

SERMON, FEB. 4<sup>TH</sup>, 2023  
FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF ITHACA  
Rev. Peaches Gillette

## **Justice and Equity, My Mother, and Mrs. Shapiro**

Justice and equity have been like dreams that I've spent my entire life reaching for long before I was able to completely comprehend or give words to the idea.

As a child, the immediate scope of my world revolved around surviving in spite of the fact that justice and equity sat at a great distance from my family, the other folks of color around me. I also recognized the distance between justice and equity as it showed up in the lives and on the faces of the poor White children that we played with on 7th Street in Brooklyn.

Each of our lives are the stories that make up reality. They are all connected.

Our lives in the present are the history of the damage to all of us from a world that was literally financed and built on the maltreatment of others, maltreatment that has created cyclical poverty, globally environmental degradation, economic underdevelopment, racial profiling, systemic racism, deteriorating neighborhood infrastructures, ongoing forms of redlining, unequal access to health-care, miseducation, undereducation, and in some places, behind the dark curtains of power abuse and corruption justice and equity are virtually non-existent. These things continue to make up the plot to the story we live.

Those of us who have been shaken into consciousness are rattled by what we see. Some see, yet are not rattled.

Those of us who have been awakened are pushed and moved into the understanding that when Fannie Lou Hamer said in 1964, "Nobody's free until everybody's free, she was right.

And when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. restated that same sentiment in 1967, when he said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," he too was right.

What they were saying in less than simple terms is, We are all in this together, whether we like it or not, whether we want to see it or not.

And even though it seems that in this case many hands **do not** make light work, they really do, because those many hands keep those of us who are weary, moving on. The hearts behind those hands, nourish our souls.

As most of you know, I grew up in the 60's and 70's in a neighborhood that was openly racist. My mother was classic as she had hitchhiked up north from the south in 1942 for better work opportunities and ended up in Harlem, eventually moving into Park Slope Brooklyn in the building of a family from "the Islands," who were one of the very few Black families who owned a brownstone in that area.

We went to school there, a small school, PS 39, where we were made to sit in the back of the classroom, were ignored even if we dared raise our hands, and were called racially derogatory names everyday of our lives in the schoolyard.

I was sunken. I was frightened. The world outside of my home was the saddest, most confusing place I knew.

I see my young nephews and as a teacher, I see other young children of color engaged in this struggle. I am the hands, along with other hands, that are holding them up. Our hope is their nourishment.

I am thankful we have journeyed this far in terms of justice and equity - and I trust that we will journey even further.

Well, I want to read you a story about the first time I felt nourished and held up while outside of my home. Sit back. It's a little lengthy. It was a story I wrote for a small book I am working on.

My earliest memories of school revolved around a teacher named Mrs. Shapiro. Although I can't quite recall what grade I was in when I met her - perhaps second or third- what I can recall is how she made me feel amid a harsh and lonely world, a world that by the time I was 10 years old, had worn me down.

Being at school was a terrifying experience for me. Children and adults teased and criticized me because of my body size. In addition, I was aware that the world looked upon me scornfully, which arose from the unrestrained racism during that time.

Children of color were assigned seats in the back of the classroom, and they understood almost immediately that their participation in academic activities was not welcome.

I sat in the back in silence, and listened, my thoughts partially on the lesson and partially adrift in a sea of loneliness and shame. The only thing I was entirely focused on was the end of the school day.

I was selectively mute when I was old enough to be in Mrs. Shapiro's class. It was a way of trying to be as invisible as possible, a way to not

“feel,” an attempt to step away from the imprisoning sense of having no place in the world and feeling hated for my skin color.

The three o'clock bell was like a freedom call that allowed me to escape from the all-consuming emptiness I felt at school. And when that bell rang, I *did* escape. I hurried out the metal doors, raced around the corner, and halfway up the block to my home on Seventh Street.

We all escaped. Every child broke loose and scattered in different directions. Some headed to the sidewalks in front of their buildings to play games, some to the candy store. Some headed to the “corner diner” for burgers and fries and a few spins on the counter stools, but I always raced home to be within the protective walls of our apartment and to sit under the soft glow of my mother's warmth.

My mother paid little attention to me. Unlike contemporary parents, she did not grow up in a culture that believes that love meant constantly hovering and doting. She grew up in a culture where children and grownups busied themselves separately, and love was not a type of entertainment or a performance. Love was infused in the air of the family, filled the atmosphere, and we simply breathed it in and out to others. There was absolutely no doting in our home. The concept did not exist for my mother. We were merely taught and expected to be kind, thoughtful, steady, sane, strong, independent, and as helpful to one another as possible.

Despite her inattentiveness, I felt adored and was incredibly happy to be freed from the outside world to stow away in her presence.

My mother was quiet and spent her time doing the chores that came with caring for eight children. I sat and watched her pensively and passionately when I was around her. Something about her was

captivating - something with which even after-school cartoons could not compete.

I loved watching her move through the apartment and through the day. It was like watching a curious film; I learned from her and wondered about what life meant with regard to her constant laboring both in our home and when she labored in the homes of others.

I was fascinated by her ability to feel calm in a world that seemed so dangerous and sad to me. I watched and absorbed everything she was - I took her into my soul. I saw a beauty in her and about her that was never recognized or honored by the world around us; after all, she was just another poor Black woman with too many kids - a burden on society. I wondered if she felt hurt.

I watched her and knew I was fortunate to experience love in the way I did. Not only did I feel loved, but I also had the opportunity to comprehend love without words or doting; our time together seemed slowed down and profound; it sat away from me at the most appropriate distance, a distance that allowed me to see more clearly what was before me. I loved her, again and again, each time I came home.

