

Engaging our Democracy 11/11/18
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Part I: Justice Stones: Blessing our Actions

with thanks to Rev. Sharon Wylie, from whom I adapted this ritual

Scholar and organizer Michelle Alexander (and author of the book “the New Jim Crow”) wrote an op-ed in the NY Times in September called “We Are Not the Resistance.” In it, she puts the current era of Trump and Trumpism into a much wider perspective. She writes: “If we pause long enough and consider where we stand in relationship to the centuries-long quest to create a truly equitable democracy, we may be able to see that the revolutionary river that brought us this far just might be the only thing that can carry us to a place where we all belong.”ⁱ

As a congregation, we are part of many streams that add to that revolutionary river of democracy, justice, equity, and sustainability with our many social justice projects. And as individuals, there are so many ways that you all live out our 7 UU principles.

I know that there is much that you all are doing to live out our principles – you text me about a protest you’re going to, I run into you at the voter canvassing headquarters, I see your posts on Facebook, and you tell me that you missed worship last week because of this or that action.

And I know that there is more than I know. Than any one of us knows.

And so let us create a shared litany of these actions this morning by sharing those things that you have done in our wider community that strengthen the democratic process, enhance justice and equity in human relations, work towards peace, respond to the climate crisis, and more.

Let us call into our sacred space the many, many, many actions, large and small, that each of us are doing to make the world a better place.

Peter and I will come around with microphones and invite you to raise your hand and share one phrase of something you've done recently: voted; called your representative; advocated for fairness at school; made a donation; attended or organized a protest, helped a neighbor get to the polls.

I invite you now to take a moment and think of one thing you’ve done to live out our principles in the wider world.

Let us, together, create a litany that flows into that great revolutionary river.

After each person shares, we will place a stone in this chalice. Layered together, our stones rise up.

[Many, many actions were shared]

We are all part of the interdependent web of existence. The actions we have just heard are now yours too. May our actions and the actions of those around us kindle our hope in the face of despair, commit to our faith in the face of fear, and strengthen our love in the face of hate.

May it be so. Blessed be.

Part II: Reflection

Look at this chalice of stones, symbolizing all these actions – and more! This is the work of engaging democracy, of being responsible citizens (in the broad sense of that word). This is the work that we Unitarian Universalists find ways to do whenever and however we can.

I take great strength from being in community with others who heed the call in the hymn we sang earlier: “Come, build a land where people together, anointed by God may then create peace: where justice shall roll down like waters, and peace like an everflowing stream.”ⁱⁱ

We’ll Build a Land, that we sang earlier, is one of my favorite hymns. It speaks to the possibility of a just, beautiful, fair, and beloved community with a Can-Do attitude: we WILL build a land where we bind up the broken, where the captives go free, restoring ruins of generations....

Let me geek out for a moment: This text comes almost directly from the Hebrew scripture text of Isaiah 61, verses 1-3, though the part about justice rolling down like waters is from the prophet Amos (5:24). In preparation for this reflection, I went back to read a paper I wrote about this text in seminary where I went deep into analyzing the types of rhetoric used to persuade the listener – and now I don’t remember what epideictic rhetoric is (nor do I care).

What I knew in my heart then is that the adapted text, when sung set to Carolyn McDade’s tune, gave me hope; it helped rekindle my faith that “the arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice” to quote our 19th century Unitarian forefather Theodore Parker.

I wrote in that paper that the argument in this hymn is this: we should have hope because rebuilding *will* happen. That’s an argument that works if you believe rebuilding will happen with certainty.

But I’m not so sure. We haven’t sung We’ll Build a Land much here at USH because I’m not so sure I believe it. It’s so certain. So soaringly optimistic. That’s what I love about it....even as I’m not so sure I believe that we can build that land.

As I read Michelle Alexander's thought-provoking op-ed, "We Are Not the Resistance," it surfaced these same questions of whether the arc of the universe bends towards justice. Her main point is this: "from the broad sweep of history, Donald Trump is the resistance. We are not." May this be a comfort and a beacon of hope.

