



It's always too soon to go home.

It is always too soon to pack it in, call it done, wash our hands and move on with our private lives. Especially in the creation of a life together, in the arena of public affairs, in the realm of civic engagement; especially in this country's ongoing experiment in democracy, in UU's ongoing practice of democratic process, especially if we will answer the call to participate in the decisions that concern us all, not once, but many times.

It's always too soon to go home, writes the journalist Rebecca Solnit, because activism and engagement in the public sphere is a way of life. Only in America, she believes, do we kid ourselves into thinking we can respond to a crisis and then go home, because, she writes, "we tend to think that political engagement is something for emergencies rather than...part and even a pleasure of everyday life. The problem seldom goes home."

In some UU congregations, though I understand not in this one, social justice activism is called Faith in Action. There are many ways, of course, that UUs live out our faith, in practices of ethical living, and in everyday decisions that align our values with our resources. Many UUs also choose to engage in personal spiritual practices of meditation and prayer, reading and silence, contemplation and mindfulness. Some join in small group ministry circles, listening together for the heart's calling to wholeness, a calling that not only connects us to one another, but also lifts us out of our individual concerns and into engagement, even entanglement, with the wider world.

When we get together, however, in congregations or in our denominational gatherings, putting our "faith in action" usually means taking direct action to create social change, action that takes many forms. Faith in action is cleaning up a beach, creating a hygiene kits for homeless teens, and it's sorting food on a field trip to the local Food Bank.

Not too long ago I took a field trip to expand the sphere into which my faith might be put into action by visiting Homeboy Industries, Father Greg Boyle's response to gang life and violence and hopelessness in Los Angeles. Homeboy is a nonprofit wraparound social services organization built on the premise that *nothing stops a bullet like a job*. On my visit, I met one of Homeboy's hundreds of trainees, a young man who has survived addiction, prison, and abuse, who had been with Homeboy for about three months-- this time. He led our hour-long tour by telling his story from the heart, the story of what brought him to Homeboy and this new start in his life. With our guide we toured the tattoo removal center, the counseling center, the computer lab, the kinship garden, and the Homegirl Café, where formerly gang-affiliated women took my order for a kale grilled cheese and a spinach-infused iced tea. One of the ways Homeboy Industries puts its faith in the power of redemption and the human spirit into action is by building bridges between communities, bridges that connect formerly gang-affiliated women and men with people and congregations who might never have imagined they could be connected.

It's a question worth contemplating, in our wall-building times. After all, how are the lives of the people who worship here, who attend services here, tied to the lives of the people who work there, who show up there? If it's true that *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny*, then who will accept the task of tugging on the threads this way, or that way, to help us feel that connection more deeply?

Faith in Action is definitely a bridge-building enterprise. It sometimes takes the form of delegations to car wash owners asking them to treat their workers with dignity and respect; action in the form of public testimony at a meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, the School Board, or the City Council, action in the form of signing on to a petition for humane immigration policies, or action in the form of a demonstration, march, picket line, protest, or rally.

Something interesting always happens when you get out there, a UU social justice warrior once told me. Dan (not his real name) was one of the congregation's volunteer leaders in Faith in Action, and he was always inviting me to join him on the streets. That's how I came to be with him, not too long ago, on a Wednesday afternoon outside the LA Mart office building, where he was collecting signatures for a petition to ask the LA District Attorney to indict the police officer who killed Brendon Glenn, an unhoused and unarmed Black man, in Venice in 2015.

I have to agree – something interesting does always happen when you get out there-- because after it happened, Dan not only drove me home, but also called me a few days later to make sure I hadn't been made too uncomfortable by the encounter. You see, what had been planned as a rally turned into a signature-gathering event, which ultimately included an unanticipated opportunity to meet the building manager of the LA Mart and two LA police officers. This had not been part of the plan. Dan and the police officers disagreed about whether or not it was legal to collect signatures in our original location, at which point Alice, Dan's wife (not her real name), made sure I knew I could go to a distant sidewalk if I wanted to.

Like many of you, I prefer not to interact with the LA police if I can help it. And I was very touched by the gesture of support from a longtime activist to a relative newbie.

But as a UU minister, I made a promise to accompany my people in our life together, as best I am able. Sometimes that means walking toward trouble, rather than away from it. Sometimes it means planning ahead for how I will participate in a direct nonviolent action, which can sometimes be supported from a distant sidewalk as well as from your side. But in this case, I didn't really think we were going to get arrested. I stayed put.

Something interesting always happens when you get out there, Dan told me. At the LA Mart at noon on a Wednesday we ran into activists from Black Lives Matter, who were there to support those who had been arrested for blocking the 405 Freeway in a previous action. I can't imagine that those activists nor anyone from our group had ever been to the LA Mart before, but at noon on Wednesday that's where we, together.

We were there even though, as Solnit writes, many people have given up on the most direct activism, because of its abrasiveness, because of its flawed participants, because their goal was not realized, or perhaps because a certain incendiary spirit and bodily risk-taking suits youth best.

