

December Covenant Group
Reading and Guiding questions
on the month's theme: *Service*

From *In Our Own Best Interest*, by William F. Schulz, Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

[The Rev. Dr. Schultz will be preaching at UUCA on Sunday, December 8.]

“But what does all of this have to do with a person in East Tennessee?”

The question from the talk show host on Knoxville's National Public Radio station was not a hostile one. I had been talking about Burma and Bosnia, China and Chiapas, refugee camps in Congo, and police brutality in New York City, and now the interviewer was simply trying to bring it all home to his listeners. “I mean, I'm sure we all agree that these kinds of human rights violations are morally repugnant,” he said, “But if I'm barely scratching out a living in East Tennessee, worried about having enough money to get my kids a decent education or to make the payments on a bigger house, what difference do all these abuses taking place so far away make to me?”

It was an excellent question, and in the hundreds of interviews I had given for Amnesty International over the years, it was one I had never been asked before. Not was it a question that we in the human rights movement often ask ourselves. We have assumed that if we describe the suffering dramatically enough, good people will respond and want to stop it. And of course many good people have. But not enough, by any means. ... Why was that?...

The Knoxville interviewer had posed a question for which anyone in the business of changing the world had better be ready. “OK, but what does this have to do with me?”

I was five years old in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to move from the front of the Montgomery bus; thirteen when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the March on Washington; and eighteen when the Tet Offensive broke the will of the United States to carry on the Vietnam War. The civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements were, before all else, moral crusades. Those who supported them from the very beginning did so because they thought it the right thing to do. The practical benefits were of secondary importance. But before these two great moral movements would grow to their maximum strength, capturing the sympathy of hundreds of thousands across the country, they had to add to their moral authority a host of pragmatic reasons for Americans to support them.

In the case of the civil rights movement, those black Americans who might at first have viewed Dr. King and his colleagues with skepticism were soon convinced that this was a crusade worth fighting for. They were convinced not only by Dr. King's rhetoric and courage but also by the practical changes the movement proposed to make in people's lives – *their* lives and those of their children. White sympathizers also responded to the moral message of equal rights, but they recognized as well that the United States could no longer remain a divided society without doing untold damage to itself. Those people too recalcitrant to see this reality early on were jolted into awareness when several U.S. cities went up in flames in the 1960s.

Similarly, public opinion about the Vietnam War gradually shifted for both ethical and practical reasons. The infamous photograph of a South Vietnamese general

executing a terrified man with a point-blank shot to the head as well as the image of a nude screaming child fleeing a village on which U.S. troops had dropped napalm had an enormous impact on Americans' sense of themselves as a virtuous people. But such moral outrage had to be coupled with growing numbers of U.S. boys returning home in body bags and a deeply divided society before mainstream opinion finally turned against the war.

Since these crusades of the 1960s and 1970s, nearly every movement for social change in the United States, whether right wing or left, has combined a moral, religious, or aesthetic dimension with a pragmatic rationale in its campaign to win public approval. ... Nearly every movement to change the world frames the benefits of what it offers in both visionary and practical terms. ... We need to be ready to answer the question "But what does all of this have to do with me?"

Guiding Questions

1. Tell a story from your childhood or youth, about when you first became aware of human need (poverty, hunger) or injustice (sexism, racism).
2. When was there a period in your life in which you wanted to spend your own time and/or energy to help – a person, a cause, a movement?
3. How/When do you connect your own life's work and family with serving the needs of others?
4. When has your own personal life's situation made it seem difficult to think about the woes of the world?
5. What breaks your heart enough that you would consider spending some of your precious time, treasure, or talent to serve someone else's need?
6. Rabindranath Tagore wrote: "I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy." Reflect on his words. What do they mean to you?