



Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

February 4, 2024

## **“On Justice” with Rev. Mary Gear**

### **Reading 1**

An excerpt from *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends In An Unapologetic World* by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg.

We all cause harm sometimes...

We have all been harmed...

We are all bystanders to harm...

And we occupy all of these roles on a small scale—in personal relationships, for example—and on larger ones, as members of society, as stakeholders in institutions, as citizens or inhabitants of nations. So, it’s critical for all of us to think through the work of repentance, accountability, and transformation...

### **Part 1: Justice as Repair**

Have you ever had the experience of wanting to take words back as soon as they leave your mouth? I sure have—regularly. Even when I try to be careful, thoughtful, and kind, sometimes I misspeak out of ignorance or thoughtlessness, or even out of a desire to help. I could relate to the man in the story that Rev. Sara told; the man who needed the lesson of trying to collect feathers to be able to understand the harm caused by his words. Once words leave our mouths, we cannot take them back, and we have no control over where they go. What then are we to do? In the story, the man just learns his lesson and changes his ways. We know it’s not quite that easy.

Each year the Unitarian Universalist Association chooses a book as the Common Read. UUs from across the country are invited to read and

discuss the same book. This year the UUA Common Read is the book that our readings are taken from: *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg.

Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources, and Judaism is one of our foundational sources. Like Christianity, Judaism has a lot to say about repentance. In her book, Rabbi Ruttenberg draws on the teachings offered by the 12th century Jewish physician and scholar, Maimonides. As it turns out, an ancient philosopher can offer us a lot as we seek to understand our modern challenges.

One teaching is that we have all caused harm, we have all been harmed, we have all been bystanders to harm. It is a universal experience that we can all relate to. This is important as a foundation for compassion. When we have been harmed and can realize that we have also done harm, it is possible to relate to each other in a way that unites us as humans. It doesn't undo the harm we've experienced or done, and it can help ignite the desire to find a way back to right relationship. Repentance at its root is returning to who we are meant to be, coming home to who we believe we are.

A little bit about the word "harm." Rabbi Ruttenberg uses the word to describe a wide range of impacts—harm is the impact of actions, not the action itself. Harm can range from hurt feelings that can be easily resolved to genocide and other atrocities. Harm is hurt, damage or injury that can be emotional, mental or physical. Harm can be short-lived or exist across generations. Sometimes harm can be repaired and sometimes it can't. Regardless, whenever there is harm, there is work to be done.

Ancient Jewish scholar, Maimonides, drew on the Jewish teachings and religious framework of the Torah and the Talmud to develop a process to help guide the work we must do to repair harm. While the intention of this process is to bring healing and repair, the primary purpose is the transformation of individuals and society. The purpose is to change who we are so that we will not do that harm again. We can't undo what was done; we can repent, make amends, and repair. But the primary purpose is to transform ourselves to be closer to the people we want to become, our best selves. This is hard work, and it is work that we are called to do as people of faith, people who want the world to be more loving, just and healthy.

So, Maimonides lays out five steps for repentance and repair.

**Step One is naming and owning the harm.** While this sounds easy, it is anything but. The person who has caused harm must understand the harm they have caused. They must be willing to face it, listen to others, name the harm, and name it publicly if it takes place in the public arena. It's hard to face our failings, and then to declare them in public! It can trigger defensiveness, a desire to keep the image we have of ourselves as good people, forgetting that good people do harmful things sometimes. There is soul searching required here, a willingness to face all that we are, our wholeness as humans.

**Step Two is starting the change.** Rabbi Ruttenberg writes, "...true repentance happens at the moment when a person comes into a situation similar to the one in which they previously committed harm, and this time, do it right." This is the transformation part and often transformation takes time and practice. In this step, the person who has done harm begins taking actions to make change. This might include things like grappling with our behavior in a spiritual practice like prayer or meditation or with the support of a counselor or spiritual director. It might mean making a sacrifice of some kind, like a financial contribution to a cause related to the harm. It means changing our self-identity in meaningful ways and practicing humility.

