

Why We March
Sermon delivered by Lisa Shaffer, Jan. 21, 2018
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There has been quiet discussion here at UUFSD about how we can be true to our desire to welcome people of all political persuasions while we hear sermons that, to some, sound political and might offend Republicans or conservatives. I believe we DO welcome everyone who shares our principles. We can call out offensive, unacceptable behavior and policies without demonizing people who choose a particular party affiliation or vote for candidates who reflect their policy preferences. Today's sermon builds on women's voices that are calling on us to take action that supports our values, and to oppose the offensive and frightening actions and policies of anyone, in public office or not, of whatever political party, gender, skin color, or ethnic background, when those actions and policies demean and threaten our nation and our planet.

What do a World Series championship, African-American opera singer Marian Anderson, abortion rights, climate change, and Donald Trump have in common? They have all stimulated public demonstrations – specifically a parade, a concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, marches, and rallies. We are social animals, and just as we share our personal or family joys and concerns here with this community, big joys and national or global concerns move us to a bigger stage.

I have been participating in political protest marches since I was in high school in the late 1960s – first anti-war demonstrations in Washington DC and New York, then an abortion rights march in DC when I was in college. Last year it seemed like almost every weekend had a march – for science, for climate action, immigration reform, you name it. And yesterday I was part of the march in San Diego.

So I have been wondering: Why do we march? What difference does it make?

Each Tuesday, for over a year, demonstrators have been gathering in front of Congressman Darrell Issa's office to express their dissatisfaction with his representation of our district. Two weeks ago he announced that he is not going to seek re-election. As we learned in statistics class, correlation does not equal causality, but I think there's a connection there.

As society's perspectives have broadened from local to more global, so too have big demonstrations and marches in our nation's capital increased. In 1957 there was one event that got a permit to demonstrate in Washington: the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, a civil rights demonstration. The next big DC event was six years later - Martin Luther King's March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in 1963. The first anti-war Vietnam protest in the capital, listed in Wikipedia, was in 1965. The pace of marches picks up as time goes by, with 18 marches in Washington listed last year.

I asked a number of people why they march. Some mentioned being inspired by Martin Niemöller (1892–1984), a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. He wrote:
*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant to search for truth and meaning. We respect the worth and dignity of all people, and we believe in the democratic process. When we see threats to these principles, we are called to action. And for some of us, sometimes, that action is marching and rallying.

If something upsets me, I might post about it on Facebook. But if I get a lot of critical responses, or people challenge my position, I admit that sometimes I just delete the post. I don't like being the only house with a political sign in my yard or the only one wearing a T-shirt with a political statement. Sometimes I do it, but I'm uncomfortable and I feel vulnerable. It feels a lot safer to be in a group, to be a follower and not the only one out front.

A year ago, after the election, our own Mary Tuller, a woman who had never protested before in her life, felt called to take a stand and be counted. Figuring that Washington DC was the epicenter of the Women's March, she flew there to do her part to make sure there was a large turnout. She said that she wanted to be able to say, in later years, that she was there. She did not sit by and do nothing.

The day after the march, you may recall, was the day of our Congregational meeting, just like this year, except last year we were voting on whether to call Rev. Meghan as our settled minister. Mary again felt called to take a stand and be counted, so she flew back on the red-eye to be home in time for that vote. And we do know that every vote and every voice counts – just look at the recent election for the House of Delegates in Virginia where there was a tie vote that had to be decided by drawing lots. One more vote would have flipped the majority in the state legislature.

Many women said that they were marching because of their daughters or their grandchildren.

My friend, Wendy, a 40-ish mother of a 10-year old daughter, said "Why I marched was simple: Our nation elected a man who openly bragged about sexually assaulting women. Who time and again has been recorded demeaning, degrading, and harassing women (and vets and the disabled and...). I have a daughter (and a mother and sisters and friends), and I could not remain silent. Silence to me felt like passive approval and I am simply too horrified by his actions to remain silent.

