

The Rights of the Spirit: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

A Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist

On December 11, 2011

By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia

The Readings supporting this service were

From an Advent Sermon given on December 2, 1928 Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

From the words of The Reverend Allan Boesak, Anti-apartheid activist, leader of the World Alliance of Churches

And the full Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Sermon

We're in the grip of the holiday season – always a challenge for Unitarian Universalists as we try to honor and draw insight, inspiration, and joy from a wide range of holidays as well as honoring our own traditions and principles. It all comes on rather quickly. I've always been someone who preferred to sit back and really relish a holiday. I'm still savoring the Thanksgiving that we shared with family in Kentucky. But one of the most challenging moments was just as I arrived at the farm on the afternoon of Thanksgiving.

My thirteen year old niece, Kiera, ran up to me and said, "Aunt Hilary, can I talk with you about my class trip to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.?" I'm your know, the fun Aunt. We decided to talk the next day, and on Friday, I got Kiera and we went for a walk down the dirt road that leads to the road and then back up to the house. And the whole time we walked, Kiera poured out her observations, shock, sadness, and anger at what she had seen.

We settled back at the top of the driveway, leaning against a car and she talked until she had released some of her horror.

She wanted to understand why people do those things to other people and she wanted to understand how to keep that sort of thing from happening again. She expressed profound anger and she wanted to know how people had let Hitler get away with such monstrosities. I explained about how there had been more than one thousand years of terrible prejudice against and oppression of Jewish people in Europe and particularly around Germany and that the Holocaust was like the hatred boiling over.

We talked about how people label other people and dehumanize them. We talked about things that happen in her school – there's only one African American kid in her school and they talk a lot – and she shared with me about his experience as a student there. She talked with me about the way that kids at her school talk about Muslims. She talked about how she argues about that with them. We talked about the way that religion is often used to justify hurting people and that, while religion has its good points – it's also done a lot of harm.

We covered a lot of territory. We talked about the slippery slope that can lead good people to commit acts of evil -- from fights with her brother to bullies at school to American history. We had a long conversation then about religion and history.

And we talked about the resistance. I talked a little bit about Dietrich Bonhoeffer – the Lutheran pastor who'd been a pacifist until he realized the scope of the Holocaust. After inner turmoil and struggle, he decided that Hitler had to be stopped and he

became involved in the July 1944 plot to assassinate him. Bonhoeffer was arrested and then executed in 1945.

Bonhoeffer's journey was a powerful one. He began as a traditional theologian. He had preached that people of the Jewish faith would ultimately come around and be reconciled to Jesus as the Christ. But Bonhoeffer's faith also caused him to reflect deeply on the injustices of human society and, as he saw the racist policies of the Nazi regime intensify, he became active in helping Jews to escape and in preaching against the repression and oppression that he saw – going so far as to refuse a teaching position that had been closed to anyone of Jewish background. It was reason and compassion that caused Bonhoeffer to transform from a man of prayer and quiet protest to a man of prayer and resistance. Despair and holy anger pushed him further into plotting assassination.

Of course Keira needed more than the bad news. I explained that after the smoke of war settled, people, were devastated by the scope of what had happened and they never wanted it to happen again. I could see from Kiera's face that she never wanted it to happen again. And she is too old to tell fairy tales to. The struggle against hatred is a long and arduous one. It won't be won easily or perhaps ever. But I still wanted to give her some hope and I want to have some hope myself.

I asked Kiera if she'd learned yet about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Since she hadn't I explained to her that so many people were shocked by what had happened in the second world war that they got together at the United Nations and they wrote and ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948. I also explained that there was also a declaration on the Rights of the Child. I asked if she would like to see them and, being Kiera -- a bottomless pit of curiosity -- she did. So we went inside and sat side by side on the sofa and I popped open my laptop. It was almost just like a homey scene on an old fashioned holiday card as we sat together and read from the glowing screen. And Kiera jumped in and read the Declaration aloud. We'd stop often to talk about what each article meant. We got about two-thirds of the way through before a riot of Krivchenias rumbled through and distracted us, but I could see that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights had done its job.

