

What The World Needs Now

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A popular song from the Sixties says

*“What the world needs now is love, sweet love
It's the only thing that there's just too little of
What the world needs now is love, sweet love,
No not just for some but for everyone.”¹*

The 3400 Unitarian Universalists in Minneapolis last month for General Assembly would have agreed that what the world needs now is love. Everywhere you looked there were bright yellow t-shirts advertising that we are standing on the side of love. At one point we all went out into the city and down the street to a local park where we had a rally on behalf of same-sex marriage and immigration reform.

And in the business meetings we considered at length what the world needs, through the social witness process. The whole process of social witness at the UUA is conducted by the Commission on Social Witness in cooperation with the UUA staff and the congregations. I have the honor to be friends with John Hooper, the co-chairman of the CSW, and he and his wife have visited us in Chatham. The social witness process is a four year process for something to start as a proposed study/action issue and end up as a Statement of Conscience, and at any given time there are several resolutions in the pipeline.

Last year a very important study/action issue on peacemaking came up for review as a statement of conscience, but the assembly sent it back to the Commission on Social Witness for redrafting. This year it passed with small modifications. It is a balanced and thoughtful statement, and I have provided some copies for you to take home and read at your leisure. Let me give you just a small excerpt here:

“We believe all people share a moral responsibility to create peace. Mindful of both our rich heritage and our past failures to prevent war, and enriched by our present diversity of experience and perspective, we commit ourselves to a radically inclusive and transformative approach to peace.

“1. Our commitment to creating peace calls us to the work of peacebuilding, peacemaking, and peacekeeping.

“Peacebuilding is the creation and support of institutions and structures that address the roots of conflict, including economic exploitation, political marginalization, the violation of human rights, and a lack of accountability to law.

“Peacemaking is the negotiation of equitable and sustainable peace agreements, mediation between hostile parties, and post-conflict rebuilding and reconciliation.

“Peacekeeping is early intervention to prevent war, stop genocide, and monitor ceasefires. Peacekeeping creates the space for diplomatic efforts, humanitarian aid, and nonviolent conflict prevention through the protection of civilians and the disarmament and separation of those involved in violent conflict.”

So as an association we have said in a formal way that peacemaking is what the world needs.

Two years ago, the Study/Action issue was on Ethical Eating, a resolution which

¹1965, words by Hal David, music by Burt Bacharach

originated with our sister UU congregation in Falmouth. We are still in the four year period covered by that resolution, so it is still available for congregations to study and generate programs. Eventually it may come to a GA to be voted on as a Statement of Conscience. I think we can see the influence of that study/action resolution in this congregation, since I preached on ethical eating last summer and Betty Twiss organized two Learning for Life programs on Cape Cod food sources. What the world needs is reform of the food system.

Coming to the floor at this year's General Assembly were eight proposed Congregational Study/Action issues. Each of these was voted on by participating congregations. Now we didn't participate and I have to take some of the heat for that; every year I say I'm going to get the congregation involved in the Social Witness process and every year the deadline in the fall comes and goes. Will y'all help me to remember this year?

At any rate, I want to give you the title and a short summary of each of the five proposed Study/Action issues which survived to reach the floor this year:

Energy, peace and justice: Nations fight with each other to control natural resources. Energy use is essential for human survival. How can Unitarian Universalists help all people, in all nations, to secure an adequate supply of energy that is safe, affordable, and sustainable? How can we prevent energy conflict while promoting energy justice?

1. National Economic Reform: A Moral Imperative. The economic crisis and current political responses will continue to destabilize our communities and erode our democracy. We cannot return to "economics as usual" without deepening economic inequality, fragmenting community resilience, and exacerbating the ecological crisis. Most areas of injustice are connected to the nature of our current economic system.
2. Immigration as a Moral Issue: Migration of people—driven by economic, social, political and environmental factors—is taking place around the world. Millions are currently in transit, in refugee camps, in detention centers, or living and working in places without full legal status and without access to social services or protection of civil rights.
3. Ending Slavery More people are enslaved today than at any time in history, about 27 million worldwide. They are in communities throughout the U.S. and their stolen labor creates objects we consume every day. Yet ending slavery forever is within our grasp. We can finish the work begun by our abolitionist forebears.
4. Revitalizing American Democracy. Democracy requires an informed, engaged citizenry. Corporate and financial interests actively influence our government, but citizen participation and oversight have been insufficient to provide balance. Voting is important, but we must also keep informed, participate personally, discuss policy with others, observe all actions of government, and advocate for needed changes.

