

GIFTS TO AN ACHING WORLD



A Sermon by
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When I left the UUA Presidency in 1993, I knew that I would rarely have the time to speak in Unitarian Universalist pulpits and I vowed that I would only speak in the pulpits of ministers who had been kind to me when I was president. That automatically eliminated about half the congregations. [Central Massachusetts.] But Harry Green has always been pretty nice to me and so, when he called to ask me to be here today, I readily agreed.

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Becoming Executive Director of Amnesty International after having been President of the UUA has been a mixed blessing, as leadership always is. At Amnesty International I have had access to decision-makers in a way I never did at the UUA. On the other hand, I never had to shake hands with murderous tyrants at the UUA nor was I ever the object of assassination threats. The angriest people got at the UUA was when the UU WORLD seemed perennially unable to get their address changes straight. Getting to know the glitterati has its pleasant aspects of course but its pitfalls as well. The first time I took Bianca Jagger to lunch, for example, I was desperate to make a good impression. We chatted amicably for a few moments after sitting down in one of New York City's most elegant restaurants, all the while me thinking to myself, "I can't believe a kid from Pittsburgh is sitting her one on one with Bianca Jagger. Be cool, Bill, be cool." And then the

complimentary salmon mousse arrived. Bianca gracefully took a scoop and offered it to me. Mine immediately disappeared down my front. Bianca looked at me with the kind of look I imagined she reserved for Mick on his worst bad-boy days but she recovered quickly. “Oh, darling,” she said, dabbing at my chin. “Let me help you. You have just spilled mousse all over your beard.”

It is not just the day to day differences between the two roles that interest me, however. 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 important questions; they are questions I have been seeking answers to for at least forty-two years and, if only Harry had given me a few more minutes this morning, I would give you the answers. The truth is that, as the old Chinese proverb has it, “You can stand on a hillside with your mouth wide open for a long time before a roast duck flies in” and, similarly, you can sit in a church for a long time before the answers to these questions become self-evident.

In a way, then, going from my years with the UUA to Amnesty International where the kind of questions we deal with are at least a bit more concrete, questions like, “How can we get the Chinese to stop torturing fifteen-year old Tibetan nuns?” and “Does it really make the United States a safer place to deny US citizens the right to an attorney as we are doing with Jose Padilla and Yasser Hamdi?” –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 have found my work at Amnesty International profoundly informed by my Unitarian Universalist faith. Let me just tell you a few ways that has been the case and why Unitarian Universalism matters so much to the world at large.

I grew up a third generation Unitarian. My grandfather was treasurer for seventeen years of the Unitarian Church of Urbana, IL, and at the end of every one of those seventeen years he paid the church deficit out of his own pocket...which is why he kept getting reelected as treasurer. And I grew up

in First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh, dropping out of church school in third grade but returning to the church in my late high school years when I decided to pursue the ministry.

Now, when I set out for theological school, thirty-three years ago I fully intended to spend my career as a parish minister. But you know about intentions. Last May I was in London, as I often am for Amnesty, and I decided that for just once in my life I would go to Saville Row and commission a handsewn English suit. So I took myself to James Levitt & Sons Tailors and I met with their head tailor, Mr. Brian Pusey. Mr. Pusey was very gracious and attentive and measured me upways and down and then he said, in that ever-so-British way, “Now, Dr. Schulz, I presume you’ll be losing weight, won’t you?” And I said, “Mr. Pusey. You are an incredibly perspicacious man. How did you know that I will indeed be losing fifteen or twenty pounds quite shortly?” And Mr. Pusey said, “Oh, yes, sir, all of my gentlemen will be losing weight. But, just in case you don’t, I think we’ll fit this to size.”

And so, despite my best intentions, I ended up a gray and battered bureaucrat. But a bureaucrat who has been forced to become acquainted

with mainstream America in all its glory and heartache and pettiness and grandeur. And the more I learn about our fellow citizens, the more convinced I become that the future of our world depends upon the faith we proffer and the principles that undergird it. Let me tell you what I mean.

I heard a lovely story the other day 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 in XXXX 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 roused 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. We like to quote Stephen Spender’s words, “I think continually of those who were truly great, who

wore at their hearts the fire's center." But, eloquent as those words are, they are not the most important Stephen Spender wrote. The most important he ever wrote are these words describing his discovery of his own corrupted heart. A firm supporter of the opponents of Franco in the Spanish Civil War, Spender 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 concept and it is 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, I was truly afraid of only 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 going on today with 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 are doing at Guantanamo Bay by refusing the prisoners there access to a “competent tribunal,” as the Conventions put it, to determine if they are prisoners of war or so-called “unlawful combatants.” 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 the chairperson of the Green Party in Maine. That kind of harassment ended twenty-five years ago, didn’t it? And I certainly never thought I would see the day when US interrogators would unapologetically torture suspects, as we are reputedly doing at Bagram Air Force Base in Afghanistan today. 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. The third gift Unitarian Universalism offers is the testimony that believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being is not just a slogan. 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 inherent 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.

It is a demanding faith that we claim, this Unitarian Universalism, but one that has never been more important to sustain. And that is why I am never so proud, so moved or so at home than when I am surrounded, as I am this morning, by you who make up our religious community.

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, kindness, and trust, losing our faith every single night and gaining it again with the coming of the day.

James Baldwin once said, “Our crowns have been bought and paid for. Now all we have to do is wear them.” Sometimes, I know, those crowns can feel a little off-center and oftentimes a little heavy. They need our constant attention, our perpetual polishing. But there they sit—I can see them now. Thank you for wearing your crowns with such devotion. Thank you for all you do to keep Unitarian Universalism so full of luster.

