

By Laura Wagner, Executive Director, UU Mass Action

This morning, I'd like to offer some reflections on our current political and social environment; this may be a bit depressing at first, so I hope you stay with me. It's very important that we have some context when thinking about the change that's needed in our world today.

Then, I'll offer some reflections on our social justice successes as a reflection of our values, principles, and our faith. I will also share my vision with you for how, we as a faith community, can work together effectively to create the change we wish to see.

Out of respect to our ancestors, I'd like to first offer this prayer.

*Let us call forth and honor the ancestors of the indigenous people who first lived on this land. Those whose lives, and the lives of their descendants, that were forever changed following First Contact.*

*And let us call forth and honor the countless souls who have journeyed to this land. Those who came willingly and those who did not. Those who saw this land as a beacon of hope and those who were terrified to learn what would happen to them here.*

*We call forth and hold this energy to help us gain clarity and to understand the times in which we live. May it be so.*

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What I love about being a UU is that our values and principles are the stars that guide us. Symbolized by our beacon of light, we recognize that beautiful words are meaningless unless we breathe life into what we profess to believe.

I recognize that we are not perfect, but that's okay. Our vision must be bold and that means, that quite often, we're going to fall short. If our goals are easy to achieve then the bar we set for ourselves is much too low.

Our ideals are a beacon of light calling us to grow into our best selves. In the words of American folklorist, Zora Neale Hurston, we must "jump at the sun. We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground."

At UU Mass Action our mission is to put our faith into action and create a world where all people are honored and valued. We are one of 23 UU State Action Networks across the county and we work to organize and mobilize UUs in Massachusetts to confront oppression. We are engaged in multiple direct-action projects and we also engage in advocating for legislation that will have a positive impact on our communities statewide.

Legislative advocacy work can be exhilarating when we achieve success, but often it's terribly depressing work that produces feelings of frustration and despair. Often, this is due to the brokenness of our democracy.

The legislative process has a theoretical way of operating, which provides an opportunity for residents to participate in democracy. Then, there's also the reality of how it

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works. The frustration and despair results from the corrupting influences that have eroded our democracy. This is the depressing part I mentioned earlier, please stay with me.

For a deeper understanding of the changes that have occurred in our political system over the past 50 years, I highly recommend that you read, “Daring Democracy,” by Frances Moore Lappé and Adam Eichen. This book was our common read selection from last year. The authors present an analysis of the functioning of our democracy at both a national and state level.

In 1945 Aldous Huxley said, “All that we are and will do depends, in the last analysis, upon what we believe the Nature of Things to be.”

And what is the nature of things? The authors of “Daring Democracy” mark the beginning of the anti-democracy movement as 1971. They state,

*“On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August, soon to be Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell – a former head of the American Bar Association and at the time serving on 11 corporate boards – wrote a thirty-four page “confidential” memo commissioned by the US Chamber of Commerce.*

*Its purpose was to outline the strongest possible response to what Powell perceived as a growing attack on corporations and “the free enterprise system” itself. It is in “deep trouble, and the hour is late,” Powell warns. The “time has come – indeed, it is long overdue – for the wisdom, ingenuity and resources of American business to be marshaled against those who would destroy it.” His dismay seemed rooted in a perception that corporations were being unfairly treated, as he writes that “few elements of American society today have as little*

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*influence in government as the American businessman, the corporation, or even the millions of corporate stockholders.”*

The authors go on to state, *“What appears indisputable, however, is that [the Powell] memo served as the playbook for the ensuing campaign to elevate private power and to undermine public voices, a multifaceted effort ultimately funded and guided by some of the wealthiest families in America.”<sup>1</sup>*

Another influencing factor from this period of time was the Southern Strategy which began to take shape in 1968 during the Nixon campaign. Ari Berman, author of *“Give Us the Ballot,”* wrote, in 1968 Richard Nixon *“premised his own campaign almost entirely on winning the white backlash vote.”*

The authors of *“Daring Democracy”* expand on this and state, *“The strategy was to stoke racial resentment during the civil rights era to shift white southern Democratic voters to the Republican party. A tactic in the pernicious narrative, especially in the ensuing decades, was the use of “dog whistles,” i.e., coded political messages that convey specific meaning to selective audiences, in this case, whites.”<sup>2</sup>*

It was during this period that a tremendous shift in the functioning of our democracy occurred. Following the Powell memo there was an increase in some of the country’s

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Moore Lappé and Adam Eichen, *Daring Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017) Pg 29

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, Pg 32

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wealthiest families using their vast fortunes to influence policy, shape our beliefs and change the very nature of our democracy.

