

**The First Revolution Is Internal  
November 16, 2008**

Years ago, while living in New York City as a twenty-something year old, I remember talking at great length to a group of people one night about how I wrote poetry, was in school for writing poetry, wanted to be a poet, but didn't feel I was doing enough to really live into my life as a poet, wasn't sharing my poetry with anyone, felt I was suffering because of not being a complete poet, and so on and so forth. When I was finally finished with my soliloquy, a woman in the group looked at me and said, "I don't mean to be glib, but, if you want to work on your self esteem, do esteemable acts."

The moment was somehow analogous to the scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when, after watching a very intimidating bad guy expertly and menacingly waving a giant sword in preparation for maliciously slaughtering him, Indiana

Jones simply pulls out his revolver and shoots the guy dead.  
Bam. Case closed.

As embarrassingly simple as this woman's comment was in response to my rambling and mournful story, it was just what I needed to get out of my, until then, lifelong rut. Within weeks, I was reading a poem of mine at a well known café; shortly after that, I was participating in poetry readings around the city; and within a year or two, I had several poems published in various anthologies.

Now, of course, things don't always work out that easily, or quickly, but in that one moment of that woman saying so simply to me, "If you want to work on your self-esteem, do esteemable acts," it was as if, indeed, a revolution was begun, and internally, I knew I could no longer let my writing life be led by my own largely self-inflicted disempowerment.

While today I don't see myself as primarily a poet, my own internal revolution of owning and learning to act upon, as *Cold Anger* author Mary Beth Rogers notes, my own "fundamental self-interest," that ability has guided me these past twenty years or so from being a very private writer with no real voice or audience to standing before a beautiful congregation of people almost every Sunday to speak about what I hope are issues of ultimate concern for this religious community and for the larger world we live in.

On this *particular* Sunday speaking before this beautiful congregation, I'm hoping that my revolution, and evolution, of not only finding my own voice, but of striving to use it for the common good, so that I can "be of use... be with people who submerge in the task," as the poet Marge Piercy says, is a revolution you will join me in, especially as this congregation moves to vote, on December 7<sup>th</sup>, on whether we, as a

congregation, join the community organizing network, Austin Interfaith.

You've heard, from the readings that Gay shared earlier, something of how and why Austin Interfaith's parent group, the Industrial Areas Foundation, works. You heard, for instance, Industrial Areas Foundation Director Ed Chambers say, "The personal growth and development of people is why we do what we do. That's what broad-based organizations do for people," says Chambers, "change their lives and integrate their values and vision. The first revolution is internal."

And you heard organizer Mike Gecan say, "Hope is physical and visceral. I don't think you talk yourself into it. I think you have to *do* yourself into it." Thus he walks into East Brooklyn, into what he describes as "the midst of hell," walks into "a house or an apartment in a project," and finds there "a tremendous person"—in fact, after hundreds of meetings, he

finds enough tremendous people to begin rebuilding the entire area. True, the work may sound intimidating—“the work of the world is common as mud,” the poet says, “Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust. But the thing worth doing, well done, has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.”

Knowing this much about the Industrial Areas Foundation, of which Austin Interfaith is one of 57 groups that make up this larger organization, what good work, good causes, good values does Austin Interfaith, right here in our city, work for, and how?

To be fair, I’ll admit it’s taken me from the first time I met with Austin Interfaith lead organizer Doug Greco last spring sometime, to this very day, to really feel I’ve begun to integrate the powerful grassroots ways in which Austin Interfaith promotes justice in our community. And still, my earlier hands-on illustration with the children may end up providing

a clearer message than anything I can put in words, without the aid of little cut-out people. But I'll give it a try.

In its own words, Austin Interfaith “is a multi-ethnic, multi-issue coalition of thirty religious congregations, public schools, and unions who work together to address public issues that affect the well being of families and neighborhoods in our community.” To address such issues, in 2007, as in the past twenty years it’s been in existence, Austin Interfaith conducted hundreds of individual meetings and house meetings with over 3,000 people, as well as meetings with city officials, educators, and economists, focusing on the central question, “What are the pressures on your family?”

Out of these conversations, Austin Interfaith (and please note, Austin Interfaith means the hundreds of volunteer leaders, not simply the three or four staff members) it came up with a 2008 action agenda that includes the five following

umbrella concerns: good jobs/living wages; education for a creative economy; affordable health care; police relationships; and immigration reform. (As a side note on immigration reform, tomorrow I will be traveling to Houston with other Austin Interfaith clergy for an Interfaith Clergy Summit entitled, “Welcoming the Stranger and Immigration Reform.” The summit is being called by the Houston sister IAF organization, known as the Metropolitan Organization, and the Office of the Cardinal of the Archdiocese of Houston-Galveston. It will feature Director of the Southwest IAF, Ernesto Cortes, along with many religious leaders.) But again, the issue of immigration, along with the four others, arose out of conversations with literally thousands of people living and around Austin, focusing on the single question, “what are the pressures on your family?”

