

“Glimmers of Hope”
Sermon and Worship Service for
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wayne County
Wooster, Ohio
February 9, 2020
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister
Worship Associate: Vivian Ashcraft
Music Director: Sharon Delgadillo
Special Music: The Folk Orchestra

Welcome and Announcements (Vivian Ashcraft)

Prelude (Folk Orchestra)

Opening words [the Rev. Eric Wikstrom] (Rev. Jennie)

“We come together this morning because within us there is something that knows we need more than we can find in our aloneness.

We know—instinctively, in the depths of ourselves—that we need others for this journey of life even though we also guard our independence and individuality quite jealously.

So let us celebrate all that makes us unique yet also all that makes us one, and let us dream dreams of all that we can do... together.

Chalice Lighting: [the Rev. Maureen Killoran] (Vivian Ashcraft)

“In these hard times, let us look first to the response of love.

In the midst of challenge, may our chalice flame bear witness to the inherent worth and dignity of every human being.

In the midst of uncertainty, may our chalice be a beacon of encouragement, that our values may guide our choices.

Let us look first to the response of love.”

*Hymn #153 Oh, I Woke up this Morning

Time for All Ages

(Chelsea Churpek)

Singing the Children Out #413 Go, now, in Peace

Sharing Joys and Concerns

(Vivian Ashcraft)

Unison Blessing *Sanctuary* - Scruggs and Thompson
Open my heart, to be a sanctuary
All made holy, loved and true. With thanksgiving,
I'll be a living sanctuary for you.

Spoken Blessing and Moment of Silence

(Rev. Jennie)

This morning we are thinking with loving kindness of all those in our congregation, or known and loved by our congregation, who are in a time of transition, loss, uncertainty, or fear. May their fears be assuaged, their minds be put at ease, and their hearts be comforted. The final stone is for the Joys, Concerns, Milestones, and Remembrances which remain silent in our hearts. Let us join our hearts together in a moment of silence in contemplation on the joys and concerns of the day. Blessed be.

Offering

(Vivian)

Welcoming of Guests

(Karen Skubik)

Reading: the words of Margory Stoneman Douglas (Vivian Ashcraft)

"There must be progress, certainly. But we must ask ourselves what kind of progress we want, and what price we want to pay for it. If, in the name of progress, we want to destroy everything beautiful in our world, and contaminate the air we breathe, and the water we drink, then we are in trouble."

Reading: the words of Margory Stoneman Douglas (Rev Jennie)

"Speak up. Learn to talk clearly and forcefully in public. Speak simply and not too long at a time, without over-emotion, always from sound preparation and knowledge. Be a nuisance where it counts, but don't be a bore at any time... Do your part to inform and stimulate the public to join your action. Be depressed, discouraged, and disappointed at failure and the disheartening effects of ignorance, greed, corruption, and bad politics—But never give up."

*Hymn #123 Spirit of Life

We are approaching the second anniversary of the mass shooting at the Margory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. That tragic event occurred on Valentine's Day in 2018. Our anguish about those deaths and losses remains with us still. Even so, as that two-year anniversary approaches, we are now able to see ways that those high school students used their experience of tragedy as an opportunity to create glimmers of hope.

There are some reasons you may not yet see their efforts as successful. But I find what they have done to be remarkably impressive and inspirational. They took a senseless tragedy and, with imagination, creativity, and inclusiveness, turned it into a movement whose empowerment and advocacy has now reached all corners of our nation and all around the world. I have learned about their movement from articles and essays and their new book, which is called, *Glimmer of Hope*. I also went to hear them speak, collaboratively with "Chicago Strong," a student coalition working to end gun violence, at the DuPage UU Church in Naperville, in June of 2019. They hosted a community town hall discussion, and it was featured in the Fall edition of UU World magazine. This remarkable movement began with the Parkland student Cameron Kasky, who survived the shooting, and whose younger brother also survived. Almost immediately after the tragic event, Cameron wrote two essays on Facebook. CNN then contacted him so they could post his essay and interview him. Several other students from Parkland then began meeting at Cameron's house. They were determined to tell people their story, in their own words, in their own way, as much as they possibly could. They were determined to galvanize other people to inform themselves and take action. They were determined that the shooting at their school must not become just another name and statistic on the list of mass shootings in our nation in schools, and in so many other settings. Cameron said that what had always happened in the past was that the media would come into town, get some photos and quotes from people, edit those, and put them into the news only until the next big news story broke. But the Parkland high school students were articulate and knowledgeable about social media enough to reach the public directly with their stories and their agenda. As such, their movement is an entirely new phenomenon.

