

Sermon by Reverend Peaches Gillette
April 2, 2023,
First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

On Resistance, Social Justice, and Faith

I want to mention that I saw the Dorothy Cotton film, *Move When The Spirit Says Move*.

I want to mention this for two reasons, one, it coincidentally underscores the topic of today's sermon about Resistance, Social Justice, and Faith, and two, as we move along our goals of building relationships across the lines that divide this nation and our communities, specifically color lines, I feel compelled to restate that the experiences of African Americans, or Black Folk (that's my 60's talk), in this country and across the globe are vastly different from those of "White Folk," especially those of my generation or older generations. When I am viewing films like the Dorothy Cotton one, it is as if we are watching two completely different presentations.

As I sat with a couple of my dear friends, White, from the Bahai community, our reactions throughout the film and after were like night and day. I was viewing events that were profoundly familiar to me. I was watching my entire life flash before my eyes. The faces on the screen were the faces of my brothers and sisters – the same as the faces of my family and my friend's families – I knew them well.

I was watching my mother's life moving slowly before my eyes – a woman who was left in abject poverty because of the history of racism in this country – a woman who was looked down upon, who cleaned the homes of White people, and whose children were surreptitiously ushered to the back of line even during church coffee hour.

I was experiencing the fear I hold for my son, his children, and all those of color who have never gained traction to live well because of this awful history of racial hate.

For 1 hour and 27 minutes, I was being raked through coals and left with burns and scars.

My friends really liked it and learned a lot.

I have always been aware of these divergent points of view, but I am also aware of that because of how we are trying to identify as a community concerning race and racism or Anti Racism. One day we must gather all folks together and have a candid conversation about the lenses through which we respectively view and live our lives.

Before I became part of this community, I remember Peggy McKernan used to do a film series as part of ARMT. I have attended a few, and although we ended each film by having compassionate, heartfelt discussions, I always thought how interesting it was for me to be almost on the outside of those discussions because so much of what I felt was never reflected in what others felt, was not beyond the superficial level, was sincere, but not quite getting what I got.

And before I continue. I theorize that until we come to some consciousness where we are watching the same or near enough to the same film, emotionally and even politically, where we all walk away feeling our hearts have been similarly broken, we will not move along to any great distance from where we are now no matter how much Social Justice and Anti Racist work we do.

And I don't just mean this congregation; I mean all congregations or communities, here or across the world, congregations that are still not sitting together discernibly mixed in race, creed, and color, as that night at Cinemapolis.

In terms of Resistance, Social Justice, and faith,
Here are a few of my humble thoughts.

Resistance moves from two directions. When we think of resisting oppression, we think of it as something outside of ourselves that filters into our minds and systems. We forget we must also resist the things within us that cause us to believe in and use taxing stereotypes about others - stereotypes that keep us from engaging effortlessly with another.

A couple of months ago, I did a workshop specifically about stereotypes, and a White woman said she was getting to know a neighbor of color and wanted to ask her if she would like to go out for a hike, but realized that Black people didn't hike and did not ask.

We must resist the thoughts fed to us from the world around us that we internalize, which prove corrosive to building relationships with others.

We will not accept oppression as an unmovable part of the human condition.

We will move our minds, bodies, hearts, and wills to dismantle systems that violate human rights.

We must move together, not with secretly different goals, but with the same goal.

Our movement must be something other than ego-driven, not on an individual or group level. I have seen this happen in many social justice groups I have been a part of.

American politician and Attorney General from 1961 – 1964, Robert Kennedy, once said:

"Each time a man stands up for an ideal or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Social Justice

If we are going to use our social justice work as a catalyst for change, and we have not gone as far as developing loving, sustainable relationships across all social barriers, races, classes, and even religions, then what we have, in essence, is social justice as a business transaction that will come and go along with the focus of the business.

If we do not invest in "friendships" with others, knowing them more intimately, and understanding their lives, not from books and films, but by simply being together, chatting, watching a movie, sharing a meal, having a beer, and yes, even hiking, our social justice work will always fall short.

American political activist Angela Davis once said:

"I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. ..."

Freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience. We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated."

Faith

You are looking at a person of great faith emotionally, religiously, spiritually, philosophically, sociologically, and so on. I love the word and the concept.

I grew up with a mother who saved our lives every day, scraped together food to nourish our bodies, provided us with shelter, and loved us even against the personal pains and struggles inherent in a society that told her she had no worth. She was able to do what she did, to carry on and continue loving the world because of her faith.

And as crazy as it may sound, and it sometimes sounds crazy to me, I have faith in each of you. I have faith because I see your humanity despite everything that may be completely different between us. I see your faith in one another, I see your hearts, I see your sincerity, and I see:

Your want to save the day,

You want to feed the hungry.

Your want to sit at the table together, discernibly, mixed - all classes, creeds, and colors.

Your want to speak of hope, love, and peace and know we can get there.

I see your want to move together into a better world,

And I thank you for that.

American Baptist Minister and Civil Rights Leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said:

"Faith is taking the whole step even when you cannot see the whole staircase.