally ill there, but most had and took their medications. One man was an admitted alcoholic who'd had a career, a wife and child. Then one day his wife and child died in a terrible car accident. He crawled into the bottle and never came out.

Once I saw him with his face covered with contusions. He had been arrested and thrown in jail long enough to dry out, and so he went into DTs. He had fallen and been hurt during his convulsions. He told me there was no publicly funded detox center there. You had to have money to dry out.

The center ran a day program for recovering addicts, but there were also those who had no interest in recovery. Over time I could distinguish the folks who would be homeless until they died or hit a bottom so low I couldn't imagine it. I could also distinguish those who were just passing through, who would go through the program and

get back on their feet. One of these was the woman described in this poem I wrote about her, called "China Cup."

Her face is like a china cup  
made for drinking delicate things.  
I think you could see through it  
if you held her to a sunny window.  
It's hard to admit not remembering her.  
She reminds me that she asked  
for the name of a church she could attend,  
where they'd welcome a homeless person.

She sings for me in teapot soprano,  
a signal of things brimming  
with sorrow and steeped in regret.  
She listens with her blossom eyes,  
that have, too often, opened onto misery,  
searching my green tea irises  
as though they speak more clearly  
than anything I could ever say.

She has such a sweet expression,  
as if innocence, once written there,  
was not inclined to leave her face  
and became kilned into her features.  
To look at her you wouldn't guess  
she's a recovering heroin addict.  
I've heard that well-made china  
can withstand enormous pressure.

As I established trust with them, people invited me to meetings of the Berkeley Homeless Coalition, which was planning a legal homeless encampment. They had done their research, having visited other encampments before working to establish guidelines, including a ban on drugs and alcohol.

They identified open lots and then went to the city with their plan. The city refused to deal with them. So they decided to camp illegally in the park in front of city hall. They asked me to help. This was during my last year in seminary. I was preparing for my interview with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, studying for finals and preparing to look for my first job as a minister, not to mention parenting my seven year old.

However, their needs were so much greater than my own, how could I refuse? The first night of the encampment I went down and blessed the space, leading a ritual to

hold all their hopes and fears. The next few days I went down each day, bringing pots of soup (they started calling me “the soup lady”), and offering support. One woman told me she’d never felt so safe in all her years on the streets as she did in that encampment.

Eventually the city agreed to a meeting. Folks in the camp asked me to go with them as a witness, and I did. A couple of times I interrupted a city official to say, “You can’t talk to him like that, he’s a human being too.”

In the end the city offered hotel vouchers for cold rainy nights, especially for disabled people (of which there were more and more as funding for their programs was slashed). However, the city refused the Coalition’s plea for a legal encampment. Furthermore, they said they would send police to clear out the illegal one if it hadn’t disbanded by Thanksgiving.

The day before the deadline, I went down to help clean up. Most folks were gone, and I joined the few who remained sweeping, raking, and picking up garbage. My favorite guy from the center was there, in his wheelchair.

This man had a progressive neuromuscular disease. Before the illness struck, he had worked as a security guard in a bank. His wife had died and he did not want to be a burden to his seven children so he chose homelessness. It was such a relief to me when he found a home. He kept falling and injuring himself at the shelters, because they placed the cots placed so close together it was hard for him to navigate.

Anyway, that day at the camp he rolled his chair over to me and said when we first met me he’d never have expected that I’d do something like this. He gestured at the rake in my hand. He said he’d figured that I’d just hang around for a little while and then leave. He was surprised that some white girl would stick around so long and help so much. He said he was glad I did. So am I.

Quite frankly, my transformation surprised me as well. I’d undergone what some liberation theologians call “a conversion to the poor.” Meeting people and hearing their stories showed me that poverty is a terrible injustice that has real, true faces. As tough as it was for me to confront that reality, I look on it as a time of great aliveness in my formation as a person of conscience.

My experience taught me that just serving poor people’s needs is not enough. It’s like the story of the two Buddhist monks standing by a river. A person comes floating

by, crying for help and the young monk jumps in to save her. As he climbs back up the bank, another person comes by and he jumps back in. After the third rescue, the older monk walks off, upriver.

The young monk cries after him, “Why are you leaving? Can’t you see all these people in the river? Come help me save them!”

The elder monk replies, “It is good to save people from the river. You do that. I will go upstream and try to prevent them from falling in.”