[She goes on:] Does it matter? Only time will tell if these marches shift the political landscape at all. But it mattered to me personally, and I hope it mattered to my daughter. All too often I let the fast pace of my life and my myriad responsibilities excuse my political and social inactivity. I wanted to model for my daughter that if you are not content with the status quo, you need to actively try and change it. Not simply sit on the sidelines and complain. So in marching, I was active, and that mattered to me.”

Another friend, Teresa, who is 64, and never had children, said “I first read Martin Niemöller's poem "First They came..." when I was in high school. It spoke to me on many levels...the evil of Nazism, and the danger of apathy. It motivated me then to speak out about Viet Nam, civil rights, women's rights, environmental protection, even saving the whales!

I thought I didn't have to do that again. After all, we had accomplished so many good things and voting was really the way to bring about change. But like Niemoller, I wasn't really paying attention to what was happening outside of my comfortable bubble or own interests. I was wrong...and like many I felt obligated to say...Not This Time.”

One of our members said “I marched last year because I was burning with rage that a man who admitted sexually assaulting women could be elected president. I march this year because I am beaming with pride that so many of my fellow Americans have turned against this president and everything he stands for. I march to resist. I march to show my power. I march for my daughter and my daughter's daughters. I march because it is my duty as a woman and an American.”

The theme of marching for our daughters came through a lot. But it may be more complicated than that. In an interesting article in the NY Times a few weeks ago, Jill Filipovic writes that “you don't need a daughter to want a better world.” She asserts that focusing on what women are doing for their children undercuts women's progress. Our value, she says, doesn't depend on our status as mothers. “We are entitled to rights and liberties by plain virtue of our humanness... Women are hungry. But having been bred to feel sated by denial, half the time we don't even know what it is we hunger for. When we do pursue what we crave, the consequences of saying so out loud can be stark. .. And so we focus on the next generation of not-yet-women. ...Do we want our daughters to spend their lives primarily in the service of their daughters? If not, then we should treat ourselves with the love and adoration we bestow on our girls and start demanding what we actually want, right now. We should learn to feed ourselves first.”

This made me think. Am I ok marching for myself or do I have to march for others? I concluded the answer has to be both. I do not want to be so self-centered that I think only of myself, but I also do need to speak out for myself.

The threats and fears are all so very personal and at the same time so universal. The abstract is never as powerful as the specific. Looking into the eyes of the person whose life you can impact

is incredibly powerful. And so, many activists, in addition to marching, tried to arrange individual meetings with their elected representatives to talk to them face-to-face, and why many elected representatives avoided town hall meetings and locked their doors to walk-in visits from constituents.

Marching is a piece of a broader process of creating change. Societal change, personal change, political change. It takes a lot of different kinds of work to create change. Some come up with the vision and inspiration. Some recruit and train the builders. Some provide the funding. Some write and sing the music. Some design and print low-cost postcards; others donate the stamps; and many write the messages. Change requires a strong foundation, a compelling design, and constant maintenance. Marching and rallying are a piece of this process, a necessary but not sufficient condition.

We can have impact one-to-one and there is strength in numbers. Seeing the Washington mall and the streets of every major city filled with demonstrators signals politicians that they need to pay attention. Trying to dismiss mass events as paid political protests doesn't have much credibility. As many, including the Hollywood stars at the Golden Globes, recently said, this is not a moment – it's a movement.

The key to this and to activism on other issues is to harness the energy exhibited at the big event into practical action. For example, #TimesUp and #MeToo have created a legal defense fund to support people who have experienced discrimination and harassment to bring legal action and hold perpetrators accountable. The Women's March and related political resistance stimulated the Indivisible movement that has helped people learn how to become more engaged in the political process. It seems to be working – the number of progressives, especially women, who are running for public office has sky-rocketed in the last 12 months.

One of our member said she marched last year because she wanted to do something with her fear and anger at the outcome of the election. She said that she didn't want to be that affluent white woman who sits behind a closed curtain and tries not to see what is happening to others. Just because it didn't hit her immediately and directly, didn't mean she didn't care.

