



Justice Sunday 2019

Sample Worship Service

JOINING TOGETHER FOR JUSTICE

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Justice Sunday 2019 Focus

An annual spring program of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Justice Sunday is a single day of learning, support, and action for human rights. This year's focus is on listening to, learning from, and collaborating with communities on the front lines of human rights issues – particularly climate justice.

Suggested Reading

From “Notebook of a Return to My Native Land,” by Aimé Césaire, Martinique poet, translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith.

And we are standing now, my country and I, hair in the wind,
my hand puny in its enormous fist and now the strength
is not in us but above us,
in a voice that drills the night and the hearing like
the penetrance of an apocalyptic wasp [...]
for it is not true that the work of humankind is done
that we have no business being on earth
that we parasite the world
that it is enough for us to heel to the world whereas the work
of humanity has only begun
and we still must overcome all the interdictions wedged in
the recesses of our fervor
and no race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence, on strength
and there is room for everyone at the convocation
and we know now that the sun turns around our earth lighting
the parcel designated by our will alone and that every star falls
from sky to earth at our command.

Suggested Hymns

Opening Hymn

109: As We Come Marching, Marching

Middle Hymn

108: My Life Flows On in Endless Song

Closing Hymn

131: Love Will Guide Us



Partnership as Solidarity

Sermon by Josh Leach, UUSC Policy Analyst

“Understand. The death of the brotherhood. Once, once an injury to one is an injury to all. Once, once they had to live for each other [...], because that was the only way of survival for all of them, the easy sharing, the knowing that when you needed... you’d be staked. Now it was a dwindling few.”

These words appear in a short story by the American writer Tillie Olsen, “Hey Sailor, What Ship?” Olsen was one of the great left-wing feminist writers of the Great Depression, and like many of her stories, this one deals with the experiences of working-class characters fighting wage cuts and unemployment, often struggling to preserve a united front in the face of social and political injustice.

Olsen’s passage encapsulates the fundamental dilemma of solidarity. The speaker, an out-of-work sailor named Whitey, is describing an incident in which another young man in the union realizes he is owed back pay, but he refuses to raise the matter with management because he doesn’t want to jeopardize his position by making waves. Whitey sees this as the kind of decision that ultimately undermines the whole union. “These kids, these cherry pickers,” he rants, “they don’t realize how we got what we got. Beginnin’ to lose it, too.”

In the story as in the real world, the need for solidarity arises when a group of people have a shared stake in righting a social wrong. There is strength in numbers, and making change in the world nearly always requires working in coalition with others who share the same goal. Yet a challenge often comes when people see an opportunity to gain a short-term advantage, privilege, or elevation in status at the expense of the larger group. This is the danger Whitey senses in the actions of his fellow worker. By choosing to guard his position over insisting on the rights he’s owed as a member, the young worker is undercutting the benefits of all his comrades – the benefits that their forbears in the labor movement fought hard to obtain.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee encounters both the strength and the challenges of solidarity in every aspect of its work for human rights. Believing that the solutions to structural injustice begin with the people closest to the problem, who organize their own community to demand their rights, UUSC works for human rights using a model of eye-to-eye partnership. In order for a movement to grow, front line communities build partnerships and alliances with people who may come from different contexts

About Josh

As UUSC’s policy analyst, Josh supports UUSC’s programs through strategic research, analysis, writing, and organizing. Working closely with program leaders and the research team, he helps to identify partners, develop program strategy, and engage in research and advocacy initiatives that advance UUSC’s mission and vision, with a particular focus on the human rights of refugees and migrants. Josh received his bachelor’s degree from the University of Chicago, where he studied modern European history, and he holds a Master of Divinity degree from Harvard University.



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and different walks of life, but who share an interest or stake in the same social change. In theory, there is no upper limit on how large these coalitions can be, or just how “unlikely” the unlikely allies might be who compose it, because all of us have a stake in living in a more just world.

The challenge to this movement-building, however, is the same one Whitey faced. What happens when people are tempted to gain a short-term advantage at the expense of the larger movement? What happens when rewards are held out for a few and come at the expense of the many? In the labor movement, this is known as the danger of being co-opted. It is a risk that besets all efforts to fight for social change.

Two instances from UUSC’s recent work on migrant and climate justice show us models for how to meet and overcome this challenge. This past year, UUSC had a chance to participate in gatherings of partners who were actively working to build alliances and coalitions across cultural and geographic divides, often with extraordinary success. In each case, however, our partners have to operate in contexts where their futures, rights, safety, and dignity are on the line, and in which powerful interests will try to co-opt individual members in order to weaken the cause.

This past October, UUSC hosted and helped organize a convening in Girdwood, Alaska of First and Indigenous People who are on the front lines of forced displacement caused by climate change. It was the first gathering of this kind in the world, bringing together more than 60 representatives from communities in the Pacific Islands, Alaska, Louisiana, Bangladesh, and more. Each of the communities represented are in danger of losing access to their homes, livelihoods, cultures, and ways of life – which have existed for millennia – due to sea level rise, erosion, and other environmental impacts linked to climate change.

