

Can We Celebrate the UN Anymore?
Rev. Dr. Steven Epperson, UCV Parish Minister
October 25, 2009

After honouring the Cariboo Hill Youth Action Committee, commemorating the legacy of John Gibbard, and having just read the stirring words taken from the Preamble of the UN Charter, the title of what I wanted to say might seem out of place: “*Can we celebrate the UN anymore?*” You know as well as I do that the United Nations—its governance structure and funding, its leadership, its programs, its history of military intervention and peacekeeping—has been, at times, the object of controversy and severe criticism. It’s accused of legitimating anti-democratic regimes and despots, and of being reluctant to achieve or enforce General Assembly and Security Council resolutions. As well, and all-too-recently, disagreements among member states about military action and intervention have been seen as having failed to prevent the Rwandan genocide (1994), the massacre in Srebrenica (1995), or to provide adequate humanitarian assistance and protection to Sudanese civilians in Darfur.

Each of us can conjure a disturbing image, a failed effort, a disheartening example of the United Nations, in reality, not living up to its principles and purpose. Controversy and failure are grist for the mill of the news media; it is that upon which they fixate because it grabs our attention, provokes our emotions, and thus, embeds in our memory. Unnoticed, far-less-often reported, too often forgotten, are the myriad, daily decent acts and achievements of United Nations workers and projects—projects like the UN World Food Program that helps to feed 100 million people every year in 80 countries, or the work of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in 116 nations, or the unsung, largely unnoticed efforts of UN peacekeepers at work in more than two dozen hot spots around the world.

That to which we are indifferent, or which provides quiet satisfaction, does not give rise to controversy and criticism, whether in interpersonal relations or in the relations between nation states. There is controversy, there is passion, there is criticism of the UN, I believe, because we care so deeply for it; we want desperately for the work of the United Nations, as guided by its principles of its founding charter, to flourish and succeed. For that reason, Unitarian Universalists have been allies and supporters of the UN from its inception to the present. And we are honoured to be able to host and celebrate a group of young people whose efforts, awarded here today, may pass unnoticed, unremarked by our local news organizations; but within these walls, and at this hour, we care, we notice, and attend to what you have accomplished with interest and approval.

On the cover of today's order of service are two images: on the left, the first three words of the UN Charter; to the right, a symbolic sculpted depiction of charter principles in action. The UN stills means a great deal to me for two reasons suggested by these images. The first is that its Charter, and other foundational documents, express the sincere aspirations of human family of the kind of world we want to live in. In the wake of World Wars and an unprecedented assault on human dignity, founding member nations of the UN, through these documents, have set the bar of hope, desire and achievement in realms of justice, peace, security, human rights and living standards very high indeed; as they should. As well, without excuse or apology, what the charter and subsequent declarations affirm and demand of our governments, and of us, are universal in scope and application. No one is let off the hook. Thus, when the Canadian government violates the inherent right of everyone "to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being...including...housing", we can turn with vigour and confidence to Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Turn to it, and demand that our government

respect its human rights obligations, and thus provide the kind of legislation and leadership needed in order to alleviate the nation-wide housing crisis into which our country has descended. We can call governments and elected representatives to a reckoning because the UN is there; and Canada is a signatory, in black and white, no shades of grey, to the Universal Declarations of Human Rights.

The second reason the UN stills means a great deal to me is due to what I mentioned earlier: the unnoticed, many, daily decent acts and achievements of United Nations workers and projects. One example; and we bring this service to a close.

Nine years ago, the brief, brutal war in Kosovo sputtered to a messy end. Serbian troops retreated from the region quicker than the UN had anticipated. In their wake: mayhem, murder and destruction. One particularly gruesome mass killing site was at the village of Suvareko, near the Albanian border. The UN was overwhelmed and left without forensic teams that it could put on the ground to identify the dead, return the remains to their loved ones, and begin the process of bringing the killers to justice. The UN put out a call for help: we need *gratis* forensic teams to come to the site. Professor Sue Black, a forensic anthropologist of the University of Dundee, and head of its Centre of Anatomy and Identification, led the first team to Suvareko.

In 38° heat, four months after the massacre, she skillfully, clinically gathered and identified the remains. Sometimes, all she had to go by was a remnant of a Mickey Mouse tee-shirt, or a distinctive button sown on the only shirt one man owned. For the sake of justice, for sake of mercy, for work without pay, Professor Black carefully separated and identified the remains of each individual so that they could be repatriated and buried by their loved ones.

“What drives me,” she said, “is that it is the right thing to do. Someone needs to be able to identify who these people are because each of us came into life with a name and we deserve

and need to go out with that same dignity...Every person deserves decency and respect. And everything we do is carried out to that level regardless of who they were, or where they came from.”

Professor Black—and those countless other individuals who work for the UN, whether for pay or not—she’s the reason why I celebrate the United Nations today. It is because of what she does and what they do: identifying and repatriating the dead, feeding and caring for the living, and striving for a world more just, decent and fair—that gives me good cause today, in spite of criticism and controversy—good cause, good reason to celebrate and honour the United Nations.

(To listen to the remarkable interview with Professor Sue Black in its entirety: “All Things Considered,” BBC/Radio Wales, October 18, 2009)

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