**Step Three is restitution and accepting consequences.** This step focuses on the needs of the person who was harmed. Of course, the immediate needs of the person harmed should be addressed, but often it's best if not by the person who caused the harm. Rabbi Ruttenberg suggests that Maimonides ordered the steps this way so that the one who did harm does some personal work toward transformation before engaging with the person they harmed, which can help avoid further harm.

Restitution and making amends can be financial and should be in proportion to the harm done. This is not throwing money at a problem to make it go away but seeking redress with humility. Reparations fit here.

This step also involves humbly accepting that our actions have consequences. In some cases, there may be legal consequences or loss of status, position, power.

**Step Four is apology.** Notice that this is step four, not step one. In our culture, we tend to apologize first and ask for forgiveness quickly. Rabbi

Rutenberg points out that forgiveness is not expected in this process; it's not about forgiveness but about transformation.

Apology is meant to be offered in relationship with the person harmed, requiring listening and vulnerability, expressing sincere regret and sorrow for the impact of our actions.

**The last step, Step Five, is making different choices.** This is the last step of transformation: when faced with the opportunity to cause similar harm we make a better choice.

Five steps for transformation, repentance and repair. Five steps toward justice.

## Reading 2

Another excerpt from *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends In An Unapologetic World* by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg.

...as one early medieval Jewish allegory shows, the path to atonement isn't infinite or insurmountable. What it demands of us is that we go as far as we can. That we do what is within our power.

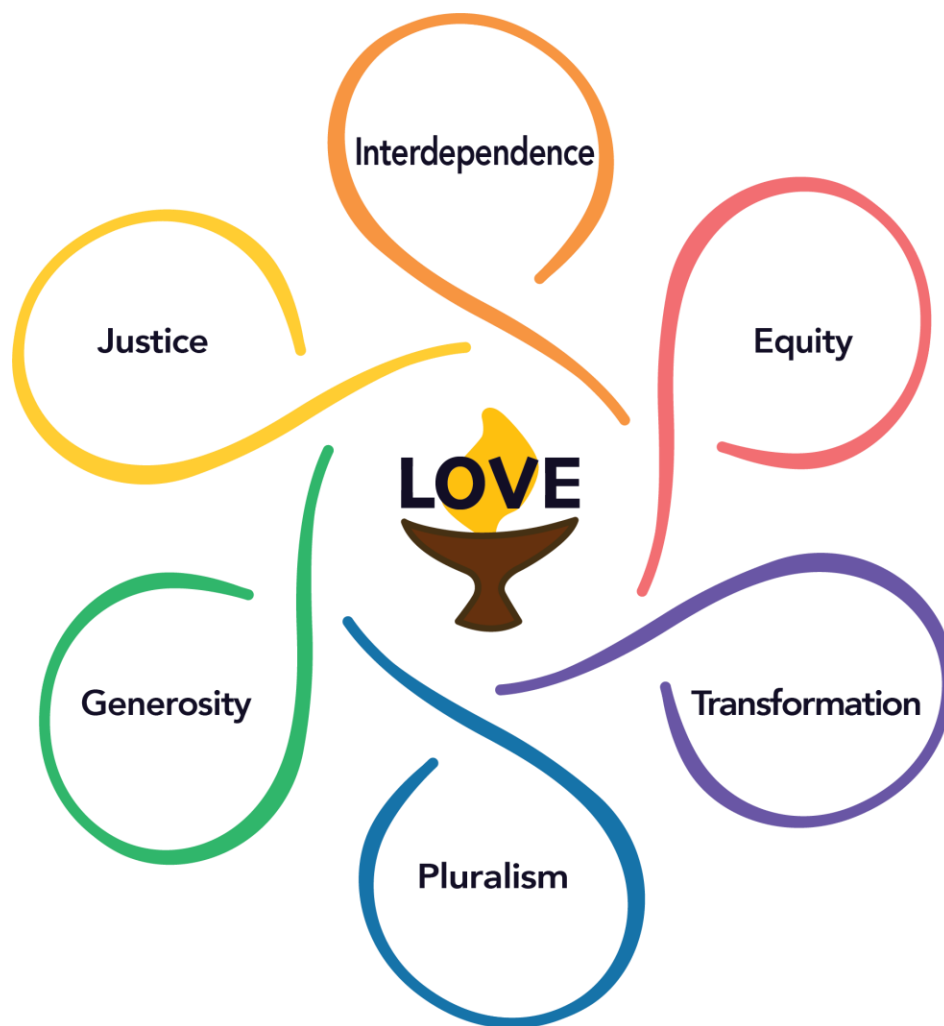
[This is the allegory:]

A ruler had a child who had gone astray on a journey of a hundred days. The child's friends said, "Return to your parent." The child said, "I cannot." Then the ruler sent a message to the child, saying, "Return as far as you can, and I will come the rest of the way to you." In a similar way, God says, "Return to me and I will return to you."

