

The Impossible Will Take a Little While

By Rev. Don Southworth

March 11, 2007

© 2007, Rev. Don Southworth

READING – You Have to Pick Your Team by Sonya Vetra Tinsley a singer, songwriter and activist in Atlanta from Paul Loeb’s book *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*

Every day presents infinite reasons to believe that change can’t happen, infinite reasons to give up. But I always tell myself, “Sonya, you have to pick your team.” It seems to me that there are two teams in this world. And that you can find evidence to support the arguments of both. The trademark of one team is cynicism. They’ll tell you why what you’re doing doesn’t matter, why nothing is going to change, why no matter how hard you work, you’re going to fail. They seem to get satisfaction out of explaining how we’ll always have injustice. You can’t change human nature, they say. It’s foolish to try. From their experience, they might be right.

Then there’s another group of people who admit they don’t how things will turn out, but have decided to work for change. I see Martin Luther King on that team, Alice Walker, Howard Zinn. I see my chaplain from college and my activist friends. They’re always telling stories of faith being rewarded, of ways that could be different, of how their own lives have changed. They’ll give you reasons why you shouldn’t give up, testimonials why we’ve yet to see our full potential as a species. They believe we’re partners in God’s creation, and that change is really possible.

There are times when both teams seem right. Both have evidence. We’ll never know who’s really going to prevail. So I just have to decide which team seems happier, which side I’d rather be on. And for me that means choosing on the side of faith. Because on the side of cynicism, even if they’re right, who wants to win that argument anyway. If I’m going to stick with somebody, I’d rather stick with people who have a sense of possibility and hope. I just know that’s the side I want to be on.

Sermon: *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*

One year ago I was wondering what team was going to pick me. I had told my former congregation that I would be leaving in July and I was wondering what team, what congregation, - if any – would want me to be their minister. My wife Kathleen and I knew we wanted that congregation to be

ERUUF but there were other very fine ministers scattered around the country who wanted the same thing. On Monday night March 13 the Search Committee called me to invite me to be on ERUUF's team. It took me about three seconds to say yes.

For those of you who haven't gotten the chance to know me very well yet, I am a sentimental, romantic, idealistic kind of guy. I remember obscure dates of family trips and events. Kathleen would prefer I remembered to pick up my clothes and not the first time that we visited Disneyland or our first movie, but that's not the way I am wired. Our reading this morning helps me to remember how I was feeling last year at this time and the team I wanted to play for. But I am also remembering last year because this month is stewardship month when we reflect on what it means to be part of ERUUF, and I am remembering the thrill of that phone call, the overwhelming love and commitment of our installation service and maybe, most of all, the hopes and dreams so many of you have shared with me and the responsibility I feel for helping to make those dreams come true.

One of those dreams was written in the search packet that was sent to those who wanted to be ERUUF's new Lead Minister. I keep that search packet on my desk at home, less than two feet from the keyboard where I write my sermons. At least once a week I pick it up to review what you wanted in your new minister, to look at your pictures and to read the surveys of your hopes and dreams. This morning's sermon is a response to a dream in the packet that said: "We value the link between spiritual practice and social action. Therefore we seek a new minister who can help us define and articulate a renewed vision of our social ministry and become a more visible and effective force in the Durham community."

The theme of this year's stewardship campaign is "Fueling Our Vision" and this morning I want to invite you to dream a bit with me and imagine what a visible, vibrant, effective social ministry would look like at ERUUF. I want to lay out some ideas and dreams, many of which I have learned from other Unitarian Universalist congregations, ideas and dreams that I hope reflect what you yearn for too.

Many congregations, in fact since we are the 30th largest congregation in the country, I would say most congregations, would love to have a social justice ministry and history as rich as ours. I hesitate to even try to list the many outreach projects that we are involved with because I'll certainly leave something out but think of all the things that we are or have been part of – farm workers, tutoring and mentoring of children and the homeless, our San Ramon sister communities, Katrina support, giving circles, refugee support, adopt a highway, feeding the homeless, marriage equality, sharing our Christmas, anti-death penalty and peace work, knitting for people throughout the community, the Crop Walk, involvement in interfaith groups, and more recently YO:Durham, environmental initiatives and the free Sima campaign. The list is long and I know that I have left lots off but it shows a long commitment to social justice. However in listening to those who are the most active in these projects and in reading the challenge from

your search packet, we can do more, and we want to have an even bigger presence in making a difference in our communities.

Before I share some of my ideas of what we can do to make an even bigger difference in our lives and in the lives of people throughout the Triangle and the world, I want to talk about why this work is so important to the well being of our congregation. One reason is articulated by the author William Easum, in his book, *Law Of Congregations*, "(Congregations), like people, are healthiest when they reach out to others, rather than worry about themselves. (Congregations) grow because they intentionally reach out; (congregations) die because they dwell on their own internal problems."

