

“Taking Shifts for the Revolution” by Rev. Jonathan (“Bucky”) Rogers

**OPENING WORDS**

*For A New Beginning* by Irish poet John O’Donohue

When the light around you lessens  
And your thoughts darken until  
Your body feels fear turn  
Cold as a stone inside

When you find yourself bereft  
Of any belief in yourself  
And all you unknowingly  
Leaned on has fallen

When one voice commands  
Your whole heart,  
And it is raven dark,

Steady yourself and see  
That it is your own thinking  
That darkens your world

Search and you will find  
A diamond-thought of light,

Know that you are not alone  
And that this darkness has purpose  
Gradually it will school your eyes  
To find the one gift your life requires  
Hidden within this night-corner.

Invoke the learning  
Of every suffering  
You have suffered.

Close your eyes  
Gather all the kindling  
About your heart  
To create one spark.  
That is all you need

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To nourish the flame  
That will cleanse the dark  
Of its weight of festered fear.

A new confidence will come alive  
To urge you towards higher ground  
Where your imagination  
Will learn to engage difficulty  
As its most rewarding threshold!

**READING**

Our reading is from the book *Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown (sic), and includes her words as well as those of Hannah Sassaman and Karissa Lewis:

“Many trees grow from a common root system underground, are one being reaching up in many bodies—birch, ash, mangrove. Oak trees wrap their roots around each other under the earth. Mycelium, the threading that makes up most mushrooms, communicates between trees, particularly about toxic growth, a process called mycorrhiza (mai·kaw·ree·zuh). Most animals, including humans, sustain parasites and bacteria along and within our bodies, some of which manage waste and keep us well.

‘Parasites can be symbiotic and help each creature thrive—stronger together rather than divided. Fish cleaning barnacles from sperm whales—cleaner and pilot fish rule!’

This support happens between and within species. Ants tell each other where food is, not hoarding individually, but operating on a principle that the more of them that gather the food, the more food they will have as a community.

‘In nature everything works in collaboration. There are hummingbirds and flowers that are in such deep coordination they need each other for survival. How vibrant and alive and successful could our movement be if we moved with such coordination and collaboration?’”

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**SERMON**

Phone banking is one of my least favorite things to do. I am a millennial and an introvert, and talking on the phone can feel excruciating at the best of times. My favorite part of phone banking is when no one picks up; just because a task is crucial to my purpose doesn't mean I want to do it. The one thought that kept me going the whole time was knowing that if we succeeded, we could make Joe Manchin the most powerful person in American politics.

Thankfully though, this is not my, or anyone's, work to do alone. As we heard in this morning's reading, the strongest trees are inter-connected. Nicole Pressley, our UU the Vote National Organizer, got me to take my first steps. Nicole lives in Georgia, and she and I worked together at UUCA in Atlanta in 2017-2018. Nicole is an ambitious and visionary organizer, and was named one of the Center for American Progress' "Faith Leaders to Watch" in 2020. On one of our UU the Vote Zoom calls before General Assembly, she told us the goal was to make 100,000 calls during GA. That sounded ambitious, but sure enough, over the course of about six major phone banks that week, we smashed through the original goal and nearly doubled it! All told, in the leadup to the general election, UU the Vote made over 3 million calls to voters in key swing states.

3 million calls. By an organization that barely existed at the beginning of 2020. The world is changing around us and we need to build new, nimble, fluid organizations. Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters."<sup>1</sup>

3 million calls. How was that volume possible? There is an elegant metaphor for this work in the ThruTalk dialer system that enabled it. If you've done phone banking for a political cause or campaign in recent years, you may have noticed that auto-dialer programs can be very erratic in terms of how quickly you're connected with voters; that's because the speed of the dialer program depends on how many people are using it at a given time. If only one person is making calls, the auto-dialer makes one call at a time, and connects you if the person picks up, or moves on to the next number if they don't. But, if you have (approximately) ten or more people using the system at the same time, the dialer program can make dozens of simultaneous calls, knowing that if multiple recipients pick up at the same time, there will be multiple phone bankers available to talk at the same time. This means one person using ThruTalk can make about 20 calls per hour, but 10 people using it can make about two thousand calls per hour. Between

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<sup>1</sup> This version of the quote is a liberal translation by Slavoj Žižek written in 2010.

