

INTRODUCTION

In her *Political Theology of the Earth*, Catherine Keller asserts her task as theologian in confronting the ecological and humanitarian crises of our times is to “link political philosophy with ecology and theology in order not just to theorize, but to agonize and to mobilize. Without anxiety” (Keller 7). In other words, Keller suggests that a political theology of, with, and for the earth must be embodied and implemented; the urgency of the present crises is too great for academic musings that are not explicitly part of praxis cycles of learning, reflection, and action in community.

My esteemed friend and colleague Jen Crow practices parish ministry in her role as Senior Minister of one of our large congregations; I direct the outward-facing justice work of our UUA in my role as Side With Love Organizing Strategy Director; both of us have frequently been called into multi-faith coalitional spaces of organizing and direct action as religious leaders of communities seeking to act in solidarity with movements led by frontline communities. As Jen and I began to wrestle with the readings we had been assigned for our papers, we felt compelled to heed Keller’s admonition. What good would 8,000 of even our most insightful words contribute to the practice of ministry in the midst of our current apocalypse of climate disaster?

After some shared discernment, we agreed that what would be most useful to us, and hopefully to you, dear colleagues, and to Unitarian Universalism, would be to eschew the traditional academic paper and response format in favor of a more democratic, more collaboratively generative process. Over the past several months, Jen and I spent approximately eight hours in intentional discussion about the readings we were assigned, answering the questions assigned by the program committee. We recorded those conversations, which we then transcribed and synthesized to distill yet another set of questions that felt alive and relevant to us. We organized the most salient points of our original conversation into loose talking points for a final conversation, and used that outline to guide our final extemporaneous conversations.

So today, we invite you to experiment with us. Here is the process we will use:

- We will divide today’s time into three sections, each of which will include some version of a grounding source, a video of a piece of the final conversation between Jen and me, and a time for synthesis and conversation: first in pairs, then in small groups, then all together.
- Each video is transcribed in this packet for accessibility and reference. Please feel free to either follow along with the transcript as you watch the videos, or to refer back to the transcripts during the synthesis and conversation period following each video.
- During each synthesis and conversation time, we will ask each group to take notes capturing the essence of your conversation. You can choose to take these notes on these paper PostIt notes that we will pass out, or to put stickies on a Jamboard to which you’ve all received an invitation. If you take notes on physical

Postlits, we will ask you to turn those in to us at the end of today's conversation so we can integrate them into the Jamboard.

- Since this session is the final one in our gathering, we also invite you to think expansively and to draw on not only the readings assigned under the Political Theologies section of our syllabus, but all the other readings as well as the conversations we have had in real time together this year.
- After today's session, we will take the videos we have created (to be edited a bit more), along with the reflections and ideas you have shared through your notetaking, and use them to create a 3-4 session facilitation plan for a congregational engagement series or small-group ministry arc to be used in your ministry contexts. We will share this resource with all members of Prairie Group by March 1, 2023; we will also likely make this resource available to the wider Association through Side With Love's platform.

We hope that this format allows us all an opportunity to engage – and collaboratively generate – political theologies that can compel, guide, and support us and our communities as we move from “agonizing” to “mobilizing” in this liminal moment.

BEHIND THE BARRICADES

David Rovics

When the world has gone crazy
And it's all becoming clear
When they're gunning down our comrades
And it seems the end is near
As they're loading up the launchers
For the tear gas grenades
We can take off our bandanas
And kiss behind the barricades

When it's madness all around
You can see this at a glance
We will cry and we will sing
And we will laugh and we will dance
As they shout their marching orders
Beneath the helicopter blades
We will seize the moment
For a kiss behind the barricades

They will try to break our spirit
And at times they may succeed
But our love for the world
Is stronger than their greed
When the building is surrounded
And hope begins to fade
In my final hour
A kiss behind the barricades

As the movement grows
There will be hills and bends
But at the center of the struggle
Are your lovers and your friends
The more we hold each other up
The less we can be swayed
Here's to love and solidarity
And a kiss behind the barricades