In February, UUSC staff participated in a summit in Maryland hosted by the National TPS Alliance, which is made up of organizers from communities affected by the cancellation of Temporary Protected Status (TPS). TPS is a humanitarian program that offers renewable status for immigrants living in the United States who cannot safely return to their home countries due to war, natural disasters, disease outbreaks, or other emergencies. In many cases, these unsafe conditions in their home countries have lasted for decades, and TPS holders have built lives and families in the United States. Despite this, the Trump administration has moved to terminate this status for the vast majority of TPS holders.

In the case of both gatherings, the communities represented face threats to their fundamental rights that are so severe as to be difficult to fully comprehend by those from an outside community.

At the First Peoples Convening in Alaska, a community leader from the island nation of Vanuatu spoke to the people assembled – telling them they ought to have the experience of flying into her country. “You will see how small and flat we are, in the midst of the vast ocean,” she said. She painted an image with words of that small island being devoured by the encroaching sea, and invited the attendees to imagine what it would mean to seek a home elsewhere. Where would they go?



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At the same convening, two community representatives from the Marshall Islands sang the national anthem of their country, before translating the final verse into English. The aching last words of the song are: “Bequeathed to us forever, I’ll never leave my dear sweet home.” It is a verse that takes on a particularly haunting meaning in light of the encroaching threats of climate change and the reality of thousands of people having to leave their homes against their will.

So too, the TPS holders gathered in Maryland in February faced the almost incalculable loss that would result if hundreds of thousands of U.S. residents are suddenly stripped of their legal status. If deprived of documentation, TPS holders will be vulnerable to deportation to places where their lives and safety may be at risk, losing access to the jobs, families, and communities they have built in the United States.

UUSC and many of its supporters marched last summer to protest the policy of separating families at the border; now, there is another family separation crisis brewing as well, triggered by the elimination of the TPS program. Currently, more than 200,000 U.S. citizen children have at least one parent who’s a TPS holder. If the program is allowed to expire, without a legislative solution in place, all of these families may soon be forced apart, separated by borders and oceans from their loved ones.

When people face existential threats of this severity, those in power often take advantage by offering them less than what they are owed, or by offering advantages to some at the expense of others. This is the co-opting strategy that is so often used to divide and disempower social movements.

In the case of the climate movement, many powerful governments and corporations have converged around the idea of carbon trading, as an alternative to phasing out industries and energy sources that contribute directly to climate change. This policy approach holds out a deceptive promise of being able to gradually limit carbon emissions and slow down the process of catastrophic climate change. In reality, however, it often harms the same indigenous communities who are already on the front lines of this human-made ecological disaster.

The kinds of carbon offset schemes that are claimed for credits on international markets often involve seizing tracts of forest and burning them in order to convert the territory into biofuel. These land grabs take resources and livelihoods away from the local communities who have been living in the forests for centuries, while leading to deforestation that actually exacerbates climate change. Carbon offsets are a false solution, in short, that hold out economic advantages for some at the expense of the many.

As for TPS, some legislators in Congress have offered partial “fixes” for some TPS holders, that would cover some members but not all of the community, or which would trade their rights against the rights of other immigrants. The Senate, for instance, recently introduced legislation that would have provided a new temporary status to TPS holders from some Latin American countries, but which would exclude entirely those from African and Asian nations. They also offered to create this partial solution for TPS holders only in exchange for new rules that would make it harder for unaccompanied refugee children to seek asylum at



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the U.S. border – attempting to pit one group of innocent people seeking safety against another.

In the face of these co-opting strategies, the temptations are great to compromise the rights of others for the sake of short-term gain. Inevitably, some natural allies are peeled away from the movement by these means.

The remarkable lesson of the First Peoples Convening and the TPS Summit, however, is that in both cases, the people closest to the problem – those with the most at stake and the most to lose – were also the people most committed to ensuring that no community was left behind. Even as their own safety and futures were on the line, they fought to ensure that justice would be served to everyone, not just themselves.

In short, they modeled the lesson of solidarity. Recognizing that being divided by co-optation never serves anyone in the long run, they worked rather to expand their list of allies and gain strength in numbers. As the more than 30 communities in the First Peoples Convening wrote in their Declaration at the close of the event, “Our issues and concerns are similar and there is added value in our collectiveness.” They committed to a solution to the climate crisis that respected the well-being and rights of all impacted communities. “We [...] call for the phase-out of fossil fuels,” they wrote, “without infringing on the right to development of indigenous nations.”

To get to this point, the convening participants had to work across cultural and geographic differences. Over three days together in Girdwood, Alaska, people from vastly different cultures and historical experiences built connections through the shared experience of dealing with climate impacts in their communities and surviving the traumas of colonization and forced displacement. They also knew the importance of enjoying the company of allies, sharing dancing, music, games, and food together from the many communities represented.

