

Susan Bruce  
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes  
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*Speaking Up and Taking Action*

Before I get started, I want to read you part of an email exchange I had with Reverend Betsy. She's been very encouraging about my leading this service, and emailed to ask how my writing was coming along. This was my response:

After several attempts at trying to sound wiser, more noble, and more spiritual than I actually am, I've settled down into writing in my own voice. I'm hoping for the best. Fortunately we are a polite congregation, and value food too much to throw it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Transcendentalist who would be one of the patron saints of UUs if we had them wrote: "Thought is the blossom; language the bud; action the fruit behind it." I found that quote recently, and decided to use it as my organizing theme for today. In speaking with Shana about music, I realized that for me, his words boil down to speaking up and taking action.

The fruit of action is getting a workout, here in the United States of America in the year 2019. It's impossible to keep up with everything that needs to be attended to, to right all the wrongs that need righting.

Every week we read a shared affirmation that reminds us that we want to dwell together in peace, speak the truth in love, and help one another. If only it were as easy as it sounds. In a world filled with chaos, in a country where human rights are being violated and children are being held in cages on the border, it's hard to feel as though we're doing enough. It's hard to get up in the morning. Everyone I know is exhausted with the constant barrage of injustice.

Now that I've cheered you up – I do have some good news. I went to an event last night that caused me to go home and rewrite my sermon.

I attended the NH Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty's celebration for abolishing the death penalty. This year the NH legislature voted to abolish the death penalty. The governor vetoed the bill, and the legislature overrode his veto.

This was an overnight success that took a little over 20 years of dedicated, constant activism. Some years it was so close. Governor Jeanne Shaheen vetoed a death penalty repeal. Governor John Lynch signed a bill that expanded the crime of capitol murder to include home invasion. In 2018, Governor Sununu vetoed a death penalty repeal bill, and an attempt to override failed. This year there were veto-proof majorities. As hard as the governor tried to cajole and threaten the legislators in his party, he couldn't turn everyone. Because this wasn't about any political party, this was about principle. The coalition began 20 years ago with members of the faith community, some legislators,

and some activists. Over the years it expanded to include family members of murder victims, judges, law enforcement, more legislators and more activists. They learned from their mistakes. They tried new things – like hiring lobbyists, which proved very successful. More than anything, they continued to educate, and reach out to legislators. Every few years they brought a death row exoneree to testify at the State House. Hearing the story of a person wrongly convicted who spent years on death row was a catalyst for some folks to change their minds about the death penalty.

The coalition was persistent. Every biennium they came back. Every year people came to the hearings to testify. Every year family members of murder victims came to tell the story of losing someone they loved – and how taking another life was not their idea of justice. Every year minds were changed. This was truly a lesson in the arc of the moral universe being long. It took decades and a lot of work.

But they did it! It was an improbable bunch that gathered to celebrate. There were legislators from all political points of view. The ACLU was there, and Amnesty International. There was at least one judge, some nuns and a minister. It was amazing. Sister Helen Prejean couldn't be there, but she sent a video message of congratulations. Actor and death penalty activist Mike Farrell sent a video message. Death row exoneree Kirk Bloodsworth sent a message. It was pretty great.

I almost didn't go. I was struggling with what I was going to say to you all today, and thought about staying home to work on it. I thought to myself: If I read some Wendell Berry, it might help. In the end I went, because people I love were celebrating an important moment in our state's history.

It was the best thing I could have done. I've been feeling so discouraged, feeling as if I just do the same things over and over, write the same newspaper columns over and over – and that is actually true – and nothing changes. And underneath everything right now is the undercurrent of anger and fear about the families at the border.

But things do change -sometimes big things! I've lived in NH long enough to have been witness to 3 historic justice votes: the vote to celebrate Martin Luther King Day, the vote for marriage equality, and the vote to abolish the death penalty.

But - this is where I struggle. The arc of the moral universe is long – and none of us are getting any younger. We need to pick up the pace. There are changes that will happen slowly, because they require education and time to build – like repealing the death penalty. We do not have 20 years to fix the camps at the border. We do not have 20 years to fix our broken political system, our addiction to war, or income inequality. The long-term changes are fueled by love but the immediate changes needed can be fueled by anger. We are conditioned from childhood that anger is wrong – but sometimes it is the correct response, and we shouldn't run away from that.

We who are committed to a just and peaceful world need to keep at it. When we are tired, we need to keep fighting. When we would rather stay in bed and pull the covers up over

our heads we need to keep fighting.

Fighting for justice looks different for all of us. The death penalty veto was overridden by ONE vote. Was that person swayed by calls from constituents? By a postcard, maybe, from a group that gets together every week to write postcards to elected officials? Or was it one of the activists outside the State House who swayed a wavering legislator when she spoke with him?

We will never know. But each one of those actions made a difference in someone's thinking. Activism doesn't have to be big, splashy events, or involve handcuffs and arrests. There is a group in Concord that began with neighbors on a street getting together to talk about what to do after the 2016 election. They've expanded since then, and so has their work for justice. Within the larger group are small groups working on issues, like education, guns violence prevention, the environment, health care, voting rights – you get the idea.

The advantage of a group like this, is of course – the fact that it's a group – a community of people who work hard together, but who also take care of each other. The work of justice sometimes leaves wounds. We can help each other with the healing.

I'm going to close with some Wendell Berry. I'm going to read a brief segment of a piece written in 2016, when Wendell Berry was having a public conversation with Eric Schlosser at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health:

*.... but his (Berry's) most provocative statements were saved for the moment to put that fire out. "I think the climate change issues is a big distraction. I'm not denying it," he said, "but you mustn't look away from the other things that are wrong." He went on to say, "One thing I dislike about the climate movement is its almost exclusive appeal to guilt, anger, and fear. I just don't think the answer's going to come from there. I think it's going to come from love. I think it will come from the people finding work that they love, and loving one another."*

*Berry called for "a broad-fronted movement," adding that "it would be economic, to protect everything that's worth protecting, to stop permanent damage to everything that's worth keeping. This is not something that I think can be enacted very soon, but that's what I'm for."*

*"A whole program of that kind has to be carried on by whole people," he went on to say. "People who are not ashamed to say that they love something, or that they have reverence, who are not ashamed of the upper branches of our language."*

*As the conversation went along, the wisdom seemed to wash over the audience, transforming the restless anxiety into a sense of joyous resolve in the face of all challenges. At least it did for this young farmer.*

*Responding to a question from the audience, he said, "I can't give anybody hope. Hope*

*has to come up out of you. It's been a struggle for me to be hopeful, and all I can do is invite other people to take up the same struggle."*

*As the event came to a close, Berry shared a recent story of civil disobedience in which he was part of a sit-in protest against mountain top removal coal mining at the Capitol Building in his home state of Kentucky. He acknowledged that, on a practical level, the effort was futile, and everyone involved knew it.*

*"The score between conservationists and the coal industry is 100 to nothing – we haven't got a chance," he told the audience. And yet, they did it anyway, living out their ideals in how they interacted with each other, in how they interacted with the building staff. It was one of the best weekends of his life.*

*"I think that's the way you get on. You're up against it, you're hard up against it, you do what you can, and you have a good time. You love your allies," said Berry.*

This is my hope for you, my beloved UUFES community and the reinvigorated social justice committee: that you will do what you can, fight hard for justice, have a good time, and love your allies.

\*Note: Wendell Berry's Radical Skepticism was written by Brian Massey, and published on Civil Eats, an internet publication.