

Preparation for Justice

What is justice? Is it a set of laws, or is it a moral construct? Doing Justice—what does that entail? Do the moral guidelines or laws that you live by apply universally to the world, or just to you and to those who agree with you?

The pledge of allegiance speaks of liberty and justice for all. But in our own country's history, "all" originally meant white male property owners. The meaning of "all" has since expanded to include many but not all of the rest of us. The movement towards justice for "all," however, continues: the long arc of the moral universe bends toward Justice, as Unitarian minister Theodore Parker and subsequently Martin Luther King have told us.

We as Unitarians live by a set of religious principles that speak in strong language of what we believe justice is. Consider the following, which is printed in the very front of our hymnal. We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

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Justice also implies that a debt may be owed to a person or group that has been wronged. In a legalistic sense, however, justice often only addresses the offending party. Participation or input by the damaged person or group—forgiveness or even acknowledgement—is not typically a significant part of the legal justice system.

So is justice a way to "make it right?" Can you do justice for a cause even if you were not the offending party? The answer is undoubtedly yes. Think of how justice demands that we care for our planet, so that our children (not just our own children) will inherit a sustainable world. Or think of how slavery or the historic demeaning of women has needed continual work to make a just world for blacks or women. These groups are not yet whole, so we are called to keep working toward racial, female, gay, and other groups' equality.

On some positions, Cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" And Vanity comes along and asks the question, "Is it popular?" But Conscience asks the question "Is it right?" And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right.

Martin Luther King

Progressive cultures have worked to free humanity from the brutalities of mere survival and to reduce suffering, improve society, and develop global community. We seek to minimize the inequities of circumstance and ability, and we support a just distribution of nature's resources and the fruits of human effort so that as many as possible can enjoy a good life.

From the Humanist Manifesto III

Conscience is the name given the governing principles of life to which a person is ultimately committed. The totality of the self and thus the integrity of personhood is involved in the moral dictates of conscience. This is the primary arena of the spirit's struggle with the moral claims made by the will of God. The depths of one's own being and the ground of meaning of one's own existence are expressed in the struggles of conscience. *Paul D. Simmons*

Most of the benefits of being white can be obtained without ever doing anything personally. Whites are given the privilege of a racist system, even if they're not personally racist. *John A. Powell*

Moral philosophers have long wrestled with the dilemma of what justifies war and they have uplifted seven criteria: a just cause, right authority, right intention, overall proportionality of the good to be done over the evil, a reasonable hope of success, a situation of last resort, and the goal of restoring peace. In the light of these criteria, wars of aggression are always immoral, but modern just-war theories allow latitude for defensive wars, wars that combat grave threats to the international order, and wars on behalf of helpless third parties.

These thoughtful criteria appear clear, however, only at first glance. Wade in, and the water grows murky *Marge Keip*

Questions to Ponder

1. Do you think of justice as a set of laws to live by or as a moral compass to guide you? This question will be shared at the group meeting.
2. How do different views of justice—like laws or morality—suggest different solutions for injustice?
3. Is the same “justice” right for everyone, or might there sometimes be unjust consequences for some while justice is created for others?
4. Have you or someone you know ever been a victim of injustice? What could you do to create justice for yourself and others in your situation?
5. Sometimes, there seems to be nothing that we can do to fix the wrongs we see in the world. How do you deal with the injustice you have no power to address?
6. What just cause is important to you? What are you doing, or considering doing, to move that cause closer to a just world?