

United Nations at 70 Years

Remarks by Rev Steven Epperson

October 25, 2015

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Opening words:

Over the years that we have gathered together on United Nations Sunday, I have come to look forward to this worship service. Along with the members of the Vancouver Branch of UN Association of Canada, we celebrate young people in the Lower Mainland by extending to them the John Gibbard Award in recognition of exemplary service and promotion of what's best about the spirit and ideals of the United Nations. As well, it's a Sunday in the year where we honour the *Sixth Principle* of our Canadian Unitarian covenant where we say that "we affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." And I'm grateful for that.

I wish to welcome the representative members of the Vancouver Branch of UN Association of Canada, and its President, Mrs Tazul Ali, and especially Miss Anjali Katta, this year's John Gibbard Award winner, along with her family and friends.

Meditation

You ask me, what are the main requirements of somebody who wishes to contribute to the development of peace and reason in the world...[?]. : '[You] must push [your] awareness to the utmost limit without losing [your] inner quiet, [you] must be able to see with the eyes of others from within their personality without losing [your] own.'

(DH to the author and 1974 Nobel Laureate, Eyvind Johnson, Jan. 31, 1958)

For over a decade now, I've spoken many times from this pulpit about the United Nations. I've talked about our nation's significant role in helping to found the UN seventy years ago at the San Francisco Conference. I was thrilled to learn of the crucial contribution of a Canadian judge and legal scholar in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. And I've been impressed and proud of Canada's multilateral record in peacekeeping, the International Criminal Court, the Ottawa Treaty on banning land mines, and other substantial ways our country has contributed to world affairs through active participation in the UN.

However, for over a decade, I also have lamented with you over Canada's ebbing influence in the UN; of how our role there has lately come to be seen as *not even controversial; it's been irrelevant*. Step-by-step over the years, our government's weird, unilateral foreign policy, its antipathy to international institutions, have made no difference to the United Nations; instead, it locked us out of a seat in the Security Council and made us of no consequence in numerous international political, humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts. (see Omer Aziz, "Canada is missing in action at the United Nations," *Globe and Mail*, August 12, 2015)

And then, just last week, like in a dream, it looks as though all that may change.

I think we've just passed through a long-needed, honest look at ourselves—who we are and what we can once again become. And we're on the cusp of rediscovery. Though extensive in size, we're a modest nation, with modest budgets, and a small military. We're a relatively uncorrupted, liberal, multicultural democracy; and we're not lugging around a lot of imperialist, messianic baggage around. These are credible assets. When we add to them our instinctive commitment to fairness, multilateralism, process-oriented diplomacy, *and* our historical legacy in the UN and other global institutions, we could rediscover and serve, once again, a significant role as an honest, fair partner, a leader, even, in world affairs.

Unitarian Universalists have been allies and supporters of the UN from its inception to the present. Our support for the aspirations and work of the UN runs deep and over the past seventy years, it has not wavered. Our faith affirms and supports the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. And though it may be a flawed vessel (what human institution isn't?), we affirm the vision and good work of the United Nations.

Just one example: the UN's World Food Programme. This agency delivers food and other relief supplies to about 80 million people in more than 80 countries every year. Last year, it distributed 3.2 tons of food, using 70 aircraft, 20 ships and 5000 trucks. It worked on six simultaneous emergencies—West Africa's Ebola epidemic, Syria, Central African Republic, South Sudan, post-typhoon Philippines and Iraq; and it provided specialized nutritional support to 7.3 million malnourished children. While our country was secretly selling weapons to Saudi Arabia, which it used to bomb neighbouring Yemen, the UN was able to get food to 700,000 starving Yemenis in the month of July alone. (see Cla Ni Chonghaile, "What's the best bit of the UN?...the World Food Programme," *Guardian*, September 8, 2015)

Don't forget, in what's being called a "G-Zero World," where no one country is distinctly in charge, states are increasingly turning to the UN and its agencies as a forum, mediator and

coordinator” of efforts that run the gamut from feeding refugees in Middle East and Europe to Iran nuclear negotiations. Time for us to stop carping from the sidelines and, once again, champion what’s good about the UN and to contribute positively to helping it run more effectively so that it and we will better achieve our vision of a more just and peaceful world.

We are honoured to celebrate the vision and work of Anjali Katta. Your efforts, awarded here today, may pass largely unnoticed by news media; but Miss Katta, please know that within these walls, and at this hour, we care, we notice and celebrate with keen interest and sincere approval who you are, what you have accomplished, and what you will go on to achieve in the future.

I want to commend the Vancouver Branch of the United Nations Association in Canada for their good work and endurance through this past decade. Last year, I said that the time would come when the petulant disdain by our government for the UN would come to an end; that we would put away childish things, believing that an adult would walk into the room. Little did I know how soon those words would come true!

So in closing, again, I want to thank the members of the Vancouver Branch of the UN Association of Canada, and extend our heartfelt congratulations to Ms. Katta on receiving this year’s John Gibbard Memorial Award.