

A Unitarian Universalist Theology of Community Organizing

By Matt Meyer

*“Relational power is both collectively effective
and individually transformative.”*

-Ernesto Cortes¹

Social justice work and Unitarian Universalism are intricately connected. Most of us believe that doing our part to make the world a better place is an important part of our spiritual journey. When it comes to the means of engagement however, there is less consensus. Our faith has much to say about the importance of charity and service and advocacy and education. I would offer though, that the tools and grounding values of community organizing reflect our Unitarian Universalist identity more than any other method of justice making. For a number of reasons, community organizing is a more holistic expression of Unitarian Universalism.

I'm interested in the intersection of these values and tools, because I've done my social justice work so badly, so many times. In college, I remember that beautiful moment of pride when I sat in the lobby of my dorm building asking fellow students to sign their name to a petition requesting recycling services in the building. I had put a petition on the door of the Resident Advisor's room and by the end of the evening, 30 people had signed it. The Resident Advisor saw the petition, agreed to meet with me, and agreed that we indeed should have recycling. "This was it," I thought, "How easy it is to create change!" But when administrative logistics made the project more difficult than it seemed at first, everything came to a stop.

This was one of the first of many times that I sat alone and wondered what had gone wrong. Why didn't people care enough to stay involved? Why did they prioritize other things? Why didn't I have the motivation to work harder myself? I was confused, angry, and embarrassed all at the same time.

This essay is partially a process of sorting through those questions to find a more sustainable way of doing social justice work that is also grounded in my values and my community. In retrospect, the recycling petition lost steam for a number of reasons that seem obvious now. I started with an issue, rather than hearing the stories of what people were really interested. It lost steam because it involved a list of names, rather than a community. And I lost steam because I was working on my own, without the support or accountability of other leaders.

Community organizing is relational. It's strategies and principles are rooted in personal relationships and community accountability. The service work, education, and advocacy that often arise out of organizing campaigns result from a more democratic process that is grounded in the needs and visions of community members most affected by the issues we seek to address. The coalitions and organizations doing organizing in our faith communities begin with everyday people rather than experts. They build the power of communities to affect long-term change, rather than blindly supporting issues or ideologies. The storytelling, mutual discernment, and relationship building that are woven

into the process of organizing reflect the basic Unitarian Universalist conceptions of covenantal relationship, democratic process, and interdependence.

Organizing is also effective. Unitarian Universalism believes that a life of faith calls us to move beyond bearing witness into concrete action. We believe not only in the ideals of a just, equitable, and compassionate world, but also in the agency of human beings to help bring that world about. The cornerstone of community organizing rests in the belief that everyday people, when they come together, have the power to affect change.

To that end, I offer this incomplete list of the values and tools of community organizing. Each of them has a counterpart as a defining aspect of Unitarian Universalism. As UU's find increasing interest in community organizing methods of social justice, I hope this essay will contribute to the conversation of how organizing can serve as a way of living out our UU values on a daily basis and perhaps even as a spiritual practice.

Storytelling

Community organizing begins with storytelling. Community members meet one on one and listen to each other's stories. We share one another's journeys and struggles. We listen deeply to the sources of each other's anger and our stories of hope.

Unitarian Universalism affirms the importance of the encouragement to spiritual growth. We do this by celebrating the diversity of spiritual paths we find within and beyond our congregations. What does this affirmation and celebration of the spiritual journey look like in practice though? It looks like story telling and story listening. If sharing the story of our unique path in one on one conversation or small group ministries is not proclaimed as a central spiritual practice of Unitarian Universalism, perhaps it should be. "Encouragement to spiritual growth," in our Association's principles does *not* mean, "keep growing, just don't tell me about it!" "Encouragement" means that I want to hear your story, because your story matters and because my listening matters as well.

Asking to hear the stories of our community members, whether they be congregants or neighbors beyond our church walls, is a primary way that we can show our fellow travelers our respect for their path, as well as our respect for their inherent worth and dignity. Storytelling is also a central tool in beginning to unpack complicated issues of identity that bring us privilege or disadvantage. It's a way to begin to understand how some are placed ahead of our neighbors or given benefit at the expense of others.

I would offer that the most successful social justice work in our UU movement in the last generation has revolved around marriage equality, because we have shared and heard the stories of our communities members seeking recognition for their families. The multitude of these shared stories laid the groundwork for shared understanding and dedication to the values they illuminate.

When we understand how we have been pushed down or lifted up through invisible systems, how we have been segregated and separated from one another, we have made the first step in moving forward together.

A Common Narrative

Out of this process of storytelling and story listening something very powerful begins to grow: a common narrative. We learn that our pain does not exist in isolation. We break down the barriers of independence and begin to recognize our interdependence.

In Boston, when faith community members came together to share their fears and struggles with health issues, they found that there were in fact systemic problems that affected the personal stories of thousands of individuals. Their stories ceased to be private struggles of family members battling sickness and began to emerge as a public story, a common narrative of a health care system that wasn't working. Once that narrative emerged from the members of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO)², it wasn't long before GBIO leading the way in what became a successful campaign to pass universal health care in Massachusetts.