The authors of “Daring Democracy” define the strategies used by this developing concentration of power as:<sup>3</sup>

1. Command the Narrative
2. Delegitimize Democracy’s Norms and Institutions
3. Quietly Create a Parallel Political Operation Pushing Anti-Democracy Message, with Hundreds of Front Groups, Community by Community
4. Build Big Donors’ Common Purpose and Coordinate Their Efforts to Achieve the Three Strategies (listed) Above

There are other influencing factors noted in “Daring Democracy” that have their roots in the shift in power set in motion by the Powell memo and the Southern Strategy. Some of these include:

- Supreme Court Decisions such as Buckley v. Valeo in 1976<sup>4</sup> and Citizens United in 2010 which allowed the “voice of the wealthy to drown out the voices of virtually everyone else.”
- An army of special interest lobbyists<sup>5</sup> in Washington DC. Yes, organizations such as Unions lobby, too, but they are “outspent thirty-four to one by corporations. Public

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Pg 37

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Pg 59

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Pg 62

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interest groups make up only 1% of total lobby spending while business makes up 75%.”<sup>6</sup>

- More and more we’re seeing the “middleman”<sup>7</sup> being cut out and corporate backed candidates are entering government directly. The current administration’s cabinet’s “total wealth equals that of a third of American households combined.”

There’s a lot more detail I could go into but for now, I think you get the point. There has been a growing concentration of wealth in this country and it’s directly related to the growing concentration of political power. Yes, things are bad on the federal level but what about here in Massachusetts? Well, while it’s not quite as bad as it is in DC, we have our challenges here, too.

But, here’s where being a faith community is so powerful!

Our values and principles are the foundation that shapes our vision. Our commitment to justice is not based on party loyalties or self interest but, as Rev. Dr. William Barber states, “...there are some issues that are not left versus right, liberal versus conservative, they are right versus wrong. We need to embrace our deepest moral values and push for a revival of the heart of our democracy.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Pg 63

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Pg 63

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/americans-whod-never-heard-of-reverend-william-barber-ii-wont-be-able-to-forget-him-after-last-night/>

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We are called to be bold. We are called to hear the voices of those who suffer most right here in our Commonwealth and we must act. We must not be swayed by dog whistle language and coded political messages that prey upon our fears. No, we must remain grounded in the values and principles we hold dearly and not accept a narrative we know to be false. It's not going to be easy.

A story comes to mind that reflects how difficult this can be.

My husband Ken is a volunteer driver for our local senior center. One day, he was giving a ride to an elderly woman who was born in Austria. The conversation turned to concerns about the current political climate and the woman stated that the news she reads increasingly reminds her of the conditions she experienced in Nazi Germany. The two discussed her observations and then the conversation turned to the crisis faced by immigrants at the southern border here in the US. To this, she replied, "Yes, but we can't let them in. They're all bringing in drugs."

I was so disheartened when Ken told me this story. How could a woman who lived through the horrors of Nazi Germany not see the parallels between the propaganda used to demonize Jews, and the propaganda now being used to demonize thousands of refugees and asylum seekers fighting for their lives here in the US?

Fear is a powerful influence that compels us to believe a narrative that betrays our own values. Bryan Stevenson, author of, "Just Mercy," teaches us about the importance of proximity when engaging in social justice. We must witness the reality of a situation ourselves

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and focus on the conditions faced by our human siblings. We are responsible for not letting fear and ignorance shape our understanding and drive our actions.

The change we call for needs to be bold. Our actions need to echo the words of Zora Neale Hurston and we must jump for the sun!

We are long overdue for our congregations to move away from issue-based organizing or engaging solely in charitable acts and towards movement building. At UU Mass Action we have transitioned to a movement building approach which recognizes that no one issue stands alone. I'd like to elaborate on this concept by beginning with the climate crisis.

The climate crisis and the rise in global temperature is shrinking the amount of arable land needed to sustain human life. In Africa, an estimated 65% of arable land is too damaged to sustain food production.<sup>9</sup> Extreme drought in Syria from 2006-2009 is directly linked to the violent uprising that began in 2011.<sup>10</sup>

And in India and Pakistan, extended periods of deadly extreme heat are making large, densely populated regions unbearable for the people who live there. Without drastic change, millions more people are going to be forced to migrate.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.ipsnews.net/2015/01/more-than-half-of-africas-arable-land-too-damaged-for-food-production/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/03/science/earth/study-links-syria-conflict-to-drought-caused-by-climate-change.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/17/climate/india-heat-wave-summer.html>

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An additional concern, of course, is flooding. As the polar ice caps melt at alarming rates, the seas will continue to rise and cover low lying islands and large coastal regions. Not too far into the future, people living in these regions will also be forced to migrate.

