

Story of Bread and Roses

Jean Ritchie's "West Virginia Mining Disaster" speaks in a very human voice of loss and pain, loss shared by anyone who has lost a loved one, and a kind of pain that cries out for change. Such voices, when joined together, can lead to efforts to transform our lives.

My early connections with the labor movement came almost only through songs. My grandparents, while living in West Virginia, were in a farming region rather than the coal fields, but I knew songs of the mining unions such as "Joe Hill" and "Which Side are You On?" A dancer friend here in San Francisco introduced me to a labor song found in our hymnal, "As We Come Marching, Marching" which I remembered from its refrain of "Bread and Roses, Bread and Roses."

In folklore, the slogan "Bread and Roses" became closely connected with the 1912 textile workers strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. While the slogan may not have been part of the struggle, women marching and singing definitely were. As Bruce Watson describes the strike in *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream*: "Fifteen thousand workers stood on picket lines that stretched for blocks, running all the way around some of the world's longest buildings. Facing them were whole battalions of state militia, their bayonets fixed. On both sides of the divide, stars and stripes waved in the drifting snow."¹ Organizers from the Industrial Workers of the World rallied the workers, tensions over the months included planted dynamite, a worker's death where both sides blamed the other, and the workers choosing to send their children to live with strangers for safety and for food.

¹ Watson, Bruce. *Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream*.

As the strike went on, says Watson, “[w]orkers were not in despair; they were singing. On sidewalks, women locked arms and marched together, cheering, calling out to others to join them... Immigrants from fifty-one countries were not at each other’s throats... Germans with Jews, Italians with Poles, Syrians with French Canadians, they were sharing food, translating speeches for each other, and creating a community...”²

Writer Kathleen Paterson’s notes some “said it was the songs that brought the strikers to victory.... somehow they learned to sing in a way that made the police and militia tremble.”³

(Please rise in body or in spirit and join me in singing hymn #109 in the grey hymnal (Singing the Living Tradition), As We Come Marching, Marching)

Singing Together #109 As We Come Marching, Marching

As we come marching, marching, in the beauty of the day,
A million darkened kitchens, a thousand mill lofts gray,
Are touched with all the radiance that a sudden sun discloses,
For the people hear us singing: Bread and Roses! Bread and Roses!

As we come marching, marching, we battle too for men,
For they are women's children, and we mother them again.
Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses.

As we come marching, marching, unnumbered women dead

² Watson, Bruce. Bread and Roses: Mills, Migrants, and the Struggle for the American Dream.

³ Paterson, Kathleen. Bread and Roses, Too.

Go crying through our singing their ancient call for bread.
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew.
Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses too.

As we come marching, marching, we bring the greater days,
The rising of the women means the rising of the race.
No more the drudge and idler, ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses, bread and roses.

Sermon Labor Sunday: Bread and Roses

(Please be seated)

So what does it mean to sing for Bread and Roses? How do we find a voice made stronger by people coming together to sing?

As a dancer, choreographer, and now candidate for Unitarian Universalist ministry, I have long been a believer in both bread and roses. Three years ago, I became the wife of a teacher and union member, when my husband Chris changed professions from electrical engineer to high school math teacher. The numerous attacks by commentators and editorials on teachers, their unions, and the collective bargaining process this year awakened me to the value of people finding the strength of a collective voice and the dangers of losing it.

What does it mean to sing for Bread *and* Roses? The song tells us that “hearts starve as well as bodies.” A person’s physical needs are real, but so are a person’s emotional, intellectual, and spiritual needs. In Kathleen Paterson’s novel about the Lawrence strike, called *Bread and Roses, Too*, she paints a scene of immigrant women from different countries coming up

with the legendary sign. They agree that they want bread, they have to have bread, but that it isn't enough. Then an Italian woman says, "I think we want... not just bread for our bellies. We want more than only bread. We want food for our hearts, our souls. We want—how to say it? We want, you know—Puccini music... We want for our beautiful children some beauty.... We want roses..."⁴

Beginning at home, as we come to the end of the summer and the beginning of the new year, have you given yourself time and energy to pursue both bread and roses? Not fluff or compilations of stuff, but food for our hearts and souls, food of substance to share with our loved ones.

The song describes roses through what the women in the past had longed for: "Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew." So art and love and beauty are "roses" and needed along with bread. For years I struggled as a dancer and choreographer to justify to myself throwing so much time and energy into roses. Wouldn't it be more helpful, wouldn't I be a better person to make bread?

Certainly education cuts often take out roses first, but sometimes the need for roses stares you in the face. I remember writing grants in support of a flamenco teacher's work in Redwood City, at Fair Oaks Elementary School. At the time, the school's students were 98% of people of color, 91% of limited English proficiency, and 85% qualify for free or reduced cost lunch. When I asked Miguel Santos how he would explain the need for flamenco in a school that needed so much, he answered: for many flamenco gave them pride in their culture. It also gave them pride in themselves – it's the one class where the students did not have to struggle with language, where the body speaks. For Miguel, all of his students could speak

⁴ Paterson, Kathleen. Bread and Roses, Too.

flamenco. When the California Arts Council cut funding for the arts to less than three cents per person, the funding for his position disappeared. Until an anonymous donor stepped in because they thought it was important.

