

“After Ecstasy, the Laundry”

When I ended my term as UUA President in 1993, I vowed that I would never preach in the pulpit of any minister who had not been kind to me when I was President. That automatically eliminated about 50% of our congregations. But not Burlington because both Bob Senghas and Gary Kowalski have been good friends and Bob especially showed his kindness to me when, twenty eight years ago I succeeded him as Executive Vice President of the UUA and he was good enough to assure a skeptical UUA Board of Trustees that this 29-year old upstart could actually do the job.

So it's good to be back in Burlington and to be involved once again in Unitarian Universalism after twelve years with Amnesty International, to be serving, for example, as I now do as Chair of the Board of the UU Service Committee, an organization of which you can be justifiably proud, which is helping to re-build New Orleans, protect human rights in Guatemala and Burma, and insure that people all over the world have access to that most precious commodity, clean water. If you aren't currently a member of UUSC, I hope you will become one for it is the most direct way to manifest your faith in action. And it's especially good to be with you on your Canvass Sunday when you make visible the degree to which you hold Unitarian Universalism and this congregation in your regard. And in that respect I want to talk this morning about why Unitarian Universalist values are so important at this particular time in history and, by implication, of how your support for this church is quite literally helping to save the world.

Now you can imagine that my years as executive director of Amnesty International USA were years of great opportunity and privilege for me, the privilege, for example, of being insulted in the nicest possible way by Lauren Bacall at a high-falutin' dinner party on the Upper East Side, for example (“Darling, aren't you that dear little human rights man?” “Yes, Ms. Bacall, I suppose I am.” “Well, may I sit with you at dinner?” Me, swooning: “Why, yes, Ms. Bacall, I'd be delighted.” “You see, darling, I wouldn't ask but, frankly, I don't know another friggin' soul here.”).

Or perhaps, more to the point, the opportunity to greet Wei Jing Sheng, the Father of Chinese Democracy, on his arrival in America after seventeen years in prison or the opportunity to work with Gary Gauger and several others of the 123 people convicted of capital crimes in this country, sentenced to death and subsequently exonerated after serving an average of 9.2 years on death row or the opportunity to go into the refugee camps in Darfur, Sudan to meet those terrorized out of their homes and then into the state offices in Khartoum to confront the ministers who ordered the terror.

So my twelve years at Amnesty constituted a remarkable opportunity and were years of great achievement in the field of human rights, virtually none of it, I might say, attributable to me. I participated in a conversation with a bunch of professors at Syracuse University a few months ago and someone asked whether over the course of the last 200 years human rights had gotten better or worse. With one exception, the professors all offered abstruse reasons why the human rights situation was worse today than in 1806. I listened to all this moaning and finally I said in my customarily tactful way, “Are you folks nuts?”— And then I said, “Why, just in the twelve years I've been

with Amnesty we've seen the creation of the International Criminal Court; war crimes tribunals for Rwanda, Bosnia and Sierra Leone; the Truth and Reconciliation process in South Africa following apartheid; the ruling by the British Law Lords in 1999 that tyrants like Augusto Pinochet could indeed be held responsible for their crimes in any country on earth that chooses to prosecute them; successful civil suits against torturers who have taken up residence in the United States; the rapid spread of democracy around the globe; a majority of countries in the world having abolished the death penalty in law or practice; and the US Supreme Court having ruled the execution of juveniles and the mentally retarded as unconstitutional. And you don't think we're better off than when the slaveholder Thomas Jefferson could get elected President?" Well, that shut them up for about a minute and a half.

But remarkable as these achievements have been, human rights still face enormous challenges and ultimately they are challenges that will be met, if they are met at all, not just by changes in American policy, in Iraq or elsewhere, but by adoption of new attitudes toward the world around us.

As practitioners of a religious enterprise, all of us are called upon to grapple with such profound questions as "Why is there something rather than nothing?," "What is the meaning of life?," "Is there a God?," and "Why do bad things happen to good people?" These are very challenging questions; they are questions I have been seeking answers to for more than forty years and, if only I had been given me a few more minutes this morning, I would supply you the answers. But the truth is that even the answer to the age-old question, "Is it more religious to sit in a pub and think of the church or to sit in a church and think of the pub?"—even that is not self-evident.

In a way, then, going from my years with the UUA to Amnesty International where the kind of questions we dealt with were at least a bit more concrete, questions like, "How can we get the Chinese to stop torturing fifteen-year old Tibetan nuns?"-- going from the contemplation of religious questions to questions of human rights is a little like traversing the reference points referred to in the famous Zen saying, "After ecstasy, the laundry."