As with We'll Build a Land, I WANT to believe Alexander, who I've long respected, that ... "a new nation is struggling to be born, a multiracial, multiethnic, multifait, egalitarian democracy in which every life and every voice truly matters. In recent years, we've seen glimpses of this new nation at Standing Rock, in the streets of Ferguson, in the eyes of the Dreamers"[and she goes on....]

I want to believe her. But I can't. Maybe it's because I'm an agnostic – but I just can't take it on faith anymore that the arc of the universe bends towards justice.

What is real and true in these times? Is justice possible? Is fascism on its way? Is catastrophic climate change inevitable? Where can we find hope and encouragement that we can believe in? In my wrestling with these questions, I reached out to Michelle Alexander and asked her how she grapples with this.

I was so grateful to receive a response: She wrote: "we must act as if change is possible, recognizing that the odds are against us."ⁱⁱⁱ

Act AS IF we can build that land – knowing, as centuries of Black and Native peoples on this land have known, that the odds are against us.....but it's possible.

She goes on: "To say that it's not possible is to claim omniscience. To say that it's certain (or even likely) is foolish. But to hold on to the possibility, however slim, that together we might birth something beautiful that's beyond our wildest dreams is, for me, the definition of faith. On my good days, I have it."

We are not omniscient – we mortals cannot be all-knowing, and I hope that we are not foolish. I do not know what the future holds for Connecticut, this nation, or the world.

But we are indeed a people of faith who are called to this possibility "that together we might birth something beautiful that's beyond our wildest dreams."

We are a people of faith who have not a creed, but a covenant – a promise to each other to live out this faith in the possible.

This is why we shared our actions for justice this morning – because we need each other to hold onto this possibility, and to remind ourselves that it doesn't rest on any one of us alone, but that together, much is possible.

After worship, we will place this chalice and stones in the foyer. You are welcome to take one whenever you are going to engage in justice work, whenever you might like a

reminder that you are part of a larger community of justice-seekers. Take them home with you when you attend town hall meetings with local politicians, when you phone call or letter write, when you march or protest.

Return them here when you want to share your energy and commitment with others, a reminder that you are part of community that shares the work of making the world a better place.

We do not all think alike or vote alike.

We care deeply about a wide variety of issues, and act on them in a wide variety of ways.

We are not a congregation of the left or the right, but, as the quote in your order of service says, we lean straight forward into the issues. Let me share with you the context of that quote: “We don’t lean left, we don’t lean right, we lean straight forward into the issues that impact people that have been impacted by the criminal justice system.”^{iv} Desmond Meade, who said this on Democracy Now last Wednesday, was one of the organizers on the campaign that won back voting rights for the 1.5 million Florida citizens who have been barred from voting because of past felony convictions (some many decades past). (Yay!)

May we be a people who lean straight forward into the issues that harm people who have been impacted by racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, ableism; may we be a congregation that leans straight forward into the issues that harm our planet.

May we be a people who engage our democracy individually and together.

May we be a people who take the long view as we find our place in the revolutionary river that flows through the centuries.

May we be a people who honor the many ways of flowing in that river.

May we be a people of wide welcome. May you be welcomed when you are hopeless and drained, may you leave inspired. When you are energized by action for justice, may your joy be contagious. When you need to take a break, may you know that others are moving in to pick up the work.

May our actions and the actions of those around us kindle our hope in the face of despair, help us commit to our faith in the face of fear, and strengthen our love in the face of hate.

The arc of the universe is long, may we support one another in the faith of possibility that it can be bent toward justice.

So may it be.

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- ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/21/opinion/sunday/resistance-kavanaugh-trump-protest.html>
- ⁱⁱ **We'll Build a Land, #121 in Singing the Living Tradition**
- ⁱⁱⁱ Personal correspondence, 11/18
- ^{iv} Democracy Now, 11/7/18