

# Be an Arc Bender

## Linda Hart Green

Sonya Renee Taylor writes: "We will not go back to normal. We should not long to return. Normal never was. Before this virus, we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, hoarding and hate. We should not go back. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment. One that fits all of humanity and nature."

You may have heard these words attributed to Brene' Brown. Like our quote for today about the moral arc of the universe from Theodore Parker, worthy words often get attributed to different sources as they are used and re-used. Good words are still good words.

The opportunity to stitch a new social fabric is a unique and sacred one. We must not waste it.

I don't think any of you good folks deny that the pandemic has revealed enormous social and economic inequities. It's not that we did not know they were there. The busy normalcy of our lives masked them to us. Now, the band-aid has been ripped off or curtain has parted or whatever image best suits your imagination. We cannot unsee what we are seeing. A danger lies in our potential to buy into the gaslighting that is going on. Those in power want us to continue to believe in existing systems which accrue great benefits to a few. If we miss this opportunity for profound change, the bend in the moral arc will recede even further into the distance.

Sonya Renee Taylor, who I quoted at the beginning of this message, says her grandmother taught her to "...call a thing a thing."

One thing we need to call out about this pandemic is that it is not the same experience for everyone.

Be an Arc Bender

I have thought about this often from my vantage point of someone with a roof over her head, a full refrigerator and a retirement income. I am not homeschooling children, working from home or worried about my business's survival.

I am at risk by age but not by race or class. I am in good health and have insurance. A friend posted a parody of privilege in pandemic. It depicted yachts positioned in a such a way that from above they spelled out "we are in this together." Yeah, right.

A more accurate metaphor is that we are in the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat. We share sadness, worry and anxiety but not about the same things or on the same levels.

Another thing to call out is unequal power dynamics. This is played out daily in the news as governors compete for resources and the advice of the medical and scientific communities are upended by political and economic interests. The truth-telling in calling a thing a thing can be a powerful force for good.

What else can we do besides naming what we see? I believe we are called to be "arc benders." I first heard this term in a blog post by the progressive Christian writer, John Pavlovitz. When I mentioned my topic to Pastor Roberta, she pointed out that there was already a progressive Jewish movement called Bend the Arc that works diligently to fight anti-Semitism and to influence political policies and decisions. I have since also found a podcast called "We are the Arc Benders."

The Podcast tells good news stories of people making a difference right where they are. We are in good company as we explore this theme.

We wonder what a new social garment will look like and how we are going to sew it. I don't think anyone has a finished product in sight. There are still too many variables and unknowns. As we take steps forward, we can keep our eyes on the prize, as Dr. King advised and keep justice firmly in our view. As we lay out new pattern pieces, justice must guide our hands. Every color must be represented by the threads. Every stitch must be woven evenly and carefully with justice.

Be an Arc Bender

This congregation and many of you as individuals have labored for justice for a long, long time. You have pledged resources and signed petitions and made phone calls and written letters and held protest signs and on and on and on. You've grown weary in the struggle at times. So have I.

We have tried to bend that moral arc by the force of our own wills! We have jumped up and down on it in indignation. Bend! Bend! Darn you! Weary from our efforts, we have reignited our fire and gone back out there and done it again and again. Now, the scope is so wide and the risks are so great, we face an unfamiliar landscape.

In our country, the divisions haven't been this wide since the Civil War. Drowning in information, we long for truth. Riddled with anxieties, we long for security. Consumed with turmoil, we long for peace.

Being arc benders now and in the future requires a new sets of skills. We are both the helpers and the ones needing help. We must reject any paradigm that does not lift up the reality that our liberation is bound inextricably to that of others. We cannot be whole unless everyone can be whole.

Arc benders can lead the way by upending traditional ways of helping. We can no longer tolerate the unequal power dynamic of the servers and the served.

Too often we look at those in need and forget that they are people with gifts and talents with much to offer and good knowledge of their community's needs. Asset-based community development is an approach developed at Northwestern University which helps a community look at what it already has and mobilizes its own members to take action on what they deem appropriate. This does not mean that no outside resources are needed. It simply honors resources and people already present.

A small but determined group in Fernandina with many participants from the UU branch group is meeting to tackle issues of economic and racial injustice in that community.

The Cracking the Code/ Bridging the Gap initiative is deserving of the whole congregation's support and more time than I can devote to it here. I hope you will get to hear more about it

soon. First to remember is that arc benders know their wholeness is bound to the wholeness of all.

Next, to be arc benders, we need to start with ourselves. Granted, this is hard work. If you have ever tried to change another's behavior, you know it's futile! You only have power over you. Leaders in family, church and society are able to self-govern. We do that by acknowledging that we cannot change in the world what we are unwilling to change in ourselves. This requires rigorous self-inventory. We are all acculturated in this society. We have by osmosis absorbed its "isms." Pick one! Start anywhere. Review your attitudes and actions. Where you feel discomfort, sit with it. This is very difficult. Don't try to fix it. Don't minimize your feelings of vulnerability. Let them be. Let any action be informed by the feelings you've identified. Risk sharing them. I guarantee you whatever comes of this difficult work will bear fruit in you and in those around you. To be an arc bender, start with yourself.

And to be an arc bender is to be courageously hopeful. I am not talking about pie-in-the-sky attitudes that dismiss evidence or defy reason.

I am talking about rigorous honesty. This honesty acknowledges difficulties in the present and chooses to continue to move forward with the conviction that the moral arc bends towards justice.

When Theodore Parker was writing passionately about his abolitionist views in the 1850's, he could not foresee Reconstruction, Jim Crow or the Civil Rights movement. He did not know his words would be intoned by the likes of Dr. King and President Obama.

He just knew what he knew. He admitted his sight was limited. He said:

"I do not pretend to understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. From what I see, it bends toward justice." It is our conscience calls us to courageous hopefulness.

I wish you all health and safety in these difficult days. It is a hard truth to accept that what we assumed was normal is no more. But by conviction of conscience, we can be part of

stitching of new social fabric. We can reinforce the truth that our wholeness is bound to that of everyone. We can commit to being arc benders that are brave enough to call a thing a thing. We can remind others that we are in the same storm but not in the same boat. We can name the inequalities for what they are and resist any attempt at solutions that do not address them. We can dare to risk starting the change process with ourselves. We can be honest with our own "isms" and sit with our discomfort. And we can persist in being courageously hopeful, not because we know all the answers, but because we believe in our heart of hearts, say it with me from wherever you are: "the moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice."