

A Fair World
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
May 18, 2025

Reflection on the Theme – Alexis Balkowitsch

I imagine a lot of you are like me—when I hear anything about ideals like “equity” or “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”, one of my first subconscious reactions is: Well duh, of course! And growing up in a liberal household, the idea that these things are fundamental was regularly modeled and reinforced. In particular, my mom spent much of her life in spaces that were not “meant” for her—as the only girl in her advanced science classes, the only female lab assistant in college, the only woman in community computer clubs and nascent IT departments during the 80’s and 90’s...so she knew the importance of welcoming diversity and inviting people in.

But those are the big picture big ideals, when values are proven and stood up for. What about in everyday, humdrum life? When you’re amongst your own community, your own safe space, places where the stakes aren’t as high?

Because for all of the liberal idealism I was taught as a kid, I actually grew up in a very judgmental household. It’s not something I necessarily harbor anger or blame or shame for anymore—particularly in my mom’s case, this was a multi-generational habit she didn’t even realize she was so enmeshed in. It was the way mothers and daughters communicated: constant, casual judgement of everyone and everything. “I would never wear that.” “I don’t like her new hair color.” “Why on earth did they choose to do things that way?” “That’s too much.” “That’s not enough.” It’s never to anyone’s face, no one is ever excluded over something—it’s just a constant private commentary that may seem harmless if you’ve grown up in it.

But it’s insidious. How can you constantly pass judgement—even just privately—without in some way viewing others as less than? Or yourself? In my case, I internalized judgmental language meant for others. It made me self-conscious, anxious, and harmed my own self worth. These days...well, I’m not going to say I’m healed and perfect—I’m human, after all, and growth is a long process. But I’ve learned to recognize judgment in myself, to call myself on it when it’s directed outwards, and try to forgive when it’s directed in. And I gotta say—life’s a lot easier when you’re not worried about what everyone else is up to.

To my mom’s credit, she realized the mistake. When I was in my late teens, she did admit to me that she should not have been so judgmental of others as I was growing up, she could see and felt bad for how it negatively affected me, and it she realized it was just something she grew up with and didn’t notice—but that didn’t make it right. That one apology and self-realization went a long way toward helping me grow, and I will always admire her for it.

So I guess my point today is that Equity, and the Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person isn’t just the Big “Well, duh!” Ideal...something grand that’s held just for the marginalized, brought up as trendy topics, or waved for social justice. It’s in every action, every choice, every thought about others and ourselves. The Worth and Dignity of Every Person means EVERY person.

***Someone Has To Start* © Stuart Campbell (lyrics to the song performed in worship)**

I've got wounds scars that will not heal
A broken heart, taught me not to feel

So, I hide away, speaking out is hardly worth the risk
I feel sad,,,,,,,, that its really come to this

Ummm... it's really come to this

So who.... who am I waiting for
Dawn is rising, time to open up the door

Somethings happening, all across my land
When I wake up, I think I'll lend a hand

**Once we all join in, it will begin
The turning of the world for everyone again
Here we are, on a little ball, floating round a little star, someone has to start**

So much hate out there, who can carry such contempt
You can't hide away, have to face it in the end

If there has to be tears, let them be tears of gladness
I'll do my part, to fight against this madness

Ummmmm..... fight against this madness

But not alone.... we stand together side by side
Pushing back, against the vicious tide

Once we all join in, it will begin
The turning of the world for everyone again
Here we are, on a little ball, floating round a little star, someone has to start

Bridge:

Light, endures, for in its presence all darkness must flee
It is possible, that it has always, always been up to me

**Once we all join in, it will begin
The turning of the world for everyone again
Here we are, on a little ball, floating round a little star, someone has to start**

A Fair World© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Someone has to start. It sounds so easy when Stuart sings it, doesn't it? Thank you for that. It's just hard to know where to start the inequities are so great. Our theme of the month is equity. Our speaker at the beginning of the month, Elisha, did a great job of introducing the topic and explaining the concept. Her extrapolation of the Albert Einstein quote about everyone being a genius was brilliant. It is believed he said, "if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." So, Elisha asked, "Is a fish welcome in your world, or only those able to climb a tree?"