The same story holds true for Stonewall and the LGBT movement that it ignited. We saw it in the trainings and public rallies of the civil rights movement and again in the consciousness raising groups of second-wave feminism. Storytelling and story listening allow us to recognize that our lives are bound up with one another. Nearly two hundred years ago, Hosea Ballou loudly proclaimed our common Universalist destiny. Today, when we engage in the common narrative of our congregations and communities and recognize that our individual stories unfold in the context of larger systems, we internalize the good news of interdependence and we live the Universalist gospel.

Collective Action

Community organizing exemplifies the power of collective action. When a community comes to understand its own story, we can open our eyes to our place in the world-as-it-is and take action to co-create the world as it might be.

Our Unitarian Universalist mandate for public action arises out of our theological roots. The first of the "five smooth stones" of liberal religion, as articulated by James Luther Adams³ is that "religious liberalism depends on the principle that 'revelation is continuous.'" Unitarian Universalism believes that it is the ability and responsibility of every generation to renew our conversation and covenant with our God and with our fellow community members. As we come of age in our society, we recognize that the scripture of holy books, the bylaws of our institutions, and the codes of our culture are no more sacred than what we may write and create together in our own time.

We believe in the power of reason⁴ to inform our faith and to question anew the assumptions of previous generations. We have access to truth above and beyond tradition. Above and beyond "the way things are." And should we find a truth that is in conflict with the status quo, it is our moral obligation to take action to address the conflict. This is the third smooth stone of Adams, "Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's effort toward the establishment of a just and loving community. It is this which makes the role of the prophet central and indispensable in liberalism." South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu would add, "There is no neutrality in a situation of injustice and oppression. If you say you are neutral, you are a liar, for you have already taken sides with the powerful. Our God is not a neutral God." Unitarian Universalism is likewise, not a neutral faith.

Our next mandate for public action is the fourth smooth stone: human agency. Unitarian Universalism rejects the mistaken concept of predestination. Writing in the 40's, A. Powell Davies⁵ proclaimed, "It is of this, today, that liberals stand accused. They did not pray that God would save them from themselves through some impossible, miraculous "Salvation." They prayed that God would save them in and through themselves while working out their own salvation." Our path is not, and ought not to be, determined by a God in heaven or even a banker on wall street for that matter. In the words of Saul Alinsky⁶, "the central principle of all our organizational efforts is self-determination" Unitarian Universalism teaches that the power for individual and collective self-determination resides in every human heart and mind.

The barriers to an acknowledgement of human agency in our society are not solely theological. They are economic and political. Ernesto Cortes explains, "The Industrial Areas Foundation approach to institutional change recognizes that problems such as poverty and unemployment are not simply matters of income. They are a crushing burden on the soul." Living our faith in human agency means taking collective actions to tear down the barriers to democratic self-determination wherever we find them, whether they be theological, economic, or political.

Ultimately, a theology rooted in the tradition of Universalist salvation is a theology of hope, the fifth smooth stone. Our call to "stand on the side of love," is statement of faith. We believe that love can overcome fear and despair and that our *ability* to move toward beloved community, means that it is our also our *responsibility*.

Reflection/Evaluation

Every organizing action is followed by evaluation. The most traditional community organizing groups end every public action, and every meeting for that matter, with a time of self-reflection.

Evaluation and collective reflection embody our opportunity to act on our covenant together. Covenantal community, which is the second smooth stone, by the way, is more than reading an affirmation on Sunday mornings. It means a commitment to hold each other accountable, to trust that we will speak our truths in love and encourage one another to growth. That doesn't happen by sheer force of will. Those commitments happen when we structure intentional time and space for them and then practice.

A well-executed culture of evaluation is a spiritual practice. It is a culture of personal and collective growth. It is a culture of mutual accountability. It is a culture of listening as deeply as we speak. A consistent practice of evaluation is a load-bearing wall in the architecture of covenantal community.

Leadership Development/democratic process

Community organizing recognizes the potential for leadership in every person. Not only does every human being have worth and dignity, but they have an ability and a responsibility to participate in and shape the democratic process. Our UU congregations and covenanted communities not only preach the necessity of democracy, but create the legal and financial structure of our polity and our Association to reflect those values.

Community organizing however goes further and challenges us to look at the role of democracy beyond the narrow context of annual meetings and elections. The organizing principle of leadership development is expressed most clearly in the Iron Rule of organizing, “never do for others what they can do for themselves.” Democracy isn’t just asking the membership of a congregation (or a nation) to show up on election day. It means an ongoing commitment to building the skills for participation. It means that the job of a leader is not only to listen to the stories and dreams of the community, but to train and develop those community members to be actors in realizing their dreams. True democracy also means looking at which groups have been excluded from leadership and structuring our institutions to develop leadership that reverses the machinery of racism and other oppressions.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel tells us that when our world is hurting, “in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.” The “use of the democratic process⁴” means that we recognize our responsibility for one another and the necessity of participation.

Concrete Change

Community organizing demands concrete changes in people’s lives. In theological terms, we call this the “Social Gospel.” Unitarian Universalists believe that the co-creation of the kin-dom of God on earth (by whatever language you call it) is more important than our beliefs of what may await us after this life.

