

Andrea Hamre, PhD  
Sunday Service, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman  
January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022

To our Lay Leader Janet Young, Service Committee, Reverend Duffy Peet and Members of our Fellowship, thank you for this opportunity to share during today's service.

My name is Dr. Andrea Hamre, and I am a transportation researcher at Montana State University – but today, I am joining you as a Member of UUFB and as a scholar who has spent some time studying and reflecting on the meaning of justice.

I offer my remarks today as a form of meditation on the concepts of freedom, justice, empathy, and dignity, and as a connection with and continuation of Reverend Peet's sermon last week on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life of intention – as we look in anticipation to the opportunity to honor Black History Month as February commences in a few weeks.

I have begun a new tradition of listening, in the days leading up to our observance of the Dr. King Holiday each year, to original recordings of his orations. This practice steeps me anew in his teachings and wisdom, shared with us until his murder at age 39.

In his speeches, Dr. King often professed and taught the meaning of the Greek word “agape” – a form of love he described as understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all people. Dr. King believed us to all be children of God, what many in our living UU tradition identify as the Spirit of Life, or a corner of the universe endowed by evolution with the aweing beauty of diverse life.

Even in the face of chronic verbal and physical abuse, threats, assaults, violence, racialized terrorism and killings by White members of our society, Dr. King expressed concern for their suffering – for their hunger, lack of education, inadequate housing, and other manifestations of poverty, and his concern for suffering encompassed not only members of our own nation but indeed the world as a whole, for “the American Dream reminds us that every [person] is the heir of a legacy of dignity.”

Dr. King described how humanity's scientific and technological genius has turned the world into a neighborhood, but lamented we had yet to manifest the ethical commitment to make the world a true global community. "We must learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] or we will perish together as fools," he said. "Every nation must be concerned about every other nation, every individual must be concerned about every other individual," he said. Of his travels to India, he said he would not forget that, amidst the noble and marvelous experiences, how he faced depressing moments of seeing with his own eyes hunger, homelessness, lack of medical care, and extreme poverty. Our destinies are intertwined, he implored:

"...life is inter-related, we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied to a single and common destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. As long as there is extreme poverty in this world, no man can be totally rich, even if he has a billion dollars, as long as diseases are rampant...no one can be totally healthy, even if he just got a checkup in the finest facility. I can never be what I ought to be until you can be what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

In short, Dr. King lambasted racism, colonialism, poverty, and hunger everywhere, and said that in order to make the American Dream a reality, we must seek to make the world dream a reality, and implored us to begin with a world perspective so that we might grow as one, not only geographically but also spiritually.

Dr. King often invoked the imagery originated by Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker in 1853: "I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways...But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice." A beautiful echoing touchstone in the pursuit of justice, this imagery was invoked by President Obama, who said that it bends because each of us reaches up to pull it toward justice – reminding us that justice is an active process that we will into being. Dr. King knew, too, that justice was not inevitable, for "human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable...every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

Let me offer today what I see as a helpful framework for reaching up to pull the moral arc of the universe toward justice. As Unitarian Universalists, how might we manifest the exertions and concerns of those dedicated individuals Dr. King taught of?

Each person is important, be kind in all you do. We're free to learn together, and search for what is true. All people need a voice. Build a fair and peaceful world, care for Earth's lifeboat.

This is a version of our living tradition's shared Principles formed for all ages, and the foundation for our reflections today on how the "capability approach" developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum may help us build lives and societies of intention.

The capability approach emphasizes both existing capacities or states of being as well as opportunities to nurture capacities. Health status, life expectancy, educational attainment, self-respect and political participation are states of being that should be understood as distinct from the freedom a person has to choose between different ways of life they value and to achieve different states of being. Both the status and the choice of status are therefore essential to the experience of freedom, from this perspective. That is, "in assessing the extent of freedom that a person enjoys, it is important to pay attention to both 'well-being' and 'agency' aspects."

Sen is a development economist, and his work has helped shift development accounting from that which is income-centered to people-centered by conceptualizing poverty as the deprivation of capabilities rather than merely low income or material resources alone. As a result, development is understood to encompass basic economic freedoms like the absence of hunger and disease as well as political freedoms such as freedom of the press and political participation. His work was the foundation for the United Nations' Human Development Index, which is a summary measure of key dimensions of human development, including health, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. The U.S. currently ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in the Human Development Index, despite having a higher gross national income per capita than all but four of the higher-ranked countries, suggesting America

has relative deficiencies in health and education investments compared to these higher overall ranked countries.

So bringing this back to our UU living tradition and shared Principles, I offer the capability approach as a framework for thinking about our efforts to live with justice-expanding intention.

