

# **Darfur: the Horror and the Hope**

## **Sermon by H. Richard Levy**

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Syracuse, March 25, 2007

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Good morning! Today Unitarian-Universalist communities throughout the United States are observing Justice Sunday. This is an opportunity for us to remember our principles of justice, equity, and compassion, and to translate that compassion into action. The focus of this year's Justice Sunday is Darfur, the region of Sudan where a genocide has been in progress for the past 4 years. The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee has called on all UU's to mount a "Drumbeat for Darfur", in order to keep the issue alive and to redouble our effort to put an end to the genocide there. I have a personal interest in Darfur because I fled from another genocide as a young boy. More about that later.

Darfur is a region in western Sudan that is populated by two groups of Muslims: African tribal people who are primarily farmers and shepherds, and nomadic Arab herders. Periodically, quarrels have arisen between these two groups over scarce resources, and as the desert encroached upon arable land these disputes intensified. Four years ago, African rebel groups attacked government posts, demanding equal treatment and protection. The government responded by arming nomadic Arab groups called Janjaweed, and turning them upon African civilians. The Janjaweed, riding camels or horses, attack villages, burn down the houses, rape the women, and kill the men, children and livestock. These attacks are supported by the Sudanese military, whose airplanes and helicopters usually bomb and shell the villages just prior to the Janjaweed assaults.

By now over 300,000 members of the African tribes have been killed, and two and a half million have fled their homes, many to neighboring Chad, where they are housed in UN-run refugee camps. They don't have enough food, water, shelter or health care, and they are subject to raids by the Janjaweed, who have crossed the border to pursue them. Numerous international aid organizations have been in Darfur to help the civilians and refugees, but most have left because of the increasing dangers to their personnel due to collapsing security.

For over two years, the rest of the world ignored this 21st. century genocide in Darfur,- just as it had previously ignored the genocide of Armenians, Jews, Cambodians, Rwandans, and Congolese in the 20th. century. The excuse for inaction then was that we didn't know what was going on, until it was too late. Tales of extermination camps in Germany during the Nazi era were widely discounted. Likewise, there was disbelief

about the Turks' massacre of the Armenians, about Pol Pot's murderous polices in Cambodia, and we knew little about the genocide in Rwanda until it was over.

But we **do** know what is happening in Darfur: The killings are widely chronicled, yet the international response has been pathetic. And there **is** precedence for intervention to prevent genocide. In 1999 the U.S. participated in a NATO-led offensive in Kosovo precisely for that reason. Fewer than 10,000 white people had died in the civil war leading up to that action; several hundred thousand black people have been massacred in Darfur and still there is no meaningful response. Elie Wiesel has written: "Let us remember: what hurts the victims of genocide most is not the cruelty of the oppressor, but the silence of the bystander."

Justice Sunday is organized by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which has a long history of actions to advance human rights and promote social justice. It was formed in 1963 by merging the Unitarian and the Universalist Service committees. Among the founders of the Unitarian Service Committee were the Rev. Waitstill Sharp, a Unitarian minister in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and his wife Martha. I want to digress briefly to tell you their story.

In October 1938, Hitler annexed the Sudetenland, a portion of Czechoslovakia. As a result, some 250,000 refugees fled to the capital, Prague. The Sharps went to Prague in February 1939 as representatives of the American Unitarian Association, to try to help with the overwhelming problems of these refugees. They also helped Jews and opponents of the Nazi regime escape to safety. On March 15, the Nazis marched into Czechoslovakia, taking over that country and making the Sharps' work much more urgent and dangerous. They remained in Prague for another 5 months, and left for the United States 4 days before the outbreak of World War II, and just one day before Gestapo agents came to arrest Martha Sharp. During those months they continually risked their own lives to save the lives of others.

Less than a year later, the Sharps returned to Europe to conduct another rescue and relief mission. Their operation helped to rescue thousands of refugees, and led directly to the creation of what is now the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

Last year, the Sharps were posthumously granted the title of *Righteous Among the Nations* by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel. This honor is conferred upon those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. Last fall, the U.S. Congress approved a resolution honoring the Sharps and commended the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee for its efforts to rescue Jews and anti-Nazi dissidents in Europe during World War II.

When the Sharps' daughter accepted the Yad Vashem honor on behalf of her parents, she said that they were "modest and ordinary people, who responded to the suffering and needs around them ... as they would have expected everyone to do in a similar situation" and that the honor was also about "the unseen efforts of a much wider

circle of people who made their work possible”. She added: “it is the kind of network that is needed again today to stop the slow genocide in Darfur.”

The congressional resolution to honor the Sharps commends the Unitarian Universalist Service Organization for carrying on the Sharps’ legacy by working to save the lives of the people of Darfur, and to protect human rights worldwide.

