

**“HOLDING ON TO HOPE NONETHELESS:
UUSC JUSTICE SUNDAY”**

The First Parish in Wayland, Mass.
March 25, 2007
The Rev. Ken Sawyer

Any of you who were not here last week were no doubt surprised on arriving today if you passed through the room downstairs (the vestry), or you will be when you go to coffee hour and see that all around the walls there are glorious banners, each prepared by one of the committees here at First Parish. Some members from each of these groups paraded in and lined the walls at the start of the service. And then after the first hymn, they said briefly why the work of their group was fun or exciting or rewarding or at least what it was.

This was part of a new way of handling Canvass Sunday and the whole process of gathering the pledges of financial support for the church that enable us to plan for a full and healthy church year ahead. The old ways had seemed to have become a bit tired, and so we tried doing a Celebration Sunday, in some other churches known as a Commitment or Covenant Sunday. And thanks to the efforts of a lot of people, it seemed to go quite well.

Every UU church does it a little differently, and we adapted the idea in response to people's reactions to the idea here, not doing everything that anyone might do. But one of the ideas that really caught on was that of the banner parade. And, it turned out, not only because the banners are so creative, numerous, and beautiful, but because of the things the banner-bearers had to say. A number of people – maybe many – said afterwards, at least to themselves, that it had never occurred to them that so many people were up to so many things at First Parish – interesting things that the banner-bearers were pleased to be involved in.

The larger world of Unitarian Universalism is like that, too: a place where there are lots more interesting things going on, lots more ways of being involved, than one might realize. Last week I mentioned that fact in passing, but then I went on to emphasize the ways in which the members here help love thrive in the world by all the individual actions we take throughout the week. The theme of the day was, “So Love May Thrive,” and I had that part of the assignment, “So Love May Thrive in the World,” after Erin addressed “So Love May Thrive Among Us” – two good reasons for supporting the church.

But when it comes to fostering love – which I was defining so broadly as to include all goodness, with justice high on the list -- I want to go back and emphasize more pointedly the ways that we do that as a movement, in organized ways, and not just as a lot of individuals on our own.

This point was made at the yearly gathering of UU ministers from the Boston and its suburbs at a gathering this past week by one of our ministers in Worcester, Barbara Merritt, who was leading the program, one she has been giving around the continent in recent years.

She drew two triangles, noting that triangles are the most stable shape. You can hinge the corners, the shape stays the same. And, she said, so do some of our patterns, even if unrewarding. One that she worries about is a UU inclination for each of us to expect too much of herself or himself acting alone. The points of the triangle are rescuer, judge, and victim, and we can take on any of these roles. We can imagine we have more power to save on our own than we do, we can pass judgment too self-confidently, including on ourselves for our failures as rescuers, we can type-cast those we would help into victims, or end up feeling the victim ourselves of our own inadequacy as rescuers, as graded by the judges we imagine. Acting in concert the three roles can lead to frustration and discouragement.

Barbara's recommendation is that instead of starting out as rescuer we start out with humility, with an awareness that we don't have all the right answers, that we can't accomplish as much as we want to, that we need to be in connection with others. I will return to Barbara and her triangles later.

But if, for example, our dream is of justice – or, as the second and sixth of the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism put it, “Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” and “world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all” – if those are parts of our fondest dreams, it is probably not enough just to be kind as we go about our daily lives, crucial as that is, too. It will take some concerted effort, people working together, actual organizations with members and supporters.

I say this with gentle care. I know many of you have not come to our worship service today in hope of hearing how many interesting things you could be doing but aren't, or how many good causes you could be supporting but aren't. But I balance that with an awareness that maybe you do have time in your life for one more activity, maybe even more, or you could make the time, once you realized what the possibilities are. There are two easy ways of doing that: you can go to the uua.org website and go looking around: we have UU groups devoted to all sorts of concerns. Or you can talk with me about the opportunities.

One of the places you may end up is the UU Service Committee, headquartered in Cambridge, active around the world, which has its own website, of course, uusc.org. The Service Committee was created during World War II to help rescue Jews and others from being sent to concentration camps and probable death. It continues to provide important help abroad in the aftermath of crises like last year's earthquake in Indonesia, and before that flood relief in Guatemala, earthquake relief in southern Asia, and flood relief after Hurricane Katrina.

But it also has particular focuses for its work at any given time, in crises and at other times at many other places around the globe. Its current focuses are four: advancing economic justice; defending civil liberties and access to democratic processes; promoting environmental justice; and protecting rights in humanitarian crises, especially among the oppressed and marginalized.

