

A sermon is not intended to be a stand alone document. The message of the day is given through the music, rituals, readings and every piece of the journey of that is the one hour journey called a worship service. The opening thought for reflection was an adapted quote from George Bernard Shaw:

“The reasonable person adapts herself to society. The unreasonable person persists in trying to adapt society to himself. Therefore all progress depends upon the unreasonable person.”

Chalice Lighting (and extinguishing) -- lyrics by Libby Roderick:

“How could anyone ever tell you that you are anything less than beautiful?! How could anyone ever tell you that you are less than whole?! How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle? How deeply you’re connected to my soul.”

Announcement: Guest Minister Schulman has accepted an invitation to come be with us to serve as our minister. (Celebration music)



Unitarian Universalist (UU) Minister, Rev. Phillip Schulman, gave his inaugural sermon: The Mental Health Human Rights Movement, Peer Support & UU

The Mental Health Human Rights Movement, Peer Support & Unitarian Universalism

**Sermon by Rev. Phillip Schulman,
Kerrville, Texas, August 22, 2021**

Today I am going to tell you about a progressive social change movement for human rights in mental health. For decades we’ve simply called it “The Movement.” You think it’s easy to organize a social change movement?! I’ve been unable even to find a name that quickly informs who we are and what we are about. We are people with lived experience of the mental system. We are people who have been stereotyped, hated, and scapegoated. We are rebels and free thinkers.

You know what it takes to stand up for our rights? You’ve got to have a lot of nerve or be a little crazy. Sometimes the only thing we completely agree upon is that a better mental health system is possible. And I am exceedingly proud to be part of this movement.

It is a multi-faceted effort to transform and humanize the mental health system. We have given voice to whistle blowers, publicized industry fraud and violence, and advocated for social change to heal the hate and oppression against people who have been seen as mentally abnormal.

I am also going to speak about peer support. Two generations ago, peer support groups were few and far between. Now there are support groups for cancer survivors, grief, veterans, writers ... virtually anything you struggle with or want to get better at, there is a support group for you that will console, empathize or encourage you onward.

I have had the good fortune of participation in peer support groups as well as social change movements for most of my adult life. These have fueled my personal, mental, emotional and spiritual growth. And I've noticed the tremendous amount of values shared with our own Unitarian Universalist (UU) living tradition. I am confident that UU awareness of mentalism and support for our movement will only grow.

I hope the views I share and the questions I raise today will contribute to this congregation, its members, friends and guests as we are guided by UU Principles and Purposes. For anyone that might be visiting today, or to anyone who is viewing this sermon on the internet, let me alert you that our religious tradition might not match your assumptions about religion. We make no effort to seek conformity to any doctrines or a set of theological beliefs. We enjoy our diversity here. We are joined together by a covenant, promises about what we will do together and how we will treat each other.

UU Principles & Mental Health Human Rights

We Unitarian Universalists come together to affirm and promote these principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person.
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process
- 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

My involvement in the movement has deepened my appreciation of these UU principles. I could go through each and talk about it in relation to campaigns for human rights in mental health.

Before I start highlighting shared values, I'd like to present the historical context from which the movement arose. It and several other movements followed the lead of African Americans and the civil rights movement. Some describe the civil rights movement as an effort to end legalized segregation and end specific legal rights. Others understand it more broadly as an effort to end the history of discrimination, hatred and violence perpetrated upon African Americans.

Women, Native Americans, Gays and Lesbians, Migrant Farm Workers, Americans with Disabilities are some of the groups that followed the African American lead, to organize and create anti-oppression movements. In this same era, groups of former mental patients organized in Boston; NYC; Portland, Oregon; and Los Angeles areas. A group of ex-patients organized to protest inhumane conditions at the state hospital in Long Beach, California. They entered Governor Brown's office en masse, and occupied his office for days. They said that the state hospital should be shut down due to numerous human rights violations.

As former patients came together to stand up for rights, they quickly came to appreciate their new found solidarity. They found it an antidote for the disrespect and trauma that they had each survived. Many found something to live for, and peer support became seen as a tool to sustain the fight.

One of the earliest slogans in the Disability Movement was “Nothing about us without us.” Much that the industry calls treatment: being stripped of rights, dignity, being tied down, forcibly drugged, being convinced to abandon hope for the things most people want, we call torture. We said: “You want to know what kind of help we need, ask us. Listen to us. We need jobs, housing, support to find meaningful employment, not to be locked up and thrown away as “mentally ill.”

Activism blossomed in numerous and diverse ways. There have been campaigns against media stereotypes, industry fraud and misinformation, the use of restraints, electroconvulsive therapy (electroshock), involuntary outpatient commitment, Big Pharma’s unaccountability, and lack of informed consent – For example, over half of people given neuroleptics long-term developed *tardive dyskinesia* or *tardive psychosis*, brain changes that can be irreversible.

Mental Health Consumers & Psychiatric Survivors

Movement leaders fought to get mental health consumers and psychiatric survivors onto policy boards. Success led to the creation of jobs and eventually a whole industry of peer support and recovery services. Many system survivors have argued that psychiatrists look in the wrong place for the cause of our distress. In a society where cruelty is common, trauma leaves people with distress patterns. Many of us have advocated for holistic (and less toxic) supports. Many of us have worked with police, mental health, and government to reduce force and violence in mental health crisis response. Lawyers have fought in court. Others have advocated and organized in hospitals, community centers, and within public services. Others have chosen academic avenues including research to support progressive system change.

