

Imagining a New World

The Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell

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We are gathered here today at what is known as the Service of the Living Tradition. It is an auspicious time, for it is a time when our larger community comes together to affirm our strength and our purpose, our values and our ideals. We look back with thanksgiving for ministers who have gone before, and we look ahead to those who will bring new life and vigor into our movement.

Note that we do not call this service merely the "service of tradition" nor do we refer to it as just "the traditional service." No, it is the Service of the Living Tradition. It's the word "living" that makes all the difference. Living implies response. All living organisms respond to their environment, to their context, and so it is with a living institution—we are called as a religious people, as we have been called all through our history, to respond—to be responsible to the contemporary moment. The question that I want to pose today is, what are we, as Unitarian Universalists just now in this particular day and time, at the beginning of a new century, called to be and to do? We have just heard the beautiful voices of these children—what kind of world are we going to be handing over to them when we are gone?

I know this: something new is coming. Something new is stirring in the collective psyche. It starts with the beginning of an intuition, a new consciousness pushing from within, waiting to be born. It has to do with our spiritual being. And it has to do with justice.

For me it began with a kind of restlessness and uneasiness. I have been increasingly agitated by what I see happening in this country—the social and economic indicators that I follow in the newspaper—and in fact the very real flesh and blood examples that I see all around me every day as I minister in an urban church. I had to ask myself, why are so many of our mentally ill wandering the streets? Why did the Oregon food bank have a 17% rise in requests last year? Why are so many teenagers cast away, sleeping in the very doorways of our church? Why, in a time of plenty? Seeing all this, I was led to examine the larger structures of oppression which bring so much suffering to so many lives. And the more I have learned, the greater my outrage has grown. As one of our congregants wrote to me, "The spiritual part of my being calls for a personal response."

I have come to believe that economic inequity—in theological terms, greed—which has become steadily worse over the past few decades—is the root problem which must be addressed. The abuse of economic power manifests itself not only in the lives of the poor, but in the lives of the middle-class as well. How many of us are working longer hours than ever before? Which one of us does not know of individuals who have been

"downsized" after years of faithful service? How many families must have two or more breadwinners, just to survive?

But as I said, change is in the air. Alternative voices are being heard now. Voices like social critic Howard Zinn¹, whose lecture so packed a hall at Portland State University that hundreds had to be turned away. His book, *A People's History of the United States*, shook me and changed me. Voices like Michael Moore, the union advocate and documentary film maker who gave us "Roger and Me," again speaking to an overflow audience that caused his talk to be postponed 45 minutes until room could be found. I'm sure you read about the World Trade Organization protest in Seattle, which drew an estimated. 40-50,000 people. All these people to protest unfair trade agreements? All these people that informed about complex issues and that angry? Environmentalists, trade union workers, human rights activists, people of many different ethnic groups -all standing together, as we have never before stood. For the more than' 100 people that our church sent to Seattle, it was a life-changing event. We knew that we had made a difference. And we came away convinced that major social changes are underway.

[1: I highly recommend Zinn's *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, HarperCollins, 1995.]

People are waking up. What is the part that Unitarian Universalists will have in this new awakening? We can learn, and we can reach out to others in creative coalitions—one might say, entrepreneurial—coalitions. We can work with the Catholics on the death penalty. With the trade unions for a living wage. With people of color to effect racial justice. What do all these issues have in common? Class struggle. We need to stand together not on our own. Not my issue but our issues are at one with the other. We can be the bridge that is so sorely needed. Unitarian Universalists have always had power far beyond what our numbers would suggest—so many of us have the substance and skills to lead. A new day is at hand. Where will we be in shaping that future?

I want to examine in more detail what I see happening to Americans in this time of vaunted economic prosperity. Have you ever wondered why there is so much anxiety in the workplace? In these days of mergers and acquisitions, no one's is really safe.