And yet the struggle for human rights and, more broadly, for social justice is in very profound ways a religious struggle and a spiritual calling. Over and over again I found my work at Amnesty International profoundly informed by my Unitarian Universalist faith and that is what I want to talk with you about today, why Unitarian Universalist values matter so much to the world at large.

I heard a lovely story not too long ago about a mother cat and her three kittens who were walking along the road one day when a large and vicious dog walked up. Naturally the kittens were frightened but the mother cat just arched her back and hissed at the dog, "Bow wow! Bow wow!" and the dog ran away. Well, of course the kittens were much impressed and they looked up at their mother admiringly and she back down at them. "You see, my darlings," she said. "That's the advantage of knowing a second language." But how many Americans, either literally or metaphorically, speak another

language, are informed about other faiths and cultures, care about the needs of those beyond our shores. At a time when the degree to which we Americans display a global sensitivity, not just a parochial one, may be very literally a matter of our own lives and deaths, Unitarian Universalism's call to embrace the whole world, to honor a myriad of tongues and traditions, is not only a revolutionary impulse; it may very well be the only thing that saves us. From the time the one and only Unitarian King, John Sigismund, issued the world's first Edict of Religious Toleration to the founding of Universalism with its conviction that all souls will be saved, not just the elect, to Unitarian Universalism's current-day commitment to a global fealty that transcends borders and races and nationalities, ours has been a faith that held the whole world in its hands.

And, complementary to that, a faith that teaches that what human beings share is far broader and more important than what divides us, if only we would see. In the midst of the 1994 Rwandan genocide a girl's school was attacked by machete-wielding militiamen in the middle of the night. The teenagers were rousted from their beds about 2:00 AM and forced to line up in the dining hall. They were ordered to separate themselves, Hutu from Tutsi, so that only the Tutsi would die. But the girls refused. A second time the commander ordered them to divide up by ethnic group. But still they refused. And finally one of the girls found her voice and, though very frightened, this is what it was reported later that she said: "We cannot separate ourselves, you see, because we are not Hutu; we are not Tutsi; we are Rwandan" at which point every one of them was slaughtered.

But what a legacy they leave! "We are not Hutu; we are not Tutsi. We are Rwandan." That sentiment is the most fundamental religious sentiment of them all and the echoes of that young girl's voice bespeak a graciousness for which the world is desperate. In her magnificent essay "The Moral Necessity of Metaphor," the novelist Cynthia Ozick quotes this passage from Leviticus, chapter 19: "The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home-born among you and you shall love him as yourself for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt" and then she goes on to say that it is exactly because we too were once strangers in the land of Egypt that we can identify with another, that "doctors can imagine what it is to be patients. Those who have no pain can imagine what it is to suffer. Those at the center can imagine what it is to be outside. The strong can imagine what it is to be weak...And we strangers can imagine the familiar hearts of [other] strangers."

I have never been tortured nor had my arm amputated but I know of plenty of people who have and I am compelled by my religious faith to make a metaphorical leap from my own trivial sufferings into those of the hearts of strangers. Familiar hearts. Of every stranger The poet Stephen Spender was a firm supporter of the opponents of Franco in the Spanish Civil War, but he gradually came to question one aspect of his own conduct. "When I saw photographs of children murdered by [Franco's] Fascists," he wrote in *The God That Failed*, "I felt furious pity. [But] when the supporters of Franco talked of [our own] atrocities, I merely felt indignant that people could tell such lies. In the first case I saw corpses, in the second only words...I gradually acquired a certain horror at the way my own mind worked...It was clear to me that unless I cared about

every murdered child impartially, I did not care about children being murdered at all." The second gift Unitarian Universalism gives the world is its conviction that what we share is far more important than what we don't and that all blood flows red—even the blood of my adversaries.

And that, my friends, is truly an earth-shattering recognition—that my enemies too can bleed, can suffer, and it leads directly to the third religious gift Unitarian Universalism offers a frightened, aching world: the notion that, while you need not love all your enemies, you surely risk your own destruction if you deprive them of their dignity.

