

A Visible Prayer

November 15, 2009

I tried to send an e-mail last week to the Decorating team. The message disappeared into the bowels of the computer and told me it was “sent.” Two minutes later an e-mail popped up telling me I had “permanent fatal errors” and bounced back all my addresses. I tried again and once more the little mail demon informed me again of the apparent demise of my message.

We live interesting time, when the words “permanent” and “fatal” no longer apply to a real tragedy or crisis, rather a minor inconvenience that does not affect the very depth of our well being. Even our machines use them blithely. To add to the casual way in which we toss these words around, I’ll bet we are the only country on the face of the earth that has an “emergency feed” on our paper towel dispensers!”

We have become accustomed to such language when referring to the activities of everyday life, and hence, these words begin to lose their real meaning as many of our daily “crises” are very far removed from those of so many whose lives are steeped in tragedy, poverty, warfare, hunger and are truly in physical and emotional jeopardy on a daily basis.

This thought occurred to me when preparing for this sermon and the work of the *Unitarian Universalist Service Committee*, that sponsors the *Guest At Your Table* program that Sonja spoke of this morning.

As you begin to fill your boxes, putting in a few coins each day, you may wonder where it goes, for what purpose and to whom. You may ask how can your little box make a difference? Making a difference was the reason the UUSC was created and began with the efforts of 2 people.

Prior to the origin of the Service Committee, one couple, a minister from The Wellesley Hills Congregation in Massachusetts, and his wife had been closely following the rise of Nazism and the impending German Occupation in Czechoslovakia.

In the United States sympathy for the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany was virtually non-existent, however the Unitarians passed a resolution at the annual meeting of the AUA in May of 1933 stating that they “greatly deplore the persecution of the Jews in Germany as a violation of equity, tolerance and humanity.”

As the war and persecution began to escalate in Europe, Waitstill and Martha Sharp made the decision to leave their Congregation and their two young children behind and in February of 1939, they traveled to Prague one month prior to the occupation. The American Unitarians had very close ties with the Czech Unitarians and were more informed than most as to the unfolding events in Czechoslovakia. The Universalists had similar connections in Holland and in 1940 established a War Relief Fund. In 1945 The Universalists proposed a joint Unitarian Universalist relief project in Holland, long before their merger as the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee in 1963.

After 5 months Martha and Waitstill secured exit visas and gave funds to the Czech Unitarians and other relief agencies and secured jobs overseas for those leaving the country. Their first trip abroad ended in August of the same year, to escape arrest from the Gestapo.

Less than a year later under the auspices of the newly formed Unitarian Service Committee the Sharps arrived in Lisbon and focused their efforts on the most vulnerable; prominent Jewish Intellectuals and refugee children, determined to get them out of occupied France. Risking arrest and death at the hands of the Nazis, they managed to secure food and water for the refugees, places of safety and personally escorted hundreds through escape routes in France and Holland to freedom.

It is estimated that between 1,000 and 3,000 were saved by the efforts of the Sharps and support from the Service Committees.

Today their legacy is well remembered as an unselfish and dangerous act of courage that gave pro-active credence to the resolution against persecution that both the Unitarians and Universalists had adopted.

Since that time, The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee was created because of the courage of two individuals who dared to put themselves in harms way, knowing full well they could lose their lives for the cause they believed in- for an act of hatred that most ignored and denied at the time . The UUSC has continued to target hot spots of persecution, genocide, poverty and war induced homelessness all across the globe. The Annual Guest at Your Table program does not ask us to risk our lives for injustices that we know exist. It does not expect us to leave our homes our loved ones and our children to care for those we have never met. It does not ask us to travel thousands of miles at our own expense to face the indelible horrors that haunt and cripple the minds of even the most emotionally secure. The Sharps were the exception; we all understand that; however the few dollars we place in that little box, without a risk to our own lives, , and happiness can have a tremendous impact on those who receive our gifts. As the UUSC is financially independent from the UUA and federal government, it depends upon our donations to make a difference, as a UU Society and as a member of The Association of UU Churches.

The first objective of the UUSC is education is to bring serious life altering issues to the attention of general public. So how is our collective donation used?

A \$30.00 donation pays for part of a multicultural brochure for Boston Residents about The Color of Water project, which outlines the unfair practices in which the Boston poor are over taxed on water supply which is the result for irresponsible corporate pollution. It also contributes in securing water resources for drought ridden areas in the US and across the globe.

\$40.00 buys materials for a woman in northern Uganda to make her own ground nut sheller, which helps reduce women's workload and increases badly needed family income as residents return home after more than 20 years of war.

\$65.00 pays for a small business loan for a displaced woman in Kenya. Kakamega Grassroots Initiative organizes women displaced by the 2008 electoral violence, into groups of 20 and provides them with training and small business loans. There is a high rate of re-payment and the first group of recipients are on their second loan.

\$66.00 pays for a door to door campaign in Swento South Africa, to educate citizens on their right to water-as guaranteed by their constitution- and helps carry out inspections by residents of municipal water services.

- As the financial gifts increase, so does the impact on communities in, the U.S., Guatemala, Gaza, Asia.**
- \$8,000 pays for a 'Women's center in Darfur, where women receive training in their rights and small business management, as well as business funds. The women's centers also help women organize their firewood committees. They also provide a place for psycho-social counseling and a chance for women to learn new skills. The funds pay for the construction of the center, staffing, equipment, and supports the start-up of small businesses.**
- \$10,000 allows the UUSC partner Barakat to provide human-rights training workshops for 100 schoolteachers in Afghanistan during their summer break.**

The Guest at Your Table is only one of the many sources of funding that supports the work of the UUSC, that strives to meet the needs of so many in this country and abroad. The list of their programs and services is very extensive and I hope you will take the time to read the literature, visit their website and better still, become a member.

I was fortunate to become a part of The UUSC Just Works program in 1998 and went to North and South Carolina to help rebuild the AME black churches that were torched in great numbers. There are many

opportunities open for those, both adults and youth, who would like to volunteer to help in oppressed areas this country and overseas.

In the days to come, as we contribute to our Guest at Your Table boxes, I am grateful to the work of the Sharps, for doing what most of us would not do, risk our own security and wellbeing for the needs of others. Their actions prompted an opportunity to help and support those who will go, and will experience the horrors we read about first hand, that we hear of on the news in the comfort of our own homes.

In his sermon last week Richard Levy told us of his personal experiences as a young German boy, who witnessed the ravages of the Nazis, and was saved by the unselfishness of a couple who took him in and raised him in London as their own.

We owe him our gratitude for his willingness to tell his story, to educate us, to act in anyway we can to curb the great distress experienced today by those who are still embedded in the throes of the terrors of human destruction.

Each day as we add our coins and checks, I am proud to be a Unitarian Universalist, whose spoken resolutions have become more than hollow words on a page to be filed away.

I have taken to heart my computers offhanded comments and unwelcome comments, it's version of fatal errors"-now taken in its proper context, for what it really is, a minor inconvenience, far removed from the reality of what a permanent fatal error can mean to those who have, in real life, been victims.

May our gifts be the visible prayer we all hope for, that our actions today, will mean justice for another, tomorrow.

So be it

Amen

Rev. Helen C. (Holly) Baylies©

