

Humanizing our Culture and Transforming the World

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme – Jeff Coleman-Payne

Belonging, building and being part of a community is an essential part of being human. Community is built by people, for people, and it's in the building, planning and organizing that makes a community happen. This work can lead to wildly transformational change for individuals within and beyond.

I moved to the west coast eight years ago to build a life and create a community with my wife. My last 8 years, I think rightly so, have been about firming my foundations in my marriage, starting my career, and raising kids. I am and have been part of a connected family and friends and feel grateful to be a part of a tight and incredible group of people. All of these experiences and the people in my life have allowed me to grow and change. Now that I feel solid in so much of my life, I want to find ways to put myself into a position where I can continue to grow my community as well as allow it to change me.

I'm also grateful and thankful for all of you wonderful people and have been lucky to engage in such wonderful conversations with so many of you. Thank you for your patience, love, understanding and friendship as you have been so welcoming to all of us into the UUCV community. I am grateful to you all. I know now that one conversation, even though it might seem insignificant, is the first brick in building community, and this is one essential way to build a strong, unbreakable wall. The more bricks, the better!

Humanizing our Culture and Transforming our World© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

When I planned this service and gave it a name – *Humanizing our Culture and Transforming our World* - it was before the assassination of a divisive conservative activist that seems to have divided our divided country even further. I mean, dehumanizing acts were on the rise, of course, since the re-election of a man who regularly belittles his opponents and demands loyalty to his person rather than the constitution or the country. A man who knows to scapegoat the most marginalized folks, building on his followers' feelings of anger and alienation.

The pace at which this administration has been able to dismantle our institutions is staggering. We know that destruction is far easier than building, but the contrast has never been clearer to me.

I'm embarrassed to say that I miss the days of the Moral Majority – though their morals were never mine, I thought I understood their motivation and what I understood seemed to make sense, though I disagreed strongly. I thought I understood the thru line then. This current far right movement is dizzying in its hypocrisy and contradictions. The chaos sometimes feels intentional and at other times, incompetent. The chaos disorients and disrupts our lives, making it hard to ground ourselves and act. We want to retreat and retrench, protect and isolate. We want to gather with like-minded people for mutual support. This congregation experienced a serious attendance boost following the last presidential election. Was that only last fall? It seems so long ago. That's another result of the trauma and chaos, our experience of time gets disrupted.

A colleague recently pointed me to this 2014 article in the UU World by Tom Schade. I've known Tom for years. He was a member of the congregation in Palatine, IL where I served as intern, though he had long left that congregation to enter the ministry before me. I'm always eager to read anything he has written. But it's interesting to note that this article is written two years before the first election of the man who currently holds the office of president. The title is "Religious community is not enough" and the first line is "Unitarian Universalist's purpose is much bigger than gathering with like-minded people for mutual support."

"'Being a community' is thinking small," writes Tom Schade. "Our ultimate goals and purpose cannot simply be about ourselves. Unitarian Universalists, like members of every other religion, are trying to change the world by encouraging people to live a different way. By word and deed, Unitarian Universalists are trying to change people. It is time for us to acknowledge and proclaim this, and to see that building a religious community is but a means to that larger end."

In 2014, his criticism was that we (UU's and UU congregations) were stuck in the eighties. He writes,

"In the eighties, it became clear that the general culture dominated by an aggressive conservatism that was openly hostile to liberalism in every form." "Unitarian Universalists wanted to gather in safe communities to support each other."

And then he writes, "In many ways we are still holding on to this legacy of hunkering down, providing gentle havens from the harsh culture outside, even though American culture is growing much more sympathetic to some of our values and ideas."

Just two years later, we learned the limits of that sympathy.

We are hunkering down again, but I think we have more tools this time to do more. I think we have the ability to support one another in an increasingly hostile world, ground ourselves in those values to resist the chaos, and seek meaningful change – in ourselves and in our world. Tom is right that religion has never been about just taking care of ourselves and our community. It has to be about change and transformation. "We must build religious communities, not as refuges, but in service to a larger goal: humanizing our culture and transforming the world."

The UUA's common read for this year – 2025-26 – is Deepa Iyer's *Social Change Now!* It's got this wonderful framework of ten social change roles that we can inhabit as we humanize our culture and transform the world. It's flexible and informative. I noticed last Sunday that some of the members of our global majority group were wearing hats with those different social change roles on them.... That group is reading this book together, and I invite the rest of you to do so as well.

Each month, as we explore a theological theme in worship, we'll be pairing it with just one of those social change roles so we can explore this approach as well. These are the tools I mentioned, that we have this time around so that we might do more than simply hunker down and protect our own.

I'm not through all the exercises in the book, but I think my default mode of social change work, and this shouldn't surprise you, is that of a Builder. I like to say I'm an institutionalist. Which is why the degree to which our institutions are being destroyed has both shocked and scared me.