She went on to say that "Welcome, opportunity, and access is realized when each member—each one—feels respected, accepted, included, and connected to the community, including connection to community members and spaces."

This year we have been exploring the new values language adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association, our Unitarian Universalist Association, words to describe our faith as written into our bylaws – specifically, Article II. The language around Equity reads, "We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities."

I want to extrapolate on that language this morning in the form of a response to a query we received in the office. It's not unrelated. The question which came through our website contact form asked if we welcomed politically conservative or right-leaning people at our church. This person went on to say that their beliefs align with UU principles but would like to avoid political activism at the church they decide to attend.

As you can imagine, I've been giving a lot of thought to that inquiry. I've served UU congregations as a minister for 23 years now, and over the years, I always had a couple people come to my office and offer, somewhat like a confession, that they were conservative and they often claimed they were "the only Republican" in the congregation. However, given that others had already been to my office to reveal that they were "the only Republican," I knew that there were always a handful of Republicans attending the church I served. They sometimes hadn't found each other since it didn't feel safe to share their political beliefs. I always felt badly about that, felt that the church was failing them, and thought it shouldn't be so. I want the church to feel safe for everyone to share their beliefs, political, religious, or otherwise. I was very careful to correct people who assumed the political beliefs of our members. Liberal religion is not the same as liberal politics. There are connections and overlap, but they are not the same.

However, what happened in the 2016 election, and again in 2024 is not a conservative wave – it is something else entirely. It is populism and fascism. Traditional conservatives don't ban dissent, they welcome it, as a part of a thriving democracy which both liberal and conservative parties have supported. What is happening now is something else, and it is a religious imperative that we speak out against the totalitarian and fascist actions of our government.

Here's the problem: I can not *not* be politically active in my words and deeds in this political climate, given the government has disappeared words that describe my religious values. The New York Times compiled government documents that show how agencies have flagged hundreds of words to limit or avoid – words like equity, diversity, inclusive, belong, cultural competence, cultural difference. The March 7th article was titled "These words are disappearing in the new Trump Administration." I knew this was happening, but it hit home a few weeks ago when a speaker we had asked us to change the title of their talk on the website twice because they couldn't afford to have some

of those aforementioned words associated with their name – oh, and my use of “they” to refer to a single individual is also one of these words the government wants us to limit or avoid. I used ‘they’ simply to obfuscate the identity of that person, not because they prefer those pronouns. Oh, yeah, *pronoun* is another word to limit or avoid.

I know many of you work for government agencies or universities who have been actively told to remove such words from your websites and documents, so many of you understand this issue far better than I do. We were really only affected when we wanted to protect a guest speaker and thus had to change language on our website to avoid the association of some of those words with that speaker’s name. It seems quite incredible that that is where we are in this country at this time, but there it is.

One of our fundamental dilemmas as religious liberals in this time is that we do wish to build bridges to those with different opinions, and there are lines we can’t, with integrity, cross. I know that I’ve shared with many of you the Overcoming Toxic Polarization website based on the research out of Columbia University by Peter T. Coleman. There was a recent post that really helped me understand the politicization of words and why an Idaho teacher was told to remove a sign in her middle school classroom that said, “All Are Welcome Here.” I mean, on the surface, *All Are Welcome Here* – isn’t that a message we all want to send? The teacher felt like either people were welcome or they won’t, but the school board felt that it was a political sign. To help me understand their objection, they compared it to an *All Lives Matter* sign, which was banned by a Minnesota school district in 2021. Again, *All Lives Matter* – on the surface, sounds like a wholesome, inclusive message, unless you read it in the context of the *Black Lives Matter* movement and as a denial that Black Lives in this country are under attack and treated as if they don’t matter as much as other lives do. I still don’t really understand why *All Are Welcome Here* is problematic, but because I do understand why *All Lives Matter* is problematic, I accept that some people read the sign *All Are Welcome Here* as a political statement.

The government is not just disappearing words, they are disappearing people, or trying to disappear people. I don’t wish to conflate what is happening now to what took place in Argentina between 1976 and 1983 when between 10,000 and 30,000 citizens were seized by the authorities and never heard from again... but the illegal seizure of citizens by authorities is taking place here and now. What’s different is that we know about it. Fortunately, we are learning where these people are, even if we are unable to get some of them back.