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one and ten callers, the quantity of calls they can make does not increase linearly, it increases EXPONENTIALLY.

I love this as a metaphor for how much more we can achieve together. Experience and received wisdom bear out that the maximum impact ten volunteers can have is exponentially greater than the impact of one volunteer. This principle could not have been more clear during UU the Vote. The most stressful but ultimately satisfying moments came when a couple of our phone banks in October and November had so many callers that we literally broke the dialer system! On our phone banks to Wisconsin and Florida, we had 150 people making calls all at the same time, and the system shut down after 45 minutes because it couldn't handle all of us at once. We still made over 20,000 calls on each of those nights. Our confusion and disappointment at not being able to continue quickly turned to pride and celebration on those occasions.

In jubilant moments like these, UU the Vote became not just a civic experience for many of us, but a spiritual one. These instances of collective despair turning to joy strengthened my belief in our faith tradition. They reminded me why I believe that though the moral arc of the universe is long, it bends towards justice.

In Octavia E. Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* and *The Parable of the Talents*, protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina says “Belief initiates and guides action - or it does nothing.” Butler was a pioneer and a prophet in the fields of speculative fiction and Afrofuturism. Though she wrote the books I mentioned in the 1990's, they correctly predicted the rise of violent authoritarianism in early 21st century America. As I watch our country devolve into conspiracy-mon-gering and militia vio-lence, I recall Butler's predictive and prophetic words. I recall her analysis that neoliberal capitalism is an unsustainable form of government and economy, and that what we believe in must lead us to stand up against the harm and trauma it causes.

“Belief initiates and guides action - or it does nothing.” Our explicit belief in democracy matters. Over the last year it has become increasingly clear that there are a finite and shrinking number of barriers between our current society and one governed by violent authoritarianism. Democracy is both a bulwark in and of itself, and a meeting place for those who envision a just and equitable future.

Nicole Pressley described how electoral organizing can be such a meeting place, writing:

“Voting is one of many political acts that create change.  
However, the organizing and relationship building we do in

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the course of electoral work is the site of the necessary ideological and spiritual transformation that allows us to imagine and call forth a new world together. Faith communities have a moral mandate to facilitate caring and cooperative relationships to reach beyond the walls of our congregations in order to move hearts and minds in service to justice and liberation.”

Electoral work is not an end in and of itself; it is a springboard for the relationship-building that is necessary to our larger goals.

UU the Vote is modeling how our relationship-building can be a site of spiritual and ideological transformation. We co-sponsored events with the New Georgia Project, Georgia Equality, Florida Rights Restoration Coalition, New Florida Majority, Black Lives Matter, CASA, Reclaim Our Vote, the Poor People’s Campaign, Election Defenders, and many individual UU congregations, in addition to a dozen UU State Action Networks. We surveyed the landscape and sought movement partners who will help us live into our values. Movement partners who prioritize not exploitation but reparation, not domination but restoration, not mis-appropriation but loving co-creation, not profitability but equitability, not fearful reaction but for caring compassion, not austerity and scarcity but interdependence, transcendence, and abundance. We identified those partners, and we boosted our reputation for showing up.

These networks, these connections to each other, to our congregations, to the organizations and institutions of our faith tradition, and to the vanguard of the modern movement for justice and liberation, are crucial. Our world is in a liminal period, with high levels of uncertainty and rapid change. The relative value of intersubjective trust, of knowing who you can rely on, is higher in times like these. We’re faced with new situations; to adapt in a timely manner, we have to know who to trust and how to be in relationship with them.