Let me tell you Ruth's story. I'm taking this account, incidentally, from Texan Jim Hightower's book *There's Nothing in the Middle of the Road but Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos*. Ruth Shaver is from small-town Texas, a community known as Mesquite. She worked for Safeway for 22 years until the company was sold to Kohlberg Kravis Roberts, a Wall Street firm that specializes in raiding corporations. To lighten their debt load, they began getting rid of some big chunks of Safeway, including the 141 stores and 8,814 Safeway workers. Just like that. entire Dallas division., Out the door.

Now no one was a more cheerful and dedicated worker than Ruth. Not only did she check groceries, she trained others and helped remodel stores. She had such pride in her work that many customers asked for her by name. Over time, she had worked her way up to earn \$12.06 an hour, or about \$24,000 a year. Then she was dumped, with no golden parachute. Because of her union's contract, she got a small severance payment, but it

lasted only a few weeks. The market for grocery clerks was glutted, and the new job she found paid only \$5.70 an hour. The other 8,813 Safeway employees had trouble finding good jobs, too, and when they did find work, almost everyone had to take pay cuts 30-60%. Four committed suicide. The divorce rate among these families has been unusually high.

But Kohlberg, Kravis, and Roberts are doing OK. They each had personal incomes of more than \$40,000,000 the year they dumped Ruth and her co-workers. Henry Kravis became one of the 400 richest people in America. In fact he has now become a philanthropist—and not a modest one. He donated \$10,000,000 to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. In gratitude, the museum named a wing of its building after him.

Hightower ends this account by saying: "So Henry Kravis got the glory as well as the gold. But, you know, there are bricks in that wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art that belong to 8,814 Safeway employees, including Ruth Shaver, who still lives in a trailer house in Mesquite, Texas."

You know, as Unitarian Universalists, we don't often meet the Ruth Shavers of this world—most of our friends don't live in trailer parks. But we can't do justice work in a vacuum. We need to learn from people who live on the edge: people who are poor, people who are transgendered, children who are homeless, migrant workers—people who make us feel shaken and uneasy because their lives are not like our own. We will learn what we must do only when we risk not knowing at all what to do, when we listen to voices we have not yet heard. We have to "leave home," in a sense, leave our comfortable ways of being, to find ourselves and our calling. We need to develop a passionate discontent, an anger that picks us up and shakes us by the neck and will not let us go. The Holy Spirit, you know, is not on the side of order and stability.

I had a recent experience that taught me some things. Because it's easy for me to intellectualize "poverty," I asked our Social Justice Director—at the church, Kate Lore, who has worked with homeless people for years, to help some of us understand what it's like to be homeless. So she arranged what she called an "immersion experience," which 20 congregants signed up for. We were to sleep in a shelter in sleeping bags and then the next day replicate as much as possible the homeless experience. Well, people kept calling Kate and dropping out, the closer we got to the deadline. More than half the people dropped out, and others took their places, then they started dropping out. Those of you who work with people who are homeless probably remember how apprehensive you felt the first time you got involved. I, for sure, wanted to drop out. I was telling myself, "What was I thinking? I've got important stuff to do! I've got to write the sermon for the Service of the Living Tradition. Besides which, my back is not going to do so well sleeping on the floor." We ended up with 16 church members, and I of course did go. After all, I'm the minister. I couldn't weasel out.

We had an orientation that Friday evening, and then prepared for the night. I hated sleeping in my clothes, crammed in with all these other people, most of whom I didn't

really know—I had no privacy. And my back didn't do well on the floor. We were up early for a simple breakfast and I do mean simple: I had a bagel and a little juice. Each of us was given a \$1.00 for lunch. We gathered to select sites for visiting, and I chose the Salvation Army. I said to the group of us who were going there, "Well, that's about two miles away and over a bridge. I guess we'll have to drive." Other people kind of smiled, and then someone said, "Uh, Marilyn -uh, excuse me, but people who are homeless don't have cars." That was only the first mistake made by their fearless leader.

At the Salvation Army we prepared lunch for the temporary residents. They came through the lunch line, and then each sat at a separate table and began eating in silence.

