

“Love and Serve Where You Stand” by Ankur Delight

Guest Speaker at Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship – February 1st, 2026

Hi. Thank you so much for having me back. I gave the title of this in advance, so it's wrong—I actually rewrote it last night. This is called "Love and Serve Where You Stand."

I went down to visit a friend in El Salvador a couple of weeks ago. His name is John Giuliano, and a lot of this is going to be about John. On the way down there, I texted him because I was feeling a lot of confusion. I asked him, "What is the authentic moral response to fascism?" and he just said that one line: "Love and serve where you stand."

The Story of John Giuliano

I need to tell you a little bit about John. He grew up in the Bronx; he's Italian-American and has a great accent. His whole life has been a dedication to this concept. When he was in third grade, he wrote to Cesar Chavez and asked to join the movement. Chavez wrote back and told him he should stay in school a little while longer!

By the time he was in high school, he was living with a group called The Catholic Worker. He was a devotee of Dorothy Day and hung out with Dan Berrigan and Phil Berrigan—radical Catholic priests and poets. Those were his mentors and guiding influences. When he finished high school and didn't know what to do, they suggested he might want to be a Jesuit.

He went to seminary, studied to be a Jesuit, and was eventually sent to Tijuana to work with a group of nuns at a convent whose service was to a jail. He worked there for a couple of years, ministering to people on the first few floors. Eventually, he asked what was happening on the fourth floor. They didn't want to answer him, but he found out: in the early 80s, the fourth floor was full of refugees from Central America trying to escape the wars our country was involved in. Following his calling, John started smuggling them out of the jail and across the border. You just can't stop him from doing those kinds of things.

El Salvador and the Civil War

He was eventually kicked out of Mexico by the Mexican FBI. The Jesuits told him he had to go get a Master's in Philosophy in Chicago, but then Ignacio Ellacuría (a priest from the Catholic University in El Salvador) wrote to him and invited him to work there. John left the Jesuit path and went to El Salvador.

He started as a lay minister during the beginning of the Civil War, eventually joined as a combatant, and years later helped negotiate the peace accords. During the war, our military developed a strategy under General Westmoreland called "depopulation." The idea was to make the war easier by removing all the people through carpet bombing and Agent Orange—techniques refined in Vietnam.

The people in the part of the country where John lived had to flee to a UN refugee camp in Honduras. They stayed there for seven years, but John viewed it as a prison camp. In 1987, they

organized. John and his colleagues went to the 12,000 people in the camp and said, "We want to go back to El Salvador to resist, but this time we are inviting the news media and international watchdog organizations. The only people we are taking back are those who are not going to run. We are going to stay no matter what happens to us." Eight hundred families volunteered. They stayed from 1987 until the peace accords were brokered in 1992.

Finding a New Path

After the accords, John felt very broken inside. He realized that while they thought they were part of a revolution, it had become just people killing each other—using bombs that said "Made in the USA."

He returned to New York for healing, spent time with his mentors, and then went on a 10,000-mile bike ride. He "tacked" all across the United States giving talks, eventually riding all the way back to El Salvador with a new plan. He wanted to start an organization in that same village called The Tamarindo (the Spanish word for the tamarind tree).

The Symbol of the Tamarindo

What was special about that tamarind tree is that during the depopulation efforts—when they carpet-bombed and burned everything—that was the one tree that did not burn. I don't know if it's due to some property of its oil or something, but it survived. So, John named the group The Tamarindo. Their only goal was "not to burn"—to stay there.

Their first project in that first year was simply to go into the hills, find those who had died, and bury them. They just took it from there.

The "New Society" and Character Formation

There is a reason I'm sharing all of this. In John's teaching, which he learned from the Jesuits, he believes that in order to have a different way of treating each other—different social relations—we need a "New Society." But the New Society cannot be made of those of us who grew up in the old one, because we just carry all our baggage and conditioning with us. We have to be remade. As he puts it: The New Society needs new people—new men, women, and children.

That was the real project of the Tamarindo. It is hard to describe; it's a tiny village where almost nothing else is happening. The Tamarindo center is like a YMCA, but it's also the Senior Center, the food bank, and the soccer league. Every community organization is housed in this one building.

From the inside, the whole point is character formation—or as they say in Spanish, *formación*. This is an education focused on values and character to create these "new people." From the outside, it looks like a group of people getting together to clean the town every Saturday, doing reforestation, or starting a roller hockey league (they actually won the Central American Cup because John loves sports).