A document can't really do much, however, in the real world without the will and work of the people. I confess for transparency, that I'm a dyed in the wool supporter of the United Nations and a believer in the Declaration. I'm saddened at the loss of traction of the United Nations, the Declaration of Human Rights, and even the Geneva Conventions.

I find myself asking, as Seyla Benhabib, asked in an essay written a couple of years ago, "What possible significance do these multilateral human covenants have if states continuously and brazenly violate them? Are these not mere words at worst or aspirational ideals at best that have little traction in limiting state conduct? Can these treaties be considered law at all?"

There's a temptation, in an age when corporations have equal if not greater rights than persons -- to wonder -- of what use these document are to us? In fact, I think that the declaration is of greater importance than ever. It isn't a document of social or civil rights alone -- it is a powerful vision of the spiritual rights of all people.

What are human beings really? We aren't simply eating, growing, living, and dying

creatures -- we have a life of the mind and heart. We have hungers for that which nourishes vision, that which connects, that which inspires, that which heals and holds and gives hope. By spiritual I mean all that -- all of those things which animate life beyond food and shelter -- which are fundamental. Fundamental in a very different way are the non-material things -- those things which are not things.

It is precisely because we have that spiritual dimension that the declaration was written. It recognizes that we are creatures of feeling, belief, thought, and impulse and that, while we dwell together on this one planet -- we are challengingly diverse.

Each person has been born into a place and time that offers a context for understanding the world and their place in it. From one epoch to another -- from one land to another -- accidents of birth, station, gender, temperament -- all blend to create a unique vision for each person. But that doesn't mean that we lack common ground or common good. It does mean that to find such things we need to survive the encounters and find have the commitment to one another to engage. In fact, our differences enrich us as long as they don't kill us. One of the ideological problems that has beset history is the idea that there is one ultimate truth and that anyone who holds differently must be terminally corrected.

The Declaration was written with the recognition that there are many in the world -- religious sects or nations in the grip of fascism - who hold with religious fervor that there is some belief that is more important than human life, that there are some beliefs so dangerous that those who think them must be killed. We saw it in the days and months after September 11, 2001, when some people thought that the threat from Islam was so profound that they sought out Muslims to torment, brutalize and even kill. The Declaration makes clear that there is no idea greater than the value of a life.

The declaration says that wherever you live in the world you are entitled to freedom of belief.

In Kiev we visited the Percherska Larva -- a huge Orthodox Christian cathedral compound. It's a UNESCO world heritage site and our cousin, Daniel was eager for us to see it. The compound is being restored and the pride and love that people had for it was evident. It reflected the long hidden yearning for a life of the spirit that had been beyond the pale during the Soviet regime. I attended a service there where the chanting of the priests sent me into a powerful meditation -- without my being able to understand a word. I was grateful that, even though the theology was not attractive to me -- the spiritual practice was powerful and genuine. And I was grateful that they had the freedom to follow that practice. In Switzerland, we visited the small church where our friends Beni and Mavina had blessed their children -- but no one in the family is actually religious. Instead they loved the ancient buildings and the freedom not to attend church. The Swiss government has been increasingly conservative and when, a few years ago they voted to ban the building of any further minarets for Muslim worship, an enterprising Swiss artist built a bunch of what he called sound bombs and planted them in church towers around the country and then he would turn them on and they would blast the sound of the Muslim call to prayer causing all and sundry to look up into bell towers and wonder what the heck was going on. It was a bold and non-violent way to create a noise for religious freedom -- even when it is not your own religion.

The declaration makes *clear* that religious freedom is a human right -- but demands that none of those beliefs be destructive to others. Religious zeal can be a

deadly weapon -- in the hands of any extremist -- Muslim, Christian, Jewish... or secular... and simply because it is religious or is dressed in religious clothing does not make it worth protecting.

