

## UNITED NATION SUNDAY

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, Sunday October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

Tuesday week, October 24<sup>th</sup>, will be United Nations Day, the 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Charter of the United Nations. Let us be mindful of that, this day—sixty-nine years of intentionality towards peace, justice and compassion, all around the world. In the aftermath of two world wars, in the shadow of nuclear weapons, United Nations Day lifts up a vision of hope, to build the kingdom of the holy here on earth. For the holy has no hands but our own. Peace on earth, with justice, and compassion. No small aspiration.

### PART ONE: United Nations Day

In Canada, out west where I grew up, United Nations Sunday was an annual event at most UU churches. I would feel remiss if UN Day were not lifted up.

When I served in Anchorage Alaska, I found that the wider community in the United States did not always look to the UN for a vision of hope; in fact, some had significant reservations about the United Nations. Some of my neighbours there saw the UN in terms of a sovereignty issue, a potential source of infringement on their independence as a nation. In fact, the United Nations does attempt to influence the behaviour of nations—towards peace and justice. I sometimes think of the United Nations as the conscience of the world. And may it be so.

For example, in South Africa that meant decades of imposed sanctions that ultimately led to the abandonment of Apartheid policies. It took time, but it worked. Eventually.

South Africa was excluded from the Commonwealth Games for thirty years, because of sanctions against Apartheid. I was in Victoria the summer of 1994 when the Commonwealth Games were held there. I shall never forget the roar of the crowd in jubilation as the mixed-race South African team walked into the stadium, their first time back after so many years. I was there. I saw it. We wept for joy to see them there once more, black and white together.

There is always enough horror and crisis to fill page one; good stuff happens too. The United Nations does a lot of good stuff routinely that rarely makes the front page unless it goes awry. Good stuff. Remember the Millennial Goals, about ten, fifteen years ago?

The UN lifted up the idea that the poor need NOT always be with us, that world peace and prosperity could happen; the UN asked what that would look like and how we could go about making it happen.

Here's the check off list—the eight Millennial Goals:

- 1 Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty
- 2 Achieve universal primary education
- 3 Promote gender equality and empower women
- 4 Reduce child mortality
- 5 Improve maternal health
- 6 Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases
- 7 Ensure environmental stability
- 8 A global partnership for development

What could be simpler? But wishing will not make it so. We're still working on it. And the United Nations is a big part of that work, for example through Unicef, through various health and development programmes, through peace initiatives.

Not all my Alaska neighbours saw the United Nations as a threat to their sovereignty. Some saw it as a guiding principle for their lives.

One day during my time in Alaska, the pulpit of the Anchorage Unitarian Universalist Fellowship was draped with the bright blue flag of the United Nations. One of our elders had died. The UN was very dear to her, her vision of hope, her aspiration, the goal of her good deeds. She had asked that the UN flag be displayed at her memorial service. And it was.

## PART TWO Myanmar, Buddhism, and the Eight-fold Path

Sometimes we ask a lot of the institutions that are precious to us.

The world wide scope of membership in the United Nations means a world wide scope of interests, interests that do not always align. Sovereignty is a delicate thing; no nation will be keen to initiate an action that will rebound against themselves or their closer allies. Most nations have minorities within their own borders. Calling others to task calls ourselves to task also.

From time to time Canada is called to task; Canada's treatment of First Nations has been likened to Apartheid. That stings.

Even so, it is to the UN one looks when egregious harm is done to a people. We are alarmed and appalled when genocide and ethnic cleansing take place. And wisely so. If one of us is at risk, then none of us is truly safe.

We humans are not always very kind to one another. Frightened angry people do ugly things. Loot-able resources, like oil, bring out the worst of our self-serving avarice, our willingness to prosper at a cost to others.

And so, these days, as I see the horrors of the daily news waft by, as I see the ethnic cleansing of the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar Burma, I am appalled. And my first thought is—the UN should do something about this! And so they should!

What do I know about the situation? I know that it's messy, and complex. I know that Myanmar or Burma (the old name) is a watershed—the land either side of the great Irrawaddy River. I know that Myanmar has loot-able resources, including oil and natural gas; I know the income disparity in Myanmar between the many and the empowered elite, between rich and poor, is one of the greatest gaps in the world. I know that there are many ethnic groups in Myanmar, and most of the people are Buddhists.

I know that an Islamic minority living on contested ground in western Myanmar has been targeted. I know that some half a million people have been violently assailed and have fled for refuge into Bangladesh. The military in Myanmar have ejected non profit agencies; the refugees only get aid, the very basics, once they make their way—those still living—to Bangladesh.

Unleashing military force on a scapegoat population serves the overlords well. When you can identify a people as other, and unleash your dogs on them, you get to steal their stuff. You get to steal their land. You get to feed the sadistic elements among your enforcers with the helpless flesh of the innocents.

What appalls me is that the folks with the guns in Burma are Buddhists. Frankly, I expect better of Buddhists. But what do I know?

I know that much of what I think I know is probably wrong, or only partially right. I know that Buddhism has two and a half thousand years of history, development, and cultural overlay.

I know that Buddhism can be understood as Theravada Buddhism (the school of the elders) or Mahayana Buddhism (the great vehicle) which includes Pure Land Buddhism; or Zen Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, and the Buddhism that found its way to North America following the Second World War.

I know that the practices of Buddhism include taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma (teaching) and the Sangha (community),

I know of the four noble truths: that life is suffering, that suffering comes from attachment to that which is impermanent, that there is a way to liberate oneself from suffering, and that is to follow the teachings of the eight-fold path.

I know of the eight-fold path: right view, right resolve, right action, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, enlightenment, and meditation.

