

Justice Sunday, April 10<sup>th</sup> 2011

## **JUSTICE AND DIGNITY FOR ALL**

### **REFLECTION BY LAURA HUMPHRIES**

This year's Justice Sunday theme is "Justice and Dignity for All." It focuses on the importance of upholding the inherent worth and dignity of **every** person. It encourages us to reflect, to understand, and to **act**.

The **act** part of this statement is a big part of what brought me to this congregation (along with regular coaxing from friends, Jennifer & Michael). Before becoming a member, I had been reflecting on the world around me, and like so many others have realized for a long time that there is a serious unbalance in justice and dignity both within and outside of our nation's borders. Yet I wasn't sure how to act, or at least act effectively. I knew that my attempts to act (voting, donations, emails, etc.) were something, but they were not quite enough. I knew that power in numbers meant joining forces with people who shared at least some of my values, and I also knew that I had much to learn from those who've been involved in social justice work for years, in some cases decades. This is a big part of what drew me here, along with the thought of my daughter being surrounded by such a supportive, accepting and involved community.

Becoming a member of this congregation was, as it turns out, not quite enough. For me, listening, nodding my head each Sunday and saying, "Uh huh, yes, that is so true, you are so right about that," felt great, but did not completely answer my desire to actually do something, to feel like I was involved in creating positive change, to really **act**.

When approached by Jane Asche to be the local rep for Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), I was initially tentative. First of all, who is UUSC? And would I be able to do them justice, in my limited time as a new single mom & newly re-employed teacher? While I am still working on doing the rep role justice, in the meantime I have discovered that UUSC is directly, and I mean *directly*, involved in that crucial word: **ACT**.

For those of you who were like me not too long ago, and may not know anything about UUSC, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is a non-denominational, independently funded organization that works to advance human rights and social justice around the world. They are experts at partnering with effective grassroots organizations of people who are already at the ground level, working within their communities to challenge oppression and inequality. In other words, they're experts at seeking out local experts to support. By following this unique partnership model, they help to create positive change in a big, big way.

UUSC has four focus areas: civil liberties, economic justice, environmental justice, and humanitarian crises during times of disaster. To borrow their quote, "Justice is Aid with Dignity. In the

face of humanitarian crises, UUSC supports the rights of people overlooked by mainstream relief.” Their campaigns and actions are far-reaching, and they are effective. UUSC partners with 50 organizations in 23 countries, including the United States. In a nutshell, they mean business. They **act**.

One of my responsibilities as local UUSC rep has been to keep the congregation informed of the incredible social justice work that UUSC does. The hardest part of this task has been having to pick only a few examples of their recent work to include in my updates, as they are constantly involved in so many amazing efforts literally around the world. When I first visited their website, my reaction was “holy rigatoni,” these guys don’t fool around! They really know how to **ACT** towards advancing justice and dignity for all.

Want to know more? I encourage you to pick up one of their annual reports or fliers in the foyer, or ask one of the many UUSC members in this congregation. Their website ([uusc.org](http://uusc.org)) is also a fantastic place to start; I am still discovering layers of stories online, describing their work to advance human rights and social justice. You will also hear more about their work during this service.

I might add to also consider, if you haven’t already, becoming a member of UUSC. Last January, we wrapped up our annual Guest at Your Table campaign, begun in November. If you include matching funds, we raised over \$3,000 to contribute to UUSC’s efforts. That’s above and beyond membership funds collected throughout the year.

Personally, I’m still working on the word ACT, especially in terms of acting with my consumer dollars when I shop for food and clothing. In the meantime, you know what I’ve found out about this congregation? Wow, this congregation **really** knows about that word, **ACT**.