My experience taught me that as important as it is to minister to poor people and to be charitable, it is not enough. It’s not enough because such ministrations may only serve to make people dependent on your assistance. Despite our good intentions, our help may further dis-empower people, which may keep them stuck in poverty.

The experiences of my life that have shaped it toward justice, have led to me to these conclusions: In addition to charity, then, we have to figure out the root causes of poverty, correct any injustices in the system (like unfair school funding) and then build programs that empower people to overcome poverty and advocate for themselves. We must further ensure adequate public funding for effective programs. This is a prudent course of action.

It’s no mere coincidence that anyone concerned about justice ends up in our tradition. That is because justice has always held a central place in our religion. Theologically, our impulse to justice rests on the idea that each human being has inherent worth and dignity.

If the Divine Spark is there within each of us then we need to honor it in very real ways. We need to work to create an equitable society in which each person is empowered to develop and to make real the potential of that spark. In fact, in our second principle we covenant to affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations.

Historically, Unitarian Universalists have done this a number of ways, including direct ministry through projects like our food drive here today, and the program that became the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry in Roxbury. We have also advocated for justice through the legal system and in government.

At denominational meetings, we have passed numerous resolutions calling for justice. One of these, written by Clarence Skinner (a personal hero of mine) was adopted by the Universalist convention in 1917. It shares a vision of a justice-shaped world. It calls for, among other things....

“An Economic Order which shall give to every human being an equal share in the common gifts of God, and in addition all he can earn by his own labor.

“A Social Order in which there shall be equal rights for all, special privilege for none, the help of the strong for the weak until the weak become strong.

“[And] A Spiritual Order which shall build out of the growing lives of living men the growing temple of the living God.”

Drafting and passing such resolutions is a model of religious advocacy that seems to be giving way to a different way of doing things. The religious justice work of the future will, I think, reach across boundaries in many ways. First, it will reach across religious boundaries to build coalitions between people of different faiths on issues of common concern such as poverty, ecology, the death penalty, and prisoner rights. Religions on the liberal end of the spectrum can also work together on gender justice and marriage rights.

Further, these coalitions will reach out to include secular nonprofit organizations working for these same causes. These coalitions of religious and secular groups will be able to work more effectively to identify and address the root causes of injustice. Such strong coalitions will be better able to advocate for public policy decisions and legislation that addresses those root injustices. They will also be able to throw the weight of religious witness behind programs that help people pull themselves up from poverty. The philosophy in general is that united we are stronger than we ever could be by ourselves.

This trend is true not only at the state and national levels, but also at the level of congregations. Knowing that we can be more effective when working alongside others, we are seeing congregations of widely different faiths working together to address the needs of their shared communities.

Unity Church has done all sorts of good things to serve others. This church has been active in the No Place for Hate campaign, and in supporting Woman Place, a shelter

for battered women. We support a group of the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and have developed a program to teach English to speakers of other languages.

In this time of economic stress, I believe there will be many opportunities for us to unite with people of other faiths to address poverty in our communities and beyond. In working with others on charitable and justice programs, we may have a greater impact than we could on our own.

We at Unity Church can start by building on some of our current ties. For instance, we could search for common ground with Temple Israel, with whom we share our space. We also have a connection through our bell choir with a UCC church in Dorchester, and could perhaps expand that connection to include shared charitable and justice work. It would be a good thing to “sound out” with them. Get it? Bell choir? Sound out?

Ethicist Robin Lovin defines societal justice as the fair distribution of the things people need in order to have good lives. As a personal virtue, Lovin says justice is all about balance. He writes, “Just people lead balanced lives, balanced between both their needs and the claims of their neighbors, and between the various good possibilities that make claims on their time, energy, and skill.... We will recognize such people... by the fact that their choices seem right, even if we could not say in advance what those choices ought to be.”

I started this sermon with the idea that we may have an inborn instinct toward fairness, and that over time people, beliefs and experiences can nurture this instinct into a full commitment to justice. Prudence, love and fortitude enter into that commitment as we discern where we can best use our time, energy and skill to do the most good for others.

At the start of this service we sang, calling on the Spirit of Life to give our lives the shape of justice. May Unity Church be a place that forms our lives and those of our children into that sacred shape. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

Blessed be and amen.