I know that for some Buddhists the goal is Nirvana—to escape the wheel of life; for others the goal is to embrace the middle way, the way of loving-kindness, the eight-fold path, so as to seek enlightenment and bring enlightenment to all the world, to become a bodhisattva.

There may be more to it than that....

I much admire Buddhism, as I know it. As I know it.

But I do not know it as more than ninety percent of Myanmar knows it, embedded in place, in culture, in history, in politics, in political activism, in identity. I know Buddhism as a westerner knows it. For example, the great semiotician, Umberto Eco—semiotics—the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behaviour—how we make meaning—Umberto Eco explains it to us this way, in his book, “How to Write a Thesis”. He’s speaking of defining the thesis topic and thus defining the bibliography and research one will need to address the topic.

Umberto explains:

Suppose I begin a thesis on traditional Japanese Zen philosophy. Clearly I must be able to read Japanese, and I cannot trust the few available Western translations. Now suppose that, in examining the critical literature, I become interested in how certain literary and artistic avant-garde movements ... made use of Zen in the fifties.... I am

now interested in understanding the meaning of Zen thought ... [as] elements of a Western artistic ideology. I will change my topic to “Zen Principles in the ‘San Francisco Renaissance’ of the 1950s,” and my primary sources will become the texts of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and so on.”

It’s a big step from a banyan tree in South East Asia to a San Francisco Beatnik poet, from a saffron robed monk with a begging bowl to an urban office worker looking for some peace and calm at the end of another long day.

How a Myanmar soldier understands Buddhism, and how I, a lotus-eating West Coast Canadian, understand Buddhism, are two very different things, emerging from two very different senses of identity.

### PART THREE: The Problem of Evil

Unitarian Universalists are by and large optimists. Onwards and upwards. But things do not always work out so well. There is this problem: the problem of evil. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Sometimes the natural world is not hospitable: fire and flood, earthquake and hurricane. Mortal illness.

Sometimes people do rotten things to other people, like ethnic cleansing. Domestic violence. Littering. Hardness of heart. Evil happens. We are mindful of the existence of evil, of our own capacity for evil, the day to day banality of evil. And we try to choose the better way.

Perhaps the great gift of Buddhism to the west has been the lifting up of meditation as a means to inner calm, to help us bring our best selves to the challenges of each day.

The UUA has a pamphlet on Evil; I found a copy in our library, across the hall. The editor of the pamphlet, Paul Rasor, writes:

Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals have always emphasized the positive aspects of the divine and human nature. As a result, critics sometimes charge that liberals don’t truly understand the reality of evil. Yet liberals are not naive about evil; they just have a different framework for understanding it.

For religious liberals, evil is not a supernatural force locked in a cosmic struggle against the forces of good... for liberals evil is neither a demonic spirit nor a philosophical dilemma, but a reality to respond to and confront.....

Religious liberals live with hope grounded in the belief that the world can be nudged toward the good. Our choices matter: We can either enable (or ignore) the evil around us, or we can help overcome it.

Victoria Safford continues:

Evil is the capacity, within us and among us, to break sacred bonds with our own souls, with one another, and with the holy. Further, it is the willingness to excuse or justify this damage, or deny it, or to call it virtue. The soil in which it flourishes is a rich compost of ignorance, arrogance, fear, and delusion—mostly self-delusion—all mingled with the sparkling dust of our original, human being.

Patrick O’Neill adds:

People are almost equally capable of both good and evil, but most of the time—say three times out of five—people choose the good. The seesaw tilts just a few degrees toward the good in this tentative world, but those few degrees are the difference between peace and Armageddon. The job of the church is to put the few stubborn ounces of our weight on the side of goodness, and press down for all we’re worth.

In conclusion, the world is messy. We press down on the seesaw scales of justice for all we’re worth. We look around and we see people all around us tossing the feather of their souls and words and deeds onto the balance for peace and the wellness of all living beings, all the world, all the beauty of the big blue pearl in space that is our home.

One such was and is Stephen Lewis. In 1984 Lewis was appointed Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations by Governor General Jeanne Sauvé, on the advice of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Lewis served at the post until 1988. From 1995 to 1999, Lewis was Deputy Director of UNICEF. From 2001 until 2006, he worked as United Nations Special Envoy

for HIV/AIDS in Africa. In this role, he drew attention to the HIV/AIDS crisis and convinced leaders and the public that they have a responsibility to respond.

I heard him speak, once. I heard Stephen Lewis deliver a series of lectures at the Vancouver School of Theology. Passionate, articulate, compelling. A bodhisattva, an enlightened one, who lingers here to teach us the way.....

Life is messy. There is no magic wand. We cannot do everything. We cannot do much of anything overnight. But we can do something. And if not now, when? The United Nations is one way we can do something, messiness and all.

I invite you to consider some small thing that is within your power to do, to tip the scales towards peace, justice, compassion, and loving-kindness.

May it be so.

## Bibliography

Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil". 1963. There is considerable discussion of this significant work to be found on line.

Umberto Eco, "How to Write a Thesis", tx Caterina Mongiat Farina and Geoff Farina, MIT Press, 2015, 1997.

Harold Kushner, "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". 1981. A definitive discussion of the problem of evil.

Eliot Pattison, "Skull Mantra".1999. Pattison's mystery novel, the first of many, is set in Chinese occupied Tibet, and offers a detailed insight into the world of Tibetan Buddhism. "Skull Mantra" won the Edgar Allan Poe Award in 2000. Well researched, well written, and likely available at a public library near you.

Publications on and off line re Buddhism, Burma, and the United Nations abound.

UUA Pamphlet "Unitarian Universalist Views of Evil, ed. Paul Rasor. UUA, 2007.