

Unitarian Society of Hartford

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Justice is Flowing

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I want to begin by thanking BJ for the invitation to share her pulpit this morning. I also want to thank Charles Huntington both for assistance in getting me here and for his years of service in UUSC's Volunteer Network. I am happy to be in Hartford on this first Sunday in 2009 and I want to express our gratitude for the support this church has shown to UUSC over the years – from Guest at Your Table, from the man-made disasters like Darfur to the natural disasters like hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and especially to those of you who are UUSC members. I find that a majority of UUs do not realize that even though the Unitarian Service Committee was created by the American Unitarian Association in 1940, soon after the war we were spun off as a separate organization. We are an associate member of the UUA, we share office space in Washington D.C., we work hand-in-hand during disaster relief, but we receive no funds from the UUA. We are only as strong as our base and you are our base. So if you are not a member I invite you to consider becoming one. You can find out more about us on our web site – uuscdotorg. Because we work with some of the poorest and most marginalized communities domestically and abroad, in this time of economic uncertainty your support is even more critical to help us 'bring hope where hope is hard to find.'

I especially fond of the hymn "Come Sing a Song with Me," because it reminds me of the work of our founders did in the response to the Holocaust, first in Czechoslovakia and then in France. The Unitarian Service Committee did, indeed, bring hope where hope was hard to find as set up both relief and rescue operations. The state of Israel has a special designation for Gentiles who risked their life to save Jews during the Holocaust -- they are called "Righteous among the Nations." In 2006 the two Unitarians, who we consider our founders, Waitstill and Martha Sharp, became only the second and third Americans among more than 21,000 people world-wide to be honored with that honorific title. By wars end they and the Unitarians who followed in their footsteps assisted more than 2,000 men, women, and children to escape the Nazi horror.

And out of the ashes of the World War II came a call by the fledgling United Nations to create a codification of individual rights to which all human beings would be entitled and which if observed would prevent another Holocaust. Under

the leadership of Eleanor Roosevelt some of the most respected legal thinkers, political theorists, authors, and philosophers were consulted as well as sacred texts, constitutions, and declarations from around the world. Out of almost two years of careful crafting and sometimes acrimonious redrafting of language emerged a collection of thirty simple articles known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights or UDHR as it has come to be known begins with a preamble, which sets out the reasons for its adoption. The first paragraph asserts that the recognition of human dignity of all people is the foundation of justice and peace in the world. The second paragraph observes that disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind and that the four freedoms: freedom of speech and belief, and freedom from fear and want have been "proclaimed as the highest aspiration" of the people. The third paragraph states that so that people are not compelled to rebellion against tyranny, human rights should be protected by rule of law. The articles themselves are quite simple. One says that we all have the right to profess our religion freely, to change it, and to practice it either alone or with other people. Another says that all children have a right to education and should be allowed to go to school. One often perceived as radical says that everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation on working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

On December 10th, 1948 when the UDHR was ratified by a vote of the 56 nations then represented at the U.N. General Assembly in Paris, its midwife, Eleanor Roosevelt, said "This Universal Declaration of Human Rights may well become the international *Magna Carta* of all men everywhere." Many today believe it has surpassed her expectations as it has influenced practically every new constitution of the now 192 nations in the U.N. system. Though the UDHR had no basis in law when it was adopted in the ensuing decades it has become an important part of customary international law. Some would say it has had more influence in the modern era than any other written document.

Let me explain how the UDHR is having such an impact...in every corner of the world...every day. The U.N. may appoint a working group interested in a specific set of issues such as those that relate to children. Intergovernmental groups such as UNICEF, NGOs such as the Children's Defense Fund, and representatives of governments met for more than a decade to elaborate a treaty of all the basic rights to which children everywhere should be entitled.

When that treaty known as the Convention of the Rights of the Child was signed at a celebratory ceremony, nations indicated their willingness to bring it before their parliaments for ratification. Ratification means member states agree to abide by the provisions, consent to be monitored, amend their domestic law to be consistent with the treaty and to report back at regular intervals on progress with

implementation. When 60 nations have ratified a treaty, it 'enters force' as international law.