We may feel outrage or despair about a lot of things. But we are much more likely to become active if it's easy – if someone organizes an event and tells us where to show up. I doubt many of us would have, on our own, made a sign and marched around in a public place as a way to express our views. But in city after city, because someone DID organize an event, and declare a time and place, and get the needed permits, and use social media to promote it, and because someone chartered buses and held sign-painting parties and knitted pink hats, hundreds of thousands, no actually millions of women and men showed up.

Does it matter? Yes - because political activism builds a web of support for change. Change requires hope, and we get hope from seeing collective action, from knowing that others share our outrage, our fear, and our goals. Change requires organization and money and energy, and demonstrations and rallies can stimulate organization and money and energy.

Change also needs persistence. Of the women I heard from, a few had been active on civil rights, Vietnam, or reproductive rights issues in the past, mostly while in college or graduate school. But then we felt like things were getting better, and we were busy with careers and families. We didn't feel the need to demonstrate for a while.

Then the Occupy Movement began in September 2011, as a response to corporate influence on our democracy. Beginning on Wall Street, Occupy movements sprang up around the country and internationally. You may recall the slogan "We are the 99%," focusing on the increased inequality in income distribution. How many of you went with David Miller, our previous minister, to take pie to the Occupy demonstrators who were sitting in at the San Diego civic center?

But, Micah White, one of the co-founders of the Occupy Movement, now asserts that the era of protest is over, that demonstrations no longer work, in the US and abroad. He concludes that the only way to make change is to "win elections or win wars." He argues that "Occupy Wall Street was a constructive failure that exposed the limits of protest at the same time as it revealed a practical way forward. On the horizon are increasingly sophisticated movements that will emerge in a bid to dominate elections, govern cities and reorient the way we live."

And this seems to me to explain why it matters. Protest and activism are needed to motivate people – to "activate" and engage them. People need to see that there is possibility – that getting off the sofa and getting involved might actually pay off. White is correct that ultimately change happens in communities, cities and states, in Congress and the White house, and that depends on who is willing to run for office and who is willing to work hard to get candidates elected.

One of Occupy's largely unrecognized victories is the momentum it built for a higher minimum wage. The Occupy protests motivated fast-food workers in New York City to walk off the job in November 2012, sparking a national worker-led movement to raise the minimum wage to \$15 an hour. In 2014, numerous cities and states including four Republican-dominated ones voted for higher pay; and more did so in 2016. From Seattle to Los Angeles to Chicago, some of the country's largest cities are setting a new economic bar to help low-income workers.

The reading included this from the UUA Side With Love campaign: Side with Love raises provocative spiritual questions including "When have I sided with love? When have I shirked siding with love?"

I was invited to join a Facebook page called Trump Snark. Every day someone posted cartoons or words that were intentionally demeaning, vulgar, insulting, and to some, funny. After a few days, I disengaged from that page. While I share the outrage and disgust with what's going on, I don't want to become part of it. I don't want to be offensive in the other direction. I want to make room for progress that includes people evolving in their understanding, and changing

their minds, and joining us on the side of love. If they have to pass through a wall of hate and shame they're less likely to do it.

And so when I march, I want to march with dignity. Women's rights, after all, are human rights. I march FOR something – for human rights, for respect, for science and education, for health care and for love. I march for Bread and Roses.

Why do we march? The answers are many.

I believe we march for ourselves, to have an outlet for our joy, our fear, our frustration.
I believe we march out of concern for others like us and not like us – to support undocumented residents, women who want to make their own choices about reproduction, people of color, veterans and young men and women who are fighting in the military.
I believe we march to create connection and community – to know that we are not alone. To support each other and claim our rights and our power.
I believe we march to create change, and I believe that marching DOES make a difference.

I am proud to be part of this UUFSD community that shares these values, that sides with love, that marches with pride and builds on the strong foundation of activism to create meaningful and lasting change. Amen