"Builders develop, organize, and implement ideas, practices, people, and resources in service to a collective vision." It's not surprising that my professional role is one of minister, the chief builder of an

organization in service to a collective vision. Though I'm often envious of my colleagues – ministers, too – with different talents. Ministers come in very different roles on Iyer's social change framework, but I am first and foremost a Builder. I can take a big vision or idea and make it happen in real life. I enjoy working as part of a team. I know how to create and organize the building blocks of a program, event, conference, meeting, Sunday service, or action. I don't feel the need to receive credit publicly; I'm satisfied with being part of a group. I enjoy solving problems that come up in the process of creation or implementation. My legacy will be the strength of the institution after I am gone. I hope I will have made the institution stronger and more stable, healthier and more resilient while with you.

We've paired the Builder role of social change with the theme of Building Belonging. Because belonging just doesn't happen – we have to work at it. We have to work at inclusion. That is, the institution has to try to include you, but the individuals being included have to work at belonging, too. We know that people feel like they belong when they participate in more than just Sunday services or coffee hour, when they work in a small group to achieve a purpose.

But building is not all we do around here and not all that needs to be done in the work to humanize our culture and transform our world. Iyer's framework is designed for people and organizations in different phases of social involvement, and with different strengths – and with the flexibility to change over time or circumstance, to practice different strengths as we enter different phases of the work. She has written it for those who are ready to transform their values into practical steps, those who are weary and need a re-set and repair, and those who are wise and ready to level up. These different roles aren't in any hierarchy – they're all needed. She refers to it as an eco-system – the social change eco-system framework. Because, for example the Builders need the Visionaries, for example. Visionaries inspire us with lofty ideals and prophetic insights about what the world can be like when our social change efforts are successful. Ministers are often Visionaries which is why I appointed at least one minister to your ad hoc vision team. Visionaries inspire us and Builders help us institutionalize those visions. We need them both. Visionaries often can't institutionalize their vision, and builders sometimes can't envision where we're going. I don't mean to say they can't do those things, they just can't do them alone. I love the practicality of this eco-system framework; that we need each others' strengths and skills to change the world.

"We aim to change the world by creating a humane culture that sustains all people." writes Tom Schade. Deepa Iyer writes:

"We are living through a time that demands our attention and requires our consistent action. People around the world are confronting wars, climate disasters, and economic inequality at unprecedented levels. Here in the United States, we face an almost daily barrage of attacks and restrictions on the rights, bodies, and livelihoods of people...The visible presence of white nationalist groups is spurring fear. Transgender youth feel unsafe in schools and on streets. Climate change is a continual threat to everyone on the planet."

Her framework – and Deepa is the first to acknowledge that this framework is built on the work of so many others – but this social change eco-system framework provides a structure and strategy that helps me see the possibility of change in this frightening moment of history where our values are being openly attacked and criticized by those in power, those we allowed in power.

“The strength of our tapestry lies not in the brightness of each thread, but the way they are woven together” says the village elder. “Every thread, no matter how simple it may seem, contributes to the whole.” Rooting ourselves in community, as Jeff has done, is an important step.

The world is in crisis, and each day it just seems to get more urgent. “All these overlapping crises stem from similar root causes: anti-Black racism, imperialism and colonialism, extractive capitalist models, and histories of oppressive treatment toward communities.” Says Deepa Iyer.

Humanizing our culture and changing the world – resisting the dehumanization, rejecting stereotypes and generalizations, being sincerely curious about your neighbor, and willing to be just a little vulnerable back. There is so much we can do in each and every moment of our lives to resist the isolation, dehumanization, and oppression.

Tom Schade suggests an experiment:

“every week, when you get home from Sunday service, notice and write down what you think about doing differently in the days ahead. What did the service, the sermon, the music, the people inspire in you? Perhaps you are thinking you should get to know more of the children by name. Perhaps you want ‘to stop and smell the flowers’ more, live with more reverence and awe. Perhaps return to a meditation practice, call an estranged relative, write a letter to the editor. Perhaps quit your job and join the Peace Corps.”

I love that Tom includes that last one, since it was from a Sunday service that I was inspired to join the Peace Corps all those many years ago. A sermon on service preached by the Rev. Richard Henry at the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City, perhaps the year 1985 or 86.

In any case, Tom’s question is “what kind of person did the experience of UU worship inspire you to be? In these aspirations are clues to our good news, the content of our UU evangelism.” And he wants us to take our news outside these doors. I think Iyer’s social change ecosystem framework gives us so many ways to successfully take that good news out into the world and humanize this otherwise cruel and harsh world.

Let’s take our threads, our strengths, our skills, and weave them into a tapestry - this tapestry of church, this institution, so beautiful and appealing that we not only humanize the culture within it, cherish those smallest acts of kindness the choir sang about, but transform the world beyond these walls. We can’t do it alone, but together... all things are possible....