

Today's Reading is from an essay called "**Poetry and Marriage: The Use of Old Forms,**" by the poet Wendell Berry.

"The meaning of marriage
begins in the giving of words.
We cannot join ourselves to one another
without giving our word.

And this must be an unconditional giving,
for in joining ourselves to another we join ourselves to the unknown.

We can join one another **only** by joining the unknown. . . .

Because the condition of marriage is worldly
and its meaning communal,
no one party to it
can be **solely** in charge.

What you alone think it ought to be, it is **not** going to be.
Where you alone think you want it to go, it is **not** going to go.

It is going where the two of you
– and marriage, time, life, history, and the world –
will take it.
You do not know the road;
you have committed your life to a **way**.

Here ends the reading.

. . .

"Several years ago now, I took a good look at my life and I decided that it was incomplete," she told me. "I realized that just about all my friends were white folks living in the suburbs – and I thought, that's just not the real world."

That's a snippet of a conversation I had a few days ago, with long-time Follen member Tempe Goodhue. She said I could share this story with you.

After this realization, Tempe decided to investigate ways to **expand** her circle of experience, and she soon started volunteering at the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry in Roxbury. For **years** now she's been a regular at their afterschool tutoring program there and she's even taught a whole class on media there twice.

“Because I kept showing up year after year, the kids there started to know me, to trust me,” Tempe said. “We started to have some **real** conversations. The group that just graduated this June, we liked each other.”

“One day I remember,” Tempe goes on, “ – it might have been after a kid asked a tutoring question about physics or science and I was just stumped – I said to some staff members there, ‘I don’t think I’m doing anything here.’

And the staff replied, ‘Yes, you are. You’re here.’”

The Urban Ministry staff were telling her -- Just her caring consistent encouragement, whether she knew all the answers or not, made a **difference** in the kids’ lives. Along with the other volunteers, Tempe made real the message of the urban ministry – that whatever else these kids have to deal with -- and it’s a LOT – their lives have value. Just by showing up and sticking with it, Tempe honors their worth and dignity. And they feel it.

“It’s definitely enriched my life, to know these kids as people,” says Tempe. “And now, when I read about the history of race in this country, about the legacy of slavery and discrimination, I see how it plays out in the lives of real people I care about. And when I hear that someone was shot in Roxbury, you better believe I search out the names. I’m scared for these kids.”

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Last Sunday in worship I told a story about having gone to a workshop at our denomination’s general assembly or GA in June. The workshop was called Courage for Racial Justice and the leader asked participants to stand up, right then and there, and declare to the crowd why doing racial justice work was important to them.

To my own surprise, I jumped up, and the experience grew my courage.

Also at last month’s GA, justice advocate Bryan Stevenson gave a related and very moving keynote speech. Author of the *New York Times* best-seller *Just Mercy*, Stevenson is a lawyer and the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative.

EJI is an Alabama-based non-profit that works to:

- eliminate excessive sentencing
- exonerate innocent death row prisoners
- confront abuse of the incarcerated and the mentally ill
- and aid children who were prosecuted as adults

You can imagine that Stevenson has some harrowing stories about real people who have been tormented by our system of mass incarceration – and he tells those stories masterfully.

Surprisingly, though, Stevenson also has a lot of **hope** to share -- and hooray! He's also got concrete **tools**, born of his experience, to recommend for us, to help us build up a widescale movement for change.

The thing that made Stevenson's message especially powerful for me was how it intersects and overlaps with the other extracurricular work I've been doing this year, as the communications coordinator for the Massachusetts chapter of Rev. Dr. William Barber's Moral Revival movement.

Founded in North Carolina as Moral Mondays, the Moral Revival movement is now a national network of statewide interfaith coalitions that are working against extremist policies targeting marginalized and poor people. It's a partnership between clergy and people of faith, who are standing up at statehouses around the country, standing up for voting rights, immigrant rights, health care access, LGBTQ rights, and a livable minimum wage.