There are many who find comfort in the idea that a heavenly being is marking points in our column when we speak out or bear witness to a cause. It can be argued though, that a Unitarian Universalist understanding of the social gospel calls us to go beyond the isolationist satisfaction of “being right” and move to a place of “being the change.”

Boston minister, John Haynes Holmes⁸ co-founded The Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice (UFSJ) in 1908, which stated "The Church must make the connection between the great words they are repeating—love and brotherhood(*sic*), humanity, sympathy—and the world of real experience... talking not about abstract principles but about our brother(*sic*) in the concrete." Our faith invites us to set aside the questions of an afterlife, that we might spend our time considering how we create heaven or hell for one another in the immediacy of this life.

Transformative Conflict

Community organizing also acknowledges that there is conflict in our world and it is our role as change agents to engage tension in transformative ways. Organizing acknowledges the messiness not just of political struggles, but in the complexities of community. The challenges of participation are to be embraced with love and faith. We might call this radically realized eschatology. Rebecca Parker⁹ describes this progressive understanding of salvation saying, “There is no land promised to any of us other than the land already given, the world already here. The serpent lives in the garden.” Even if we don’t achieve the perfection of justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, the way that we engage the conflicts and complexities of our world with love is our salvation in the here and now. UU musician and theologian Peter Mayer¹⁰, proclaims, “God is a river, not just a stone. God is a wild raging rapid. So swimmer, let go.”

Means and Ends

Saul Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals" devotes many pages to a discussion on the ethics of means and ends. I was raised in a Unitarian Universalism that taught me it was not only my responsibility to be an agent of change, but that how I/we go about that transformation is also of utmost importance. As a Unitarian Universalist, our work for change is to be done in relationship. It is covenantal. Covenant is the ends and means of living in right relationship. Relational power, as Ernesto Cortes described at the beginning, is both the destination and the pathway.

Our denominational work to "Stand on the Side of Love," calls us to engage the work of relationship building. It calls us to organize. Let us leave with the words of Davies again, "Love is not a sentiment, a mere indulgence, a tender softness towards all things, good or evil. Genuine love, creative love, is the most demanding thing in the world. It will not relax its standards-it will not because it cannot."



Matt Meyer is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist. He has a degree in music and travels to UU congregations as a guest musician and worship leader and has lead hundreds of services for congregations around the country. He is a founding member of the Lucy Stone Cooperative, an intentional community living the values and tradition of Unitarian Universalism. Matt currently works as a Housing Program Organizer, supporting mobile home parks in their development and governance of housing cooperatives.

Additional Notes:

¹**Ernesto Cortes** founded Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), in his home town of San Antonio in 1974. COPS was one of the first Industrial Area Foundation (IAF) affiliates to create a powerful and sustainable organization that served as a model for future IAF efforts.

²The **Greater Boston Interfaith Organization** is the Boston affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation.

³**James Luther Adams** was a Unitarian parish minister, social activist, journal editor, distinguished scholar, translator and editor of major German theologians, prolific author, and divinity school professor for more than forty years. Adams was the most influential theologian among American Unitarian Universalists of the 20th century. Adams' five smooth stones are explained in the essay "Guiding Principles for a Free Faith" in *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essays in Religion and Society*, Max Stackhouse, ed. Beacon Press, 1976, pp. 12—20. While this book is out of print, some congregations may own it and there are also copies available from the Internet. **Hosea Ballou** has been called the "father of American Universalism," along with John Murray, who founded the first Universalist church in America.

⁴The Congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association affirm and promote **seven principles** and draw from **six sources**. The fifth source includes the “guidance of reason.” The Fifth Principle affirms “the use of the democratic process in our congregations and society at large.”
<http://www.uua.org/beliefs/principles/>

⁵**A Powell Davies** (June 5, 1902-September 26, 1957) was the minister of All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington, D.C. from 1943 to his death in 1957. A prolific author of theological books and sermon collections, he came to national prominence in the U.S. through his liberal activism advocating civil rights for African-Americans and women and ethical stands against post-war nuclear proliferation and the methods employed by the American government during the era of McCarthyism.

⁶**Saul Alinsky** (January 30, 1909 – June 12, 1972) was an American community organizer and writer. He is generally considered to be the founder of modern community organizing. His most famous book, “Rules for Radicals” summarizes his theories and methods of organizing.

⁸**John Haynes Holmes** helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in 1909, and also the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1920, which he later chaired. He was one of the people who publicized the work of Gandhi from his pulpit in the United States; He served as the Senior Minister of The Community Church of New York from 1918-1949.

⁹**Rebecca Parker** is an ordained United Methodist minister in dual fellowship with the Unitarian Universalist Association. She has served as the president of Starr King School since 1990.

She elaborates the three progressive eschatology's (theological term for "speaking on final things") of universalist, social gospel, and radically realized in a book she coauthored with Rev. John Buehrens, "House for Hope."

¹⁰**Peter Mayer** is a Unitarian Universalist singer/songwriter. He is the author of "Blue Boat Home" and "God is a River." Check him out at www.petermayer.net

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