In the years of activism, we came to recognize that individuals had found many different ways to recover. Therefore, we have valued and advocated for choice, self-determination, respect, acceptance of one another and the right to make sense of our experiences in our own way.

One of many values shared with UU tradition is the questioning of authority. Many of the leaders and heroes in the movement were once noncompliant

patients. I have personally known hundreds of people who have spent months, and in many cases years, in mental hospitals or who otherwise found their life squelched by the mental health system... and who went on to live powerful lives free of psychiatric intervention.

Choice: Diversity of Perspectives

There is a large spectrum of viewpoints among us. Some of us credit the system for saving our lives. Others have received crushing blows by the mental health system. Many of us continue to use mental health services. Many keep as far away from the system as possible. Our efforts are nonpartisan. We come from many nations and numerous different political parties.

What we have in common is an awareness of the hate, discrimination and targeting of people who get seen as mentally ill, imbalanced, deranged, disordered or crazy. What we have in common is a knowledge that too often standard medical treatment has been harmful. Most of us advocate for a society that does a much better job hearing the cries of those who have been abused, exploited, marginalized, mistreated and for whatever reason are in distress.

Coming out as having lived experience of the mental system is risky and dangerous. Challenging the dominant paradigm of mental health treatments takes extra courage, resilience and skill. One reason I have remained connected to the movement is the privilege of getting to know some amazing people. Another thing that's kept me connected is the spiritual wealth I've experienced in the movement. Most of us know what it's like to have our world fall apart, and how to recover from mistreatment. We know that everybody needs support. We know, as the REM song put it, that "everybody hurts sometimes." We know that people have value that is not about their income, education, or even achievements. We know that too many people never experience a world that values them.

Many of us have been plagued by addictions. Many of us live in poverty. Many of us have been called difficult people. And yet because our movement values inherent worth, we work to build inclusive community. We have embraced other MAD — Marginalized And Disempowered — people and we learned that each

has beautiful wonderful precious gifts to share. Knowledge of inherent worth creeps into our relationships and everything we do. Our movement has a wealth that is too often absent in this the richest country in the history of the planet.

Many peer support communities have similar spiritual wealth. Yes this is my segue to peer support.

A boy asks his father: "Dad, how do you spell 'peer'?"

Dad: "It depends how it's used. Give it to me in a sentence."

Son: "OK, how do you spell the word 'peer'?"

I am a huge fan of peer support. I shudder to think where I would be without it. There is a healing force that arises in the company of others who "have been there." It's present and begins working even before the meeting begins. Peer Support groups, systems, and communities have a different structure than most of society. Many groups sit in a circle to demonstrate equality and unity. Groups gain wisdom over time. This gets valued above the latest trend, guru or expert opinions. In most peer support systems, there is an understanding that you are free to "take what you can use and leave the rest." Qualities of freedom and responsibility and empowerment abide. Group members are living examples showing that recovery is possible.

Peer support has spread because it is affordable, accessible and effective. The Mental Health Human Rights movement was an early adopter of this technology. People who the mental health system had given grim prognoses refused to comply. Empowerment, hope and advocacy are valued.

Spiritually-Wounded Peer Rebels

Banged up, spiritually-wounded rebels found peers, came together, and dared to believe that they have been unleashing a force capable of changing the world. Peer support in this context has been exceptional in its embrace of progressive social change agenda.

In the larger society, most peer support groups eschew social issues. Like most of mental health and religion, peer support tends to accept rather than challenge the status quo. It focuses on personal advancement rather than social change.

However, peer support that is based in the movement has more values in common with UU tradition. Choice and self-determination are also core values. We, UUs, are a religious people who “nurture souls and help heal the world.” We build our own theology. We value our right to choose the perspective on life experiences that gives us the most satisfaction within a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We value the richness that comes from a community where people with greatly divergent views can remain in open dialogue.

Peer support groups that grew from and remain within our human rights movement embrace and embody this practice of radical acceptance. By contrast, peer support groups within the industry tend to only allow expression of views that embrace and conform to the currently-dominant paradigm -- medical model treatment plans based on diagnosis and prescription from psychiatrists.

Where in society can we find gatherings of people who express such diverse worldviews, practice acceptance of one another and encouragement towards continued learning, integration and spiritual growth? Perhaps there are precious few. Within two generations or so, there could be many!

Beneath many things I’ve shared today is a religious posture that I hope we have here in this sanctuary. The concept of sanctuary is crucial in human rights work and in peer support too. Human rights work seeks to change the things that harm and injure people. It seeks to make the world a safe place. Peer support creates space between people.

And “sanctuary” has another meaning. It is a place where we bow or we quiet ourselves to experience awe, great mystery, the Holy, Higher Power. In UU sanctuaries we tune into the awesome miracle and mystery that is unfolding from inside each and every one of us.

Our forebears were heretics, people who challenged dominant ways of thinking. Our religion asks us to renew our prophetic voice and proclaim a new order, a beloved community waiting to be made real.

Whether everything, nothing, or a few things I've shared about human rights and peer support matches your view, I have trust that you will join me in this blessing: May this sanctuary be a place where each of us can come out, come out from wherever we are, and be welcomed into Beloved Community.

*Edited August 24, 2021. For more information, email to: helputhrive@yahoo.com.
Rev. Phillip Schulman is also on Facebook. Distributed by Aciu! Institute.*