But every one of those projects is a ruse—an excuse. The whole point is to come up with things we have to do together as a group so we can be connected to each other and develop our sense of self and our sense of contribution.

Value Through Contribution

John kept saying over and over: "The Tamarindo is not a drop-in center." It's not a babysitting service. If you come, you come with a commitment. To him, every person has value, and every person makes a contribution. To show someone they have value, you ask them to make a contribution.

Everyone who comes to the center follows five simple rules:

1. Respect yourself.
2. Respect others.
3. Respect the environment.
4. Punctuality.
5. Cleanliness.

They have water and springs rigged up, so everyone has the access they need to follow these rules. You show your respect, and then you do everything together.

34 Years of Growth

That started in 1992. It has been 34 years. I hadn't been back in 25 years, so I went to see what we could all learn from this. What's crazy is that the people who started as three or four-year-olds in 1992 are now running the whole place.

The values were planted, watered for 34 years, and now they have flowered and are dropping seeds everywhere. They are literally reforesting the land, but they are also "reforesting" the people. It's so beautiful. I walked around with one 20-year-old who had been there his whole life...

The Secret of the Tamarindo: "La Clave"

I asked a 20-year-old at the center how all of this was possible—how they managed to keep this community thriving for decades. He took me to their two main buildings. One is an art building, concrete-floored and covered in murals, where they hold workshops for English, theater, and art. The other is a sports arena for soccer and roller hockey. Half of the art building is meticulously organized with hockey skates, pads, and sticks.

The young man told me, "The reason we can do all this is because of the Work Plan (*Plan de Trabajo*). The work plan is the key—*la clave*."

He showed me the plan posted on the wall. It wasn't a list of tasks or a calendar. It was a version of the Prayer of Saint Francis. This is what they read at the start of every meeting, whether they are discussing scholarship funds or an ice hockey tournament:

The Work Plan

- Make me an instrument of your peace.
- Where there is hate, let me sow love.
- Where there is injury, let me sow forgiveness.
- Where there is doubt, faith.
- Where there is despair, hope.
- Where there is darkness, light.
- Where there is arrogance, humility.
- Where there is pain, joy.
- When things get difficult, may I seek to console instead of seeking consolation.
- May I seek to understand instead of seeking understanding.
- May I seek to love instead of looking for love in all the wrong places.
- For it is in giving that we receive; it is in forgiving that we are forgiven; and it is in dying to our egos that we are truly born.

It is crystal clear to them that the activities—the hockey, the classes—are just a means to that end.

The Story of Santos

To illustrate how deep this "work plan" goes, I have to tell you about Santos. He was a leader at the Tamarindo when I first visited 25 years ago.

Recently, El Salvador transitioned from a democracy to a dictatorship. The current president consolidated power and, in an effort to reduce crime, began mass incarcerations. There are no hearings, no trials, and no due process. They even implemented a policy where anyone can call a tip line, denounce someone as a criminal, and get paid \$300.

That is what happened to Santos. Someone called and claimed he was a gang leader, even though he was actually a leader of the Tamarindo. Soldiers came to his house and put him in jail. John Giuliano worked fervently for months just to find out where he was.

Two Square Feet of Faith

Santos eventually got out and told us what it was like. In these jails, they might put 600 men in a single large room. There are two holes in the ground for a bathroom and a few bunk beds, but each person has an average of only two square feet to stand or sit on.

Meals are just a plastic cup with a little bit of beans, rice, and an egg, served twice a day. The only outside items the guards allow in are soap, toothpaste, and toothbrushes.

When Santos first arrived in that environment, his initial thought was the same as any of ours would be: *"This is a mistake. I'm not supposed to be here. When am I going to get my hearing?"*

And he talks to the people who have been there for a while. And many of whom have been there for years. And they're like, oh no, this is not that... it's not that kind of scene. It's not a hearing and trial scene, this is like: You just stay here until you die. Kind of scene. And suicide is... is a big thing, of course, in that context.

And so he's, he's, of course, depressed and trying to figure out what to do. And so he goes, you know, he's raised in this culture with John, and also in a Catholic culture, and so he asks God. He's like, why? Why did you send me here? Like, what's going on? And he told us, he's like, you know, I sat there and I thought that. And then I remembered... the *plan de Trabajo*. The work plan. He's like, if I'm here, and if I'm gonna make use of this, I'm gonna use this not to seek consolation, but to console. And so he just started talking to everybody there and acting as an agent of, um... of hope, and emphasis that, like, we're gonna get through this, you're gonna do it. And it gave him this sense of meaning and contribution to be able to continue.