## **REFLECTION BY JANE ASCHE**

**Reflection on a Story of Aid with Dignity**, Excerpts from the Sermon “Dignity Rising” By the Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull

I would like for you to imagine it is a Tuesday morning in early January of 2011, and you are a farmer in a rural area of Haiti outside of the capital city of Port au Prince. You have risen early as you do every morning. Your wife prepares the coffee, nurses your 4 month old son, calls to your two little daughters to hurry up, hurry up, or they will be late for school. You’re among the lucky in Haiti. You’re children go to school. So many in your country are poor, desperately poor. You struggle to make do for your family, and your wife works hard embroidering exquisite wares for wealthy tourists. You’re among the luckiest families.

All day long you work beside your neighbors. You’re accustomed to working together, helping each other out. Through the local organization, the Papaye Peasant Movement (PPM), you have learned skills to help you farm the land more effectively. Rainfall is iffy. The soil doesn’t cooperate. But you know the benefits of organizing locally to cut through the challenges of unpredictable weather and an equally unpredictable government. You have been inspired by the PPM’s leader, Chavannes Jean-Baptiste. He keeps telling you that you cannot survive alone.

It's been a long day. The sun begins to dip. You think about cleaning up your tools. Then you feel the ground tremble under your feet. You shudder. The earth beneath you shudders. Suddenly everything is chaos. Oh, my God! It is an earthquake. You have known earthquakes before, but something tells you this is like nothing you have ever known. You run for home, terrified for your wife and children. You hear your baby screaming. You hear your wife wailing.

It's late January 2011. Your world has been turned inside out. You survived. Your wife survived. Your baby survived, but not without two broken legs. He cries like he'll never stop. Your darling little girls were crushed beneath the rubble of their school, the school they were so proud of. Your wife cries like she will never stop. You're too numb to cry. Water is scarce. You've heard that food is being hoarded by the government. You watch planes come in from so many countries. You hear they are carrying food and medical supplies and workers to help out.

The planes come and go, yet food and supplies do not arrive in your rural area. Eventually a truck arrives with a familiar sign on the side, one of the big relief organizations. The foreigners set up tents and talk among themselves about what to do. Why don't they ask you and your friends in the Papaye Peasant Movement? You're the experts. You know Haiti. You know how to organize to get things done.

Weeks pass. A meeting is called at the PPM training Center, a tent staked down on the upturned earth. Chavannes is there. He talks about "Haitians rebuilding Haiti." You know he means you and your neighbors. He talks about the dignity of survival. Next to him stands a woman Chavannes introduces as Martha. She's from an organization called the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. He explains that the UUSC is partnering with the PPM to bring relief right away and to address the long term needs of you and your neighbors. She listens to your stories, your needs and your knowledge of how to organize in your rural community. Chavannes speaks of the UUSC and PPM as "brothers and sisters working together." Your grief is fierce, but now you have your dignity. You are being consulted as a partner in planning and participating in the course of action for recovery from this disaster of nature.

The Haitians have endured abuse and exploitation over the past 500 years from the Spanish, the French and Americans. Yet they are resilient. The same cooperation that made indigenous resistance possible hundreds of years ago makes the most effective streams of recovery possible in the wake of what our farmer friend, his family and millions of Haitians experienced that Tuesday afternoon of January 12, 2011 and on into today. Expertise resides within Haiti – experts do not fly in; experts are already there.

So where does this leave us? With nothing to do in the continued wake of suffering known to our neighbors to the south? On the contrary, we can help by honoring the dignity of the Haitian people through the empowering model of solidarity at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Remember the woman named Martha working with Chavannes, the leader of the PPM? That was Martha Thompson, manager of the UUSC's Rights in Humanitarian Crises Programs. Martha was one of the first UUSC members to venture to Haiti after the earthquake to assess needs by consulting indigenous groups already organized, already responding.

What followed was a thoughtful selection of additional grassroots partner organizations through which UUSC could channel funds and skills both to respond to immediate needs and cooperatively forge strategies for long-term recovery. Because of Martha and Chavannes and the farmer and his wife and women and men and, yes, Haitian children, we can make a difference together. It's an unconventional approach, linking with indigenous partner organizations for immediate and long-term responses to the travesty of poverty and the devastation of nature. It's an approach that works. Local organizations that have already earned the trust of the local populace can reach Haitians by-passed by larger relief organizations that deny the fault lines of race, class, and gender and fail to consult with the real experts, the indigenous people themselves. That is what it means to provide aid with dignity, aid that draws on the expertise and shows respect for the knowledge and skills of the people themselves.