It's an enlightened document -- not because it reflects the ideas of rights -- like I have a right and you have a right -- but that the rights we have must be entirely tempered by a respect for the space that we share and that we all have a right to share that space. And more -- that right does not come because we are male or female or rich or young or any other attribute -- but because we simply are. It is an enlightened document because it recognizes the inherent value of all persons, beyond their use to society or their status.

If you look closely at the Declaration of Human Rights there are key phrases that sound remarkably like our own principles. The dignity and worth of the human being, the right to a voice and a vote, the right of conscience... our principles are based very closely upon those key human rights. Those key human rights speak of a faith -- and a recognition of something that both inhabits and transcends the particularities of religion - - a faith in the dignity of the human and the inherent value of life. For Unitarian Universalists this faith in the worth of life and in human dignity is religiously central -- it is a bold statement against notions of original sin and the possibility of condemnation. It is a bolder statement of faith in the possibility of humans to create a just world together. You might argue that there's no real proof that people can create that world together -- given the hard evidence of history.

I agree that as long as we believe it's not possible -- it won't be. I also believe that, because the Universal Declaration of human rights exists -- created by human hearts and minds and human hopes and true endeavors -- it is a signal piece of evidence that perhaps, after all, a just world is possible. I respect the right of anyone to hold the 10 commandments as sacred, but I don't see that that having received them made humanity instantly better. Any good moral code requires not only that we live it ourselves but that we share and teach it and test it against the common good. But that's a long sermon in itself.

What I can say is that the Declaration of Human Rights outlines the opportunity to live together on earth in the wide array of our beliefs and at peace at the same time. It creates the possibility of a global commons -- where we can be enriched by our diversity and still have a common law that prevents any belief from being destructive of life and freedom. It is our greatest insurance against nightmares like the Holocaust or even the terrible violence in Darfur or Bosnia or countless other places. Where once we had no language to address the cruelties of the world we now have a language. Imperfect. Yes. And, more than anything, just as it required the hard work of dedicated people to draft it -- it will take generation after generation of dedicated persons to make it live into the future.

I had a great time with our Coming Of Age Class last Sunday afternoon after the second service. The lesson was about good and evil. Where evil comes from and why people hurt one another. I have to tell you that if you want to encounter some real philosophers and deep folk -- be a coming of age mentor sometime. Anyway, these young people knocked me over. One kid spoke about the ego, superego and id, and the need for our reason and compassion to help us overcome the primitive aspects of ourselves that are still acting as though they are fighting for survival when such a fight is

no longer needed or useful -- that we can be angry or combative when there is a real danger or when we are entirely mistaken about there being a real danger. Another kid spoke about our inherent interdependence and the idea that when someone misuses another person it's because they somehow fail to recognize that they are, in fact, one -- that no one is more valuable than another. Both of these kids understood in a very grounded way -- that we need some way to override our worst with our best. I found myself wishing that Kiera could be there with that remarkable group of young people.

They are products of families, a society, and a faith that take seriously the very core values that are outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Our Principles and the articles of the Declaration are born of the same spirit and the same hopes. Unitarian Universalists affirm and promote a bone deep faith in the ability of human beings to shape a fairer destiny for this world. I witnessed our young people whose vision, compassion, and yearning for justice makes me more hopeful. I feel more hope -- both in the hills of Kentucky and in the halls of Countryside Church.

I am unwilling to simply leave this mess for these new generations to deal with. It comes to these young people and to us to keep alive the vision of rights of persons and of the great value of global commons, it comes to us to work for the rights of persons far and near -- whose situations may be radically different from our own.

And though I find the holiday season racing by much too fast and I find that there is precious little peace on earth -- I have found that between the 63rd birthday of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the young people in whom those values are strong -- we have something powerful to celebrate.