Another way to think of that phenomenon came to mind for me this week. I've started making notes toward my sermon for next week, which will be, in part, about the liberation movements in England in the 1980s. The popular music in England at that time was part of what birthed those liberation movements. And

so, while thinking about next week's sermon, a phrase from a Billy Bragg song came to my mind. The song is called, "Waiting for the Great Leap Forward." The lyric is, "If no one out there understands, start your own revolution and cut out the middle man." That's what the student activists from Parkland did. They started their own movement, and cut out the middle people of mainstream media.

Those students have said that they will not forget what has happened to them, nor what the epidemic of gun violence is doing to people across our nation, especially in the inner cities, and they will not stop talking about this until laws have changed. The reforms they are demanding include:

- Change the Standards of Gun Ownership, including a ban on assault weapons, high capacity magazines, and other weapons of war;
- Cut in half the rate of gun deaths in ten years;
- Accountability for the Gun Lobby and Industry;
- Name a National Director of Gun Violence Prevention;
- Generate Community-Based Solutions; and
- Empower the next generation, including by automatically registering eligible voters when they turn eighteen.

Within four days after the shooting, Cameron and his friends had announced at a press conference that the name of their movement was Never Again, and that there would be a March For Our Lives in Washington, DC, on March 24th, similar to the Women's March on Washington. They were being interviewed on all the major network and cable new outlets. And they had launched student trips to the capital in Tallahassee, and to Washington, DC, to lobby legislators in person. Over 800,000 people came to the March For Our Lives in Washington. There were over 800 simultaneous marches that day, around the nation and around the world. Each time one of the students had the opportunity to make a written or public statement, they felt that could be their last chance. So they educated themselves, dug deep in their souls, and crafted their words the best that they possibly could. Knowing how quickly the spotlight moves on to other stories these days, they were articulate, concise, and creative. In his speech at the rally in Washington, Ryan Deitsch said, "We need to arm our teachers." Having gotten the crowd's attention, and also some booing, he then said, "We need to arm them

with pencils, pens, paper, and the money they need! They need that money to support their families and to support themselves before they can support the futures and those classrooms!” And in his speech that day, student Alex Wind said, “Together we will use our voices to make sure that our schools, churches, movie theatres, and concerts, and our streets become safer without having them feel like prisons. If teachers start packing heat, are they going to arm pastors, ministers, and rabbis? Are they going to arm the guys scanning tickets at the movie theater? Are they going to arm the person wearing the Mickey costume at Disney?”

After the march and rally in Washington, the Parkland students began their Road to Change tour, which is education, advocacy, and voter registration. By now we are all readily familiar with Cameron Kasky, David Hogg, and Emma Gonzalez, as three of the main front people of this movement. But I am impressed to have learned how many students are also leaders, behind the scenes and working locally across the United States. The Parkland students have taken to heart the teaching: “Leaders creates leaders.” And their movement brings to my mind the phrase, “Lead, Follow, or Get out of the way.” One of those student leaders, Matt Deitsch wrote that Road to Change was inspired by the farmers movement in California and the Freedom Riders. He said, “In order to topple corruption we must organize and educate-- We must listen to and learn from every community in this great nation... We are empowering young people, who are better connected now than at any time in American history, to be the leaders in their community.”

When I heard these student leaders speak and answer questions at the town hall meeting in Naperville, Illinois, it was clear to me that they knew the basic principles and methods of interfaith community organizing models such as Gamaliel, ACORN, the DART Network, and the Industrial Areas Foundation, called, IAF for short. IAF is the model that I’m most familiar with. IAF’s work is congregation-based, interfaith, and centered around the people, institutions, and needs of a specific geographic area. IAF seeks to empower people and communities “that have little power over decisions that impact their own lives.” They provide training, leadership development, mentoring, and organizing tools. And their successes include areas of immigration, public safety, housing, voter engagement, environmental, criminal justice, neighborhood development, and senior issues. An affiliate chapter begins with building and deepening relationships between individuals and their congregations or other institutions. Only after that do the participants discern the social justice and advocacy needs and priorities in their local community.

