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 Arlington Street Church  
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## Sacred Justice

~ for the Unitarian Universalist Association's *Join the Move* Sunday ~

“Through the long summer and [now] into the autumn ... night after night, ... the neighborhood children play hide and seek: [s]treaming out into the gray twilight as soon as the dishes are cleared from [their dinner tables; [g]athering in the street, ... quickly [dividing] into hidens and [seekers]; and [fanning] out behind the garages and backyards that encircle the steps that represent home base.

“In the dark,” writes the Boston Globe's Linda Weltner, “... I ... see the small figures sneaking past our wall, their bodies tense and ready for the long sprint to [home].

“[Much later, as they return from the game,] ... radiant with the glory of [the] late [hour] and a star-studded sky, [I] call out, 'How'd you do?' [The reply is victorious:] 'I got home safe.'”<sup>1</sup>

This is how I feel about being here, with you: I got home, safe.

This is how many of us feel about being Unitarian Universalists: long and twisting and sometimes perilous spiritual journeys led us to these doors. We got home safe.

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I am told there was a rabbi who opened worship each week with the twenty-fourth verse from Psalm 118, “This is the day the lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.” Sometimes, it was hard for his congregation to be glad, let alone rejoice. Sometimes, it was all but impossible for them to keep hope alive. And then came Friday, May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1948: the state of Israel was born. And once again, the rabbi stood before his people and said, “This is the day the lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.”

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<sup>1</sup> Please see [frjakestoptheworld.blogspot.com/2004/04/alleluia-christ-is-risen.html](http://frjakestoptheworld.blogspot.com/2004/04/alleluia-christ-is-risen.html)

To believe, despite all evidence to the contrary, that justice will be done; and to walk that talk, to act as if it were so, to live deeply into a belief in justice: that is to answer *yes* to a sacred calling.

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Rev. Lewis B. Fisher said, “Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer ... is that we do not stand at all; we move.”

We move toward justice.

Predicting slavery’s demise, Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker said, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but a little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.”

In August of 1967, Dr. King paraphrased Theodore Parker when he said to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, “The arc of the Moral Universe is long, but it bends toward Justice.”

Justice is a cornerstone of the mission of this beloved community, our reasons for being: love, service, justice, peace. We come home to Arlington Street, to one another, and we go forth: to answer the call and keep faith with justice. I am told that Dr. King defined the church as “the place you go from.” We say, “The service begins when the service ends.”

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As Unitarian Universalists, when we say justice, we envision that long arc, thinking big – abolition; suffrage; worker’s rights; black civil rights; queer rights and equal marriage and gender freedom; changes to policies affecting the environment, prison system, immigration; economic justice. Proud and righteous, we have been the breaking edge of the wave of every great social movement in America. This is not because we are knee-jerk liberals or ideologues. It is because our faith teaches us that devotion to justice is a sacred trust; justice is holy.

When the decision was made last winter to sell the Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters on Beacon Hill and move to Boston’s Innovation District, Kay Montgomery, for thirty years our Executive Vice President, wrote, “Best memory [of 25 Beacon Street]: the era when the Massachusetts State House struggled with the issue of marriage equality and

we hung huge signs [outside, on our four-story wall] facing the State House, [signs] that said things like, ‘Civil Marriage is a Civil Right.’ The demonstrators and the politicians [from both sides of the debate] couldn’t miss them.”<sup>2</sup> It was a time that, once again, we invoked slain San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk’s immortal phrase, “a simple matter of justice.” UUA president Bill Sinkford declared, “We stand on the side of love,” and Rev. Jason Shelton sat down at a piano and set those words to today’s closing hymn. Our faith calls us to stand on the side of love, service, justice, peace.

We envision that long, bending arc of justice, and then there are, too, the people and things before our very eyes.

Religious educator Rose Schwab writes, “I was awarded a grant from my college, and ... I went to Transylvania, and lived in a rural Unitarian village.... [The Unitarians in Transylvania] are culturally distinct [from us], but have similar roots, and radical beliefs. And the people were *really* nice to me.

