

Wear It On Your Sleeve
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
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It's an old high-school experiment. You may remember it well. You fill a glass of water to the brim. Carefully, drip by drip, you fill the glass to above the rim, holding the water through surface tension. Then, you drip one more fateful drop. The tension breaks, the surface trembles and water flows over the sides of the glass. It is that last drop, indistinguishable from all the others but crucially important that constitutes what is called "The Tipping Point."

In a fascinating book (a bestseller literally for years!) called The Tipping Point, social scientist Malcolm Gladwell explores how a few individual or haphazard events have set off epidemics, for better or ill, that have profoundly altered the culture. He applies this theory to everything from the resurrection of *Hush Puppie* shoes to the well-honed message of *Sesame Street* to the murder rate in NYC, Paul Revere's ride, hiring practices at the company that makes Gore-Tex fabric, the AIDS crisis, and recently in comments to the press, the election of Donald Trump. I imagine he would have included TikTok and COVID if they had existed.

Ideas, Gladwell explains, often follow the same rules of contagion as infectious diseases. An idea may incubate for a long time in a few carriers, it may linger for years in a subculture, but if the proper conditions are present it can erupt suddenly, for better or worse, into a full-blown social movement.

He writes, "Human beings have a hard time with this effect because it seems out of proportion to the cause. But to appreciate the power of epidemics, we have to abandon this expectation of proportionality. We need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that sometimes big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes happen very quickly, for better or for ill."

This morning, I want to apply the *Tipping Point* theory to us and to how wearing it our sleeves activates the overflow that creates social change. That said, this is not as a step-by-step "how-to" sermon. I'm not going to lay out a plan for activism, allyship or resistance, although I hope we can spearhead and support some of that work together through our Social Justice Allies and through UUAJAZ.

Rather, my hope is that my words will serve as a reminder to you of your inherent power and your inalienable rights. I want to pose the question: What does it mean (or might it mean) for us as individuals within a community to tip the *tipping point* and deliberately start and control positive epidemics of our own -- epidemics of compassion, justice, and peace?

A common misconception that morphs into a stumbling block is that we need to be special, saintly cave dwellers who subsist on locusts and wild honey, or a Kennedy cousin, or Malala, or Gandhi, or a dot.com millionaire philanthropist or a Beltway insider in order to be an agent of change in our complex, wounded and, dare I say, corrupt society.

The scholar Cornel West has pointed out that to turn Martin Luther King, Jr. into a super human saint is to disempower us regular folk to believe we have the power to affect change. We may identify all too readily with the question posed by our esteemed UU ancestor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who asked: "What in these desponding days can be done by us?" His answer -- "Wherever one comes, there comes revolution. *We are* the wondermakers."

Emerson's revelation is such an important and empowering one -- we are *all* citizen activists. It's not the other guy. It's *us*...individually and collectively, wearing it on our sleeves. We are the wonder-makers, the peacemakers, the ones "giving life the shape of justice," the tippers of that fateful tipping point. We just need to believe it and place our boots on the pavement.

There is another misconception that suggests spirituality and activism are somehow incompatible -- one being worldly and one other-worldly. Yet, often, as our spirituality deepens and matures, a growing awareness of our personal relatedness to the universe grows, too. Our self-focus, our toxic individualism, so insidious in American culture, might be eclipsed by the universal themes of justice, compassion and equity, a concern for the planet and those who live on it, especially the marginalized and vulnerable.

At this fraught juncture in history, we wade thigh deep in the overflow of tipping points – the vessel has been so full for so long now — racial justice, immigrant justice, economic justice, reproductive justice, climate justice, voting rights, education justice. Last week, Janine Gelsing shared some of the ways UUJAZ is confronting these issues.

You may or may not agree with the premise that UUs want to think of themselves as the gold star do-gooders and I'd argue that we are, in the main. Yet, we have bright exemplars and we have a shadow side, too – just as I pointed out in my homily for Indigenous People's day last October.

A quick run-down of prominent 19th and 20th century Unitarians and Universalists reveals renowned social "tippers" in all areas of activism: Horace Mann established the first public schools; Dorothea Dix demanded humane treatment of the mentally ill; Samuel Gridley Howe founded the Perkins Institute for the Blind; Henry Berg organized the SPCA. Susan B. Anthony and Julia Ward Howe crusaded for women's suffrage, Clarence Darrow argued the Scopes trial protecting evolution, and Margaret Sanger midwived the American Birth Control League, forerunner of Planned Parenthood.

