

“Do You See What I See?”

January 27, 2019

Director of Youth Ministries, Sam Wilson

When we look back on this past year and think about the state of the world today, it is so easy to feel despair:

- The supreme court’s decision to allow the transgender military ban to go into effect.
- A different court in Arizona convicting 4 volunteers simply for putting out water for migrants in the desert.
- A group of white high school students taunting a Native American elder and veteran then using their race and class privilege to gaslight the country into believing they weren’t at fault.

That was just this week. Kids kept in cages. Kavanaugh. Resurgence of the KKK. Those are just things that start with the letter K. Don’t get me started on things, or people, that start with the letter T. And all of that is just within this country.

Expanding our view beyond our borders, we see a similarly dismal picture:

- Ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar.
- The election of extreme far-right leader Bolsonaro in Brazil who has openly declared he is “homophobic, with pride.”
- The abduction of over 1,600 children in Somalia, for recruitment as child soldiers.
- Syria and the ongoing refugee crisis, which is in and of itself “enough said,” but, also, a particularly insidious but less-discussed effect of this: a spike in sex trafficking rings around refugee camps. Sex traffickers have always preyed on populations that are the most vulnerable.

Actually, can we all just take a collective deep breath? Because, whew! This is the world we inhabit. It is so easy to get bogged down in the dirt of despair when we watch the news and think about everything going on today in the world, and yet, far too often we don’t take the time to sift through that dirt and find the little nuggets of gold, progress & joy as well.

So let me embody a big old gold-panning sieve for you right now, sort through some of this dirt and share a few shiny nuggets that I found, then maybe we can all shake things up a bit and see if we can’t find a bit more together, too.

First, let me tell you about some global statistics, and progress that happens every single day. According to Oxford University’s Max Roser and his “Our World in Data” website, by tomorrow, approximately 295,000 more people will have gained access to electricity for the first time. By Tuesday, an estimated 610,000 more people will have access to clean drinking water for the first time than today. And by Wednesday, over a million more people on this planet will be able to get online for the first time ever.

Now let's look at some other statistics regarding the state of the world today versus 50 or 60 years ago. As reported in Nicholas Kristoff's column last month in the New York Times: 60 years ago, a majority of humans had always lived in "extreme poverty," meaning they survived on fewer than about two dollars per person per day. When I was born in the mid-80's that number was close to 44% of the world. Now that figure is less than 10 percent. That is a massive amount of people who no longer have to live in abject poverty and continual struggle for survival.

Likewise, in the 50's, around two-thirds of parents worldwide had suffered the loss of at least one child, arguably considered one of the most painful things a person can experience in their lives, and yet, it happened, regularly, to so many people all over the world. Today, that number is drastically lower, with only 4% of children worldwide not making it to their 6th birthday. 60 years ago that figure was 5 times as high, with almost 20 percent of all kids in the world not making it past the age of 5.

Beyond simply surviving, a greater number of people on this planet are also gaining massive amounts of access to education in a relatively short amount of time. Just 50 years ago a majority of the world was illiterate; today that number is less than 15 percent.

So many things truly are getting better!

Specifically, from this past year, let me share a few other things that we can see when we start shaking through some more of that nasty mud and sand that clogs our news and minds these days:

- Amid the muck of climate change deniers and rising sea levels, we find that the world also added nearly 30 percent more solar energy capacity
- In spite of rampant rising healthcare costs and significant issues with access to healthcare in this country, we learn that India has declared that it will soon fund the world's largest national free health program, serving 500 million people!
- Spreading out the gritty sand of the #metoo movement and staggering reports of sexual violence toward women, we see the glimmer of Saudi Arabia's ban on women driving that has officially ended, and we marvel in the fact that the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia filled half of his new cabinet with women and then appointed the country's first female president. A New York Times article on this event notes, however, that "despite the staggering pace of progress [in Ethiopia], it is still a deeply authoritarian state," then goes on to recognize though that actually "you can [really only] have these kind of radical overhauls of gender balancing in a cabinet when it's authoritarian." Perhaps this is something we can all keep in mind for 2020 when we otherwise lament current abuses of executive power. Wink wink.
- Before getting stuck in the dregs of mass incarceration, we discover that Cyntoia Brown was granted clemency this year, halting the life sentence she was given at 16 years of age for killing a man who was soliciting her for sex when he became violent. She feared

for her own life and fought back. It's no longer legal in Tennessee to sentence a child to life in prison.

- Lest we get too glum thinking about massive corporations like Walmart and the high cost of low prices, we too can revel in Nike hiring Colin Kaepernick and Gillette taking on toxic masculinity in their recent ads, signaling an era when corporate profit does not need to come at the expense of moral fortitude.
- Finally, does everyone know about what happened in Malaysia this past year? Najib Razik, prime minister for almost a decade and considered untouchable by many, who also happened to be a friend of our President's and had many things in common with him, was ousted by the opposition party in an upset victory. He could now also be facing serious jailtime. Accountability for political terror often takes a long time, but it is possible, and a review of our global history shows that it is also quite prevalent. Let's not lose sight of that, either.

So, please, the next time you shudder at a headline or start sinking into the pits of despair, remember these wins, rest assured in the reality of global progress, and continue to place your faith in a world that still can be.

That being said, I want to be clear that I am not championing blind optimism here, and, I do appreciate that many of us who are committed to liberal religion can sometimes find ourselves wading in that territory as we loftily talk about things like pushing the arc of the universe toward justice. To be clear, I am not suggesting that you take a Marie Kondo approach to your news from now on, and simply keep the articles that spark joy for you! In fact, I would also say that there is room in our faith and community to "reclaim rituals of atonement and lament," as UU Minister Nancy McDonald Ladd asserts in her new book "After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism."

