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**Beyond \$15:
The Study Floor of a Universal Basic Income
#21stCenturyUniversalism**
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frederickuu.org

Last Sunday was the capstone of our summer book series on Reading for Resistance and Resilience, featuring George Orwell's *1984*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Talents*. In particular, last week we explored the ways that **Octavia Butler's speculative fiction was birthed out of a deep tension between dystopian realism and utopian hope.**

Relatedly, on this Labor Day Sunday, I originally planned to invite us to reflect on the "Fight for 15," a current goal of the labor movement to secure both a nationwide minimum wage of \$15 and the right of low-wage workers to organize unions. However, as you can see from the sermon title, our Congregational Conversations this summer about dystopian fiction have inspired me to **imagine what might be possible beyond an endless struggle for a-few-dollars-an-hour increase in our minimum wage.**

Part of what can hold us back is not only a lack of political will, but also a failure of imagination—or a sense of inertia which insists that the way things are is the way they will always be. But if we zoom out historically, we can remind ourselves that many movements toward freedom and equality—the abolition of slavery in 1865 (only 150 years ago), securing the right to vote for women in 1920 (less than a hundred years ago), legalizing same-sex marriage in 2015 (only two years ago)—were **all goals that many people claimed were impossible to**

achieve until just before they became a reality. It is also significant to remember that some of our UU forbears were on the front line for each of those movements for social change.

But that's in the past. And as I tell my seminary students when I teach UU History and Polity, I don't want you to stop with learning about the successes of our past. I want our past to inspire you to **be part of making the UU history that future generations will learn about.**

Here's one example of what I mean. In the eighteenth-century, a few years before the founding of this country, our Universalist forbears were making an argument that was incredibly radical in their day: *universal salvation* for all people in a next world. Rejecting a Calvinist theology of predestination, they preached that a loving God would never punish someone *eternally* for what at most would be finite sins in this world. Over time, the focus of **Universalism evolved from a universal salvation in a next world to "Loving the hell out of this world."** So we get Universalists like Clara Barton founding the Red Cross.

In that spirit, what might a Universalist ethic for the twenty-first century look like? What might help us move toward achieving the lofty goals of our UU 6th Principle: "The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice," not merely for some, but "for all."

I invite you to consider that such a **twenty-first century Universalism might be built on at least three key pillars:**

- 1. Universal health care,**
- 2. Universal education through college, and**
- 3. Universal basic income** (Parijs/Vanderborcht 299).

These might sound like utopian pipe dreams—and the political divides in this country make it clear that achieving such goals would be far from simple—but they are no more audacious than the idea of

- universal *salvation* in the eighteenth century,
- universal *freedom* (through the abolition of slavery) in the nineteenth century,
- universal *suffrage* (for women) in the twentieth century, and
- universal *marriage* (for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender citizens) in the early twenty-first century.

We “stand on the shoulder of giants”— ancestors who helped shift history toward freedom and equality. And now it is our turn to find out if we collectively have the fortitude to bequeath to future generations a better world than the one we inherited.

Since this is Labor Day Weekend, I want to invite us to reflect on how we might reimagine the future of labor. If you are curious to learn more, the best resource I have found on the topic of a **Basic Income** is a book published this year from Harvard University Press by Philippe Van Parijs and Yannick Vanderborght, who are respectively an economics and a political science professor. Various theorists have written about the advantages and disadvantages of a Universal Basic Income since the late eighteenth century, but a growing number of serious proponents are currently advocating for “**a regular cash income paid to all [citizens of this country], on an individual basis, without a means test or work requirement**” (1).

Related to this idea, a few years ago, I did a lot of work in the area of vocational discernment, the study of how one chooses a career or calling. Two of the most frequently quoted pieces of advice for vocational discernment are:

1. The place [you are called] to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet” and
2. “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then do that. What the world needs is people that have come alive.”

I find both of those quotes deeply inspiring, and I have found them to be helpful sources of guidance over the years at various points, for myself and others. But eventually, I started to push back against the unacknowledged privilege beneath those two ideas. For all their wisdom, these two pieces of advice fail to acknowledge that **our economy is not currently set up to allow everyone to be paid a living wage to do their dream job.**

But as we explored a few weeks ago in a sermon on “A Brief History of Tomorrow,” **there are coming shockwaves that have already started to deeply impact our economy, including climate change** (forcing our species to recognize ecological limits), **wealth inequality, and automation** from robots and other forms of artificial intelligence (1).

And this is another point where a brief look backward can remind us of how much change is possible: “Beginning in the early nineteenth century and continuing for over a hundred

years, working hours in America were gradually reduced — cut in half according to most accounts” through the Labor Movement, which pushed back against the exploitation of workers by employers. And in the nineteenth century, extrapolating from these earlier successes, **many of the best economists and public intellectuals of the time “regularly predicted that, well before the twentieth century ended, a Golden Age of Leisure would arrive, when no one would have to work more than two hours a day”** (Honnicutt vii).

For those forced to earn a living through alienated labor, a ten-hour work week would mean that they would still have time to pursue the American Dream of “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” instead of returning home from work too exhausted to do anything but rest long enough to drag themselves back to work. Instead of the utopia our nineteenth-century forebears imagined us inheriting, here in the early twenty-first century, many of us find ourselves in the middle stages of a growing corporate dystopia in which the highest court in our land has declared that “corporations are people” — and many of us actual humans work, not a ten-hour week, but at least a 10-hour *day*, building to a 50-hour, 60-hour (or more) work week (viii).