I watched Mrs. Shapiro in the same way I watched my mother. I watched her as she walked around the perimeter of the desks in the classroom, talking and teaching lessons. She had thick, dark brown hair, which she wore in a "beehive." I mainly knew blond-haired people, and so she seemed unique to me.

She was rather tall and dressed as "sharp as a tack," an expression my mother often used. She walked with a light swagger that made me think of the cowboys I saw on television. She wore dark red lipstick and had wonderfully thick, dark eyebrows. Her voice was raspy and

confident, and she occasionally smelled of cigarettes, but most of the time, she carried the fragrance of the loveliest perfumes.

I thought Mrs. Shapiro was gorgeous, like a movie star, and I watched her, not simply because of how she looked, but because I could not get her off my mind. There was a specialness about her, shadowed by a sadness in her eyes that sometimes brought tears to my own - a sadness that I faintly saw in my mother.

She was quiet to me, not because she didn't speak very much; she always had a lot to say. She was quiet to me because she did not make me feel alone in the classroom - a feeling that creates an internal noise. She never gave me distasteful looks and didn't turn away from me unsmilingly if our eyes met. She deliberately smiled at me when she saw me looking at her. She even touched me on the shoulder when she circled the room; her touch made me feel at peace. She would often wink at me as she sat at her desk.

As a child, a wink was a powerful gesture of affection. A wink was what charming male actors would use to woo a woman. A wink was sweet and kind. I grew to trust Mrs. Shapiro in a way that I never trusted anyone other than my mother. I trusted her because, to her, I was just a child in her classroom, and for the first time I can remember, I felt safe in school. I watched her just as I watched my mother - she was an intriguing person and one I did not fear.

One day, Mrs. Shapiro asked me to stay after school to help her "straighten up" the classroom. She wiped the chalkboard and slowly, with excellent handwriting, wrote out the lesson for the next day. I organized messy papers that were left disheveled and pushed the chairs neatly back into their places. When I finished, she called me to her desk where she was sitting. I stood before her and waited to hear what she had to say. I don't remember feeling nervous at all; I just

waited. She reached into her desk drawer, took out an ashtray, and placed it in front of her. She went into her purse, took out a cigarette and matches, lit up, leaned back in her chair and asked me if I knew she was Jewish. I shook my head no.

At the time, I did not really understand what that meant. She began to tell me about her family and some of the sadness Jewish people experienced worldwide. There were no harsh details in what she said; she simply spoke about how Jewish people were often hated. She talked about her children, their ages, and what they were like and told me she was divorced - a concept I had never heard before. She asked me if I knew what that meant. I shook my head no, and she explained it to me.

She paused and simply looked at me as I stood respectfully in front of her. She told me she knew I was smart and hoped I felt good in her class. She spoke for a long time, and I just listened. She spoke about many things and nothing specific, but the more she spoke, the more completely I saw her, and the more I knew that I did not have to be invisible to her - the more I felt her hand on my shoulder.

She would not allow me to be invisible. Then she stopped talking about her life, thanked me for helping her, and said I should head home.

Mrs. Shapiro's talk was not like a story with a plot, a middle, or an end, but everything she said stayed with me. Within her words and in who she was, I learned my most meaningful lesson - that someone else understood my suffering, that I was not alone, and none of us were truly alone.

Every day I went back to school, back to her class, I embraced the awareness of how her room felt very much like home. Home - where I

felt most safe, where the beautiful courtship of a mother and child happened slowly and perfectly, where I watched a woman with whom I would forever fall in love.

Throughout the world, people want the same things: they want to be embraced by love, touched by the hands of justice; they want access to clean air and water; they want economic opportunities; they want their children to be safe and sound in the world; they want to be able to afford healthcare; they want a good home, a sense of community pulling together, so that each of us can feel our worth and know that we can make a sustainable difference in this world that leads to the reality of our justice, equity, and equality.

We are now in the front line of a journey that still seems quite long, but we must walk on, we must use all we have, our bodies, our voices, our minds, our strength, our courage, our hearts and our hands at all times and keep moving and fighting for what is good for all.

We must be like the sounding of a bell that rings out for freedom, and we must use love and our wits, understanding that justice and equity will come and stay when we learn that we truly need one another.

I will read a part of a speech given from the pulpit by Dr. King on the subject of courage. Selma Alabama, 1965. I will read it as it was written.

“Deep down in our non-violent creed is the conviction there are some things so dear, some things so precious, some things so eternally true, that they're worth dying for.



“And if a man happens to be 36-years-old, as I happen to be, some great truth stands before the door of his life--some great opportunity to stand up for that which is right.

“A man might be afraid his home will get bombed, or he's afraid that he will lose his job, or he's afraid that he will get shot, or beat down by state troopers, and he may go on and live until he's 80. He's just as dead at 36 as he would be at 80. The cessation of breathing in his life is merely the belated announcement of an earlier death of the spirit.

“A man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right.

“A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice.

“A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true.

“So we're going to stand up amid horses. We're going to stand up right here in Alabama, amid the billy-clubs. We're going to stand up right here in Alabama amid police dogs, if they have them. We're going to stand up amid tear gas! We're going to stand up amid anything they can muster up, letting the world know that we are determined to be free!”

We must insist that justice and equity ring as loudly as we do for this same freedom that king spoke of. Our freedom is dependent on our attainment of these human rights --- justice and equity.

Thank you.