And there's this, um... I don't know if you've heard of Admiral Stockdale? In Korea. So it's a U.S. Prisoner of war in Korea. And there's, um... I don't know if he developed it, but there's this paradox named after him, the Stockdale Paradox. Where, of these prisoners of war, the people who died quickest or went crazy or started collaborating with the other side were the people who they thought they would never get out. They started with no hope. And they, um, and they just, they just, they were broken, right? And the people who died or went crazy or collaborated second were the people who were optimistic and thought they would get out immediately. Those are the people who got broken second.

And the people who made it, like this Admiral Stockdale character, and like Santos, were the people who thought: we'll get out, one day. But it's not... I'm not gonna put any timelines on it. And it's not going to be soon. And the point... is to stay strong until it happens. So that's, that's what he did. And, you know, it took 4 months. And he got out.

And every 15 days, he has to go 3 hours to the capital city to check in, he's like on probation. For the... without the crime or the trial or anything. But he's on probation, and every time he goes, he texts John, he's like, "I'm going into the courthouse." And he... and because they could just... put him in jail again for however long they want, and then he texts when he comes out. So, every 15 days, every one in the village has a... it has a little moment, like a sigh of fear and relief around that.

But the point, I mean, he's an incredible person, but the point is the work plan, right? And the role how... I mean, what I'm learning from this is how we can use the work plan as a tool in our everyday lives.

The second story is, uh, they started a scholarship program. So, you know, John's doing this work, he's been there since 1992. He has a lot of supporters, you know, give all those talks. And people want to give money, of course, they want to start a non-profit, of course. John has no interest in non-profits. But, you know, people want to send money, they want to have scholarships, they help build the hockey floor and all these things. It's really... incredible. Uh... And so they're like, okay, great, we can send people to college. And he's like, alright, we'll have this application process. So they have an application process, and they realize that all these people apply. Because scholarship is... it's huge in El Salvador, right? Um, but they don't... they can't tell the difference between who's applying for real and who's just, like, looking for money. And everyone's got a sob story. Because everyone lived through the same war. And everyone's life was destroyed by the war. Everyone. So there's no, like... it's all real, but it's hard to know, like, who really, who really cares?

And so they have this, they go through this for a couple years, they end up giving scholarships to a few people, it doesn't work out at all. And then they go back to the work plan. And they're like, alright, how do we want to redo this as tamarindos? How can we do it the way we do it, not the way some NGO would do it. And they're like, oh. We should... anyone who wants to get the scholarship should just come and work for us for a year and spend time in this community. And then they'll know if this is for them, or if we're for them. And it just changed everything. And now, every single person who's even just willing to do that gets the scholarship, goes to college, and then he hires them, and then they have work. Um, because he always needs more people to work, right?

So... I chose this topic today just because I went to El Salvador, but also because I, I think it might be relevant. You know. The people in Guarjila, the members of the Tamarindo, they've been on hard times for 60 years, their entire lives. Like, the reason the Civil War started is because there was incredible poverty and income inequality and all of the institutions were corrupt and against the, in the people, right? And, in the Tamarindo, they're still full of hope and action, working together as individuals and as a community, every day.

So, does that feel relevant to your lives? To this moment? Yeah, so. Despair... is a tool. Despair is not accidental. Despair is a tool. And for a small, powerful group of people to control a large group of people—I'm thinking of, like, English imperialism in India, there's many other examples—um, you might think of: despair is essential. Because no matter the size of the military hardware, when you're outnumbered 1,000 to 1, do people want to act? They can do what they want.

And so the key thing in preventing like, real revolution, real social change—and that's what John said, he's like, "The war, that wasn't a revolution, we were just killing each other. The Tamarindo, that's the revolution." Right? In order to prevent that, despair is essential. Because if you believe that you can act and your actions will be worthwhile, then you will do so, and you will change

something. But if 999 people out of 1,000 are despairing and overwhelmed all the time, then you won't act, and it'll be fine for those who are interested in control, right?

So, how did the... so, the main battle, then, is the battle against despair. So how did the Tamarindo do it? What we've seen is the work plan, shared values, the shared experience of working together for decades. Some of which was living through a war together. Not everybody has that. Um, so we can replicate some of those things. Some of those things we can't, or don't want to. But there's another tool that really stuck with me that I want to share with you, which I call the lineage.

