

From Fear to Faith

Good morning.

My name is Charles Loflin and have the distinct pleasure of speaking with you today in my capacity as Executive Director for UU FaithAction NJ. I want to especially thank Rev. Dawn for the invitation to be with you today and share a bit about the work that we are doing for social justice across the state. I also want to take this opportunity to express my deepest thanks to the UU Congregation of the South Jersey Shore for your ongoing support. I hope too, that if you are learning about UU FaithAction for the first time, that you might consider getting directly involved with this work. Also, I want to share some final thoughts about why I believe that we as Unitarian Universalists, especially in the work of Social Justice, are being called to Reject Fear in Favor of Faith. That's a lot of ground to cover, so let's get right into it.

First, let me share a little bit about this history of UU FaithAction especially for those who may not be familiar.

In 2006, the UU Congregation of Princeton conducted a congregational survey around commitments to social justice. One

of the projects that came from that effort was the establishment of the UU Legislative Ministries of New Jersey known then as UULMNJ and known today as UU FaithAction NJ. From its inception the organization was envisioned as a collaboration among all the New Jersey UU congregations to advocate for UU values in the public square and especially with the New Jersey Legislature. By 2008, the organization established a two-pronged mission: one a ministry dedicated to education and research of social justice issues and the other coordinating grass roots advocacy and establishing public policy via legislation.

In 2010, the organization established the operational model of organizing around individual Task Forces to collaborate with congregational teams as well as other organizations around priority issues.

Today, UU FaithAction is organized around the following Task Forces:

- Criminal Justice Reform;
- Environmental Justice;
- Gun Violence Prevention;
- Immigration Justice;
- Reparations;

Reproductive Justice; and
FAIR (Faith Action Inclusivity Representatives) which is our
youth-led caucus

In 2017, the Board adopted the current mission statement. It
reads:

Grounded in our Unitarian Universalist faith, we are
confronting systemic injustice and building a more
compassionate society in New Jersey by:

- Educating ourselves and others on social and political
issues
- Mobilizing individuals and congregations to act for
justice
- Advocating for equitable and sustainable public policy

Thanks to the ongoing participation and financial support of our
21 member congregations and individual donors, UU FaithAction
provides both the advocacy and legislative leadership that both
makes a real difference on issues of equity and justice, but also
helps us build wider alliances between front-line communities,
advocacy groups, legislators and key coalitions across the state.

Our Vision Statement says:

We envision a just New Jersey free from systemic oppression and greed, full of engaged people committed to each other, to our communities, and to the earth.

To facilitate communication between the members congregations and the organization, we encourage each congregation to appoint one or two liaisons. Janet Longo is serves as your congregational liaison to UU FaithAction and we thank her for her service.

Additionally, UU FaithAction is led by our board trustees which is comprised of members from affiliated congregations and religious professionals serving affiliated congregations who bring their remarkable expertise to this work.

There are many ways to get involved at UU FaithAction.

One of the simplest is to join our mailing list by visiting our website at <https://uufaithaction.org>. At the very top of the page is a link to sign up for email and text alerts. This allows us to send alert such as when there is action to take on particular legislation such as contacting state legislators to indicate support or opposition on specific bills. These action alerts are often time

sensitive but they have real impact on legislators. Additionally, we send out occasional education alerts to share information about workshops, book reads, and other opportunities related to social justice issues. This is also the best way to make sure you know of upcoming UU FaithAction events including our upcoming Gala on April 9th, our Annual Meeting in May and the Issues Conference that we hold each fall.

Another great way to get involved is through our Task Forces. Each task force meets monthly via Zoom to discuss the issues and legislation related to that task force. You can find detailed information about each task force on our website as well as contact information for the task force chairs who can provide details for their upcoming meeting. The task forces provide opportunities to connect with UUs from other congregations and to build relationships with allied group and coalition partners.

As mentioned earlier, congregational liaisons fill an important role of being the primary conduit between UU FaithAction and each congregation. Liaisons help to communicate not only keep a congregation updated on events and issues at UU FaithAction but also to share social justice activities of the congregation with us so that we can help promote those events through our community

calendar. We want to build the strongest possible relationship with each congregation as we work together to do the work of social justice throughout the state. If you have potential interest in serving on the Board of Trustees, I would love to have a conversation about that as well.

A final way to be involved that's critical to our ongoing work is through individual financial supports. Each affiliated congregation is asked to make an annual contribution based on their number of members which is a major source of our funding but we are also reliant on individuals who choose to support us directly. It is especially helpful for those who are able to make recurring monthly donations as this provides a consistent revenue stream that helps tremendously in the budgeting process.