All of these are what the world needs. The world needs a fair distribution of energy resources, a fundamental shift in the way we do business economically, comprehensive immigration reform, an end to slavery and a revitalization of democracy.

Now if you were a delegate and had to pick one of these issues as the most important one, which would you pick? Do you know?

Maybe you have a favorite issue that was left out. Maybe the proposed issues don't speak to what the world needs most, in your book.

Or maybe you're a bit overwhelmed by the question, as I am, usually. I go to GA thinking, "How do we go about deciding which question is more important?" I think if I watch closely I will find the answer, and that will help me make up my mind whether global warming is more important than racism, poverty, disease or war.

But in fact the General Assembly doesn't really have such a cut-and-dried process. Rather it operated like any other democratic body, like the annual meeting of the church or your

local town meeting. Things are proposed, people line up in favor or opposed to the specific proposals, they speak for a set amount of time and then they vote.

Now as in other democratic bodies, a lot of the decision takes place outside the assembly. At GA they have mini-assemblies on specific issue which let you compare and contrast and suggest language changes.

One of the most important decisions at GA was whether to boycott Arizona in 2012, when GA is scheduled to meet in Phoenix, because of that state's horrible new law dealing with illegal immigrants. The UUA Board had proposed pulling out of Arizona and finding another site. The Arizona UU ministers asked us not to pull out, and they were supported by many progressive community groups in Arizona. On the second day of GA, there was a kind of summit meeting of the minority caucuses within the UUA on this issue, and they proposed after much discussion that we not boycott Arizona in 2012 but rather do the minimum business legally necessary and concentrate on social justice issues. On the floor of the Assembly, this plan was substituted for the Board's boycott proposal, and passed despite passionate support for the boycott from some delegates.

I was not present on Sunday when the Assembly winnowed down the Study Action Resolutions, but the eventual winner was "Immigration as a Moral Issue." I have included some of the text of that resolution in the booklet I prepared. It is not surprising to me that this issue won, for we are all conscious of the immigration issue raised by Arizona's new law. Many speakers said that immigration was to the present decade what civil rights had been to the Sixties. We heard about immigrant-oriented programs at many churches, and I have been thinking about what might be useful for our church.

Is that to say that immigration in some cosmic scale outweighs economic reform? One could argue that a thorough reform of the world economic system might resolve the immigration crisis.

How do we decide what the world needs? Many of you will be saying at this point, what difference does it make? These resolutions are only pieces of paper. The UUA commands no armies, doesn't have enough money to support the programs we have now, let alone start significant new ones. And we're among the smallest religious denomination in the country. Who cares what the UUs think that the world needs? It might make the Minneapolis paper on the day the convention ends, but the resolutions passed won't make headlines in the New York Times.

Well, the first answer to that is that the New York Times is not the end arbiter of whether something is important or worthwhile. This is the newspaper, after all, that was sure we'd find weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq.

A more significant answer is found in the wisdom of Margaret Mead, quoted at Number 561 in your hymnal: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." We have an influence in the public square out of all proportions to our numbers; if you look at the coverage of the struggle for same-sex marriage, for example, you will see UU ministers and lay leaders in state after state featured prominently among equal marriage supporters. When the local ministers and congregations take action on the issues framed by the Social Witness process, this can bring about significant change in the community.

Now I have framed the issue to this point as what the world needs. That is not the Commission on Social Witness' language, which is my language. I choose it for two reasons. First, I have been all my life puzzled by the question of what need of the world is most important. I can remember my senior thesis in college, which tried to get handle on the roots of urban violence. I remember one day of sitting in the library for 7 hours, and all I had to show for it was thirteen balled-up first paragraphs.

The second reason I use the language of what the world needs is because I have come to

suspect that it's the wrong question. And the man who makes me suspect this is both a great mystic and man of action, the late Howard Thurman.