## Part 2: Justice as Connection

Repentance is another one of those words that Unitarian Universalists tend to not use a lot and that can be challenging for some. Last week, I spoke about faith, this week it's repentance. Pretty churchy language! What I notice is that these words have meanings that are important in our time; they are sacred language that can help inform how we live our values in the world. Unitarian Universalists share a longing for personal and cultural transformation that makes the world a better place for everyone. Sacred words help us express our longing and create a process for transformation.

This month our spiritual theme is justice, another core UU value. This slide shows the six core values with love at the center.



(Graphic created by Tanya Webster)

The Commission that identified and explored our core UU values defined justice this way:

We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.

There's a lot in there: multiculturalism, anti-racism, anti-oppression, changing systems, and inclusive democratic processes.

In practice, justice means asking why things are as they are—why is there poverty, racism, ableism, transphobia—and changing the systems that support harm. Justice means collective action to change the causes of injustice. Justice work takes time and persistence, and it cannot be done alone.

And I always appreciate Cornel West's definition: Justice is what love looks like in public.

As I reflected on this theme of justice and how to introduce it today, I came to understand that repentance and repair is all about justice. Each of the steps that Maimonides lays out seeks personal and collective transformation. And transformed people transform the world. In order to change systems, to do the work of justice, we have to face the harm being done, begin to change, make restitution and face the consequences, apologize, and make different choices. Justice happens at each step in the repentance process, and the result is people who act in more just ways and systems that support a more just society. Each step brings us closer to repair, closer to the Beloved Community we yearn for.

Justice work is complicated and hard, and, just like repentance, it requires sacrifice. I like the definition of sacrifice offered by author Brendan O'Brien in his book Homesick. He says sacrifice is trading something of lesser value for something of greater value. Now, value is subjective. Life teaches us that we can't always have everything that we value, so we have to prioritize and choose. We might sacrifice our comfort in order to do anti-racism work. We might sacrifice some wealth and savings in order to make restitution and pay reparations. We might sacrifice time and efficiency in order to use a decision-making process that welcomes and includes everyone.

In *Repentance and Repair*, Rabbi Ruttenberg notes that our culture prioritizes forgiveness over true accountability and repentance. When

speaking about reparations for Native people or people of African descent, for example, we often hear, “can’t we just forgive and move on?” We tend to prioritize the comfort and unity of those with privilege over justice for those without privilege. Justice demands that those with privilege sacrifice unity, comfort, and wealth. Will it feel like a loss? Of course it will. And justice demands that we ask what we value most. Are we willing to sacrifice something else that we value for our value of justice?

After the service today, we will once again discuss the behavioral covenant we’ve been exploring for the past year and a half. I hope you will join this discussion about how we do the work of justice within our congregation.

Our covenant is the agreements we make about how we will be together, the promises that we make to each other. When we covenant, we elevate the value of right relationship and community over individualism. And we have processes that help us return to right relationship when we act in ways that are against our agreements, in ways that harm each other and our community. This is how we transform conflict, how we transform ourselves, and how we transform the world. We do the work of repentance and repair in here; this is a community to practice the work of justice, because what we do in here is what we bring out there. If we practice compassion, accountability, repentance and repair in here, we can bring it out into a world that needs it so badly.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes

The work of repentance, all the way through, is the work of transformation... It's about ownership – owning who we have been and what we have done, and also owning the person that we are capable of becoming.

The work of justice may be hard, and we don’t do it alone. We do what we can, and we meet each other along the way.

Justice is how we live our mission of becoming the community we are capable of being.

Together we make it so.