As I watched Stevenson's speech I could see immediately how the tools he recommends intersect with the strategies I was learning from Barber and the revival coalition -- and I knew then that I wanted to spend the summer thinking out these ideas, sharing them with you, and refining my own commitments. Today and over the next two weeks, I'll be telling you what I've learned and listening for your feedback. For me, it's a clear and compelling recipe for resilience -- and resistance.

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Stevenson's first tool is also the title of today's sermon. Two words -- Get Proximate.

To illustrate, Stevenson told the story of his first meeting with a death row inmate. He was only a law student at the time, not very knowledgeable about the man's case or how to handle it. Stevenson felt tormented about going to the prison. He did not want to face this condemned man whom he was sure he could not help.

Turns out he was wrong. The inmate was thrilled to see him. With a death sentence hanging over his head, the man had found it too difficult to visit with his wife and family, so, he said to Bryan, "You're the first person I've talked to who was not a death row prisoner or a death row guard." The man just thoroughly enjoyed the conversation, the visit itself gave him joy. Afterward he left singing a hymn.

"I couldn't have guessed that, even in my ignorance, being proximate could have such an impact on someone's life," Stevenson said.

But proximity does that-- it changes us and it changes the situations we're in. In ways we just **could not** have anticipated.

Liberals, UUs, **human beings** have a tendency to think we understand social problems by reading and viewing the news, by listening to sermons like this one. But that's an illusion. It's not until we get actually on the ground, one-to-one with real people and we **listen** to them, that we understand -- and then can summon -- what's required for meaningful action.

Along with many of you, Follenite Alice Dunn has gone on several of our service trips to rebuild New Orleans. She knows firsthand the value of getting proximate.

In our service last week, Alice and her husband Gordon, along with Ann Schauffler, shared their grief about the recent death of Rev. Josie Phillips, one of the first folks they'd worked with in New Orleans.

"I will never forget working with Rev. Josie on her funny little church," Alice told me this week, and she gave me permission to share the conversation with you. "It was really just a little shotgun house, in a neighborhood where every building had been under 5 feet of water after Katrina. We got there 2 **years** after the storm and the whole area was **still** a complete mess. The huge Catholic church next door to Rev. Josie just stood empty all that time, but here she was, one person working all day every day to rebuild her little church, just so the kids in the neighborhood would have somewhere safe to gather."

"Rev. Josie was so excited to learn that I was an architect," says Alice, "that I could help her design a space that worked. She wanted to add some bathrooms, for boys and girls, and a food pantry."

"But she was adamant that these bathrooms not have windows, and I couldn't understand why," remembers Alice. "I said they have to have windows, legally. And besides that, it's just not safe for kids to go into dark rooms. But Rev. Josie was adamant and we went round and round. Finally I had to make myself really listen and find out what her community was dealing with, and then I came to understand -- any place with windows is broken into in five seconds there. So we came up with a compromise -- little windows way up high, too small for anyone to climb through."

Alice told me another story, from her first trip to New Orleans. "We were in the Lower 9th ward that year, helping an old man rebuild his house. I was working in the bathroom, where an earlier volunteer group had put up some wooden framing over the ruined ceiling. The man was very agitated that they had blocked up an opening that had been there. He asked me over and over to remove it, to make sure that the opening in his bathroom ceiling was unblocked." Why was he so upset about this?

"And after I listened for a while and I puzzled about it," says Alice, "all of a sudden it came to me, and someone confirmed it for me later."

"That opening was the man's access to his attic. When the waters came, and they came **all of a sudden** and filled his whole house, that little man had climbed through that hole up to his attic.

And then he'd cut a hole out of the roof and got rescued. The opening in his bathroom ceiling had saved this man's life."

