

Sermon: Reflections on Justice (Laurel)

It's remarkable to me how quickly showing up can create a cascade. Sometimes we have no idea the impact of what we've done. But other times, other times the universe lights up our network of connection as if to say: do not lose faith. Keep showing up. Sometimes the evil in the world is unfathomable, but so is the good.

This evening marks the end of the days of awe in the Jewish tradition. Yom Kippur begins tonight at sundown. Tradition says it is the day of reckoning, the day that God seals our names into the book of life, noting who has lived righteously and who has not.

Here's why I think the days of awe and Yom Kippur in particular are profoundly important: it's a time when Jewish people reflect on the impacts we have on one another and reorient back towards our ideas about justice and kindness and humility. Because life is complicated and it takes periodically checking in with ourselves and each other and asking if we're really living into our deepest commitments.

When Roe v. Wade was overturned in June of 2022 it felt like the world was turning upside down. I remember feeling like it was impossible, so absurd and cruel that I couldn't fathom the reality of it.

We had already finished out the church year but the idea of *not* having service after something so life altering felt wrong. I was attending our national UU General Assembly virtually, so I was still local that weekend. And, though spontaneously planning a service in 36 hours felt sort of extreme and I had no idea if anyone would actually come, I was guided by the immovable sense that I could not stand by and pretend that such a violation of people's bodily autonomy was fine.

So I planned a vigil for Sunday night and invited all the other houses of faith in town and Kala came to play music and Rabbi Rachel came to speak, as did Pastor Cassie from the Lutheran church. And it honestly felt strangely vulnerable to do something so out of the ordinary, but it also profoundly necessary to do *something*.

And then soon after, our national UU justice organization Side With Love put together a training series about organizing for reproductive rights and about a half dozen of us decided to attend. The group of us then decided that we were starting a reproductive justice group within this congregation. You might remember last year we led a service about risk tolerance and sent out a congregational survey to look

at our collective ideas about risk and how we might be best suited to engage in justice work.

Over the last year we've seen how, as many predicted, the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* was just the beginning of a political wave targeted at stripping the rights of queer and trans people in particular. So, when our group reconvened this summer to think about who we were and what our mission was, we decided that focusing only on reproductive rights was too limited, especially in a state that has tried to protect abortion access.

And so SHAG was born, which yes, is intentionally cheeky, because joy and playfulness are critical for world building. SHAG stands for Sexual Health and Gender justice.

The mission of the Sexual Health and Gender Justice Group is to promote education, advocacy, and joy around issues of sexual health and gender justice in line with our Unitarian Universalist values. These issues include access to reproductive healthcare, queer and trans liberation, bodily autonomy, gender equity, and comprehensive sex education for all.

So far this year, SHAG has been tracking the effort in Massachusetts to update the sex education curriculums in public schools, which had not been updated in decades. There were links in the weekly update to sign petitions in support of these efforts and we are thrilled to say those efforts were fruitful and the motion passed, allowing for more holistic sexuality education in schools.

The Boston Globe reported:

“State education officials unanimously approved revised sex ed curriculum guidelines for the first time since 1999, incorporating more inclusive language and updating recommendations to schools for K-12 instruction in physical, mental, emotional, and sexual health.

The [new framework](#) emphasizes skills like healthy decision-making and problem solving, social awareness, media literacy, and communication and relationship skills, as well as topics like the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity, and sexual health.”

SHAG also selected this month's Share the Plate organization to lift up the work of MassEquality and create more connections between our congregation and the

wider network of people working for sexual health and gender justice.

And here we are today continuing to imagine the kind of joyful justice work we can foster within ourselves, this congregation, and the larger world. SHAG meets on the third Thursday of the month at 3pm on zoom.

We invite your participation, be it in brainstorming, contributing to Share the Plate, signing petitions, or telling friends outside this congregation that your religious community works to support bodily autonomy, the right to reproductive choice, transgender rights, comprehensive sexuality education, and equity for queer people.

In a world where so much hatred is enacted in the name of religion, openly supporting sexual health and gender justice in an explicitly religious community is a powerful antidote.

So in this season of reflection, this day of reckoning and reorienting and forgiving, I invite us all to consider those values we hold most dear and the ways that we can live out those values with greater intention.

And in moments when the world feels too cold, I invite you to remember this moment, in this congregation, amongst a community of people who are also finding those small infinite ways to rebuild the world in the image of justice and joy, kindness and care.

We do this with love. We do this together.

Amen.