If art and beauty and most of all love are necessities, we create and engage in them here at UUSM in abundance. If worship is, in the words we shared together this morning, “loneliness seeking communion,” If worship is “to sing with the singing beauty of the earth,”

“to work with dedication and skill,” and

“to pause from work and listen to a strain of music,”⁵

then together we create art and love and beauty in community. We share these roses with each other as we worship together each Sunday. May we carry them forth with us and share them with others.

In a congregation of Unitarian Universalists, whose principles call us to justice, equity, and compassion, we must also consider bread. And not only consider it and discuss it, but act on it. Bread and roses are also about worth and dignity. About a person being worthy of fair compensation for the work done. About the dignity of being human, with depth and passion and creativity. A human being can bring caring and loyalty and pride to their work in a way that no machine, despite all the research in artificial intelligence, can do. (my teaching/engineering husband points out no machine *to date*. Personally, I think they have a long way to go.) In a country currently facing over 9% unemployment, with growing concentration of wealth, with increasing numbers of uninsured, we need to raise our voices “in their ancient call for bread.”

Our need to consider the call for bread begins within the congregation. Before we preach to others about fair compensation, we need to embody it

⁵ Trapp, Jacob. “To Worship” in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

ourselves in the pay and benefits we provide staff members. Sharing “life’s glories” may feel more complicated when it is specific rather than abstract, in the here and now, rather than in relation to an historical event 100 years ago. Within the congregation, deciding how things are shared means making choices within a budget, including what you may need to give up for the sharing to be more equitable, and learning to negotiate the give and take of different priorities. The choices to be made include what will be the size of the budget, since most of it comes from our own donations.

I know from my dance company, for which some of the income came from ticket sales and grants, but most from Chris and me, that I struggled with how to determine what was fair compensation for dancers: the going rate in other companies?, an abstract sense of what is fair?, some kind of balance with our other donations?

Ideally the congregation and its members try to make the decisions in a way to embody our principles and in keeping with the covenant we affirm with one another. As we practice approaching these ideals, we can bring both the ideals and the skills we have developed into the community at large.

For the community-at-large needs our voices. The issues facing workers, both employed and unemployed, are legion. While the woman in the song Dave Merrill sang may seem very romantic as she walks near the mine in West Virginia, the pain of not being able to provide for your children is very real. The protections unions fought for: safety regulations, minimum wage, limited work weeks (or these days weeks long enough to qualify for benefits), and social security are under attack. I know some of the attacks by commentators on teachers this past year made my blood boil. I know how much work and thought Chris puts into his teaching. I’ve watched as different classes taught by the same person achieve widely

differing results on the same test. While commentators decry the education costs in state and local budgets, I know that the move from a senior architect designing computer hardware to a public school teaching meant an 80% pay cut. Yet, Chris will say that he puts as much time and energy into teach as he ever did in Silicon Valley, with six-day and 60-hour weeks were common in both. A union gives an individual worker, whether teacher, nurse, hotel worker or any other, a stronger voice in speaking with management, including when the management is the government.

While our principles may serve as a strong guide, Unitarian Universalist history often seems often quiet on worker issues and labor unions, although some leaders of the movement speak out on these questions. There are even occasional negative surprises along the way - Labor Day became a federal holiday in 1894 as part of President Grover Cleveland's attempt to reconcile with labor unions after the Pullman strike, a strike which at its height involved 250,000 railroad workers in 27 states and which ended when 12,000 U.S. soldiers intervened in one of the most violent railroad related strikes the country ever had. George Pullman, the head of the Pullman Palace Car Company, was an active Universalist; two of his brothers were ministers. (So much for the stereotype of Universalists being the Unitarians' country cousins).⁶

However, there are leaders in our movement to whom to turn. James Luther Adams, a key Unitarian ethicist in the 20th century, early in his ministry negotiated a textile strike in Salem (not far from Lawrence) with mill owners and workers, with some of each in his congregation, and both sides respected his fairness.

⁶ Buehrens, John A. Universalists and Unitarians in America.

Adams later became an advocate of voluntary associations, groups in a democratic society which a person is free to join or withdraw. Ideally, congregations and trade unions are examples of voluntary associations. Adams held that voluntary associations offer “the means for dispersing power, in that power is the capacity to participate in making social decisions.”⁷ The voluntary association can speak with a more powerful voice than an individual, while giving room for the individual to speak within the association. As such, Adams proposed they can develop enough power to challenge institutionally entrenched power, and are therefore a means for the “institutionalizing of gradual revolution.”⁸

Adams did warn that a voluntary association can itself become an institutionally entrenched power, and I realize that unions and, for that matter, denominations can become just that. On the other hand, I prefer institutionalizing gradual revolution to both oppression or sudden revolution.

A journalist said about the strike in Lawrence, “Beware that movement that generates its own songs.”⁹ In Lawrence, the women found their voice through singing and through action, marching together through the snow. What moves you enough to sing? What do you care enough about to step out, to speak out, to generate your own songs? We need new visions of both bread and roses, bread and roses.

⁷ Adams, James Luther. “The Indispensable Discipline of Social Responsibility”

⁸ Adams, James Luther. “The Indispensable Discipline of Social Responsibility”

⁹ Paterson, Kathleen. Bread and Roses, Too.