CONVERSATION I: RADICAL INTERDEPENDENCE - A POLITICAL THEOLOGY

PART 1

ASHLEY: I think we need to start with a recognition that if all theology is political, and if all politics are theological, we need to recognize the landscape that we are currently in here in the United States and globally in this moment. Specifically here in the United States, but also throughout every place that has been touched by the influence of Christian hegemony and the West. It is a Calvinist theology of predestination and original sin and depravity, and a belief in a punishing God who is somehow separating out those who are worthy of salvation from those who deserve punishment. And God dominates the people, so then in turn, there's a small group who should have the ability to dominate everyone else and the earth, right? So there is an elect that is both religious and political. And these people, the elect who know the right ways of God and who are saved, are going to create a system of government, a politics in the form of a nation state—multiple nation states—that is inherently anti-democratic. It is always seeking to concentrate power in the hands of a few over the many. And it depends on and encourages the exploitation, the extraction of both human and natural resources.

So this is the theology that is behind thousands of years of development of Christian hegemony and imperialism and white supremacy and colonialism. And I think in the last hundred years, because of the explosion of technology and military technology and globalization, that has accelerated the move toward this being the dominating theology, and therefore the dominating politics of the globe. And so I think we see that there are corporate elites who are in fact considered people in the law of much of the world, and the people who benefit directly from those corporations who enact mass exploitation and extraction of the earth and its people.

Then you hold that in opposition to the radical strands of our specifically universalist, but both Unitarian and universalist, theologies—as well as the liberatory Christian traditions and many, many, many non-dominant religious traditions and practices and spiritual traditions. Indigenous practices, any number of religions that are not the imperial ones. And what is fundamentally important to recognize about those differences is that when you have such a different theological anthropology, when you believe such different things about the nature of humanity—universalism, in opposition, holds that we are born from belovedness, salvation is our birthright, all of us are in fact interdependent not only with other humans, but with all of creation, and that God wants flourishing for all people and for the earth—now, right now, *this worldly*, here, not TBD down the road. Then the politics of that theology compel us to work for a world in which we are creating the conditions of possibility for all of us to be free and thrive.

And so I think the incarnation of that, as we have articulated it, is democracy. And by that I mean the “little d” expansive notion of democracy in which the people rule themselves. And the more of us who have power in determining what happens to more of us, the more likely we are to tend

toward mutuality, toward reverence for the earth and for one another, toward abundance and generation rather than extraction , right?

So, do you want to react to that frame?

JEN: Yeah. Well, I'm going to go off-script now... What I'm thinking about as you're talking is that democracy was set up as a different way of understanding humanity. As an alternative that was supposed to be life-giving and representing all people and moving against that sense of elect or elite as the ruling class overall. And that part of where that's been going wrong over and over is who's included in the circle of democracy. The earth isn't included, many people aren't included, many beings are not included, who's considered human has been in contention since the beginning of democracy in America. And it's that tension between the ideals and the practice that is where we are.

I think about theology and politics or theology and practice, it's the tension between "great idea" and "poor execution," or "high aspiration" and "ordinary person." So thinking about politics and practice as a way of expressing our theology, and a way of spiritual living, I would say, is all about ever more aligning actions with values, or actions with theology, or politics with theology.

So we're missing the mark over and over, I think. And having those aspirations out there as an expression of our theology really does matter as a hopeful place, asking where we going? What do we mean? How do we make it bigger? Make the circle bigger?

PART 2

ASHLEY: So as we talk about how to make that understanding of the circle bigger—as Marge Piercy would say, "each day, you mean one more" – I'm thinking about the legacies of our faith and of so many traditional environmentalist movements. The word we used for a long time was "conservation movements" – inherently conservative, the idea that we were going back to some pristine, natural state where there were no humans, there's a distinct separation between human and nature, we understand ourselves in a very linear legacy of progress, of Christian dominionism where humans have dominion over the earth, and it's very individualist, very triumphalist.

But I think the wisdom that is coming out of the most alive, vibrant movements now— the movement for Black Lives, Sunrise Movement, the Water Protectors – is number one, a less linear conception of time. We are drawing from the past, we are in relationship with the past, both what needs repair and the gifts and legacies of our ancestors.

JEN: So, an honest look.