Extraordinary deeds are accomplished by ordinary people moved to action through compassion. Extraordinary deeds can also be taken by governments aroused to action by compassionate citizens. I myself am the beneficiary of such extraordinary deeds. On that very day when Hitler’s troops marched into Czechoslovakia, and the Sharps were in Prague, I boarded a train in Leipzig, Germany. I was 9 years old and, along with hundreds of other children, bound for England. We were without our parents, on our way to families we didn’t know,- but to safety.

The plight of the Jews in Germany had become desperate following *Kristalnacht* (“the night of broken glass”) in November 1938. That night, all over Germany, the Nazis burned down synagogues, ransacked Jewish shops, and arrested Jewish men,- including my father. Public opinion was shocked by newspaper reports of these events. In Britain it galvanized prominent individuals to speak directly with the prime minister. The cabinet adopted a proposal to admit unaccompanied refugee children under the age of 17 years to Britain. In two weeks the first trainload of children left Berlin. Some 10,000 mostly Jewish children from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia were brought to England on *Kindertransports* (i.e. children transports) which were financed by committed Jewish and non-Jewish individuals and organizations.

Like thousands of others, my parents had tried, in vain, to escape from Nazi Germany. The *Kindertransports* provided the opportunity for my parents at least to get me out. They located distant relatives in England, whom we didn’t know, willing to take me. Their names were Win and Bernard Schlesinger,- a remarkable couple who had 5 children of their own, and who not only took me into their own home, but provided a facility and support for 12 other Jewish refugee children. My mother and baby sister did manage to escape just days before the war started.

One reason for the rapid approval by the British cabinet of the *Kindertransports* was the hope that their lead would be followed in the United States. Sadly, this did not happen. A plan to admit refugee children to this country came to Congress early in 1939, but it was opposed by the powerful anti-immigration lobby and died in committee.

The *Kindertransports* were extraordinarily successful. In terms of numbers, they were minuscule: 10,000 children saved from the millions of individuals destined to be exterminated. But for those of us fortunate enough to participate, it meant literally everything. Their success depended on three factors: **publicity** about the shocking *Kristalnacht* event; the commitment and compassion of many **individuals** galvanized by this publicity; and the courage of a **government** to mount a humanitarian action in the

face of strong opposition. It is these three ingredients that provide the hope for a solution to end the genocide in Darfur.

First, the publicity. Although there have been many reports about Darfur, most have been in the printed media. In 1938, the principal means of disseminating news was newspapers. Today it is television. The impact of T.V. coverage is enormous. Recall what happened a few weeks ago when the housing situation at Walter Reed Hospital was shown on T.V. The outcry was huge, and within days there was action!

Many Americans still don't know about Darfur. What is needed is much more T.V. coverage. ABC nightly T.V. newscasts devoted only 11 minutes to Darfur in all of 2006. But finally there is hope. Just this week, Ann Curry's passionate reports about Darfur on NBC-TV mark a new level of commitment to bring this story to a large television audience. It is worth noting that Ann Curry's relentless desire to cover this story of human suffering was inspired by learning, as a child, of those who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

The second ingredient is the actions of individuals. The sheer monstrosity of genocide is itself a problem. We find it impossible to comprehend the murder of 300,000 individuals in Darfur, or of six million Jews by the Nazis. What moves us is what we feel in the heart. And that occurs when we connect with individuals and feel compassion. In his book "The Quest for Wholeness", Robert Brumet reminds us that compassion begins with empathy, the ability to deeply understand another person's experience. Empathy allows us to see through the eyes of another person, to feel that person's pain. When we feel empathy for someone we open our heart and become connected to them. It empowers us and leads to action. It is impossible to connect with hundreds of thousands, or millions of people in that way. But we **can** connect with individuals.

NY Times journalist Nicholas Kristof understands this very well. He has visited Darfur many times and his numerous reports during the past 2 years concentrate on the plight of individuals. His heart-rending stories engender compassion precisely because we can empathize with the people he writes about.

Kristof tells of a 20-year-old woman, Halima Abdelkarim. Last March the Janjaweed, wearing Sudanese military uniforms, arrived at Halima's town, rounded up the women, berated them with racial epithets, beat them with sticks, and then gang-raped them all. Halima, who was 3 months pregnant, was raped by 3 men; her little 10-year-old sister Sadia was raped by two men. They tried to take Sadia's donkey, but she resisted, so they shot and killed her. Halima and the other survivors made their way to a nearby shantytown where she eventually gave birth. Some time later the Janjaweed began attacking the women when they left the camp to collect firewood. The women do this job because if the Janjaweed catch men, they kill them; women are "only" raped. And that is what happened to Halima,- again. She was carrying her baby; the Janjaweed threw the baby on the ground and three of them raped her, beat her, and stole her clothes. "You blacks are like monkeys, you are not human" they shouted, "We can do anything we want to you."