In such periods of high uncertainty and rapid change, one needs an iterative structure. A praxis model that says to continually repeat the cycle of plan, act, reflect, and adjust. We have to engage in what Gramsci called a “critical self-reflection.” That’s why each stage of UU the Vote is both a tool for action and for teaching. Last year there was a Summer Organizing School, as well as a UU the Vote cohort taking Beloved Conversations, so that we can “embody racial justice as a spiritual practice”. Coalitional civil rights organizing work is especially needed here in the South. The National Center for Responsive Philanthropy has released a series of reports entitled “As the South Grows”, detailing how organizers over the previous decade in the Southern US received

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less than one-tenth the per capita national average of grant funding. It’s our responsibility as Georgians to loudly advocate for our Unitarian Universalist Association and other national organizations to invest money and attention in our region.

Our ability to do things like build liberatory partnerships in the South is why relational organizing plays to our strengths as Unitarian Universalists. Relational organizing posits that folks are much more likely to respond to a call to action from someone with whom they already have a relationship. It asks us to take the sometimes uncomfortable step of forming and leveraging our own personal connections and networks to amplify collective calls to action.

Lest we doubt the power of relational organizing, let us look to our own faith tradition. Relationships in the abolitionist movement led to Unitarians Theodore Parker, Samuel Gridley Howe, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson financially supporting John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry by. The lay-led Unitarian fellowships planted in the South in the 1940s, counted among their memberships most of the attorneys that Martin Luther King Jr worked with in Montgomery, AL in 1955. In March of 1965, King appealed to clergy from across the country to come to Selma, AL. Every UU minister was contacted by either our UUA or Ministers’ Association, asking them to either go to Selma, or to pay another minister’s way to Selma. These ministers had pre-existing relationships that created the trust necessary for collaboration in such risky and ultimately deadly circumstances. Ministers Richard Leonard and Gordon Gibson report writing their wills ahead of the trip to Selma, because it was more important to them to go than to come back. The ministers going to Selma had legitimate concern. They knew activist Jimmie Lee Jackson had already been killed in Alabama the month before. UU minister James Reeb was killed three days after arriving in Selma. Fourteen days after that, UU lay leader Viola Liuzzo was assassinated by the KKK in cooperation with FBI informant Gary Thomas Rowe, who had earlier that day informed the bureau of violent plans. In an effort to deflect attention from the FBI’s role in the killing, J. Edgar Hoover fed disinformation to the press and politicians about Liuzzo’s drug use, political allegiances, and intimate relations with African-American civil rights activists. (Pause) The relationships we build in spiritual community must give us the courage to stand up for civil rights in the face of violent authoritarianism.

We as UUs are well-situated for relational organizing because we are a relational faith, affirming not just ACCEPTANCE of one another but INTERDEPENDENCE upon one another. Affirming not just acceptance of our Black siblings in spirit but that our collective freedom depends on Black freedom, because we are INTERDEPENDENT. UU the Vote is a site of expanding and deepening those relationships, of getting to know Black and brown leaders within and beyond our movement who will be issuing this

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generation’s call to Selma. Our partners have noticed that we are showing up when needed, and bringing trained and organized volunteers. We as UUs have once again enhanced our reputation. Now, we have to live up to it and live into it.

Relational organizing asks us to learn from those with whom we are in partnership, to be willing to be changed by our encounters. That takes reflection and processing. One of the tools of authoritarianism is to set so many metaphorical fires that it feels like there isn’t time to organize and learn. We have to engage in a “critical self-reflection.” Taking time to deepen in this work intellectually, spiritually, and relationally is an act of rebellion; it is a tiny revolution, if you will, a “transformation that allows us to imagine and call forth a new world together.”

“The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born;” and y’all, we are building that new world, and we are building it in a way that values not perfectionism but connectionism, not urgency but diversity, not defensiveness but inventiveness, not paternalism but universalism, not individualism but mutualism, not power hoarding but mutually supporting.

May it be so, and may we be the ones to make it so.

## **BENEDICTION**

Our benediction is by Rev. Wayne Arnason:

Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,  
and the stakes are very high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth:  
you are not alone.