ASHLEY: Yes, an honest look, while being realistic in the present about what harm reduction looks like, about honoring the damage that is happening while also trying to create the conditions of possibility for a future where there is thriving, not just for humans, but for the earth and for our communities in which we do understand ourselves as radically interdependent. And that sacredness, that the potential in each of us is realizable by all of us—those are the gifts of those movements.

And so when I think about what it means for me as a faith-based religious leader, what I'm thinking about is how do you invite people from their bubbles— their very local, their congregations, their individual communities—and have them both have the practice of being in relationship with more people, different people, understanding themselves in relationship with the earth and with other parts of creation immediately around them, but also pointing toward this radical interdependence of all of creation and invite people out of this arc of time and into a more spiral, circular understanding of time in which we are not the beginning nor the end of the work that there is to do.

So what does that look like for you on a congregational level?

JEN: That conception of time— I'll just go there for a minute—is learning how to honor the inheritance of the past, which is rich in Unitarian universalism and in our congregations. And to take that learning and the many gifts there, and then to find the ways to take what we want and need from that, and leave some of the rest of it behind. And then imagine a future that looks really different from the present that we're in.

Some of what I'm thinking about is very practical. Many of us have read *Ministry for The Future* as part of our preparation for this group, one of the books in our understanding of climate resilience and what's possible. And for me, reading that book, just the idea that there would be a ministry or a group that focused on or claimed the value of people in the future or beings in the future, and what they need us to do differently right now to ensure their future and their possibility for thriving. So thinking forward, and including the future generations as well as the past generations...

ASHLEY: Which is a very traditional Indigenous concept. The seventh generation. It's not new, but it's one that is foreign to our particular thread.

JEN: Absolutely. And maybe we have done that when it comes to our children, or our individual congregation. But again, that's expanding the circle of who is included in the circle of who's

important when we're making decisions, or when we're listening, or we're imagining together. All of those people, not just my kid.

Back to how this looks in the congregation, in terms of theological grounding, one of the main things I'm focusing on right now is helping people understand the move or the expansion from individual to collective; individual to community. We have strong roots there in our universalist theology and history, by initially saying salvation is for not for an elect few. That the circle is wide-wide enough that everybody's in it. That was radical, and still is. But how to actually understand that not just as, "That means *you* are saved! And *you* are saved!"

ASHLEY: And you get a car! And you get a car!

JEN: Exactly right. But beyond that, what it also means is: I'm not [saved] unless you are, too. And that's different than saying God just made it lucky that we all are. There's a contingency there, or a connection there: I'm not fully free, I'm not fully whole until *you* are. So that's the move I'm trying to help folks make in the congregation—that expansion beyond self to myself as intimately interconnected with *yourself* and *yourself* and *yourself*, which includes the earth and other beings.

So that's the theological shift, which I also feel is alive in Unitarian Universalism as a whole right now—moving from individual to collective in how we're thinking and how we're making decisions, who we're including,

ASHLEY: Right. And I think it's made possible by these small, incremental moves. So it's not going from "you are my people in my little tiny congregation" to "I am radically interdependent with all of creation." But it's like, how does your congregation be in relationship with your neighborhood? Giving people the opportunity to develop relationships—*because* they are a member of your congregation—that they would not have necessarily developed just living their lives on their own block. From my perspective, we have all these UUs who are on fire for justice in so many ways, but who really don't have any idea how to be in relationship with their local communities, with partner organizations. And it's not that they don't want to, they just don't know how to start. And so our job at the national level is to create the opportunity for those kinds of connections to happen.

So whether it looks like people from Wyoming and California and New York phone banking people in Arizona and Georgia, because we understand that it's not just state by state (and what more perfect metaphor right now than what we're dealing with post-election this week, right?). But it's also what happened last week in Philadelphia, which is that our folks showed up, they were gonna door knock in a particular neighborhood with a partner organization who asked us to be there. And they found out that the polling precinct had been shut down without notice to

the people in the neighborhood. And so immediately, my team was on the ground with these partners, and they sent out text messages to all these folks at the local Philadelphia congregations. I think 12 UUs showed up with their cars within an hour. They drove 200 people from this one little precinct to where they needed to, where they needed to be, and they voted.

For me, the hope is always in what the possibility is if we take that to scale. That kind of interdependence and relationship, that kind of meaningful local work, but then expand that exponentially to the impacts we could have. And that's why the old silly adage of "Think globally, Act locally" is really true.