Howard Thurman had at least three careers, and wrote many books. He was a mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr. when he was dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. He was a founder of the Fellowship For Reconciliation. He met many world leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi and helped Gandhi's idea of nonviolence take hold in the struggle for racial justice in the United States.

And I imagine that Thurman's most famous quote must have come up when someone seeking wisdom, someone perplexed by the kinds of questions I have been asking this morning, popped the question to the great man, "Dr Thurman, what is the world's greatest need?"

Now if Dr. Thurman had said eliminating racism or poverty or war, no one would remember his words today. They would have been drowned, a mere speck in history's ocean of ideas. But Dr Thurman answered the question by questioning the question. What he said was,

"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive." Let me repeat that. "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and then go and do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

With this answer, Dr. Thurman does three things. First, he personalizes social action. It is not the world's concern. If you are the one doing the action, it is your concern.

Second, he relieves you of the duty to save the world all by yourself. However much it may feed your savior complex, you need to understand that you are not what stands between the world and oblivion. You are not responsible for the whole shebang. Get over it.

Third, and most importantly, he ties social action to a spiritual impulse. It is a false choice, as President Obama would say, to have to choose between spirituality and social action. Social action proceeds out of the religious impulse, out of what makes you come alive.

When Dr. Thurman says "come alive," he is using the broadest language for a religious experience. You can interpret it as feeling a spark of the divine, but you can also interpret it as coming to your best self.

And it echoes the call of another wise man, Joseph Campbell. His prescription for life was "follow your bliss." It was under the influence of that prescription in the early nineties that I made the decision to leave the practice of law and enter the ministry.

I like the idea of inspired people doing action, though I have to say that I don't know how that works for collective action. It's an anarchic model, but that's how social action actually proceeds in most of our churches. There is not one committee telling people what's most important to do. Rather, people bring their reforming passions to the church and get blessing and permission to pursue them under the umbrella of the church's social action program.

In this church at this season, there is an immense amount of volunteer activity. A great many of you sign up for regular stints in the thrift shop, and some of you are there almost every day. I caught two of you opening up on the Fifth of July just to make some money for the church over the holiday weekend. We also have a pretty full roster of people to help with the magician and the summer concert series.

Do you do this work because it makes you come alive or because the community has exerted some peer pressure to get you to volunteer? I suspect for most of you it is a little of both, and of course out of your love for and commitment to the church. Maybe you signed up out of a sense of duty, but you discovered that hanging around with other volunteers can give you a great sense of the church as a group, and you can connect with the world at large as it comes through the store. You can come alive in this work.

Much of the social critique of corporate America that spawned the counterculture in my youth was based on the proposition that our plastic, impersonal rational military industrial complex was sucking all the life out of us. Things have changed a lot, but there is still

hollowness, a zombie quality in many corners of our culture. A social agenda which is based on the value of coming alive has a lot of promise. One way we can come alive is to help others realize their potential. Another way is through acts of creativity which help others wake up.

In the reading I did earlier, (John 12: 1-8) Jesus, who has just raised Lazarus from the dead, visits at the home of Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha. Mary has some expensive oil, with which she anoints her hair to wash Jesus' feet. For this luxury, she is rebuked by Judas on the basis that the oil is so expensive it should have been sold so that the money could be given to the poor. But Jesus rebukes Judas in turn, saying that Mary bought it for his funeral, and "You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

In a rational sense, however hypocritical his motivation, Judas is right. The poor are everywhere and they are needy. But Jesus is also right, that the most important thing for Mary is to express her love for Jesus before he is put to death; this is what makes her come alive. Lazarus has literally come alive, Jesus is soon to be dying and in those circumstances it is OK for Mary to use her expensive oil to wash his feet.

Howard Thurman, coming from an African-American Baptist church tradition, says that religion does not pass from one person to another by creed, argument or exchange of information; it is more on the model of a contagion². The spirit that is at its core is always fighting with the mind. The mind tries to explain it, to put it into boxes, to make it make sense. But it is that spirit, that shining inner light, that makes us come alive, and what the world needs is people who have come alive. As the prophet Isaiah says (58:8), "Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and you healing shall spring up quickly." In this spirit, I invite you to join me in "This Little Light of Mine," rising as you are willing and able.
Amen.

Reading John 12

1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" 6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

²<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILPnG3kjO1k>