

From Me to We: Community Action

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“The Low Road” by Marge Piercy

What can they do
to you? Whatever they want.
They can set you up, they can
bust you, they can break
your fingers, they can
burn your brain with electricity,
blur you with drugs till you
can't walk, can't remember, they can
take your child, wall up
your lover. They can do anything
you can't stop them
from doing. How can you stop
them? Alone, you can fight,
you can refuse, you can
take what revenge you can
but they roll over you.

But two people fighting
back to back can cut through
a mob, a snake-dancing file
can break a cordon, an army
can meet an army.

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.
A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
ten thousand, power and your own paper;
a hundred thousand, your own media;
ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again and they said no,
it starts when you say *We*
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.

For Unitarian Universalists “scripture” is a much broader and more inclusive concept than in many other religions. For well over a century we have embraced the principle of the “open canon,” which means that we are permitted to draw inspiration from a wide variety of sacred sources. Because our movement has its roots in the Protestant Reformation, we share with other denominations a Biblical heritage. But in its current post-Christian form Unitarian Universalism recognizes the contributions made by other faith traditions (as well as secular writers) to humankind’s religious and ethical enlightenment.

Nor do we confine ourselves to the literature of antiquity. The wisdom conveyed by 20th century figures like Mohandas K. Gandhi and Dorothy Day rivals that of those celebrated ancient sages, and the nature-inspired ecstatic poetry of Mary Oliver can be as sublime as anything found in the Psalms. In her poem “The Low Road,” Marge Piercy takes on a prophetic voice, calling us into community as a means of resisting oppression and injustice. I have found that pieces like this often leave a deeper impression on listeners than a passage culled from the Bible – especially those for whom conventional religion holds little appeal.

Clearly, one has to be discerning about one’s choices. The prospector must dig deep in the ancient and modern literature of East and West to find those nuggets of inspiration and insight that are truly worth sharing. But one must go through a similar process in working solely with the Bible or the Koran, for here too a good deal of dross is mixed with the gold, and the teachings are not of uniformly high quality.

For purposes of ICWJ and this useful collection. The Piercy directly addresses the futility often felt by the solitary voice “crying in the wilderness” (cf. Is.40:3; Mk.1:3). The first stanza echoes what the Biblical interpreter Walter Wink has said about the Dominator System and the tactics it has traditionally used to maintain its power and preserve its privileges. Such Systems work overtime to keep their subjects isolated, wither through intimidation or by using propaganda to instill helplessness and/or resignation.

Marge Piercy sees redemption as a function of organization, and strong, determined efforts to build capacity. This is not a handbook, however – a nuts & bolts instruction manual for aspiring leaders. It is simply a call to action and, like Jesus himself, Piercy employs homely and at times humorous references to keep the reader engaged and drive home her points about the efficacy of partnership and collaboration.

The poet ends on a serious note, warning that the work she is prescribing will not be easy and that the System will put up fierce resistance when threatened. To succeed one must be willing to “bear the cross,” which for Piercy involves suspending our individual needs and preferences and

throwing our lot in with our fellow activists – moving decisively from ‘me’ to ‘we,’ in other words. “The Low Road” is a fierce poem, but with an undercurrent of gentleness. There is strength in numbers, but Piercy focuses on the power to persuade and nurture rather than to coerce and dominate. Hers, I believe, is a vision commensurate with the Kingdom of God, although that idea is implied rather than explicit.

Questions for Discussion:

- 1.) Piercy underscores the importance of organizing and the latent power of communities. As a poet, she aims to inspire and to motivate but doesn’t provide us with a toolkit. How do we make it happen? What indispensable resources are needed for the making of a popular movement?
- 2.) The poem speaks to the discouragement that is a frequent and inevitable experience when one is engaged in the struggle for human rights. Think of some of the antidotes to burnout and frustration that you have found effective.
- 3.) Consider Piercy’s title to the poem “The Low Road.” What does the phrase evoke in you? What do you consider the low road to be?
- 4.) A movement like Occupy Wall Street quickly went national, but then disappeared within a matter of months. What makes some movements sustainable and why are others subject to “boom and bust?”
- 5.) Piercy’s is basically a secular poem. Does it help if an enterprise is spiritually grounded and states its case in religious terms? Is this approach less compelling than it was 40 or 50 years ago and if so, why?

Prayer (attributed to Cesar Chavez, former head of the United Farm Workers)

Show me the suffering of the most miserable, so I will know my people’s plight.
Free me to pray for others, so you are present in every person.
Help me to take responsibility for my own life, so that I can be free at last.
Grant me courage to serve others, for in service there is true life.
Bring forth song and celebration, so that the spirit will be alive among us.
Let the spirit flourish and grow, so that we will never tire of the struggle.
Let us remember those who have died for justice, for they have given us life.
Help us to love even those who hate us, so that we can change the world.

Suggested Song

“One Man’s Hands” by Pete Seeger: (As seen on YouTube, performed by the New Wine Singers at the Chicago Opera House)