However, as much as we may also need to come to terms with pain, despair, and bad news, in order to build resilience and bolster our ability to accept the realities of our world, we must not get lost in negativity either.

A decade ago, Van Jones, before he was a TV personality and household name, spoke to thousands of UUs at our annual General Assembly, and aptly noted that "MLK Jr. didn't get famous giving a speech called "I have a complaint. I have a critique. I have a very long list of issues about which I am thoroughly pissed off. That wasn't his speech. He had a dream, and you have dreams, and they're beautiful dreams...and the country is not waiting for a movement that can just critique it, the country is hungry now for a movement to inspire it, to be it's best self again."

As social justice activists and enthusiasts in a society mired by oppression and inequity, I would argue that more often than not these days, we find ourselves pushing back on so many things, over and over again, but, when all we do is resist, or even persist, what are we persisting for?

Van Jones also talked about how so many of us try to be like David in the story of David versus Goliath. We love to grab our slingshot and shoot it against the giant of oppression, we take aim at sexism, and racism, and homophobia. We arm ourselves against these massive systems that are seemingly hard to dismantle and yet still we fight. But, as Jones says, “The David and Goliath story has a shadow side. It requires that someone else be the enemy, that someone else be wrong.... And that we are perfect and pure. And after a while, what I noticed, is that we get real good with that slingshot. And sometimes Goliath is not in view, and then the meetings get real bad... everyone is sling-shotting, looking for who are we supposed to be against here.”

Indeed, far too often we focus on what we are against instead of what we are for. Van Jones continues: “It might be time for us to look at a different part of the book. When you have a storm of this magnitude coming, you might want to look in the part of Genesis where they talk about building an arc... Can we go from David the protestor to Noah’s family of builders, can all that creativity that is present in this room be unleashed to renew and reconstruct and reinvent our politics, our society? That’s the challenge.”

So yes, I agree, sure, let’s talk about building that arc. Let’s talk about what we want to create, what we want to do and make and build and not just want we want to push back against. But even more so let’s talk about where we want that arc to take us. Let’s talk about what we want the world to look like both during and after the giant rainstorm.

Each year the UU Association of Congregations recommends one book called a Common Read, and encourages congregations to get their people to read it together. This year the book is called Justice on Earth, an excellent and direly-needed examination of the intersection of environmental and racial justice, specifically for people of faith working on these issues. We far too often work on one or the other without recognizing how much they overlap. If you have no idea what I mean, I urge you to go on a Toxic Tour in downtown Boston sometime. And read this book! There are copies in our library and, plans are underway for us to host a multigenerational community-wide conversation about the book and this topic here in March, too.

Anyway, one of the chapters focuses on “resilience-based organizing” as an effective means for congregations specifically to live into a vision of “an alternative to the dominant political-economic system that has its foot on the accelerator.” The authors describe the effective model that Movement Generation came up with, an organization formed following Hurricane Katrina by a group of people of color with a mission to explore “opportunities and challenges facing working class communities of color in relationship to ecology and sustainability.” This model identifies a set of “R’s” that are necessary aspects of transformative¹ justice work.

¹ I would also highlight the use here of the word “transformative” justice as opposed to “restorative” justice, because, far too often well-meaning liberals look toward restorative justice practices which inherently restore systems back to their oppressive roots.

The first R that they identified was Resistance and the second was Resilience, but these are the two that I feel like we are most used to hearing about and spend a lot of our time at least trying to get better at. Which is great, and absolutely essential. However, today, I want to highlight the last R that they came up with: Reimagining. As in, reimagining a different world. So then, what is your vision? What is our vision? What do you see when you reimagine a different world? As mentioned during our opening words, “there is work to do, and you have all that you need to do it right here in this room.” This work extends over a lifetime, but, while I have all of you here today, let’s get started!

Oh and before we begin, for anyone here who thinks that their time has passed to effect change, and, visioning is fruitless at this point, you’ll leave these kinds of thinking about what could be to the youth, do you remember how I told you about the opposition party taking back control of Malaysia and ousting their corrupt prime minister? Well, did I mention that the leader of that opposition party is 92 years old. 92. So, believe me, it truly is never too late.

Now, on your way in today you should have been given a tiny mirror by one of our ushers. If for some reason you did not get one, or you’ve managed to misplace it, please raise your hand and someone will bring you one.²

Okay, now, I invite you to take the mirror in the palm of your hand, tilt it left and right, look at the lights reflected in it and think for a bit about all of the sources of joy and light in your life this past year. What have been some of the golden nuggets that you have noticed in your life, what are the sparks of joy and hope you have noticed?

Now, tilt your mirrors again, this time toward other people in the congregation, and notice their reflections back toward you. Think about who the people are in your community, here today and beyond these walls. Who are your supporters, your advocates, your tribe?

Now, hold your mirror up to yourself and gaze upon your own reflection. Think about your own strengths. What are you good at, what are you proud of yourself for, what are some things that you know that you are really good at?

Finally, I invite you all to put your hand over the mirror and close your eyes. Drawing on the hope from the joys in your life, the solidarity of the people by your side, and your own strength, take a minute to imagine what’s possible. What is your vision of the world that could be? How might you reimagine this world we live in as a place that reflects your values, that embraces your love, and that fits around you like the warmth of a fire on a snowy day.

What do you see?

When you are ready, please open your eyes. And may what you saw be so.

² For those reading at home, feel free to participate by finding any small object with a reflective surface!