Hashim Adam Mersal, a young African tribesman, managed to escape from Darfur and now lives in Pittsburgh. Mr. Mersal's village was attacked by Sudanese planes in August 2003. Then the Janjaweed arrived, sacked the village, raped the women, and killed many of the men, including Hashim's father and brother. His mother begged him to take the family's only valuable possession, what was left of their cattle, to Chad. He walked for two days to get there, leaving behind his mother and 16 surviving siblings. After two years he managed to come to the States, using a phony diplomatic passport from Chad, in order to tell the story of his people's demise. Eventually he was caught and jailed, but later he was released on a \$5000 bond. He now awaits action on his application for political asylum. Recently, he learned that his mother and siblings are alive, in a refugee camp. Mr. Mersal says that what is desperately needed in Darfur is peacekeepers on the ground to stop the killings. He is wracked by guilt at having survived, when so many others died. "I am alive and breathing, but I am like a dead man who walks. The rest of my life will be nothing but sorrow" he laments.

The third ingredient for hope, from the success of the *Kindertransports*, is the need for effective government action. The United Nations has been completely impotent in stopping the genocide in Darfur. The U.N. Charter declares that genocide is a crime and requires member nations to take measures to prevent and punish any acts of genocide. All U.N. peacekeeping missions must be authorized by the Security Council; they must have the consent of all the parties concerned; and they must preserve the sovereignty of the host state. These provisions have impeded successful U.N. action in Darfur. The U.N. has **not** declared the killings in Darfur a genocide because of the resistance of several countries, principally China, a member of the Security Council which has economic ties with Sudan. The Chinese are the principal buyers of Sudanese oil. They supply Sudan with Chinese AK-47s, which are used by the Janjaweed, as well as military materiel used by the Sudanese army. The government of Sudan, which is itself complicit in the genocide, has argued that its sovereignty is threatened by U.N. peacekeepers.

In order to stop the genocide in Darfur, a robust U.N. peacekeeping force of at least 20,000 needs to be dispatched immediately. Sudanese President Bashir's past refusal to allow peacekeepers into Darfur can no longer be allowed to act as a deterrent to the halting of genocide. The U.S. should supply airlifts, and a no-fly zone must be enforced to prevent Sudanese planes from bombing the villages. To take these steps will require the political will to oppose Bashir's intransigence. All hope for ending the genocide rests with U.S. leadership. President Bush's record on Darfur, to his credit, is better than those of other leaders. He **has** labeled the killings in Darfur genocide, although he has still not made Darfur a priority. A month ago the U.S. special envoy for Sudan, Andrew Natsios, returned to Sudan in a new effort to expedite deployment of peacekeepers to Darfur. Recently, he visited China to urge the Beijing government to use its economic leverage in this effort. To translate these initiatives into finally ending the genocide will require unwavering leadership by the American government. And **that**, in turn, will take continued, relentless pressure by committed American citizens.

Polls show that the majority of American people believe that our government has the responsibility to stop the genocide in Darfur, and that not enough has been done. Thousands have been moved to act, They have protested, attended rallies, donated money, and raised awareness.

Entertainers George Clooney and Angelina Jolie have raised consciousness by traveling to Darfur; pictures of Jolie's most recent trip are in last week's issue of Newsweek. Congressman Tom Lantos, Democrat from California and currently Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs,- and the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to the U.S. Congress,- has been a strong voice of conscience for Darfur for 3 years. Lantos was arrested eleven months ago at a protest rally about Darfur at the Sudanese Embassy in Washington. He was joined by several others, including UU's Rev. Dr. Terrence Ellen.

Marine Corps veteran Brian Steidle spent 6 months as a State Department representative with the African Union's peacekeeping mission in Darfur. He took thousands of pictures to document the genocide, some of which are posted on the web. He could no longer stand the feeling of impotence brought on by what he saw. He brought his photos home and launched a 21,000 mile "Tour for Darfur", covering 22 cities in 11 states. His goal is to spur Americans to urge our government to support an armed, multinational peacekeeping force in Darfur.

But you do not need to be a Brian Steidle, or an Angelina Jolie, or a Waitstill and Martha Sharp, to make a difference. Each of us can contribute in some way. 13 year-old Rachel Koretsky of Philadelphia organized a rally, distributed circulars, and conducted a raffle to raise \$14,000 for Darfur as her bat mitzvah charity project. There are numerous web sites with useful information and suggestions how you can help. A partial list is available at the Darfur Table in Fellowship Hall.

When Nicholas Kristof speaks about the Darfur genocide he is often asked why he goes on about it so much. After all, there are so many problems that need fixing here at home. This is his response: "We have a moral compass within us, and its needle is moved not only by human suffering but also by human evil".

And let us remember what the 18th. century Irish statesman Edmund Burke, wrote: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."