Alice says, "I had nightmares for weeks after that, imagining what this sweet little man had been through. Having been right there, in his house, I understood it viscerally, and it changed me." unquote

We helpers come from our worlds, with all our assumptions of how to fix things -- where to put what-size windows or how to cover over bathroom ceilings -- based on how things work in **our** world. And we can make fixes that don't **fix** anything. Or that make things worse.

Follonite Ann Schauffler has been on many New Orleans trips, and maintains long-term friendships with folks she's met there. She agrees with Alice whole-heartedly. "You have to learn to set aside your assumptions, your judgement," says Ann. "Our responsibility is to listen first and foremost, to take our cues from the people in the neighborhoods so we can build what **their** vision of a solution, not ours."

"And then, **then**, you can be open to starting real relationships with people, to actually receiving their hospitality, which is unsurpassed."

"Time and again, after we'd established trust," says Ann, "we'd be working on a project, and people would come out of their houses with these amazing home-cooked meals, and we'd say 'You don't have to do that.' But they DID have to do it, so that they could **give back** and WE could receive, so we could have a human-to-human connection as equals. And when you have that, you see all the commonalities, you **see** that they have the same hopes and dreams for their families and communities that we have for ours. And then there is real human intimacy, without division."

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Get Proximate, says Bryan Stevenson. Whatever you're working on, proximity can and will change your perspective on it. "We just **can't** solve problems from a distance," he says.

"But if you are willing to get closer to people who are suffering, you will find the power to change the world."

Tempe, Alice, and Ann will tell you. The power to make real and lasting change comes from relationship, from taking the time to listen and let go your own assumptions, to build genuine connections.

Relationship. In our reading this morning, Wendell Berry is talking about marriage -- Which is admittedly, an endeavor slightly different from framing a bathroom ceiling.

But Berry captures the **true mystery** of genuine human relationship, about what happens when you encounter another person as an equal. When neither of you is in charge and you enter an unknown future.

“What you alone think it ought to be,” Berry writes. “It is not going to be. Where you alone think you want it to go, it is **not** going to go. It is going where the two of you – and time, life, history, and the world – will take it. You do not know the road; you have committed your life to a **way**.”

And it’s that **WAY**, that openness to someone else’s experience, that respect, that forms the basis for true friendship, lasting love, and, as it turns out, widescale resistance.

Yep. That’s the really cool thing. Because What’s true on the individual level is also true for groups. Relationship built on Respect. It makes for what the Rev. Barber and the Moral Revival call Fusion Politics.

It was December 2006 when Rev. Barber first gathered representatives from sixteen organizations across North Carolina —representing clergy, labor, women’s rights, LGBTQ rights and racial justice—to build what he called a “fusion coalition.” With time, listening, and trust-building, members forged a commitment across issues, creating a comprehensive and human-centered, anti-racism, anti-poverty agenda. They stuck to it, because they share a broader vision for the future. “It’s about fundamental change, not incremental change,” Barber says.

Working separately, on 16 different issues, the groups had been weak and ineffectual. But gathered together in a coalition, they grew strong in commitments and in numbers.

Eleven years later, they have ousted the state’s right-wing governor and reversed many destructive policies. Now their strategy is spreading nationally.

“No, we don’t have money on our side,” says Barber. “What we have is truth. We have love and justice and the faith that, if we can hold on for a little while longer, goodness will win out in the end.”

Get Proximate, says Bryan Stevenson. Drop your assumptions and your pre-conceived ideas and get **closer** to people who are different from you, who are suffering. Listen to their needs and work to suit **their** vision.

This is also the gameplan of the new UUA, which is working to center the voices of people of color and to follow **their** leadership. It’s a new paradigm and the path is not clear or easy. It is challenging, but that challenge feels right. And right for *right now*.

As Berry says, when you open yourself to another, to real relationship, you enter the unknown. “You do not know the road but you have committed your life to a **way**.”

So much is unknown, so much is in flux. But we have each other, we have the chance to **listen** and forge a new way, together, toward justice.

Let us walk forward, in love. Amen.