

## **And Service Is Our Gift**

Arlington Street Church – February 17, 2008

On January 18, 2008, I received the following email from a gentleman I have been corresponding with in Nairobi, Kenya:

From the time I wrote you [last], I have been very keen on the unfolding events up to this minute that I am writing you again. It all appeared to be well and peaceful. Each voter knew what he or she intended to achieve “change for a better future.” Hell broke loose the moment [ election] results were announced. I am writing to you as a person who dwells in one of Nairobi’s sprawling slums. Horrifying scenes have been unfolding each day. For the first time in my life I witnessed human beings beheaded. Slums are densely populated areas and the dwellers voted knowing that new leadership brings a hope, just as I expressed my optimism to you in my letter. That seems to be no more as our leaders show no signs of let up to their hard line positions. It is hard to know who’s saying the truth as we continue suffering.<sup>1</sup>

Now Samuel, not his actual name, and his wife and several young children are physically safe and have not been harmed – he and I just exchanged emails this past Friday – but they have lost their home and all of their savings and nearly all of their hope.

Upon reading his email, I remember just staring at the computer screen, consumed in my absolute powerlessness to do anything to assist this man and his family who I have grown to love and care about so much, over the last six months of our long distance pastoral relationship. As with so much of the violence

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<sup>1</sup> Email message dated January 18, 2008 from “Samuel”, Nairobi, Kenya.

and human suffering that we all witness on the news, in the newspapers or even right before our very eyes, my overwhelming reaction to it was quite simply powerlessness.

Another email, just a few days after that one from Samuel provided me a measure of relief. This message told of a special mission – already underway – to Nairobi and the other parts of Kenya most affected by the violence and suffering, following the failed elections of late December 2007. This mission was led and funded by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, the UUSC.

You see the UUSC's Director of Programs is a Kenyan, by the name of Atema Eclai. Atema and the president of the UUSC, Charlie Clements, and two other Unitarian Universalists had arrived in Kenya on January 19<sup>th</sup>, just one day after Samuel's terrifying email message to me. In fact, the UUSC has had relationships with several partner groups in Kenya for quite a few years now. That was such a comfort to me, just as it might be to you, too.

Like those Stories of Hope that we heard earlier in our service this morning, the Service Committee's work in Kenya is geared toward empowering individuals to overcome the structural or situational circumstances that perpetrate and perpetuate suffering and oppression. The UUSC's humanitarian mission to

Kenya in January was of such significance that upon their return to the United States they went directly to Washington DC to meet with representatives of the State Department, Congress and the World Bank. Just two days after that meeting, the World Bank threatened to cut off funds to the government of Kenya unless it began immediate mediation to resolve the political crisis that had given rise to the violence and terror there.<sup>2</sup>

Then on February 4<sup>th</sup>, members of that delegation returned to Kenya to continue the humanitarian mission and to monitor the progress of the mediation process while working with individual Kenyans who were courageously resisting the impulse to political violence. The mission also conducted a leadership school there for lay leaders of about a dozen Unitarian Universalist congregations in eastern Africa.<sup>3</sup> The UUSC has established a joint humanitarian aid fund, with the Unitarian Universalist Association – the Kenya Crisis Fund – to provide direct assistance to those whose human rights and very lives are so imperiled.

The current and on-going work of the UUSC in Kenya is just one example of the mission and vision of the Service Committee, “(to) advance human rights and social justice around the world, partnering with those who confront unjust power structures and

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<sup>2</sup> UU World, “UU Mission to Kenya Sees Destruction Firsthand.” Donald E. Skinner, February 8, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

mobilizing to challenge oppressive policies.”<sup>4</sup> The Service Committee “envisions a world free from oppression and injustice, where all can realize their full human rights.”<sup>5</sup>

Yes, I can hear some of you thinking that is a mighty big mission and a huge and expansive vision. It is. But ours is a country where one in eight children struggle to survive while living in poverty. Ours is a world where more than one billion people live on less than \$1 per day. Ours is a world where 30,000 children a day die of poverty and disease.<sup>6</sup>

As we sang just a few moments ago, “Our world is one world, what touches one affects us all. Our is world is one world, its ways of wealth affect us all, the way we spend the way we share, who are the rich who are the poor, who stand or fall.”<sup>7</sup> This is our one world and oppression and injustice – in all of their forms – are a huge and expansive evil that we Unitarian Universalists have covenanted to ameliorate and eradicate; not just within these walls or right outside of them but even far beyond them. “What touches one affects us all.”

In fact the UUSC was born of efforts that began to address an evil of just such huge and immense scope – Nazism and the Holocaust. And just as the UUSC’s most recent mission to Kenya

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<sup>4</sup> UUSC Mission Statement at UUSC.Org.

<sup>5</sup> UUSC Vision Statement at UUSC.Org.

<sup>6</sup> SojoMail 02.14.08, sojo.net.

<sup>7</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition*. “Our World is One World” Hymn #134.

involved just a handful of people, the work of the then Unitarian Service Committee began in Nazi Europe, initially with just two individuals. They were a young married couple, Martha and Waitstill Sharp. Waitstill was the recently installed minister at our church in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts in 1939.

He and his wife Martha – leaving their two young children behind with friends - left for Prague, Czechoslovakia in February of 1939. They arrived there on the very day that the Nazis marched into Prague to occupy that nation. I would like to share with you Martha's account of her arrival in Prague on March 15, 1939, lest anyone of us here this morning think that a single individual, or a small group of people, cannot make a lasting impact against even the most immense evils that plague our world.