When I was growing up in Pittsburgh in the 1950s, I was truly afraid of just two things. I was afraid of nuclear war and I was afraid of Tony Santaguido. I was afraid of nuclear war because my parents had comfortingly assured me that Pittsburgh's steel factories would be the first thing the Russians bombed in a nuclear attack. Of course when we were taught that if we were merely to duck and cover under our wooden desks, we would be safe from radiation, I quickly relegated nuclear war to a lower spot on my litany of worries. But that left Tony Santaguido, the neighborhood bully. Tony once caught me with a left hook that persuaded me on the spot to go into the ministry. But I happened to notice something that we all know about bullies: Tony was far less fierce when he was by himself and not surrounded by his retinue of admirers. Over the years I even got to know one or two of Tony's friends and gradually they convinced him to leave me alone, if not exactly to hold me in his affection.

I tell you this story because I worry that the United States has failed to learn that simple lesson I learned so long ago. Not that you don't sometimes have to stand up to bullies. Of course you do. But that equally as important is to strip them of their retinue. Casey Stengel once said that "the secret of a great baseball manager is to keep the two guys who hate your guts away from the three guys who are undecided." And that's part of the way we fight terrorists too. But every time the United States violates human rights, every time we deny our adversaries their basic right to be considered persons of dignity, we risk the loyalty of our friends and hand fodder to our adversaries in the form of certain proof of our hypocrisy. And we give those who are undecided—and, believe me, the war against terrorism will be won or lost among those in the Muslim and Arab worlds who, when it comes to the United States, are largely undecided—we give the undecided one more reason to mistrust our word and disdain our values.

I guess I was just naïve but I never thought I'd see the day when hundreds of people were hunted down in this country, rounded up, imprisoned, shackled, denied access to their families, because of the color of their skins, the ethnicity of their names, the practice of their religion. I thought that day was past in this country but that is exactly what happened to 1200 foreign nationals in the weeks following 9/11 and it is still happening to some of them at this very hour. I never thought I would see the day when the United States government would imprison two of its own citizens and then try to deny them the most fundamental rights any US citizen has a right to claim, rights that every one of us was taught we had in our elementary school civics classes—the right to a lawyer; the right to know what you are charged with; the right to confront your

accuser. I thought that day was past but that is exactly what is happened to Jose Padilla and Yaser Hamdi. I never thought I would see the day when the United States would thumb its nose at the Geneva Conventions as we have done at Guantanamo Bay or deny the right of habeas corpus to prisoners. I never thought I'd see the day when the Transportation Security Administration would construct a "no-fly" list to prevent certain US residents from getting on airplanes but not tell us how to get our names off such a list. So far the "no fly" list has snagged a 78-year old nun from Wisconsin and Sen. Edward Kennedy of MA who is a "terrorist" only for the purposes of his political opponents' fundraising. And I certainly never thought I would see the day when US interrogators would unapologetically torture suspects, as we are did systematically in Iraq and Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay and may still be doing today with the full approval of the highest authorities of our government. Taken together, these actions constitute the gravest threat to human rights since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 because they threaten to undermine the entire structure upon which international human rights have been built—the notions that we are trying to build a civilized world together in which all people are respected and all nations abide by the rule of law. You need not love your adversaries and you certainly ought not allow them to hurt you but, if you strip them of their dignity, you plunge the world even further into barbarism and invite upon yourself even more horrific retaliation.

These three gifts, then, signal how critical a Unitarian Universalist faith is to the trepidations of the day--a loyalty offered not just to a nation but to the world, to the international community; a recognition that what human beings share in common is far greater than what divides us; and a certainty that all human beings deserve the assumption of dignity, even when they betray it, and that if we too betray that faith, we put in jeopardy not only our mortal souls but the lives of everyone whom we hold dear. From Darfur to Afghanistan, Iraq to Burma, these principles need to guide the footsteps of those who make decisions that decide the fates of all the rest of us.

It is a demanding faith that we claim, this Unitarian Universalism, but one that has never been more important to sustain. No authentic person can live in this world unmoved by how immense is the tragedy that is Creation. No pretty words can cover it up; no simple faith can fix it; no complex theology can explain it away. It just is. Truly religious people know that, fear it, sometimes flee it but more often do their best to face it. For they know that their job is keep companion, to keep companion with evil and heartache and death at the same time that we keep companion with blessings and possibility and grace. And in that companionship we glean the angels of compassion, losing our faith every single night and gaining it again with the coming of the day.

"Our crowns have been bought and paid for," James Baldwin once said, "Now all we have to do is wear them." I know that those crowns can sometimes seem a little tarnished. But they maintain their luster through the courage and steadfastness of those whose lives lend them polish. May we be a people ever faithful and committed to that buffing in order that the children of light might have the time to finish their green and glorious dance. Just that. The time to finish our dance.