Those four special, ongoing focuses have found expression since 2004 in annual appeals to our churches to have a Justice Sunday, which this year is today, all over the continent, calling attention to the UUSC's important work and one particular area of concern related to those four focuses. The first focused on human rights in Burma, the second on the human right to water, the third to the economic justice issues of labor

rights and working wages, and this year to ending the genocide in Darfur, as part of the UUSC's Drumbeats for Darfur campaign.

Again I want to speak with gentle care. I am going to assume that those of us here are either aware of the ongoing disaster in Sudan or can easily find out. The UUSC's own brief statement of the situation is posted downstairs. In brief, the government has allowed and probably instigated monstrous deadly attacks on the black Africans in the country by groups like the Janjaweed militia, armed by the government. There have been over 300,000 deaths, 2.5 million people have been displaced and live with little safety or supplies.

The UUSC itself is working in the area, especially with women. It has a fund one can contribute to. It lobbies on behalf of action that might hasten an end to the violence, like more support for the pan-African troops there. And it urges action by us, specifically that we urge our legislators to keep pressure on President Bush to implement the Darfur Peace and Accountability Act that he signed into law last year, freezing the assets of those associated with creating the violence and denying access to ports in the United States to tankers doing business with Sudan.

But rather than go into the awful details of the situation, I want to deal with the feeling I sense among many people these days that it is hard to muster much enthusiasm for social causes in general when the prospects for success seem so dim. Another nightmarish slaughter in Africa, but for all the attention that has been focused on it by groups like the UUSC, it just goes on. And of course Iraq has left nearly everyone, whatever their initial feelings about the invasion and occupation, burdened with the sense that by now, no good can come of this, all the endings are bad ones.

I want to go back to Barbara Merritt's triangles, because however we imagine ourselves in the roles of rescuer, judge, and victim, it is a combination that is enervating. The trio of values that Barbara would have us move toward replaces the presumption of rescuing with humility, and then the role of judge with right relations, connection, and compassion both for other people, the ones we would help, as well as for ourselves. And then instead of victim, the beaten-down and defeated, there is a corner of the triangle alive with engagement, with hope that victimization can be successfully confronted through humble, determined, compassionate effort both personal and collective.

I am going to close with a longer-than-usual quotation, one on "The Politics of Hope" by Vaclav Havel, that highlights hope as a mixture of realism and conviction.

But I can't bring up the UUSC without crediting all that has been done by members of this congregation on that organization's behalf, especially by Bobby Robinson and Larry Shafer. And to note as well that along with coffee and chocolate sales as part of the UUSC Coffee Project, in partnership with Equal Exchange, we support the UUSC through the Guest at Your table boxes in December, with a special collection after that, and through the dues and contributions of the many First Parishioners who are UUSC members, too – which you can also do on line.

Speaking of which, if it is your thing, you can access UUSC blogs via that same website, and find out about such exciting opportunities as those for teens 16 and older in one-week JustWork Projects – and I will help sponsor any teen who signs up. My other UUSC-related activity of late has been to transfer out of a mutual fund that refuses to stop holding shares in companies that do business with the Sudanese government. It is not

going to stop the killing, but one can imagine every bit might help, and it is better than turning away.

In an interview published [in *Disturbing the Peace*] in 1989, Vaclav Havel, the Czechoslovakian playwright, political prisoner, and eventual president, spoke these words about hope:

“The kind of hope I often think about (especially in situations that are particularly hopeless, such as prison) I understand above all as a state of mind, not a state of the world. Either we have hope within us or we don’t; it is a dimension of the soul, and it’s not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. I don’t think you can explain it as a mere derivative of something here, of some movement, or of some favorable signs in the world. I feel that its deepest roots are in the transcendental, just as the roots of human responsibility are, though of course I can’t—unlike Christians, for instance—say anything concrete about the transcendental. An individual may affirm or deny that his hope is so rooted, but this does nothing to change my conviction (which is more than a conviction; it’s an inner experience). The most convinced materialist and atheist may have more of this genuine, transcendently rooted inner hope... than ten metaphysicians together.

“Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. In short, I think that the deepest and most important form of hope, the only one that can keep us above water and urge us to good works, and the only true source of the breathtaking dimension of the human spirit and its efforts, is something we get, as it were, from ‘elsewhere.’ It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.”

May such hope live on in us, and in the groups and causes we support, like the UUSC, and may our own hopes be supported by them in turn. Amen.