So, lineage, right? A line. And from the geometry, the mathematical definition, it's infinite, right? Not a line segment, but a line. Goes on in both directions. And John never said anything about this, but I just picked this up in his office. There's 25 framed photographs. Something like that. And every single one is of a mentor of his. Many, many of whom they were personal mentors in his life, like Dorothy Day or the Berrigans. Um, some of whom are just historical figures. But every single one of those people is a... is a hero that shares his values, that shares his actions, and then he can look to for support. So he looks up from whatever he's doing, and he sees Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador, whose assassination started the Civil War. Or he sees Gandhi, or Martin Luther King, or Cesar Chavez, or Dorothy Day.

And... for me, it's like, every time you see that, you don't see just the teacher, but you see the teaching. And you remember the teaching, right? Everywhere he looks, he's reminded what he was given by these people. And what he can do, his potential. So compare that... to reading the news. Right, the feeling of reading the news. I'm not saying the information's bad to have, but what's the feeling? Right. Despair. Overwhelm. Right? And so... and now just measure how much time you spend with your lineage versus how much time you spend with the news. And John reads the news, but he spends hours surrounded by his lineage every day, much more than he spends focused on the news.

Right, and that, that to me is a huge, a huge boost of inspiration. It's like, it's like standing next to a giant that is pulling you upwards. And I know that feeling, because I was standing next to him, and I'm like, oh. This is what I need to feel great is to just... and we were at this cocktail party, kind of last night at his house, and I went over to stand next to him. This is something Joe does a lot. And he's like, "Do you need something?" And I was like, "No, I just want to stand next to you. I just enjoy... I can feel the benefit of standing next to you."

You know, the other thing... the other thing about remembering that lineage is that all of those people, they're proof that whatever you're feeling right now in whatever conditions are happening right now, those have happened before. This is not the first time. Like, I look at a picture of Gandhi and... and I can compare. Like, things are rough, right? Things are scary right now in the U.S. for me. Really scary. But were they scarier or scary for Gandhi? Yeah. Were they scary for Martin Luther King? Yeah. Were they scary for Cesar Chavez? They were really scary, so this is not the first time that we've been scared. And people succeeded. So it's a constant reminder that these problems are real and they are surmountable by humans. Right.

There's one story, um... I'm just, I'm just trying to share what I, what I learned, right? So there's one story that really stuck with me. Here's a picture of this Catholic priest from World War II. His name is Max Colby. You guys ever heard of this guy? I had neither, there was probably lots of people like this that we've never heard of. And he... he's Polish. You know, Germans invaded Poland, 1939. And he had a... he was a friar, some kind of priest. He had a friary, which is, I guess, a place where a friar hangs out. And... and he hid 2,000 Jews for years, in his friary. And he was publishing religious tracts that were actually just anti-Nazi propaganda. Uh, until they caught him, you know.

And they took him away to Auschwitz. And one day, at Auschwitz, somebody escaped successfully. And so... I guess, I don't know how they do things. This is how they do things, apparently. To punish the people, they pick 10 people at random to execute. And one of the guys they picked just immediately started crying: "My wife, my children." And so this guy, he's like, he just volunteers. He's like, "Let me, can I... can I take his place?" And they're like, "Okay."

And so he goes with the other 9 people, and they're, they're, um, starved for 2 weeks, that was the... that was how they were gonna kill them. But after 14 days, and he's just leading them in songs the entire time. No food, no water, 2 weeks. Just songs. Like, joyful songs. Until they, you know, they slowly, like, die one by one. And at the end, he's not dead, and so they have to give him a... some sort of lethal injection or something. And he's just singing the entire time until the moment he dies. You know, every time John looks up and turns his head left, that's what he sees, you know? That's what he sees.

The other, the other thing, piece of art that I really liked, is a woodblock engraving. I would—so, you guys know that style of art? Just like an engraving. A bunch of people in a bread line. Like, kind of bums, looking for free food in a bread line, government. And they're just down, you know, down and out, as you would imagine. And in the middle, and they all have their little bowl. And in the middle is Jesus. It's called "Jesus in the Breadline." And it's like, it's not above, not below, he's not helping. It's just right in between. In the bread line. And that's...

You know, every time someone said, "Oh, so happy how you're helping the people in El Salvador here," John was like, "We're not helping. This is not about helping someone else. This is about living together. This is about accompanying people." And he would just, he would just point them to that piece of art. So... what's an authentic moral response to fascism? Love and serve where you stand. Thank you.