At the TPS People’s Summit, organizers reminded participants from the beginning that they had agreed as a movement to a fundamental tenet of solidarity. They made a solemn promise that in order for them to accept any TPS legislative solution, it had to include all 13 nationalities that benefited from the program.

To make good on this promise required an extraordinary organizing feat: bringing together 13 different communities scattered across the United States, many of which had little in common with each other apart from the fact of having TPS. In order to accomplish this, the TPS Alliance ensured that there was continuous on-site translation into four different languages: Spanish, English, Nepali, and Haitian Kreyol. In one inspiring scene, participants in the summit got to their feet in order to practice chants of solidarity in each other’s languages. Though the vast majority of people there spoke Spanish as their first language, by the end of the day everyone could pull off a no less rousing chant in Nepali.

One Sudanese TPS holder testified at the summit to the power of the solidarity she had witnessed. She



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said that when she learned that TPS cancellations were happening to other countries, she felt isolated and afraid. There are only around a thousand Sudanese TPS holders in the country, and they are scattered across the United States. Moreover, they have no powerful political constituency already fighting for them. She said that when she found out about the TPS Alliance, it changed her life: “It showed me that I was not alone.”

The solidarity embodied in the eye-to-eye partnership model is essential to social movements. It is partly because it is the only way to win; the only way to achieve long-term the goals we seek. Allowing oneself to be co-opted by the promise of immediate gain or a “compromise” solution may seem in the moment like a path forward; but ultimately it depletes and weakens the movement, drawing from it the only thing that gives it strength – alliances with other people across boundaries of difference. This is the practical and pragmatic reason why we need solidarity.

The other, deeper reason, however, is conveyed in the experience of the Sudanese TPS holder. Solidarity is needed because, in its absence, the fundamental rights of individuals are abandoned. When natural allies are seduced away by material rewards, those left behind are those with the smallest constituencies to defend their interests. They are the people from the smallest nations, the least populous TPS nationalities, and especially children – who, because of their age and vulnerability, are uniquely forced to rely on the care and goodwill of adults.

During the TPS Summit, a group of the children of TPS holders put on a play that they had created and rehearsed called “The Last Dream.” It depicts the experience of a group of Salvadoran children, who are celebrating their young sister’s birthday on the night that news of the TPS cancellation comes down, and they are suddenly faced with the prospect that their parents may be deported to the same country from which they had fled a U.S.-sponsored civil war and political upheaval.

Throughout the play, a nightmarish face with skeletal hands appeared at times on stage, symbolizing the human cruelty that forced so many Salvadorans from their homes decades ago, and which now threatens to exile them again from their new homes in the United States. In the powerful closing scene of the children’s play, a young girl confronts this face directly. She asks it through tears, “Have you ever known what it is to be loved?”

At its root, solidarity is love – love for the inherent worth and dignity in every person. It is a commitment to the belief that no human being is disposable, that no fundamental human rights should ever be sacrificed for the sake of the advancement of a few. Solidarity means that if even one child will suffer or be torn from her parents as a result of a policy, then that policy can never be accepted, whatever else it may pretend to achieve. It is the lesson embodied in the words of the poet Stephen Spender:

No cause is just unless it guards the innocent

As sacred trust: no truth but that



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Which reckons this child's tears an argument.

The importance and strength of deep solidarity – the kind of joining together that does not sacrifice the interests of any one group for the sake of another – is clear. But many of us might be wondering: how can I be in solidarity? How can I be part of the movement for Temporary Protected Status, climate justice for First and Indigenous Peoples, and other key issues?

Many of us who are less directly impacted by these and other human rights abuses may wonder how we can be allies in struggles for liberation. Maybe we see the value of solidarity and the reason why it is necessary, but still we worry in our hearts that there may not be room for us in the movement, that our desire to get involved in some way is not welcome or beneficial.

In truth, we are needed. One of the first things that organizers said at the TPS Summit was: “We know that we won't win permanent residency alone. We need allies.” This was why they invited UUSC and its members and supporters to attend and support the summit. They encouraged all of us to go out and share the stories of TPS holders with their elected officials and the members of their communities, and we invite you to join this effort with UUSC.

Finally, we may have more of a stake in social justice than we think. As the well-known community organizer Saul Alinsky wrote, having a stake isn't just a matter of material interest. It also has to do with the desire we all share to lead a meaningful life. If we can use the time, commitment, and resources we have to contribute to movements larger than ourselves – movements that help the larger human family and will continue when we are gone – this is how we build lives of lasting purpose.

Our closing words on the theme of solidarity come from “The Conscientious Objector” by the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay:

I shall die, but that is all that I shall do for Death;
I am not on his pay-roll.
I will not tell him the whereabouts of my friends
nor of my enemies either.
Though he promise me much,
I will not map him the route to any man's door.
Am I a spy in the land of the living,
that I should deliver men to Death?
Brother, the password and the plans of our city
are safe with me; never through me Shall you be overcome.