And how might these people, who will be forced to migrate from their no longer existing homes, be treated? If the current treatment of migrants is any indication, not so good.

And how is immigration tied to mass incarceration? The prison industrial complex is not going to go quietly into the night as activists succeed in changing the policies that drive so many people into the prison system. In Massachusetts, we succeeded in passing landmark legislation last session that will have a significant, positive impact on reducing the prison population. But, over the last three legislative sessions, we failed to get even basic protections in place to protect vulnerable immigrant communities.

The Department of Homeland Security issued a directive this summer for ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) to increase daily immigration arrests and detentions from 40,500 to 51,000. This policy results in an unprecedented amount of people being imprisoned in detention facilities and our local county jails are only too happy to meet the demand. Corrections officials are not concerned if their prison beds are filled by people being held pre-trial, convicted of a crime, or if the person is an immigrant detained by ICE. They just want those beds filled.

Prisons divert a lot of money from our state budget, money that is desperately needed to invest in infrastructure to help us meet our clean, renewable energy goals. We will never

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end fossil fuel consumption if our elected officials don't prioritize this as a goal. Individual behavioral changes are just not enough. We need a commitment to statewide, systemic changes in our energy policies.

So, where do we start?

We could start with our corrupted democracy. During the last legislative session climate and immigrant rights activists were certainly disheartened and discouraged. We got only a tiny fraction of what we wanted to keep us moving towards 100% clean, renewable energy by 2050 and absolutely nothing on immigrant rights. Nothing, not even a provision protecting a person's due process. Nothing.

A particularly painful climate legislation failure was the amendment which would have established a commitment to Environmental Justice. It was gutted by the Senate Chair of the Telecommunication, Utilities and Energy Committee. The senator struck the language identifying race, ethnicity or income as a factor when addressing environmental justice. His justification being that he felt "all communities should be protected," while completely ignoring the history of injustice suffered by communities of low income and people of color.

Some of the other frustrating moments of the past legislative session included being told that climate activists were asking for too much and we needed to "choose only one or two bills for the session." At other times, when advocating for a legislator to act on a specific bill we were told about how "busy" they were and that they "can't take action on everything."

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In the summer of 2016 Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org, challenged us to declare war on Climate Change and mobilize a response like that which occurred in WWII. We need that type of bold, no holds barred action, everyone rowing in the same direction kind of response. This is a global scale crisis and our response needs to reflect that. Our response as UUs needs to reflect that.

It is unacceptable to work for two years only to get tweaks passed in laws that address the climate crisis. If our elected officials are not willing to lead, then it's time for them to follow those who are leading or get out of the way. And we, as constituents and advocates must change our strategy. We dilute our power when we latch on to one bill and see it as a panacea to a problem to the exclusion of all else. We dilute our power when we want to define the problem and solution on our own and refuse to work collectively with our community partners. And we dilute our power when we only exist in coalitions that work in isolation from everything else that's happening.

Imagine what would happen if progressive coalitions joined forces?

The Poor People's Campaign, led by Rev Dr. William Barber, calls for this level of bold action.

The authors of "Daring Democracy" call us to create a Movement of Movements, bringing coalitions together to create a bold, unifying platform.

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I know this can seem overwhelming at first. But, John Silver, founder of Represent.Us reminds us that “we can love two children at once.”<sup>12</sup>

We do not have to be experts on every issue and attend every coalition meeting. But, imagine our power if we each understood the true power dynamics that influence our democracy; if we each grasped the big picture for creating a just world and understood how our piece of the puzzle fit into that picture; if we work together to create a bold platform of demands that centralize our power and dilute the power of big money opposition.

This can happen. At the end of the previous session, climate and immigrant rights activists came together for shared actions. We saw the shift in power this created, and it awakened a commitment for us to continue. UU Mass Action is partnering with Adam Eichen, co-author of “Daring Democracy” and we have convened, and are in discussion with, climate, economic, criminal justice and immigrant rights activists. We are beginning to explore the rules changes that are needed at the State House that will restore our democracy.

This is a very exciting time for social justice. Politely playing by the rules, rules that powerful corporations do not follow, is over. There is too much at stake and too many people are suffering.

I’d like to leave you with these words by political activist, Angela Davis -

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<sup>12</sup> Frances Moore Lappé and Adam Eichen, *Daring Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2017) Pg 112

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*"I'm no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I'm changing the things I cannot accept"*

Rev. Dr. Barber refers to this time as the "Third Reconstruction." Let us all recognize the significance of this time and work together to create a world that honors and values all people.

May it be so.