“I didn’t speak any Hungarian,” Rose Schwab continues. “... I was just learning it when I got there. And somehow I got the word for *hello* mixed up with the word for *nylon sack*. So basically I was just going through my day[s], and when I saw somebody, I’d yell, ‘Nylon saaack!’ And they would yell, ‘Nylon saaack!’ right back at me.

“... They were just that kind. They were putting bunnies in my lap and feeding me strawberry jam and giving me to the old women, who literally spent hours feeding me cookies. There was one elderly woman who would hand-feed me cookies. I’d be walking down the road, and I’d see her, and we wouldn’t even stop. She’d reach out, put a cookie in my mouth, and *crunch!* I’d keep going for my walk.”

“And of course I went to the Unitarian high school and the Unitarian seminary,” Rose Schwab concludes, “and I am so thankful I did, because I was reminded that Unitarianism is a profoundly beautiful religion.”<sup>3</sup>

A belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every being – our first principle – affirms that everyone and everything matters; every one counts.

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<sup>2</sup> Please see [stewardship.blogs.uua.org/2013/05/28/taking-our-memories-with-us/](http://stewardship.blogs.uua.org/2013/05/28/taking-our-memories-with-us/)

<sup>3</sup> Rose Schwab, *Coming to Home*, Wildflower Unitarian Universalist Church, Austin, TX, 2/20/11

To make of the work of justice a spiritual practice means that, in everything we do, we remember that we are all kin; we are all, says our seventh principle, deeply interrelated. Sometimes, the spiritual practice of justice is a four-story banner, and sometimes it's a cookie. The work is all, always holy work, and everyone – everything – counts.

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I've told you the story, before, of attending my very first Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Ithaca, New York, in 1977. I was nineteen years old, tagging along with my beloved minister and mentor, Rev. Dr. Dana McLean Greeley.

Up for consideration at the General Assembly was the Anita Bryant resolution. Anita Bryant: the perky woman in the nationally-broadcast orange juice ads who made it her business to hate queer people.<sup>4</sup> Unitarian Universalist campaign organizers wore bright orange tee shirts that said, "Anita Bryant Sucks Oranges." At the time, to my knowledge, I had never met a queer person. Hmm.

I went with Dana to the plenary session for the Anita Bryant vote, and took a ringside seat to history in the making.

Three moments are seared into my memory:

Dana, standing on the plenary floor, surrounded by a group of men in suits and ties. He had served as senior minister here at Arlington Street, then as the first president of the newly-merged Unitarian Universalist Association, and was a highly-respected champion of peace and human rights and basic fairness. He stood a full head higher than they, and his voice was huge. They were asking for his support. His face was serious, and he had his arms out, drawing them into a circle.

The vote was taken. The moderator called for those in favor. The "aye" swelled and rang from the delegates that filled the hall.

Then the call for "nay." The hall grew very still. The crowd held its collective breath. The earth shifted slightly on its axis. The vote to resist

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4 Two of her choice quotes from when she was serving as spokeswoman for the Save Our Children campaign: "As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children." "If gays are granted rights, next we'll have to give rights to prostitutes and to people who sleep with St. Bernards and to nail biters."

Anita Bryant's hateful campaign and stand on the side of love was unanimous. The room exploded into cheers and applause.

And then, from all throughout the room, Dana Greeley was swarmed by the people whose lives had just been changed forever by a religious movement that had voted to take their part. Everyone tried to get close enough to touch him, to thank him. The men wept openly. And something in me broke open in pride, in gratitude, in love.

Even before I knew that it was a vote that would change my life, I had experienced all I needed to know about Unitarian Universalism to give it my heart, forever. When we say “love, service, justice, and peace,” we mean for everyone, everything, everywhere. We mean it.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Our faith teaches us that  
devotion to justice is a sacred trust; justice is holy.

In large ways and in small,  
may we answer *yes*  
to the sacred calling of justice,  
doing our part to bend  
the moral arc of the universe.

May we stand – and move – on the side of love.

*Nylon saaack!*

*Welcome home!*

Let us rejoice and be glad it!