These folks perceived themselves as citizens of John Winthrop's "city on the hill" where individual and family well-being was directly related to the common good. As a result, they set about establishing "beloved community" here on earth rather than wringing their hands about salvation in the hereafter.

Our Universalist ancestors were the more justice-oriented branch in our family tree. And less affluent too, not surprisingly. We have the Rev. Clarence Skinner and his gospel of social action. He wrote several books that had a substantial influence on our denomination in the twentieth century: *The Social Implication of Universalism* in 1915 and *A Religion for Greatness* in 1945, These works remain fresh and inspiring today. He preached that there is no middle way – it is Universalism or perish." We proudly lift up Universalist Clara Barton, founder of the Red Cross, who quipped: "I defy the tyranny of precedent."

On the other hand, and especially on the wake of Labor Day, we must mention railroad tycoon George Pullman, too, a so-called Universalist who hired post- Civil War African Americans who might not otherwise have employment but also exploited them with long hours and low wages and fought their attempts to unionize.

More recently, our former UUA President Bill Schulz, who later served as head of Amnesty International, has extolled UUism as a faith that is *so this-worldly* that we have no choice but to engage with the world and seek to save it. He asks: "But what are the true odds of succeeding at saving the world? For every victory of justice, we can cite a dozen instances of its defeat." He continues: "Do our actions in the face of wrong and tragedy truly make a difference?" Yes, of course it makes a difference! As Schulz puts it: "The Unitarian Universalism that I honor takes it on faith that we can affect the tenor of the day."

Pete Seeger, who sang for joy and freedom, and who wrote our first hymn, the renowned and beloved social justice song, "If I Had a Hammer," was also a Unitarian Universalist. Along with Woody Guthrie and others, he sang for humanity, for labor rights, for a clean Hudson River, and against war and inequality. Seeger died at age 94 in 2014. Throughout his long life, he wore it on his sleeve. He protested and was labelled un-American. He defined his mission as "speaking truth to power without getting thrown in jail too often." He noted that there are many ways to do. He did it with banjos and boats. Others are doing it with cooking and gardens, swimming and science. "We just have to be aware," he tells us, "that it's a struggle all the way."

Despite the overflowing tipping points, I remain convinced that responsive, civil societies define what is expected of people; they educate their members to embrace these values, praising them when they do and admonishing them when they don't. Although the ultimate foundation of morality may be commitments of individual conscience, it is an interdependent web of everyday activists, wearing it on their sleeves, who help us sustain these commitments in a truly civil society.

Moreover, I'd argue that we need more that cynical trolling, political bullying, and complaining about a world increasing turning upside down. And as moving as it is to stand in solidarity by observing a moment of silence and offering prayers for the latest tragedy or changing our Facebook profile pictures to a pink fist or a Ukrainian flag, this is not going to push the status quo off its mark.

Some suggestions – Join our Social justice allies and organize group actions for our congregation. Get involved in the upcoming elections, the Black Lives Matter or the Climate Justice movements, stand against institutional racism, support reproductive justice, take up the active challenges on the UJJAZ website.

Yes, it has become riskier to wear it on our sleeves. Many UU churches have had their Black Lives Matter banners vandalized and destroyed. Protests have become more violent and death threats are now as common as mud. For Pete's sake, Cracker Barrel restaurant has received death threats for adding a veggie burger to their menu! Even so, let's promote the idea that reasonableness and responsibility are forms of compassionate action. Reason, compassion, justice- it's a three-legged stool. Let's get real about the Second Amendment and assert that it is reasonable to expect that assault weapons not be sold to civilians at Walmart.

Even in the face of frustration about the system, experiencing "compassion fatigue" or feeling numb and foggy after another shooting or Supreme court decision that renders us afraid and feeling powerless, each of us can still choose to bless the world with conscience, to savor the world and to save it, and we should absolutely expect our leaders to do the same in their policy making and in their actions. Tipping Points are a reaffirmation of that potential for change and the power of intentional and intelligent action. Look around you. The world, the city on the hill, America suffers from much surface tension.

Our planet may appear an immovable, implacable place at times. But it is not. With the slightest push -- in just the right place -- it can be tipped. And we can do the tipping. We can wear it on our sleeves, affect the tenor of the day and start an epidemic of compassion, justice, peace.

President Obama left us with these words in his parting letter to America: "I'll be right there with you every step of the way," he wrote. "And when the arc of progress seems slow, remember: America is not the project of any one person. The single most powerful word in our democracy is the word 'We.' 'We the People.' 'We shall overcome.' "

Wear it on your sleeves, my friends. Be brave, and let's step lively – together.

Blessed be. Blessed we. And Amen.

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