JEN: It is real. Absolutely.

ASHLEY: And I think what we're doing both in our congregations and our organizing is equipping people to be able to be in those moments and say yes.

JEN: Yep. Absolutely. So that they come with the willingness and the skills that they need to be present in a situation like that. To change what they expect, to be like, "Oh, this isn't what I expected. How can I be of use here, in this moment? What does that look like?"

The thing you were saying about those radical moments of transformation in us, or radical experience of interdependence—I wanna go back to that because I think some of what we do in congregations and what you're doing in organizing is creating the possibility for those actual conversion, transformative experiences to happen for people that then really do change their understanding of how they live. We're doing that in congregations—trying to create opportunities for that to happen.

But then also—I think we have those experiences, but then how to identify them, name them, notice them, and then hold onto them and let them change you. Because some of the work of the congregation—and probably of organizing, too... I talked earlier about waiting for my wife to have a baby, and how in that moment I believe all of my spiritual practice had made it possible so that, what did I think of to do in that moment? Pray. And then, what did that help me feel? Connected—to everybody who had ever waited for a baby, or ever sat waiting for someone they loved...

ASHLEY: Across time and space.

JEN: Exactly. Across time in space. In fact, my imagination went immediately to where I knew there was conflict in the world right at that moment, and thinking about the other parents who were waiting for a baby to be born in the middle of that. I've never forgotten that, and it changes my feeling of connection. Now when I hear about crises around the world, environmental crises included, I think about that.

So in congregational life, part of what I really hope we're doing is helping people recognize those moments of potential really deep interconnection, and then hold onto it. Reference back to it to help them think about how they want to be and what we need to do.

ASHLEY: We are compelled because of our spiritual grounding, our training, our experience in community. We can do no other than act as if we, in fact, do belong to each other and to the earth. That is the natural posture that comes out of the work that we do, if we're lucky, and if we're doing it right.

JEN: And that to me is where the hope is. We could just be collapsed into despair, but what happens if we act as if another future is possible? What happens if we act as if that kind of interdependence can fuel how we are together? There's real hope there that isn't if we just give up, or try to go backwards in time

ASHLEY: Or try to do it alone.

JEN: Yeah. Alone is pointless.

ASHLEY: Indeed.

JEN: Indeed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION: CONVERSATION I

What does the practice of working with your people to expand the understanding of salvation beyond the individual to the collective look like? Where are you stuck? What signs of hope do you see?

TIGERS AND A STRAWBERRY

Translated by Paul Reps (Zen Flesh, Zen Bones, New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1958, pages 22–23).

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him. Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away at the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

CONVERSATION II: WE FIGHT EVEN THOUGH WE MAY LOSE

ASHLEY: You and I spent some time talking about this quote from *Rooted & Rising* where she [Rabbi Shoshana Meira Friedman] writes, “My activism lives in the paradox that in order to have the courage to affect any kind of change, I have to come from a stance of letting go of the outcome. I want us to be successful with all of my heart, soul, and might, but if I waited for assurance of success before getting involved, I would never do a thing” [Schade & Bullitt-Jonas 40].

So in the context of specifically a Unitarian legacy that is really about triumphalism, onward and upward forever, the universe where justice--what does it mean for us now to face the fact that we might not win, that we might not succeed, and to continue to do the work anyway. What does it mean? Why?

JEN: Right. Well, success in this definition would be we “save the earth.” And by “save,” we mean probably “restore it back to some previous state that’s even better than where it is right now.” Some previous state that’s better than what it is right now; that goes back. But everything points to that’s not possible. There’s no reversing where we are. There might be staving off, but not reversing. So I think really what this quote was talking about is, what do you do with despair? How do you find how you’re going to be, even in a situation that, of course, evokes despair and a sense of powerlessness.

And that takes me right back to, for me, recovery. The foundation of my recovery was around, “What am I powerless over?” A whole lot, it turns out! You know? It’s like, the trick of recovery (for me anyway) was, I got into it thinking and having to admit, “I’m powerless over alcohol.” But it turns out I’m actually powerless over just about every other thing, too. And that can feel like total despair, until I remember what I *do* have power over and what I *do* have control over, which is: how am I going to be and what am I going to do? What am I going to say? How am I going to internally work with my own thoughts so I can show up and be present to what is?