Mahmoud Khalil – March 8th arrested and detained in retaliation for his advocacy of Palestinian human rights at Columbia, removed to a Louisiana detention facility.

Mohsen Mahdawi, another Columbia student detained by immigration agents in Vermont last month – because he and his supporters were ready, he was not removed to the Louisiana detention facility but is being held in Vermont, his home for the last 10 years.

Kilmar Ábrego García 29 year old El Salvadoran deported “in error” which the administration refuses, despite a court order, to facilitate his return.

Andry José Hernández Romero kidnapped and deported to the same El Salvadoran prison as Ábrego. He was legally seeking asylum in the US due to credible threats of violence against him in Venezuela because of his sexual orientation and political beliefs.

We don’t know how many American citizens have been wrongly detained in Trump administration’s immigration crackdown, but April 30 the United Nations issued a press release that UN experts were alarmed at illegal deportations from the United States to El Salvador...

These deportations without due process is a concern for both liberals and conservatives, because without due process, the law protects no one.

“We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.”

The flower festival that we celebrated last Sunday has become increasingly important to me over the years – it was created in the context of rising totalitarianism, as an expression of our appreciation and celebration of diversity, and as a rejection of fascism that suppresses human rights. It has renewed meaning for us in this time, more than a hundred years since the first ritual was enacted.

This is not a conservative or a liberal issue, this is not about Republicans or Democrats, this is about human rights and human diversity and human expression. The US government is targeting the marginalized – those at the margins because they are least protected and have the least power. If those of us with more power don’t speak for those with less, we will eventually find ourselves targeted, excluded, denied human rights and disappeared...

I think Utah governor Cox said it well recently. He is a Republican and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints – the Mormons. He recently vetoed a bill that prohibits all transgender girls from competing on a girls’ team in K-12 interscholastic school sports.

In his letter explaining his veto, Governor Cox begins with his values. He wrote:

“When in doubt however, I always try to err on the side of kindness, mercy and compassion. I also try to get proximate and I am learning so much from our transgender community. They are great kids who face enormous struggles. Here are the numbers that have most impacted my decision: 75,000, 4, 1, 86 and 56.

- 75,000 high school kids participating in high school sports in Utah.
- 4 transgender kids playing high school sports in Utah.
- 1 transgender student playing girls sports.
- 86% of trans youth reporting suicidality.
- 56% of trans youth having attempted suicide.

Four kids and only one of them playing girls sports. That’s what all of this is about. Four kids who aren’t dominating or winning trophies or taking scholarships. Four kids who are just trying to find some friends and feel like they are a part of something. Four kids trying to get through each day. Rarely has so much fear and anger been directed at so few. I don’t understand what they are going through or why they feel the way they do. But I want them to live. And all the research shows that even a little acceptance and connection can reduce suicidality significantly. For that reason, as much as any other, I have taken this action in the hope that we can continue to work together and find a better way. If a veto override occurs, I hope we can work to find ways to show these four kids that we love them and they have a place in our state.”

Unfortunately, the veto override took place and the bill was passed into law in Utah.

But this conservative, Republican governor, based his veto on his values of kindness, mercy and compassion. That’s what religion can do for us, help us return to our values, whether they be kindness, mercy and compassion, or equity, justice, and love. Values that conservatives hold as well as liberals.

Conservatives preserve the tradition, and liberals seek change. We need both here, but there is no room for fascism, white supremacy, or totalitarianism. That's why I can't not be politically active in my words and deeds in this political climate, given the government has disappeared words that describe my religious values, given the government is trying to disappear people.

"Welcome, opportunity, and access is realized when each member—each one—feels respected, accepted, included, and connected to the community, including connection to community members and spaces."

It's a long hard process. I am not suggesting it is easy. I am saying it is important.

"Once we all join in, it will begin," sings Stuart, "The turning of the world for everyone again, Here we are, on a little ball, floating round a little star, someone has to start."

Well, let that someone be me. Let that someone be this congregation. Let us take one step at a time. One step toward equity.

"We declare that every person is inherently worthy and has the right to flourish with dignity, love, and compassion. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities." May it be so.