I pick up my tray, and I look around. Just like them, I guess, I don't want to risk rejection. I see a guy who said "Hi" to me earlier, so I take a chance: "Do you mind if I sit here?" I ask. He pauses and then says, "Go ahead." For a while I say nothing, and both of us have our faces in our food. Finally I say, "So how's it going?" He looks up, and for the first time I really see him. He is a man of about 50, a Native American, I would guess, with neatly combed hair that is graying, and a clipped mustache. His features are coarse, and his nose has been broken at some time in the past.

We talk awkwardly, we chat. He wants to know who I am and why I'm there at the shelter. I tell him, and he seems to warm up to me a bit. I see the tattoo of a pair of boxing gloves on his forearm. "Are you a boxer?" I ask. "Used to be," he says. I can see from his strong build, a boxer. "I used to be the State Champion—started with welterweight, when I was just a kid." "Wow," I say. "Wow." "I got in trouble, though—because of my drinking. Got in trouble, and got in jail. I would get out, get drunk, and get in trouble again. I been in jail most of my adult life. I'm on parole now. Going to A.A. Trying to stay clean and sober." His eyes look hopeful, determined. "What's your name?" I ask. "My name is Willie," he answers, and he puts his hand forward, a hand surprisingly soft for a man of the street. "My name is Marilyn," I say. "Will you come back?" he asks. "Maybe," I say. "Maybe.

All of a sudden, it's not just numbers, not just statistics about "the homeless"—it's Willie. I'll always remember him. I see his face, feel his hand, hear his voice saying, "Will you come back?" And I know that, yes, in some form, in some way, I'll be coming back.

You have all seen the statistics on division of wealth in this country, and so I'm not going to spend a lot of time on that, But let me give you one figure that just flabbergasted me. It's just over the top. In the 80's and 90's practically all the wealth we generated as a people went into the pockets of the wealthiest among us. The income of the top 1% went up 61.6%. The bottom 80% of the population—and this includes almost all of us—gained 1.2%. But let's leave the numbers—let's translate this into shopping. These numbers reveal why one woman—who likely does not work at all—can go into Saks Fifth Avenue and pay \$350 for a little black leather purse (on sale), while across town a minimum wage mom has to go to bed hungry so that her children can eat

She's one of the lucky ones. We are forming a vast underclass who are either wandering the streets or in jail. They have no stake at all in the society, and don't see a way out.

Fact: One out of 5 of our workers makes less than \$6.00 an hour. That's barely \$10,000 a year.

Fact: The U.S. has a higher proportion of its citizens jailed than any other country in history.

Fact: Over 20 million Americans cannot read the poison warnings on a can under the sink or a letter from a teacher or the first page of the paper.

Fact: The fastest growing population among the homeless is families. The average age of a person who is homeless? You guess. Eight years old.

As I began learning about these issues, I realized that I needed to know more about economics, and I began reading. What a wasteland! As John Kenneth Galbraith said, "if all the economists in the world were laid end to end, that would be a good thing." The basic problem with economics today is that it's trying to be hard science, and it's not. Very human problems have been reduced to sets of elaborate mathematical formulas that have no philosophical or moral container—unless one could say the assumption is that people are totally self-interested and materialistic, and the fittest should survive. And our economic policies are based on this kind of thinking. As Unitarian Universalists, do we not believe that all people have worth, and that a society should be judged not just by how much freedom it gives to the strong, but rather by how much care it gives to the most vulnerable among us.

This is not the first time in the history of the Republic that we have been up against big money and the abuse of power. Remember the Gilded Age, at the turn of the last century? This was a time of gross economic inequity—the time of the terrible injustices of child labor, unregulated corporations, appalling conditions in our prisons and mental hospitals, and the legal bondage of women. It was a time that begged for reform, and some of the great 19th century reformers were from our religious faith, people such as Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, and our friend and ally Jane Addams of Hull House—which incidentally was bankrolled by a Unitarian. It was a new day. People stepped out to lead, and others followed.

We are now in a second Gilded Age. I believe that the clear and compelling issue in contemporary life is the rise of big money and with that rise, the demise of democracy. "We have two governments," writes Lewis Lapham – the provisional government, which speaks to the people through pageants, parades, and the press. And then the permanent government, which is a secular oligarchy of the rich and powerful. This government goes about its work quietly. Free expression among the citizens is fine, so long as nothing interferes with the rule of money². Whoever gets left behind, gets left behind.