And it turns out, being present to what is, *is winning*, as painful as it is sometimes. But this idea of success being something that we can even come up with is awfully presumptuous, for starters. Things are changing in a way such that we don’t know how it’s going to turn out. What we know is that we’re in a time of transition with the Earth, which is largely human-caused. We know that. So what do we do next? What do we do right now?

ASHLEY: You and I have talked quite a bit about, what does it mean if we are in a hospice moment with the Earth? It occurs to me we’re having this conversation about our congregations, about whether our ministry is being hospice ministers to The Church. And I think about the connections between... well, climate is such an interesting example because it is the clearest place where local change makes no difference on the global scale. I can change as many light

bulbs, I can recycle as much as I want, I can drive my Leaf or whatever, but my little action will not save everything. Right? And yet the scale of mass change and movement and energy that would be required to shift things is pretty impossible to imagine for any one individual person. It's hard to think about how to get to that meta scale from the micro.

JEN: Right. So I'm hearing, great, I can change what I do, but that's not going to be enough to change the world, or the course of where we're going. And really, the only way to get there is that whatever change I'm doing, I bring to you—and to you---and to you---and then *we* change. Again, going from *I* to *we*.

ASHLEY: And it matters. I know that you have been doing a lot of deep, intimate caregiving with people in your life right now. But my understanding is that for you, and for those of us who do that kind of work, it is not actually about-- you're not under the illusion that you're extending somebody's life by treating them well.

JEN: Yeah, that's a great example. It's hard. There are a number of folks in my life who are dying right now, and who are aware of that. I'm aware of it, and I get to show up with them and be with them. And it is a lot of tiny detail about how I care for them, how we care for each other. I think anybody that has done a memorial service or been with someone who's dying, it's clearly a sacred time and it's clearly liminal time, which is what I think we're in right now.

But that sacred, liminal specific time... I'm thinking about Janne, and thinking about how she's living in this "bonus time" right now, is how we talk about it. Of knowing that she had a terminal diagnosis, then almost died, and then coming back from it in a really remarkable way, in what we all know is still a very limited time. And she talks about the first time she got to go back to the grocery store after regaining some of her strength after her seizure. And she says, "I was telling everybody there, 'I almost died! And now I'm in the grocery store, just zipping around!'" And the wonder, again, of the world when it was almost gone--and is going--for her. That level of appreciation of really small things, and me being present with her--I get that, too. I come home and think, "This cup of coffee is frickin' *amazing!*" Or that sunset.

So there's a level of attention we bring when we know time is limited – and not only is it limited, it's never going to be like it is now again. Which is always actually true.

But that's the other frame that I've been really picking up, spending this time with folks who are ill or who are in the process of dying. It's like, this is as healthy they're ever going to be—right now, in this moment. So what are we to do?

I wonder about that with the Earth. If this is as healthy as it's ever going to be, what do we do with that?

ASHLEY: At least while we're around to witness it. And, Jen, the other thing I hear in that is that giving the attention and intention to the kind of care, and intimacy, and closeness at that hyper-micro level of caretaking at the end of life... it calls forth (if you're lucky) the best in you as a caretaker and a human being, too. It's transformation for you *and* for the person. It brings dignity into the situation that might not be there otherwise. And, because I think about this on the meta scale-- I learned as a young organizer, I learned the concept of 'political home.' The organization or the particular movement or campaign that you choose to be your thing.

If you come to that through a frame of collective liberation, you understand that you're connected to the big thing. All of the systems have to change, everything must be reversed. But you need a political home because--Mario Lugay said this--when the revolution starts, you have to get on a bus to get there. And you have to know where the bus stop is, who the people are that are going to get on it with you, the route that you're going to take, the roles that everybody's going to play getting on and off the bus. And you have to feel connected to that bigger thing. But you're not going to get to the bigger thing if you don't get on the bus in the first place. And so that's why we have movement homes, political homes, but it's also why we have congregations. We are pointing toward the most cosmic by being in extremely close, intimate relationship with each other. And if we're lucky, it evokes the best in us in those very up-close, micro moments.

