

Navigating Social Justice
Rev. David Takahashi Morris
Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church
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In the drought that lasted from 1991 to 1994, central and southern California cities were desperate for water. They found a source in the large rice farmers of Butte County, north of Sacramento, who sold hundreds of thousands of acre-feet of water over several years to the State Drought Water Bank. They had plenty of surface water, so it seemed like a successful solution all around. The rice farmers replaced their supplies by pumping groundwater into their fields. Unfortunately, this lowered local aquifers so drastically that local Butte County families, farms, and towns who depended on wells for their water suddenly found themselves drinking water contaminated with heavy metals from the bottom of their wells—assuming their pumps hadn't burnt out trying to get water from dry wells first. The successful solution developed some unintended consequences.

Here in Contra Costa the water issues we're focused on relate to the Delta, that immense water source just north and east of here. Plans to take out enormous amounts of water and send them south, by pumping and by building a new canal, have been stalled by controversy over—among other things—the risk that lower water levels would harm fish in the Delta. Advocates of the water transfer refer to this dilemma as “fish vs. people.” Newspapers are running stories about farming communities endangered by over-zealous water protectionists.

The complexity of these water issues is incredible. Every possible solution has an impact on all the constituents in the system. Southern California agricultural businesses need the water they might receive from the north; workers depend on jobs with the Southern growers; businesses of all kinds depend on income generated by the growers and their workers. But the issue isn't “fish vs. people.” The Delta fisheries are only important to the smelt. Delta fisheries sustain industries themselves, of commercial and recreational fishing, boating, and tourism; they are also a prime source of support for Pacific salmon fisheries. You may have heard those salmon aren't doing so well, and neither are the industries and communities that depend on them. So it's people vs. people, business vs. business, economy vs. economy.

I'd say water is only one issue, but it's clearly more than one issue. The same thing is true of many of the other complex conundrums confronting us: health care; our involvement in the Middle East; the crisis in our financial systems; the dismantling of public systems of education and social welfare in response to California's budget crisis; poverty and homelessness in every American community, and all over the world. Navigating every one of these big issues requires us to find a course among countless separate intertwined issues, smaller controversies, and clashes among competing interests.

Does it all make you tired? Can you feel yourself wanting to tune out, listen to some good music, and work on your inner spiritual development?

That's what kept happening to me as I was preparing for this morning. I would get seduced into breaking complicated issues down to their constituent parts, following the money, tracing the fingerprints of political and financial influence, trying to find out who was right and who was wrong so I could make a few clear judgments to declare for you this morning. Then I'd sort of drift off, grumbling about greedy so-and-so's.

There are no simple answers to the problems facing our community, our state, our nation and our world. Every social issue, from economics to equal rights to eco-justice, is a complicated web of competing positions and worldviews, all of which have at least two things in common: they all believe they're right, and they all want to win.

It's tempting to turn away, to let the parties and the courts and the legislatures sort it all out. I believe it's this temptation that has led so many of us to stop pushing for completion of the health care reform effort President Obama is leading. There's been so much compromise, so many concessions, and so much dealing; there's not much left that makes for a good slogan or bumper sticker. We advocates of reform seem to have lost our passion. One problem with that is that some individuals, some business communities, some corporate entities, some political parties benefit from the issues remaining unresolved, because the current system is designed to reward them unjustly. Another problem is that as long as these issues remain unresolved, some people won't have access to adequate healthcare; some won't have a place to live or food to eat; some won't have access to uncontaminated drinking water. We have to stay with the problems, we have to resist the impulse to turn away, even as we know that solutions won't come easily; even as we acknowledge there will be no perfect answer.

Staying with a complicated issue that doesn't have a clear or simple solution is a specialty of our religious tradition. It matters what we believe, as Sophia Lyon Fahs says, and our beliefs guide us toward embracing complexity and differences, toward understanding that a resolution in which one side wins while another loses is no resolution at all. This is a countercultural understanding; our American culture is steeped in the assumption that for one person or one position to win, the other must lose. That might be true this afternoon, when the Saints and the Colts share the Super Bowl spotlight, but in life as long as there is a loser there is no resolution, just a temporary respite that lets all sides prepare for the next, inevitable conflict. If you want to really push the analogy, I might point out that the same thing is true of the Colts and the Saints: Whatever happens this afternoon, they'll start the whole struggle again next season.