While I was the interim minister in Little Rock, Arkansas, I took part in starting up an affiliate chapter of IAF. Our leader was a young woman from Egypt, named Alaa Eldamaty. She is Muslim, and had worked in an IAF chapter in Boston and Cambridge, especially on the issue of affordable health care. Our meetings of local interfaith clergy and lay leaders were, both productive and spiritually renewing. I would leave them feeling fulfilled, inspired, and motivated. We also took part in larger training sessions, sometimes led by Alaa, sometimes by her mentor. IAF's model begins with listening, through individual face-to-face meetings, which are also called "One-on-one's." We would ask a person, who always, on the surface, seemed different than oneself, about their original sense of calling to do social justice work, and what they, personally, felt the most important needs in their community were. And then we'd just listen, and listen longer. Then we'd switch, and we would be listened to, empathetically. Thus, respectful and caring relationships were formed and deepened, and many stereotypes fell away. One of the resources we used is the booklet, *Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal*, by Michael Gecan, from the Metro Industrial Areas Foundation. In emphasizing the profound value of such an individual meeting, Gecan cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer as saying, "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them... Those who cannot listen long and patiently will always talk past others, and finally will no longer even notice it..." In addition to the one-on-one's, IAF's model includes a power (relational) analysis of the surrounding community. I remember Alaa leading a large group session in which she asked us, "Who has the power in Little Rock? –the power to employ people, to evict people, to make decisions that affect the general population's lives?" We listed major medical centers, the universities and colleges, other major employers, and super market chains. She then asked us, "How many of you know the names of the Mayor, the City Manager, the City Board of Directors, the Superintendent of the School District, and the various judges?" She then said, "You can be sure that the CEOs and boards of directors and university chancellors know the names of those officials and representatives. If we are going to advocate for changes that will make people's lives better in Little Rock, we have to educate ourselves about who the people with power to make decisions are."

The individual meetings, power (relational) analysis, and teaching and training establish relationships and create cohesiveness in the group as a whole. That leads to the "action and evaluation" phase. The chapter discerns which social justice issues it will focus on. As such, the issues an IAF chapter works on change depending on the changing needs and injustices of their local community, and of changing times. But the relationships last-- for years, even for decades. And the

chapter maintains a readiness to respond, as a cohesive group of individuals in right-relationship with each other, despite how radically different they initially thought they were from each other.

The Parkland student activists' high school is named after a predecessor activist of theirs, Margory Stoneman Douglas. She has become known as the woman who saved the Florida everglades. And she also fought for racial justice and women's right to vote. As a young woman, Margory Stoneman Douglas married a man who was a con artist, who tried to steal her father's money. She divorced him, and moved to Miami to write for the newspaper her father published. She was soon able to support herself through her writing: articles, books, and fiction. And she became an activist that we can still admire and learn from today.

"Vicissitudes" are those sudden events, usually tragic, that are beyond our control and leave us in hardship in our career or life journey. The Parkland high school students, and Margory Stoneman Douglas were all hit with vicissitudes of life that were tragic. And none of them saw them coming. But they all said to themselves: I'm going to find my voice and use it, and I'm going to make what I say and do matter, inspired by people who came before me and who sacrificed. And I'm going to make what I say and do matter for the generations who will come after me. I'm going to make what I say and do count for something, and advocate on behalf of people and situations that are most vulnerable-- Because, in the end, life isn't about me. It's about the things that are larger and of more lasting importance than just me.

Now that the year 2020 has finally arrived, our nation is in a weirdly liminal period when we, in some precarious ways, do not know what is going to happen, and it could be said that we are, "Waiting for a Great Leap Forward." We can learn from the Parkland high school students and Margory Stoneman Douglas. They survived and flourished. We can be advocates in community --in ever-expanding communities-- because that's what a movement is. And it's one of the main things people come to our Unitarian Universalist congregations for-- to join together in collective action for the common good.

*Closing Hymn #368 Now Let us Sing

*Parting Words [the late Robert F. Kennedy] (Rev Jennie)

"This world demands the qualities of youth; not a time of life but a state of mind, a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over the life of ease."