The other reason comes from an essay in *The Impossible Will Take a Little While* written by Cornel West, professor of Religion at Princeton. West writes, "A specter of despair haunts America. The quality of our lives and the integrity of our souls are in jeopardy. Wealth inequality and class polarization are escalating – with ugly consequences for the most vulnerable among us. Spiritual malnutrition and existential emptiness are rampant. The precious systems of caring and nurturing are eroding. Market moralities and mentalities – fueled by economic imperatives to make a profit at nearly any cost – yield unprecedented levels of loneliness, isolation and sadness. And our public life lies in shambles, shot through with icy cynicism and paralyzing pessimism."

West wrote this essay in 1997, before the beginning of the Iraq war and the scandals, mistruths and incompetence that have come from Washington, before we knew how much trouble we are in because of our poor stewardship of the Earth and before the despair and fear that was September 11 or Hurricane Katrina. In other words, our despair is even greater today than it was ten years ago.

Any serious imagining of what our social justice ministry might be one day, must begin with acknowledging the despair and cynicism that is so deeply ingrained in our culture and, all too often, in us. Each of us know the despair, the suffering, the fear, that comes with life; and each of us responds to it differently. What despair, what suffering is closest to your heart this morning? Are you worried about the health of a loved one, are you wondering how you will find the time and money to take care of an aging parent, are you waking up in the middle of the night obsessing about what's going to happen to your child, are you watching your health slip away, are you crying because you feel all alone or are you turning to work, food, alcohol or the internet so you don't have to feel the pain? Many, if not most, of us are working so hard to take care of our own lives that we struggle to deal with the despair of the greater world. Who has the time? Who has the emotional and spiritual reserves to fight another battle, a battle that seems destined to be lost? Who has the compassion, the courage, the hope, the faith, to make a difference in something that seems too big to influence?

Any vision of a social justice ministry must begin with a congregation being able to provide the hope, the faith, the comfort to help us face the pain and suffering of life. As Sonya Tinsley writes, "I'd rather stick with people who have a sense of possibility and hope." So would I. A religious community must be a place where our spirits and lives are nurtured by connecting with, and remembering, something bigger than ourselves. That something bigger can be the embrace of another person, a covenant of shared values we strive to live up to or the mystery and wonder of the sacred – no matter what we name it.

Religious communities remind us – when we do our work well – that there is something bigger than our own life's struggles and joys. My colleague Mark Morrison-Reed speaks to why we need, why we thirst for religious community so desperately: "A religious community enhances our vision, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our power is too limited to do all that must be done."

Two of the challenges and realities we face as human beings are that our vision is narrow as is our power. I am reminded of that every Sunday when I stand before you and share what I see and what I hope we have the power to do together. That is why the vision that counts in our Fellowship is not mine, or yours, but ours. Sometimes that can be tough for us to remember; especially when it comes to having a vibrant, healthy, effective social justice ministry.

One of the challenges congregations face when imagining and creating a social justice ministry vision is that people have passion for their own individual causes. This is natural; all of us have different issues that speak to us, our hearts are broken by different stories, different injustices and we are moved to action in different ways. That is why it is good that we have so many projects and causes that people can be involved in. But sometimes what happens is that a congregation's social justice ministry becomes fragmented and our causes are a little like throwing spaghetti on the wall; some projects stick and some projects don't.

And when things don't stick and people don't give their time and money to a specific cause, the people who care passionately about that issue sometimes feel resentful that more people don't care, they sometimes become righteously indignant and angry, and even become disengaged from their religious community. I've seen and heard some of this here at ERUUF. When this happens, and thankfully it does not happen as much at ERUUF as it has in other congregations I have been part of, I believe it is because of a dangerous separation congregations often live from.

We speak and act as if social justice is different than spiritual growth. We say we come for the religious and not the political or we say the spiritual does not matter, only social justice activism does. We separate our programs and their funding, and we assign our social justice work to a committee instead of a congregation. One of the reasons I was so excited about coming to ERUUF is because of that line in your search packet. "We value the link between spiritual practice and social action." Amen. Hallelujah. How

can we strengthen that link and create a social justice ministry that not only is a beacon for the Triangle and for Unitarian Universalism, but that also feeds and nurtures each one of us while it helps to change and empower lives?

I suggest we look to other congregations to see how they are living this every day. There are many congregations throughout the country - both inside and outside our Unitarian Universalist tradition – that have developed social justice ministries that we can learn from. Places like All Souls in DC, Unity in St. Paul and First Unitarian in Portland, Oregon. I want us to learn – and steal – from all of them but the model that I most yearn for and continue to learn about comes from the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, New York.