But not all of them have given up." (Solnit 18)

There are many forms, many ways, to put our Faith in Action. Even in the arena of nonviolent political action, there are many more tools than I'd imagined prior to my own deepening education in nonviolence. This isn't your 8-12 color crayon box, containing just a few colors: red for marches, blue for demonstrations, green for petitions and letter. Instead, today's activists are wielding the mega-box version, with at least 198 strategies for achieving social change through nonviolent means – this is not just red and green but burnt sienna, ocher, forest, mint, and more. When I say 198, I mean it, by the way - the political scholar of nonviolence, Jean Sharp,

has made an exhaustive list of 198 Methods Of Nonviolent Action that available online, to demonstrate the sheer creativity of tools available in the tool box – the full rainbow of colors to draw with.

Sharp begins with Formal Statements such as Public Speeches and Letters, continues to Drama and Art such as Humorous Skits and Singing, and then does a deep dive into Economic Noncooperation such as strikes and slow downs- Gandhi would be proud, as would the worker-leaders of CLUE- before he's even gotten halfway.

What I find uncomfortable about many of these ideas – and what was difficult for me about showing up at the LA Mart on a Wednesday for a demonstration or a rally – what I find uncomfortable is that these actions ask me not only to agree or disagree with an idea – like the idea that we are all woven together in a single garment of destiny, but to move my body into a public space in alignment with that idea. In order to act – for many of these actions, though not all – I will have to embody my values to participate.

Yet in the face of such embodiment, the life of faith we have inherited from our Protestant Christian ancestors can seem to be disembodied, or even body-denying, with no use for human appetite, human flesh, human hair and fingers and feet all sharing a small space together on a crowded subway car. But Faith in Action is an embodied practice. It is about showing up in person, on the sidewalk, meeting strangers; crowding my body into the seat of the city hall chamber to give public testimony; carrying my sign on the train, in my arms; accompanying my people in body and in spirit.

Our faith can seem to be disembodied. *All head, no heart*, congregants have lamented in the past. Or all head, no hands and feet. But a religious life directs us to wholeness: hands and heart and head. It can use our bodies as well as our minds. It calls us to public participation as well as private practice.

I say this knowing that not all of us serve best by carrying a protest sign, wearing a button, talking to strangers on the sidewalk, and going on delegations. Solnit says this, too, writing “an equally important act is the creation of parallel and alternative institutions, of turning away from rather than confronting authority and injustice.”

Each of us needs places in our lives where we can hear what the Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann called “a voice from elsewhere.” The gift of building, maintaining, supporting, and leading an institution that resists the prevailing culture – and that offers an alternative to the way it is-- is indeed a way of putting our hands, our hearts, our heads, our faith- into action. That is a gift of this sanctuary, and of this congregation, every day... a gift among many others.

But some of us do serve best by storming the bridges of encounter. On that Wednesday afternoon, there was enough of the Puritan denial of pleasure in me that I felt a little guilty for having so much fun gathering signatures. I was chatting away with my fellow Faith in Action delegation members and enjoying the afternoon away from my screens and desk. But wasn't my side conversation with Alice preventing me from getting a few more signatures? Shouldn't I buckle down and get this done?

Solnit doesn't think so. She demonstrated for years at the Nevada Test Site to oppose nuclear testing, where she writes, “the experience was also about camping in the desert, about the beauty of the light and the grandeur of the space, about friendship and discovery. The place gave me much more than I could ever give it.”

She writes, “Resistance is usually portrayed as a duty, but it can be a pleasure, an education, a revelation.”

Let me say that again: “Resistance is usually portrayed as a duty, but it can be a pleasure, an education, a revelation.”

In these movement times, I hope you will not deny yourself the pleasure, education, and revelation of public engagement. If you say yes, you will be invited to move your body into new and uncomfortable spaces – spaces like the Kingdom Day Parade that will move down MLK Boulevard in South Los Angeles on Monday, January 15th, starting at Western and King and ending at Crenshaw and Vernon at Leimert Park.

If you are a white person who is used to being in exclusively white spaces, I particularly encourage you to attend the parade and to bring your body to a space dedicated to black communities. My children and I will be there, as we have been for the past few years. And of course you may be invited to join the Women’s March, taking place on January 20th this year in Los Angeles, one of the most hopeful and joyful experiences many people had last year, an experience of pleasure, vitality, and discovery in the midst of struggle.

What I am saying is that faith in action is not only about this action, this field trip, this issue, this moment. It is not about overwhelmed diligence and dutiful obligation. It is an orientation toward public life that invites engagement, for the long haul; and that results in entanglement, relationship, unexpected friendships, chance encounters. It is another way of getting caught – not by the LA police after all, but rather *in an inescapable network of mutuality*, and the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

May it be so.

Sources: Adapted from “Til Earth and Heaven Ring,” preached 21 Feb 2106 at the UU Community Church of Santa Monica