190 of the 192 countries in the United Nations system have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Thus, the world's only Jewish state and many states that identify as Muslim, capitalist states as well as communist states, north and south, poor and rich have all ratified this treaty creating an international morality of sorts. Of course, there are nay sayers. Somalia's excuse is that it has not had a government for more than a decade. Some would say that's why the U.S. is the only other nation to refuse ratification, but that would be cynical! There were two reasons the U.S. has resisted: 1) the U.S. did not want to give up the right to try a juvenile, who had committed a heinous crime, convict them, and then wait until their majority and execute them. The rest of the world believed that an adolescent heart and mind are a work in progress and if they make such a serious mistake, it is we as adults who have failed them and they should be given an opportunity for rehabilitation rather than having their life taken away (We were the last country in the world doing this...until even our Supreme Court said we could not continue this barbaric practice); 2) the rest of the world feels that someone should reach their majority – age 18 – before you give them a weapon and ask them to take someone else's life. We do not want to give up the right to have child soldiers as I was when I joined the military at age 17.

I have no doubts that the United States will -- at long last -- become the 191st nation to ratify this treaty during the Obama administration. Just as we will rejoin the so-called 'community of civilized nations' and abide by the many conventions that have been discarded ... sometimes without formal process such as the Geneva Conventions, which someone determined were 'quaint.'

Perhaps we will even determine that remedies for gross violations for human rights are important too by signing or I should say resigning the Convention on the International Criminal Court, which was to be a place where crimes against humanity, genocide, and war crimes would be adjudicated on permanent basis. Some nations sign treaties and then let them languish by not ratifying them. The Bush administration went so far as to 'unsign' the Convention of the International Criminal Court that the Clinton administration had signed, because it wanted to send a strong signal to the international community.

There were virtually no remedies for serious violators of human rights until about the fifth decade after the UDHR was ratified. Writ large the concept of human rights is a struggle with the concept of sovereignty. Dictators like Augusto Pinochet of Chile were protected as the head of state by the notion of the immunity of the sovereign head of state. Chile was one of more than a hundred nations that signed that the Convention against Torture, which stipulated that torture that originated from the state was a crime against humanity. After signing the treaty Pinochet, however, continued to torture and disappear political opponents. In the late 1990s a Spanish court recognizing that crimes against

humanity enjoy universal jurisdiction and have no statute of limitations indicted the General Pinochet, ignoring the immunity he had granted himself with a lifetime seat in the Chilean Senate. The Spanish judge indicted him and issued an extradition order when Pinochet traveled to London for medical care. He remained under house arrest for a year as the case worked its way through the British legal system to its highest judicial authority in the Court of the House of Lords. There they ruled the indictment and the extradition order were legal instruments. Though he was released because of medical problems, the case reverberated around the world as the rights promised in the UDHR finally had begun to have remedies. And in that year, 1999, the New York Times created a new verb when it commented that dictators and thugs around the world now hesitated to travel for fear of being 'pinocheted.'

These twenty conventions, the thousands of domestic laws in hundreds of countries around the world that are modified each time a treaty is signed, and the promise of universal jurisdiction, which has emboldened other courts around the world to begin provide remedies to the rights promised in the Universal Declaration, represent a great awakening of hope. Around the world today the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is beginning to fulfill Amos' prophecy about justice flowing like a river.

The UDHR is the foundation of all of our work at UUSC. Our mission statement says we advance human rights and social justice by partnering with those that confront unjust power structures and by mobilizing to challenge oppressive policies.

We have worked in Guatemala for more than a quarter of a century. Amongst our 'partners' there is an organization of women whose fathers, husbands, and sons were massacred by the tens, no hundreds of thousands in the 1980s. These courageous women are considered dangerous in Guatemala today because they want to exhume the bodies of their loved ones from clandestine graves and rebury them with dignity, because they want the forensic evidence from those graves gathered in such a way to create a chain of custody that can be used in courts of law, because they want the perpetrators to be named, and for the spotlight of history to be focused on them in the docket. Our Mayan partners are not vengeful and it is not so important that guilty verdicts are returned, but they think the truth about what happened is important if there is to be national reconciliation.

In working side by side with Juan de Dios, a survivor of a massacre, and others in Guatemala, we understand what Theodore Parker meant when he said, "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Though first heard from Parker's pulpit and made famous by Martin Luther King, Jr, this article of faith is alive and well in the organizations with which we partner.