And so I'm interested in the ways that it does matter that I have my little community garden plot, even while big agriculture is cutting down the entire Amazon rainforest. It does matter that I show up with the water protectors in direct action even though they're going to lose the fight against Line Three in the sense that Line Three is going to be laid in the ground. And so interestingly, even though we do that stuff, not anticipating that it's going to change the course of history necessarily. But when we do that, when we bring that quality of attention and intention (and we're going to talk about this more in a minute), it actually creates the conditions of possibility for transformation on a meta scale to occur, which would not have been there, had we not brought that attention intention to that very small thing.

JEN: It goes back to the sense of despair. If we don't do anything, if I don't tend my garden plot, if I don't show up at the bus stop, if I don't go to church, if I don't care for the people I love who are dying--we know what happens then for sure. I feel like there's a "for sure-ness" to, if we don't do what we can do, it will continue to get worse and we will feel bad about ourselves, too. And we won't have the relationships that sustain us when things are hard. That's what happens if we do nothing. If we do something, that is a way of connecting--however small--it opens a possibility of change and of care. And it's fully embodied. I think that's another key piece of this—it's why I tend the small garden plot, because it gets my hands in the dirt and I see the bugs and I see what life is like and I grow stuff.

Caring for someone who's dying... I mean, I joke around, but it's true—anytime you care for somebody who's dying, bodily fluids are involved, very intimate body care. And being that in

touch with another person in that way, cutting somebody's toenails, is such a reminder for me that, "Oh, I have toenails. How am I going to take care of those? And so does everybody else." Or I think of when my wife was getting ready to have a C-section and she was getting the epidural and I wasn't allowed in the room. I had to sit out in the hallway while she was getting the epidural and I was praying for her and the doctor and the baby and everybody. And I had such a spiritual experience moment of feeling connected to every other parent who's ever sat outside waiting where I'm waiting for a baby to come. And at that moment I was transported to people across the world who were doing the same thing in various conditions, and feeling very connected.

ASHLEY: We cannot imagine meta transformation without actually having embodied personal experience of connection. We talked about—I threw out the phrase "I believe that we will win." This chant we always say in the streets.

JEN: Yes—those are the moments, when we're chanting that, when I'm standing next to other folks arm in arm where I feel like, "There is a possibility here that I don't believe in most of the rest of the time." Because, how can there not be? Look at us!

ASHLEY: And even though that small thing will not, in fact change—like, the police are still there ready to throw tear gas and arrest folks and whatever. But we can't imagine a world without police if we don't have that experience together in those streets, in that. And I think the same goes for any kind of justice work. We do have to have these intimate experiences—with each other, with the earth, with new and different ways of being, right? And somehow we feel in better alignment with what we desire.

JEN: Absolutely. And those moments in the streets... Part of what works for me so much in that is, most of the time, maybe I'm next to one person that I'm very close to and that I trust to get through whatever is coming with. But for the most part, I'm not close with all those other folks, but I am trusting them and we are doing something together that creates some other possibility.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION: CONVERSATION II

What are the spiritual practices and resources that we must nurture in

ourselves and our congregations to prepare and sustain us in bringing our greatest attention and intention to the struggle?

THE LOW ROAD

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 after they said no,
it starts when you say *We*
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more

CONVERSATION III: THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

ASHLEY: So we spent some time in our conversations talking about this quote from Jay O'Hara in *Rooted & Rising* where he writes, "I have come to understand faith as relinquishing both the illusion of control and the expectation of success. Faith means to stare directly into the abyss and walk into whatever it may be. Walking forward in faith opens the door to a new possibility, the unexpected possibility that God may still have for us. The possibility of miracle." Now, I think neither of us has a theology of an interventionist of God who comes in and shapes the course of history and makes a miracle. And the way that miracle, the way that O'Hara is talking about, shows up is, as we talked about in the last section, creating the conditions of possibility for transformation, both on the personal and on the most meta level.

So I think it's worthwhile to talk about what that looks like in practice. How do we as religious leaders, as congregations, as organizers, as movements, create the conditions of possibility for transformation. Both in the intimate ways we talked about before, but also on the largest scale.