And that is exactly what UUSC members do in places like Darfur, Gaza, Haiti, Kenya, Pakistan, and Uganda – work hand in hand with survivors of humanitarian crises who are less likely to receive aid because of their race, religion, class (social status), gender or geographic location.

### **SERMON "JUSTICE AND DIGNITY FOR ALL" BY JOEL BROWN**

Our ideas of justice have changed greatly over the history of humanity, the history of our nation, and I am sure each of us has changed our views during our own lifetimes. It is interesting to look at this evolution and to see where we are today in terms of what we consider justice and who has access to it.

Probably the earliest introduction for any of us to the term "justice" is in the Pledge of Allegiance. It has an interesting history and, I think, is a good illustration of the paradoxes that we face in the modern world.

The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892, by Francis Bellamy who was a Baptist minister, a Christian socialist, and the cousin of socialist utopian novelist Edward Bellamy. Bellamy "viewed his Pledge as an 'inoculation' that would protect immigrants and native-born but insufficiently patriotic Americans from the 'virus' of radicalism and subversion." The original "Pledge of Allegiance" was published as part of the celebration of Columbus Day, a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the Americas. It is probably safe to say that no indigenous peoples were on the committee that designed the observance. The event was conceived and promoted by James B. Upham, a marketer for the magazine, as a campaign to instill the idea of American nationalism by selling flags to public schools and magazines to students.

Bellamy's original Pledge read

*I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

The Pledge was supposed to be quick and to the point. Bellamy designed it to be recited in 15 seconds. As a socialist, he had initially also considered using the words *equality* and *fraternity* but decided against it - knowing that the state superintendents of education on his committee were against equality for women and African Americans.

In 1940 the Supreme Court, ruled that students in public schools, including the respondents, Jehovah's Witnesses, could be compelled to swear the Pledge. A rash of mob violence and intimidation against Jehovah's Witnesses followed the ruling. In 1943, in the middle of a war against tyranny and facism, the Supreme Court reversed its decision, ruling that public school students are not required to say the Pledge, concluding that "compulsory unification of opinion" violates the First Amendment.

If you are missing the irony so far, let me conclude this part about the pledge with some trivia. When we recite the pledge, we usually accompany the words with a salute. An early version of the salute, adopted in 1892, was known as the Bellamy salute, the right hand extended toward the flag with the palm down.

On a more serious note, the two words in the last phrase "liberty and justice" really represent the dichotomy that we are confronted with today. The libertarian idea of "everyone for themselves with maximum freedom to achieve success", versus fairness, which is embodied in most of our modern-day ideas of justice.

In ancient history, justice was usually associated with fate, reincarnation or Divine Providence, with a life in accordance with the cosmic plan. If you weren't good, you would suffer forever. This approach had mixed success because people kept redefining what 'good' was. The association of justice with fairness in this life has thus been historically and culturally rare and is perhaps chiefly a modern innovation in western societies.

In *Republic*, Plato argues for justice that covers both the just person and the just City State. Justice is a proper, harmonious relationship between the warring parts of the person or city. Plato's definition of justice is that justice is the having and doing of what is one's own. A just man is a man in the right place, doing his best and giving the precise equivalent of what he has received. This applies both at the individual level and at the universal level. Socrates used the parable of the ship to illustrate this point: the unjust city is like a ship in open ocean, crewed by a powerful but drunken captain (the common people), a group of untrustworthy advisors who try to manipulate the captain into giving them power over the ship's course (the politicians), and a navigator (the philosopher) who is the only one who knows how to get the ship to port. For Socrates, the only way the ship will reach its destination – the good – is if the navigator takes charge.