In South Africa one of our partners is a hardy band of women led by a 71 year old, Serafina.. When the local water authority installed water meters that shut off after 25 liters, only in poor black neighborhoods, they knew right away that this violated their rights. The World Health Organization says 25 liters of water a day is the minimum required for human survival, with at least 50 liters needed to live with “human dignity.” Serafina and the rest of the Coalition against Water Privatization demanded to know how these water meters squared with their constitution, the one adopted under Nelson Mandela, which was the first constitution in the world to recognize the human right to water. They organized and took action, and after years of struggle, with UUSC’s assistance, they took Johannesburg Water to court – and won the right to 50 liters of water a day – the minimum required to live with human dignity! Their victory was important not only for them but for the rest of the world, because it set a precedent in the global effort to invest the human right to water with the force of law.

Several years ago another of our partners, Earth Rights International challenged an American oil company that had built a gas pipeline in Burma using slave labor. Their co-founder Ka Hsaw Wa crossed into Burma from Thailand many times gathering testimonies about the brutality of the military regime press-ganging villagers into their private work force. He then met a law student from Harvard, Katie Redford, who suggested they used an obscure American law written in 1792 called the “Alien Tort Claims Act” to hold the corporation accountable in U.S. courts. Despite armies of lawyers representing the oil company UNOCAL, they finally offered to settle rather than go to court.

UUSC has partners today in Darfur, where the *janjaweed* are raping and killing their fellow Muslims. More than 250,000 people have died and more than two million have been displaced. Yet in the midst of this horror an African woman named Amina is making a difference. She has set up two women’s centers where victims of rape can be buffered against the shame that causes their own families to reject them, that causes them to resent their own infants. Amina takes a multi-faceted approach to women’s protection and strengthens women’s ability to protect themselves. She trains camp leaders about gender-based violence and helps them think through ways to protect women. An eighteen year old named Suad who lives in an internally displaced persons camp in Darfur told us, “I gave birth to this baby. I used to want to kill myself and my baby. I then discovered this [women’s] center and I found I was not the only one who went through a bad experience. I am now being helped to love this child, and although it is really hard, I now it’s not the child’s fault. At this center I’ve also been receiving training that allows me to make money,” which means she doesn’t have to leave the camp to gather firewood where many assaults against women take place.

In the U.S. we've been working with Camilo Mejia and his colleagues in Iraq Vets against the War, Nancy Lessin, founder of Military Families Speak Out, and Johnathan Hutto and his colleagues in Appeal for Redress as they all try to put a human face on this war in Iraq that has now lasted longer than World War II. Camilo was the first combat soldier from Iraq to apply as a Conscientious Objector, but was court martialed and jailed before the military would process his application. You can find film clips from all of them -- speaking truth to power -- on our website. If you want to have an veteran from the Iraq war speak here, learn about the six thousand military families making ends meet on food stamps today, or have an active duty soldier tell you why they are speaking out against this war when they've been 'stop loss'd' and forced to stay in the military even though they have completed their obligation, you can do so through our website or our staff.

Perhaps justice today in Guatemala, South Africa, and Burma is only a trickle, but because of the courageous men and women with whom we partner, and because of the support we receive from Unitarian Universalists like you which makes our work possible, we know that someday righteousness in those places will be an ever-flowing stream.

We need you to be human rights defenders. We believe being informed gives you the possibility of a moral response, so we promise to keep you updated on issues where your voice can make a difference. We were so pleased when a number of you joined us and the FEMA trailer last spring when we were pressuring Senator Dodd to bring his housing relief bill for the Gulf Coast out of committee where it had languished for almost a year.

Defending human rights demands that we say **no to the propaganda of war** and **no to the corporations that benefit from killing**. Instead, we will say yes to our culture that honors women, because they, more than men, **nurture** life. Yes, to our culture that honors the sun, because it, more than oil, **produces** life. Yes, to our culture that honors water, because it, more than the stock market, **sustains** life. And yes to our culture that honors the seasons and decency and human dignity, because they all **illuminate** life. While property is important, it is not more important to us than life itself. The seeds of this culture have been planted by ministers and lay-persons in Unitarian and Universalist congregations, which for more than 150 years have been in the forefront of the effort to keep our ship of state on a self-correcting course. Whether the issue is abolition, women's suffrage, the Holocaust, civil rights, Vietnam, Central America, Iraq, or equal marriage, Unitarians or Universalists or Unitarian Universalists have been there bearing witness, providing leadership, and insuring that justice is flowing down like waters.