Again, we are so grateful for those who are already involved in the work of UU FaithAction and we welcome anyone who wants to get more involved with the call to social justice. After all, it's right there in our name—we strive to help NJ UU's put their Faith into Action.

That leads me directly to the reflection that I wanted to share with you today. I've been thinking a lot recently on the work of social

justice within Unitarian Universalism and where we find ourselves in this moment. These last couple of years of navigating through what it means to be a religious community in the midst of a pandemic have had many congregations asking existential questions about who we are, what we do, and how we do it. Moreover, it has required us to consider answers to these and other questions in multiple contexts. What does it mean for a particular congregation? What does it mean in the larger context of community? What is the impact when we think of the larger circles? As a state? As a region? As a national movement?

It seems to me, that the challenge of our time is how keep from being overwhelmed by Fear. If we're being completely honest, there certainly seems to be a lot for which to be legitimately fearful.

Through the pandemic, I've personally experienced waves of Fear. The fear that I would catch COVID. The fear for the safety of my immediate family—and then my extended family especially those who lived in a part of the country that didn't seem to be taking the pandemic seriously. Even after being vaccinated, there was that period when I feared for my teenager who wasn't yet eligible for the vaccine. Plus don't even get me started on the fear

around the impact the pandemic was having on my teen's education. Even today, I have enormous concerns for extended family with children currently too young for vaccination. My heart continues to go out to all those parents for whom this is an ongoing concern. But perhaps my greatest pandemic fear is that so many people seem unwilling to take common sense precautions and that as a result, the threat of potentially more variants to come is very real.

And if the global pandemic wasn't enough in and of itself, these last years have included massive concern about systemic racial injustice, targeted oppression against marginalized communities, catastrophic climate change, and a profoundly inequitable economic system. All of this has been happening in what is perhaps the most politically polarized environment imaginable that has literally spawned a rebirth of authoritarianism and attempted insurrection.

I have to remind myself that all of these things and more describe not what has happened—as in past tense—but what is happening—as in the present tense. This is the reality of the moment. This is now. This is real-time.

When we live in a world so eager to stoke our fears on a daily basis, how do we cope? I'm particularly interested in how an environment of fear impact our Unitarian Universalist congregations and institutions and especially how that can have an impact on our social justice work.

And I want to be really clear here. Social justice work has been a part of Unitarian Universalism from its beginning and even before in the work of the Unitarians and the Universalists. But it has also been a source of tension within and among congregations. I deeply believe that Unitarian Universalism at its core demands social justice work. UU theologian James Luther Adams said "Right attitudes are never sufficient alone. They must find embodiment in social institutions."¹

In a time like ours of heightened anxiety, congregational fears that social justice actions may lead to division and conflict can be magnified in terribly disproportionate ways. It can manifest in a fear-based response that errs on the side of inaction or potentially making decisions that are counter to the core values of Unitarian Universalism.

¹ <https://www.uua.org/leadership/learning-center/governance/polity/47013.shtml>

Over the last few decades, research around how fear impacts our assessment of risk are particularly telling. Fear is problematic when it is disproportionate to actual risk. Fear can lead to an overestimate of the risk of catastrophic outcome.

I would argue that perhaps the most dangerous kind of fear is that which remains unspoken. When we aren't able to process our fears and name them, they can grow out of control. This can lead to catastrophic thinking where we assume worst-case scenarios and believe that things are much worse than they actually are.

In a time of fear, we are more susceptible to longing for a return to what was comfortable. There is danger in the nostalgia for a falsely idealized past imagined as free from the ambiguity and anxiety of the present.

So what is the alternative to this fear?

I would suggest that a life-affirming faith is the alternative.

As we heard in the reading from Sarah Gibb Millspaugh's "Shifting from Fear to Faith", that "spiritual faith is not the same as spiritual certainty." This is not magical thinking or denial of reality or simply

ignoring fear. It is a faith borne out of our direct experience informed by the values we affirm and promote. It is a faith that says while we cannot know exactly what religious community will look like as we continue to move through the pandemic, that our commitment to one another will guide us. It is a faith that says because we hold to the inherent worth and dignity of every individual as well as the principles of justice, equity, and compassion that we will side with the marginalized. It is a faith that in the presence of fear doubles down on dismantling white supremacy and building multi-cultural beloved community. It is a faith that strives to err on the side of action rather than inaction.

Fear will mislead us and bring us to break our vows. But faith—liberating faith—will lead us back to relationship, back to community, and back to creating the world we dream about.

May It Be So.