Issues like water justice are complicated, multilayered and challenging; the complexity is real, and many people have much at stake. Yet on a deeper level, some of the difficulty arises out of a false premise. Again and again as I read up on California water issues, no matter what side of the issue I was reading, I encountered the same idea: Water is not the problem; we have plenty of water; distribution is the problem.

That premise is a lie.

On this deeper level, the reason we can't resolve our water distribution issues is that our way of using water is unsustainable. There is *not* enough water, in the Sierra, the Delta, or anywhere else on earth to make it possible for the industrial farming system to continue to operate the way it does. There is *not* enough water for the commercial fishing industry to continue to overfish, or to farm fish and shellfish in ways that contaminate everything around them. There is *not* enough water for we urban and suburban California residents to continue maintaining our subtropical plantscapes in a semi-arid climate.

The real reason we can't resolve our water issues, beyond any complexities of demand and need, is that we are trying to sustain a system based on the lie that we can have enough water without fundamentally changing our way of living. No political resolution is going to make that work.

Water isn't the only place where this happens. How much of our culture is based on unsustainable systems? Here are just a few I can think of:

We continue to live as if oil will always be available in unlimited quantities, even though we know that is not true and that we are rapidly approaching the permanent end of affordable petroleum products.

We propped up a system of finance that rewards people for destroying businesses, slashing jobs, and persuading people to buy things they don't need and can't afford. Now that the system is beginning to make profits off of dismantling and reselling its own wreckage, we say it is "recovering."

We act as if educating our children is a luxury to be paid for out of the scraps and leavings of state budgets, while our prisons are overflowing with children we have not prepared for life.

We pretend that undocumented immigrants are a drag and burden on our economies, when in fact most Americans could not eat a salad or a piece of fruit, shop in a discount store, or drink a glass of wine without their labor.

You can make your own list. Every day, in countless parts of our lives, we are living lies that everyone knows are lies. We distract ourselves from them by waging fierce fights over issues that ultimately won't change the fact that our way of life is unsustainable. But we know. In our middle of the night wakings, in our anxieties and depressions, in our exhaustion as we face another day of too much work and too little peace, in the stridency of our attacks on whoever we blame for the war, for the drought, for the polluted air, for the traffic jam we're stuck in—we know: The way we live is unsustainable.

What can we do?

This is the part where I am *not* going to tell you to sell your car, quit your job, grow all your own food, and drop off the grid. Maybe you can do that, and if so, more power to you—so to speak—but most of us can't. What most of us can do is take a few small steps—and make one huge spiritual shift.

We can learn: Learn what the real cost of our food, our water, our shelter and our transportation is. Learn what our communities need from us. Learn what choices we do have, to make our

lives more sustainable. As we learn, we can make practical, ongoing changes which place us more and more in alignment with what our planet and our society can sustain. As we learn, we can teach, and we can advocate. That is how the seeds of transformation are sown.

Sharif Abdullah, the cultural critic and community educator whose words Yvonne shared before I began, says: “Learning compassion, that ultimately I AM YOU, will provide the energy for the profound societal shift necessary for our salvation.”

This is the spiritual shift our world is calling for. So many of our issues seem unresolvable because we insist on seeing ourselves as alone, as separate. We insist on looking for solutions that will make things work for me, even if they don’t work for you. That’s the lie that lets us live in unsustainable ways. There is no such solution. The only solutions are those that work sustainably for all, because we are inextricably linked to one another.

Our tradition has long taught this. From the earliest days, we have understood: There are no divisions in the human family. We are all in this together, and we share a common destination. We cannot live with lies; we must learn the truth, and we must live the truth—together.