[2: Lewis Lapham, Harper's Magazine, August 1996.]

So what are we to do? We must begin to speak to one another and to listen—and then to imagine a different way. It's not just those *others* who are in trouble—it's all of us—we are all one body. We must gather in groups and tell one another about our fears for our

own safety, about our loneliness and isolation, about the clutter in our lives, about the children we don't understand, about the job that sucks the life out of us, about the days going by in a blur with nothing to show for them. If we allow our hearts to speak, we will discover very quickly that we are not alone. And with that knowledge comes the sense of community and caring that will support us on our journey to a better place.

But it is not enough to speak of our pain. We must understand that our world is not irrevocably the way it is—our current economic structures, despite what some people believe—have not been divinely ordained. Human beings, just people have made choices, and we can make different choices. Let yourself imagine. Let yourself dream. If you could change your society, what would it look like? Who all would be included? Who would be in charge? What would your vision be?

I speak of imagination as being essential. I say this because the power of the human mind is both enormous and beautiful to behold. I believe that we can create a better way. And I speak of the imagination of common folks like you and me, because I no longer believe that the solution to our social problems will come from the top down. I do not believe that our politicians will lead us to this new world—mainly because our system of campaign financing forces them to feed at the trough of the rich. We must lead, and they will follow.

So solutions are not likely to come from Washington. Nor will they come through a particular political ideology. It's pretty clear that capitalism has won out over the planned economies of socialism—but the excesses of capitalism have led us to poverty—material poverty for many, and spiritual poverty throughout the land. We need a vision. The scripture doesn't say, "Without a program, the people perish"; it doesn't say, "Without a political agenda, the people perish"—it says, "Without a vision, the people perish."

You see, it is our vision, our changing consciousness, that will determine the shape of our world, will determine even what we are able to see. You know, every culture has a story, a kind of controlling narrative. Some wag has suggested that our cultural narrative is "BE BORN, CONSUME, OBEY, AND DIE." What a scenario! And we wonder why our children are confused and restless. This is not a worthy narrative, a worthy story, to pass on to them.

But there is hope. I will share with you some of the shifts I'm hoping for, and that I see signs of, already. A shift

- from economic expansion to balance
- from the plundering of the earth to reverence for the earth
- from individuality to community
- from knowledge to wisdom
- from greed to moderation
- from charity to justice

It is our passion for justice that will rekindle the social imagination. But be wary. And I say this in particular to Unitarian Universalists, who so easily fall into the sin of pride. To transform ourselves and our society, to sustain us in that hard work, we must be grounded in something larger than our own egos. Ego will always fail us, because it is self-referential. It always asks the question, "How will my importance be raised up? What will I get out of this?" The way of the Spirit is different. It has to do with with humility, with relinquishment. The question becomes, "What brokenness needs to be made whole? What am I called to give?"

As Unitarian Universalists, we should be at the center of the conversation about this new world. Why? Because we have the character and the courage and the values for this task. We are wise and passionate people. There is only one thing that can stop us—ourselves. When we pull back from the Sacred and act as if our faith were not central to our being. When we remain comfortable for too long, so that we cannot hear the cries of the forgotten. When we obsess about individual freedom and fail to bind ourselves in community, toward common purpose. When our religious communities concern themselves with the trivial and fail to focus on a mission larger than themselves and their needs.

I guess the big question is, why do all this anyway? Why not just plug in our own computers, stay behind locked doors, away from all these troubling things? We must act because it is only through resistance that we become clear, energized, truly alive. And it is when we are creating something new, together, that joy springs up within us and gives us hope and strength.

A new day is coming. I see it everywhere I look. Where will Unitarian Universalists stand? Let it not be said fifty years, a hundred years, from now, "Look what terrible injustice was being done—and the church, the church said nothing." Much has been given us, and much is required. Let us love mercy and do justice. Let us walk humbly with our God. Let our tradition be truly a living tradition. Else what can we say to the children when they ask us about the world we have given them? What can we say to the children?