Now, in our relatively small, admittedly homogeneous neck of the woods, we Wildflowers may not feel we need to concern ourselves with issues such as, and I quote here, “increas[ing] funding and access for English as a Second Language courses;” “improv[ing] relationships with police in African-American communities around our congregations;” or “increas[ing] funding at the federal, state, city, and county level for effective workforce development strategies, especially long-term training for living wage jobs to lift people out of poverty and into the middle class.” We may in fact slip into the all too common misconception that Austin Interfaith, unlike us, consists almost entirely of East Austin, Catholic, low-income, Spanish-speaking communities. We Unitarian Universalists really wouldn’t fit in.

In fact, in the months that members of Wildflower and I have been attending leadership meetings, clergy caucuses, and

accountability sessions as prospective Austin Interfaith members, we have been met warmly and eagerly by Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, Baptists, and Jews; Spanish speakers, English speakers; African-American people, Hispanic people, Anglo people; working-class, middle-class, and upper-middle class people. We have gone to meetings on the East Side, Central Austin, and in the far—*far*—northwest part of town.

And it was in a church in that far northwest part of town, off of Highway 620, that thirteen of us Wildflowers attended an accountability session this past October, to witness Austin Interfaith in action as they asked three Texas Legislative candidates and one Travis County Commissioner candidate whether they would support particular aspects of the 2008 action agenda that Austin Interfaith had created.

Sample questions included, under the heading of education, “Will you support allowing schools to develop and implement a wider range of performance measures and assessment (not just the TAKS tests) such as student portfolios, performance, scientific investigations and projects?” and, under the heading of health care, “Do you support giving the Texas Department of Insurance the authority and responsibility to regulate health insurance, protect consumers and increase health insurance coverage in Texas?” In response, each candidate had the choice of saying either yes or no, followed by a brief explanation.

Now, by the way, back at the accountability session that Amy Young and I attended at St. Ignatius Church last spring, over 5,000 signatures supporting the Austin Interfaith agenda were handed in—5,000 signatures of people from Austin Interfaith churches who are registered voters. Candidates

know about these signatures, about these voters, and they know that to say yes or no to any of these questions asked of them by Austin Interfaith is to gain or lose a vote or two.

Does that mean candidates will just say yes to everything? That's where the accountability part comes in. At the accountability sessions (which candidates are prepped for by Austin Interfaith leaders, by the way—they're not going in cold), at these sessions, candidates are reminded that if they say yes to supporting any part of the Austin Interfaith agenda, they will, from here on out, be held accountable!

Now, does all this work of Austin Interfaith actually work? In part, that is really for each of you to decide, and I paraphrase organizer Mike Gecan in suggesting to you that you will best do that not by *talking* yourself into it; "you have to *do* yourself into it." And you *do* yourselves into it by getting yourselves involved and building relationships with other

members of Austin Interfaith. For me, and I believe I can say for others, simply meeting other leaders from all across the city has been a revolution of relationship building in itself.

Still, if you want a success story, here's one straight from Austin Interfaith's own Victory Pages. I quote here at length:

Santa Barbara [Church] leaders have succeeded in getting the first of a total of forty families in the Hornsby Bend area fully connected to running water. Last year over \$400,000 in infrastructure was invested in the project to get the families, some of whom had been without water for five years, running water. By organizing residents to work together with the utility company, applications were approved, pipes laid on properties, and meters activated to start the water flowing!

Other success stories include: Austin Interfaith convincing the city to dedicate ten lots for Habitat for Humanity homes in the Montopolis area; leaders working with Travis Heights community members to improve living

conditions at the Travis Park apartments, which had been infested with rats, mold, and raw sewage; and leaders working with public officials to secure hundreds of thousands of dollars for the long-term job-training program, Capital IDEA.

With stories such as these, I hope you will see that Wildflower Church joining Austin Interfaith is itself a capital idea! But, while hoping that, I catch myself wondering, amidst all this information sharing, Eliza, where's the spiritual message? Where are those issues of *ultimate* concern you said you liked to talk about on Sunday mornings? Do I, the alleged poet, have the words?

I'll turn instead the poet whose words we shared earlier, who proclaims, "I want to be with people who submerge in the task, who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along, who stand in the line and haul in their places, who are not parlor generals or field deserters but move

in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out.”

I'll turn also to the apostle, to the Catholic saint, who cries, in the second Book of James:

What good is it my brothers and sisters, if you have faith but do not have works? .... Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

And, turning to our own faith, I'll remember the Unitarian minister, Edward Everett Hale who says, “I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can so something. And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.”

What can I do? I can, to quote Mike Gecan, do myself into hope and empowerment, as I did when I was twenty-

something years old and a woman said to me, simply, “If you want to work on your self-esteem, do esteemable acts.”

Today, these twenty or so years later, I can revolve and evolve that charge into something like this: “If you want to work on compassion, do compassionate acts;” “if you want to work on love, do loving acts;” “If you want to work on justice, do just acts.” Our congregation’s own mission statement concludes with the proclamation that “we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice.”

That being so, let us, as a “deliberately inclusive, open-minded religious community in the Unitarian Universalist tradition,” live out our mission. Let us do so, in part, by becoming, truly, and actively, a member of the Austin Interfaith community.

Amen.