In our own lives, I offer this as an opportunity to take stock: First, of our current states of being – are we healthy in body, mind, and soul, are we curiously engaged in growth through learning, and are we meeting our daily needs for safety, food, and shelter? And second, of our capacities – are we maintaining and cultivating relationships and putting ourselves in situations that nurture our own opportunities to achieve new states of being? This could mean taking a step back and having very frank and difficult conversations with a medical professional about chronic risk factors, making an honest assessment of the balance of attention we give to television and social media versus more focused efforts toward learning, and an evaluation about whether we are experiencing chronic stresses either due to insufficient income or a source of employment that takes too much time and energy away from our families, friends, and community. It could also mean reassessing whether any relationships or situations in our lives make us feel pigeon-holed, static, suffocated, or stymied. This is important inner work for living with intention.

As UUs we can also look to the capability approach for inspiration for the work we do in here in the Bozeman community and in our greater national and global societies. First, what is the current state – as a community, are we sharing broadly in the achievement of key health indicators and educational attainments? Is our community organized in such a way to support the broad shared enjoyment of adequate material wellbeing? And second, as a community do we broadly provide opportunities to choose between different ways of living?

I will take just a moment now to offer a few examples and applications from my work with sustainable transportation. I recently shared about the idea of carsharing in Bozeman in the context of new and denser housing in the downtown area, which I appreciate has been an issue of considerable and ongoing debate in our community. Someone I was speaking to shared that she could not imagine making any use of carsharing, because she was used to being

able to get in her car and drive whenever she wanted to. How could carsharing possibly be much use to new residents? Wouldn't anyone moving to downtown Bozeman want 24/7 access to a private vehicle? A teachable moment! I thought. Yes, I responded, I see you are sharing from your personal experience as someone who has the financial and physical capacity to own and operate a car, perhaps so for many years or even decades, without interruption. But what if you've never been able to afford a private vehicle? In that case, access to a car through a carsharing system could be a freedom-expanding opportunity for certain trips, an empowering and enabling expansion of your capability set for different ways of living. I tried, in that moment and in similar conversations, to raise some awareness about what in my field is sometimes called "windshield bias" – the tendency to perceive transportation issues through the primary lived experience of driving – despite the fact that many members of our community cannot or choose not to drive. In this way, empathy is an important part of my work in sustainable transportation, because it helps us reflect upon and care more about how our transportation policies and funding decisions impact the transportation experiences of other members of our community, especially those who might have fewer resources. Empathy is so important to our practice of honoring the dignity of those we are traveling alongside in our communities, and especially when we get behind the wheel of a car, let us remember the force generated by the weight and acceleration of our vehicles and take special care for the safety of those walking and biking. As the Penalosa brothers say, livable communities are places where walkers and bikers have dignified experiences, and a developed society is one in which the rich ride public transportation – rather than one in which the poor have to drive.

My husband and I were out driving a few weeks ago, and came up to a car with a bumper sticker that read, in large text "Bozeman Is Full" – and small in smaller text "But I hear Missoula is pretty nice." 😊 We began discussing some of the tensions in this fast-growing small urban area related to population growth, new housing development and housing affordability, car traffic and parking. And I suppose today I want us to consider reflecting on these growing pains in Bozeman from the perspective of the capability approach and our shared Principles. How can walk the talk in our own backyards and help to manifest a community in which you and I both have the opportunity to be what we ought to be? Perhaps the capability approach can help us to see that life in Bozeman is not the zero-sum game of a finite community, but rather as a place that could afford freedom-

expanding opportunities and new states of being to those who would like to make a go of it here.

Taking a step back, in my assessment, we have made so progress toward achieving Dr. King's vision of a broad community of sisters and brothers, a global society of nations concerned about one another, but so much work remains. Food security, access to healthcare and education, political and religious freedoms, and peaceful coexistence remain inadequate in many parts of the world, and these are issues we can work on right here in Bozeman as well. 'We are more than we have ever been, and less than we hope to be' said one speaker at President Biden's inauguration. We are a nation "unfinished" said the poet Amanda Gorman at the same occasion.

Dr. King said self-destruction would be America's price for continued exploitation of Black and other marginalized members of our society – we cannot thrive and be our best while any part of our society remains oppressed. And Dr. King taught that the salvation of our world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.

Each person is important, be kind in all you do. We're free to learn together, and search for what is true. All people need a voice. Build a fair and peaceful world, care for Earth's lifeboat.

May we be maladjusted wherever and whenever it is not so. May we be maladjusted to intolerance and bigotry, abuse and violence. May we be maladjusted to compulsory states of mind and beliefs. May we be maladjusted to harmful dogmas, inequality, and environmental degradation. As Dr. King taught, let us not allow fear to convince us to adjust to the unjust.

And in our own lives, may we search for ways to reach up and pull with all our might on the moral arc of the universe, pulling and pulling, bending and bending, always toward justice.

*Notes and Sources:* Quotes and paraphrases from Dr. King's orations are from the audio compilation *Speeches by Martin Luther King: The Ultimate Collection*. The capability approach was developed in works such as Amartya Sen's [Inequality Reexamined](#) and [Development As Freedom](#). Further reading and context are found in [Capabilities and Social Justice: The Political Philosophy of Amartya Sen](#)

and Martha Nussbaum. Karel Martens employs the capability approach in his philosophical development of the theory of transport justice in Transport Justice: Designing Fair Transportation Systems.