JEN: And listening to that again and thinking about what miracle is in this context, the question I would have for all of us is, "What miracle have you experienced?" In congregational life, in organizing... what thing that seemed completely impossible have you actually been a part of or seen or experienced in your life? Because "miracle" makes it sound like something that's completely impossible. But I'm like, "I've experienced that!" I've experienced that in the congregation where I've seen folks come together in a way that I never could have imagined and that went far beyond what I hoped for. I've seen that happen in people's lives where I thought, "This will never change!" And then it does.

So the idea that miracles are real—that's in how we define it, right? It's not an interventionist God for you or I, but it is something happens that nobody could have imagined because it's so outside, we didn't dare hope. There's something about hope in all of this too.

ASHLEY: Again, as a young organizer, I learned this lesson that 99% of organizing is just trying to get enough people together to keep a crack open between the door of oppression and the people that it's going to crush. So you're spending 99% of your time just leaving a crack and you're not making any progress at all. You're also probably not backsliding the ton, but that's what the work is. But what that does is that because the door isn't locked—because revelation isn't sealed and the story isn't finished--*that* 99% of the time makes it possible for these explosive moments when George Floyd is killed, when the water protectors decide that they're going to show up at Standing Rock and people from around the whole world show up with them--all of a sudden all of that work makes it possible for the door to be flung open and all of these people are going through.

So in order to understand the labor of that other 99% of the time of holding that door open as being worthwhile, as a calling, as a discipline, you have to connect with the possibility that the door could be flung open, but you also have to connect generationally. It's impossible to sustain that place without feeling deeply connected to history, to understanding the legacy of how we got to where we are, both good and bad. You have to deeply understand yourself as connected to the people who are next to you, who are in the struggle, *and* the pull on the other —Arundhati Roy talked about the “portal moment” that we were in, pulling us forward to something different than we know. And I know what it looks like in my organizing work, I can talk about that. I want to know what that looks like for you—to nourish the people who are in that 99%-of-the-time struggle.

JEN: When you were talking about just keeping that crack, that space, there are so many pulls... Thinking about the rubber band wanting to snap back into place, and so many pressures to keep us from being connected enough to ourselves, to each other, to what's going on, to being awake in a terrifying world... there are all these pressures to not pay attention and not care that impact us. So, where does this come into play in a congregational setting is, it's how to live in this tension place, or maybe not tension place, but how do we live with the pain that people are in and the despair that folks feel, and the discomfort.

So in some of it's that space of helping people grow their ability to live in discomfort so they can be awake and connected enough to themselves and each other to even be here. I feel like that's step one, maybe, is how to help people exist in an awake and aware and present way when so much is challenging about that, and so much is critical about that too. Which is how we're are able to help people make that connection — how to be okay being uncomfortable without simple answers is step one.

ASHLEY: And just from being in relationship with your congregation, I think concretely that looks like what you do in worship. It looks like the way that you do governance, it looks like the small group offerings that you give and the partnership relationships that you cultivate. It is very embodied, concrete praxis.

For us at the national level, we've experienced a really big shift at Side With Love both because under Susan Frederick-Gray's leadership, we have a ton more resources than were ever allocated to the work. So my staff group is about to be 13 people, and when I came in, there were four. And for a decade before that it was one and a half, maybe two people working and in various offices. But we have committed to an organizing frame—not just a witness frame, not an education frame—but an organizing frame, which is a fundamental commitment to the idea that we need to be in relationship with each other more deeply across congregations. It is an expression of our theology, our association, our polity.

But it's also trying to do that work of connecting Unitarian Universalism (which has a tendency to be a little bit insular and not deeply connected—we don't always play well with others) to these movements for justice. And to building power, not because we're so unique and we're the ones who have to do it all ourselves, but because we're trying to prepare people for these moments. Number one, to sustain a holding open of the door in those moments when that is our work. But to be really ready. You know, we're trying to make a nice bus stop for the people that jumped on the bus together.

JEN: Well, to even have there *be* a bus stop.

ASHLEY: Exactly. Right. But to have it be so people are receiving spiritual grounding in their congregations and also with us. So that they're learning skills, literal organizing skills, through us, and they're then sharing those things across congregations, right?