Last week I met their co-ministers, Scott Taylor and Kaaren Anderson, and this week I read their twenty page Social Justice newsletter. I'm going to tell you some of the things they are doing that I hope we can do one day, but before I do I want to share these words from the former Senior Minister in Rochester, Dick Gilbert, whose words we opened our service with this morning and who served that congregation for 32 years.

Gilbert wrote, "In our congregation we have tried to make social responsibility – alongside worship and spiritual growth, the mutual ministry of a caring community, and religious education as a life-span undertaking – an integral part of what we are as a religious community. Each church school class takes on some form of social outreach – from the very young writing cards to our people who are sick or shut in, to our youth group working at the soup kitchen, to an extensive program of task forces for the adult community aimed at systematic change. There is never a question that justice making is part of who we are as Unitarian Universalists."

Gilbert and First Unitarian in Rochester developed a model of congregational life where worship and the celebration of life is at the core, surrounding that core are a caring community, lifespan religious education and moral discourse and action. Everything is linked together and feeds each other. He observed that these segments "Are understood, not as administrative categories but as functions of the church occurring at many programmatic places. These aspects of the total program are interdependent. Not one succeeds unless all the others succeed."

Not one succeeds unless all the others succeed. This is a model not only for our social justice ministry but for everything we do here at ERUUF.

Imagine a place where children are actively engaged with adults and teens not only in writing cards for our sick and lonely but walking in the Crop Walk hand in hand, and then sitting together reflecting on what they have learned together. Imagine a place where we study and reflect on an issue such as peace for months, listening to each other about our struggles, our doubts with practicing peace in our

own lives while we are writing letters and marching to stop the war. Imagine a place that gives at least 10% of our annual budget away to people and groups outside of ERUUF, a place that knows we have a responsibility to share our riches with others who are not as fortunate before we take care of ourselves.

Imagine a place that works together not only on many social justice activities to help people today but reflects, discusses, maybe even prays about what issue is most pressing in our communities today, sets a goal for the change we would like to see in the community and acts together, in unity, to make that change happen. Imagine a place where a Social Justice Coordinator is a paid member of our staff, in fact is paid in part by all the Unitarian Universalist congregations in the Triangle leading, teaching, organizing us in how to make more of a difference in the world. Imagine a place where nobody is made to feel guilty because they aren't engaged in social justice work, where everyone who is a member tells us what breaks their heart and has a way to do something about it and feel supported in their work. Imagine a place where others in our community say we stand for something, that we walk our talk, that we have made a difference, as individuals and also as an institution in the lives of those who will never step inside our doors.

We are living some of this today but we can do so much more. We need only look to congregations like Rochester for inspiration.

Last year the Rochester congregation asked people to cut their Christmas and holiday spending in half and to give the half they did not spend to their congregation's Greater Good fund. They raised \$80,000. People reported having a better holiday and feeling like they were making a real difference in the world. Last year Rochester gave away 19% or over \$190,000 of their budget away. And their overall congregational budget went up as well. This year we will give about 4% or \$35,000 away. We can do at least 10% next year, I am sure.

Rochester is considering purchasing four or five hybrids to make available to members of the congregation and the wider community so they can do their part to lower fuel emissions in New York. They have a weekly radio show talking about what they are doing in their community and what Unitarian Universalism is all about. They have a program where every social action project is combined with spiritual reflection. Where everyone young and old are involved, some way, in making a difference in their community and in their world, which makes a difference in their life.

In two weeks Mary and I will be leading a workshop on peace, this year's UUA study action issue, and I hope we can design a two year program which blends the elements of Rochester's model of study, spiritual reflection and action together. Next Saturday our Social Justice Council, Mary and I will be retreating to envision what social justice might look like at ERUUF in the future. I hope you will consider joining us. Two weeks ago thirty of you signed up to help with YO:Durham, a program that I believe holds

hope for not only engaging us with the at risk youth of our community but might be the impetus for us to envision as a congregation a specific issue in our community that we wish to address and change .

Billie Holiday sang, “The difficult I’ll do know. The impossible will take a little while.” I dream of an ERUUF that not only does good work with its social justice ministry but where our social justice ministry does good work on us and challenges each of us to engage profoundly in the despair of the world, and acting not from guilt or obligation but from hope and faith. I dream of a place where we are reminded, challenged and supported each and every day to heed Gandhi’s words and be the change we want to see in the world.

That’s the team I pick to play with, to work with, to worship with, to change myself and the world with. A team that is always telling stories of faith being rewarded, of ways that could be different, of how their own lives have changed. A team that will give you reasons why you shouldn’t give up, testimonials why we’ve yet to see our full potential as a species. That believes we are partners in creation, and that change is really possible. I just know that’s the side I want to be on. Will you join me?

May it be so. Amen.