How do we determine what justice is? John Rawls, one of the foremost contemporary philosophers on justice and society claims that "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions". According to his egalitarian approach, justice can only exist within the coordinates of equality. This basic view can be elaborated in many different ways, according to what goods are to be distributed—wealth, respect, opportunity—and what they are to be distributed equally between—individuals, families, nations, races, species. Commonly held egalitarian positions include demands for equality of opportunity and for equality of outcome. It affirms that freedom and justice without equality are hollow and that equality itself is the highest justice.

In his book *Justice as Fairness*, Rawls proposed that justice has two main principles: Liberty and Equality. The first and most important principle, Liberty, states that every individual has an equal right to basic liberties, he said "certain rights and freedoms are more important or "basic" than others" and "each person has an equal claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic rights and liberties"

The second principle, Equality, deals with how the benefits of society should be distributed. Rawls idea was that "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged, and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity."

Rawls also provided a basis for determining the baseline for equality, and includes both economic and social advantages, the *maximin rule*. As defined in game theory, maximin means maximizing the minimum, or making choices that produce the highest payoff for the least advantaged position. Thus, maximin represents a formulation of *social equality*.

This basic level of social equality would be defined by members through a thought experiment in which the parties select principles that will determine the basic structure of the society they will live in. This choice is made from behind a veil of ignorance, which would deprive participants of information about their own particular characteristics: ethnicity, social status, gender and, crucially, Conception of the Good (an individual's idea of how to lead a good life). This would force participants to select principles impartially and rationally. As we go about our lives next week, maybe that is a good thought experiment for all of us "what are the basic rights?" and why do I think that?

Probably the cleanest and most dramatic example of this egalitarian approach is the major sports leagues. Every year, in the draft of available players, the team that finished last gets first pick. This is predicated on the belief, which every team and all members of the leagues accept, that equality (or parity) among teams maximizes competition and the belief that any given team or player can succeed is what attracts fans.

Thus, in this egalitarian approach, justice requires the maximization of the total or average welfare across all people and institutions. While this is certainly going to require some sacrifice on the part of some, usually the more favored members, the end result is that society as a whole benefits.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Robert Nozick, a contemporary of Rawls at Harvard University, wrote of a pure libertarianism in his book "Anarchy, State, and Utopia". It has been translated into 11 languages and was named one of the "100 most influential books since the war" by the Times Literary Supplement, so you can bet much argument, both for and against are built on it.

Nozick argues in favor of a minimal state, "limited to the narrow functions of protection against force, theft, fraud, enforcement of contracts, and so on." When a state takes on more responsibilities than these, Nozick argues, rights will be violated. To support the idea of the minimal state, Nozick presents an argument that illustrates how the minimalist state arises naturally from anarchy and how any expansion of state power past this minimalist threshold is unjustified.

While I don't think they would necessarily use the terms I chose, this looks suspiciously like the positions staked out by the two major political parties over the past couple of weeks.

The Theme for Justice Sunday is "Justice is aid with dignity" and Jane and Laura have spoken of some very important examples where UUSC provides aid to people desperately in need, and they certainly do so with justice and dignity. But, where does the need for justice (fairness) start and stop? Justice is being denied to same-sex couples prohibited from enjoying the economic and social benefits of marrying just the same as it being denied to the poor people in earthquake ravaged Haiti. Justice is being denied to migrant farm workers who harvest our cheap food in terms of access to good schools for their children just as it is being denied to the citizens of war-ravaged Libya. Although the urgency of these situations is vastly different, they are all injustices.

What is aid? Is it merely the money we give to UUSC and other charities to help the poor or weak in desperate times? Or is it the total effort that we make by living a fair and just existence and calling out injustice when we see it in the public square? I return to Plato's original idea that justice has both an individual and a universal component. It is not enough to be a 'just' individual if the organizations and institutions to which you belong practice injustice by denying some people and groups access to a fairly high level of goods and services. On the other hand, it matters little if you are a member of a just society if you do not treat people fairly.

I will close with the words of our greatest justice seekers, Martin Luther King Jr who said "The hope of a secure and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace and brotherhood".