The other thing that we're really intentionally doing is—the UUA has four intersectional justice priorities. LGBTQIA+, Gender, & Reproductive Justice; Democracy & Voting Rights; Climate Justice; and Decriminalization. And we're really unapologetic for doing all of those things at the same time and making sure that we are clear about the intersections of them. Climate historically has been really siloed and off on the side, and we have been really intentional about trying to say, “No, actually we have to do racial justice to do climate justice.” You cannot do this without a disability justice lens and a gender justice lens and all these things. So part of our work, too, is that you are nurturing those extremely intimate connections, and then we are taking them to that next scale level of denominational connections and trying to point toward the really meta of mass movements.

JEN: When you talk about intersectionality, having those four core justice commitments, organizing commitments... On the congregational level, and I'm sure you've experienced this with organizing at the UUA too, it's “But mine is the most important. And if you're paying attention to that one, then you're not paying attention to me and you're not taking seriously the needs and the urgency of this.” But the sense of interconnection and nurturing that among these different groups has been a real process in the congregation where I'm serving. And there's a real process that's happening in the work that you're doing. Let's toss out this zero-sum game, this “If I pay attention to one, I don't love you anymore or I'm not caring.”

There's something about the miracle piece, and I want to just go back to if I can find the right thread here... You were talking about how 99% of the time you're holding the door back from crushing, and then maybe 1% or one moment, something amazing or different shifts. And I think that experience on the congregational level... the expectation isn't for it to be magic all the time. That actually what we're doing is tilling the soil, both within our own spiritual lives and within our community and in the relationships we're building—so that it's all there when that moment

happens. People know that thing about “I invest in my spiritual community and my church and the relationships there because when something awful happens or something beautiful, I want my community there.” And if I haven’t made that investment of time and relationship and energy there, I’m going to be on my own. We know that around time and death, around new life, around transitions. It’s different for somebody who has been a part of things; who has been doing that very day-to-day work of connecting and working on their own spiritual practice so that when the moment comes, everything is there.

ASHLEY: And I think the intimacy of congregational life, or belonging to one particular local nonprofit or movement organization or whatever that looks like is that you... Part of the work is getting really grounded in what you can and can’t do. Being super comfortable in the resources that you have and what you lack. And preparation for that door-busting-open moment is getting so clear and grounded in that, but also understanding your place in the ecosystem so you know who does have the skills that you don’t have, or does have the resources that you don’t have? How you can share those more broadly so that you’re really ready to mobilize and leverage the moment that is possible.

I think of some of our congregations, for example, that opened up to protestors who were being pursued by police during the movement uprising moments and literally hosted people inside while the police ran around surrounding the congregations... That didn’t happen because people just stumbled up to the doors of the congregation. That happened because within the congregation—

JEN: Somebody knew somebody, knew they were trustworthy.

ASHLEY: But also that congregation was ready to say yes quickly. They didn’t have to have a congregational meeting about it. They didn’t have to run down the 30 people who had to weigh in on the decision. Somebody had authority, and they had enough trust in the system to know what their strength was and to be able to say yes in the moment.

And so I think the work of spiritual community is not just “woo-woo, I love you,” it’s nice to be there and be seen and witnessed, but to really understand the power that we have. And that is of course spiritual—but also infrastructural, and relational. We have so many forms of currency of power.

And that brings us, I think, full circle back to the beginning of our conversation. We really do need to have a powerful political theology of what we want to imagine, and who we are in relationship with that’s helping to form that imagination of the world that we could be living in. And we need to be ready to try and grow that power; to wield it with skill, with humility, and with groundedness; and to have as many possible partners in that as we can.

JEN: And we have to be so grounded in that theology so that we know how to make decisions quickly. So that we know that every person out there matters. And so that the people that are literally fleeing the police, they are our people and they need to be safe and cared for. And so the doors open.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION: CONVERSATION III

In what ways is your congregation deepening relationships, building power, and leveraging resources in relationship with movements for justice? What needs to change in your setting in order for that to happen more effectively? What “miracles” (a thing that happens that seemed impossible) have you experienced in movements/our faith tradition/your congregation?

CONVERSATION IV: SYNTHESIS

What's one inheritance or legacy that you want to draw on as wisdom moving forward? What compelling vision for the future are you aligning and joining with? What's one immediate commitment that you want to make to get un-stuck right now?