Martha wrote:

I found a taxi in the early darkness, and noting that the driver had a companion in the front seat, gave an address that was near but not actually the one which was my destination. The 'extra cargo' tried to engage me in conversation, but I parried his questions. Arriving at the place, I hastily paid the driver [and walked] around the corner, hiding in the first doorway to watch and see whether I was being followed. The 'companion' came around the same corner, looked up the street, down an alley or two and then walked along the street. The driver honked. My heart raced as I realized that my follower must be a Gestapo agent. I flattened myself against

the entrance and, in the darkness, he walked right by and then headed back toward the cab.<sup>8</sup>

This was what met Martha, a young mother and social worker, in her first hours of that first trip. She and Waitstill were able to accomplish their mission that night; to secret away a prominent anti-Nazi activist to the British Embassy, and the safety of political asylum.

The Sharps went on over the next several years, along with one other Unitarian couple, to fight against the Gestapo and facism, bureaucracies, intransigence, anti-Semitism and outright denial in both the United States and Europe in order to rescue and save the lives of thousands of people; many of them young Jewish children who are still alive today. However we will never know the entire scope of their work, because they were forced to burn their notes and records as the Gestapo closed-in on them.

Only recently has a rough measure of the scope of their work come to light in the effort that resulted in Martha and Waitstill Sharp being declared Righteous Among the Nations by *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel. They are only the second and third Americans to be accorded that honor and Martha is the first American woman to be so named.

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<sup>8</sup> Celebrating the Work of Martha and Waitstill Sharp. Page 1.

These, my friends, are the roots of our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Charlie Clements, President of the UUSC said of them:

[The] UUSC hopes the story of the Sharps' selfless acts of courage will inspire others to look into their own hearts and ask, "Who are the Righteous Among the Nations today? Who will take risks on behalf of unknown others facing genocide in this century? Who will speak out and bear witness to the inhumanity of this era?"<sup>9</sup>

Let us answer those questions today. Let us answer those questions today by saying that we will bear such witness; that we will be part of the work that stretches out into the far corners of our planet to save someone, a child or a family. Let us answer that it is we who will come together and bear witness to the injustice and suffering that is, at times, beyond our own comprehension and ability to bear.

The Service Committee makes it possible for us to do this from the comfort of our own homes and very own dinner tables. In a few moments the children of our church school, along with some parents and staff will distribute Guest at Your Table boxes. We ask you to take those boxes to your homes and places of work and other gathering places so that over the next month you can

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* page 7.

contribute money to fund the urgent and life-saving work of the Service Committee.

And this work is not just limited to the cases and places highlighted here this morning. The Service Committee also works in Darfur, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, and Guatemala. The Committee also works extensively throughout the United States, especially with youth and young people, training them to engage in the life-saving and justice-making work to which it is dedicated. In addition to the Guest at Your Table boxes, we will have information available over the next month about these efforts and how to participate in, and support them.

But back to these boxes, they represent Samuel and his family in Nairobi, Viola and her community in New Orleans, Angel and his children in Ecuador, and Mary and her grandmother in Korokocho. These boxes are those suffering people who will be guests at your tables over the next month. You and I will be their hosts and we will have the privilege, the honor and the duty to feed them as we would, were they sitting across from us at our dinner tables. For one month we will have the opportunity to contribute to their nourishment and sustenance, their wellbeing and their very lives.

When we return these boxes with the resources to rebuild their lives, we are telling Samuel and his family that we remember

them – that they matter to us. This year the Guest at Your Table campaign has become so much more personal to me and hopefully to you too. We are called upon to help Samuel and his family rebuild their home and their lives and we are able to do it.

This will be our time to affirm their inherent worth and dignity. This will be our chance to create justice, equity and compassion in their human relations. This will be our moment to accept them and encourage their spiritual and physical growth. This will be our opportunity to affirm their truth and meaning in this world. This will be our time to support and affirm their rights of conscience and struggles to live under the democratic process. This will be our time to live into our covenanted goal of community with them that creates and sustains peace, liberty and justice. This will be our time to nourish and strengthen their and our interdependent web of existence of which we all are a part.

This will be our time to live into what we say we believe and what we say we want our world to be and to become. Because what becomes of them also becomes of us. Whether we can stuff these boxes with 20 and 50 dollar bills or just the stray change we find in our pockets at the end of our day, we can change their lives – and our own – by contributing it to the work of the Service Committee. We have already covenanted to do so. And we are the only ones who can do so.

Whatever way you choose to give, please do so consciously and generously and in recognition of all that we have and of all that we have to do.

My beloved Unitarian Universalist seekers we have much to be proud of in the work of the UUSC. It is one vehicle by which the words of Margaret Mead are realized, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”<sup>10</sup> Like that handful of Unitarian Universalists in Kenya, our individual efforts empower other individual efforts to overcome injustice, oppression and suffering. Like the generosity of spirit that propelled the Sharps to save thousands of lives, our own generosity can bring safe shelter, clean water, disaster recovery and worker justice to even the most downtrodden in even the most distant reaches of our world.

This is our work to do and our time to do it. Let us never forget that and let not a day go by in the next month when we do not feed the guests at our tables.

Amen and blessed be.

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<sup>10</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition*, reading #561.