Turning again to some of our best science fiction writers to help us imagine what the future could look like, Arthur C. Clarke (1917 - 2008), co-writer of the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* said in an interview around the time that movie was released:

“The goal of the future is *full unemployment*, so we can play.” In other words, let the machines take care of feeding and clothing us, building our houses, cooking us awesome meals, making our cars and phones and other devices, driving us around town, handling our medical, legal, and administrative needs. We humans can then spend all our time on creative pursuits, leisure, play, scientific research, travel, entertainment, new business ventures, taking care of the sick...or helping each other out with various ideas and projects. (Bess 67-68)

Of course, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is partially a cautionary tale about how automation can go awry:

Dave Bowman: Open the pod bay doors, HAL.

HAL: I'm sorry, Dave. I'm afraid I can't do that.... I know that you and Frank were planning to disconnect me, and I'm afraid that's something I cannot allow to

happen. Although you took very thorough precautions in the pod against my hearing you, I could see your lips move.

Despite fears of the machines taking over, Clarke also saw the boon to human happiness that could arise from automation.

The year before *2001: A Space Odyssey* was released in theaters, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. published his final book, which was titled *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* In that book he wrote:

I am now convinced that the simplest approach will prove to be the most effective —**the solution to poverty is to abolish it directly by a now widely discussed measure: the guaranteed income**.... The dignity of the individual will flourish when the decisions concerning his life are in his own hands, when he has the assurance that his income is stable and certain, and when he knows that he has the means to seek self-improvement. (Parijs/Vanderborcht 89)

The core concern is not to redistribute income so that everyone has an equal amount. Rather, it is to structure our tax system so that everyone has at least a *basic minimum* as a part of living into what we UUs call our First Principle, “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

Currently, the metaphor most often used to describe how we as a society seek to meet this goal is a social safety “net,” so that there are programs intended to keep you from falling too far during an emergency. But almost anyone who has tried to use those systems will tell you about how complex and demoralizing it can be to try to navigate social service programs. Proponents of a Universal Basic Income invite us to consider the **alternative metaphor: give every citizen of this country a sturdy floor** (4).

If you are wondering what such a “floor” might look like. To take the most recent calculations from the book I referred to earlier, and using the year 2015, a Universal Basic Income for the United States might look something like a **monthly payment of a little more than \$1,100, for a total of approximately \$14,000/year, so that no one would be beneath the official poverty line**. Over time, a Universal Basic Income would need to be keyed to an “average index over several years” to keep up with inflation (11).

Again, one of the greatest advantages of a Universal Basic Income would be to give every citizen a study floor from which to operate, giving all workers the flexibility to avoid taking lousy jobs out of desperation. A Universal Basic Income would also provide **at least a partial counterbalance—principally for women—who for years have done an unfair share of unpaid housework, childcare, and volunteering** (102). As to whether all of this is a desirable goal, my single favorite quote on this topic is from the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who said that, “Leisure is a peculiar thing. Leisure is very good for the rich, quite good for Harvard professors—and very bad for the poor.” May we all be part of building a better world with more *freedom* for all (48).

There is much more to be said about the promises and perils of living into what a new Universalism for the twenty-first century might look like. But my goal has mainly been to remind us on this Labor Day Weekend that the ways things are is neither how they have always been nor how they have to be.

In that spirit, tomorrow is **Labor Day, a federal holiday established by Congress to celebrate the labor movement’s role in securing worker’s rights**. And in a few moments, we will be invited to sing what is perhaps the most famous anthem of the labor movement, “Solidarity Forever.” But first, especially since we have been reflecting some on our UU heritage, I want to remind us of some of this song’s deep resonance.

The lyrics to “**Solidarity Forever**” were written by the labor activist Ralph Chaplin (1887–1961) in 1915, although we will also be singing some additional verses written over time as the labor movement became increasingly inclusive of all workers. Chaplin set his lyrics to the tune of “**John Brown’s Body**,” a marching song written by Union soldiers during the Civil War, about the radical abolitionist John Brown. Some of you may recall that, of the Secret Six who helped fund and supply John Brown’s 1859 raid on the federal armory at Harpers’ Ferry, *five* were Unitarians, two were Unitarian *ministers*. Among those five Unitarians was Samuel Howe, the husband of another of our Unitarian ancestors, Julia Ward Howe, who awoke in the middle of the night after visiting Civil War camps and hospitals, inspired to write new lyrics to the tune of “John Brown’s Body,” verses that became the “**Battle Hymn of the Republic**”

When the Civil War began, it was far from clear in the North whether the fight was *only* to preserve the union *or* also to end slavery. Julia’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic” was written in November 1861, more than a year *before* Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. **Julia’s lyrics helped catalyze popular support for using the Civil War as an opportunity to end slavery once and for all (167).**

As we prepare to sing this labor anthem, I invite you to remember the historic echoes in “John Brown’s Body” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” As we sing, open the imagination of your mind and the compassion of your heart to what might become possible when we all join together in solidarity with ever-increasing circles of inclusion.

For Further Study

U.S. Basic Income Guarantee Network: usbig.net

Basic Income Earth Network: basicincome.org