

The Good Somalian

A service celebrated at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse on 25 March 2007
Chip Roush

PRELUDE

{*Can You Hear?*, sung with pictures of people projected on screen}

FIRST READING

The United Nations Charter is a treaty, now signed by 192 nations, that governs how the member states will treat each other. It was signed in San Francisco, on June 26, 1945, by 50 of the 51 original members. This is excerpted from the Preamble to the Charter; as it is included in our hymnals. "We the peoples of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, ... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, ... to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, and for these ends to practice tolerance and live together in peace...as good neighbors, to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples, have resolved to combine our efforts to accomplish these aims..."

SECOND READING by Margaret Koblinski, as told to Maura Brennan

Last Saturday I got up at 5:30 am, as has been my habit since my son joined the swim team. It was another icy February day, and I was feeling a little sorry for myself as I left my warm house, my husband snoring away, wrapped in a cozy comforter. I dropped Connor at practice, and went to the nearby Denny's fast food restaurant to wait it out. I had become an early morning regular there, as it is too far to drive home and come back in the space of an hour and a half practice time. I grumbled as I got out of the car, and wondered aloud whether my son would ever fully appreciate the sacrifices that were made for him throughout his childhood. I settled in with my Home Décor magazine, and my coffee, and thought, with a heavy sigh, about the dozens of chores on my List at home. As I tore a picture from the magazine, I noticed a woman across the restaurant, who was also tearing pages out of a magazine. She was intent on her work, but it didn't take me long to recognize that she had the look of a street person. She was hunched over and mumbling to herself. Her oversized sweater was dirty. Her hair was greasy and unkempt.

I was flooded with sadness and an immediate pang of guilt. I was ashamed for my recent feelings of martyrdom. I don't know what *real* hardship is, I lectured myself in my head. I woke up in 200 count sheets in a warm house. I have **never** gone without three square meals, let alone shelter. I have a family who loves me... and all my faculties... and my health. I am blessed and lucky, and I will never forget it again, I thought. I resolved to remember this woman whenever I felt crabby about an errand or an inconvenience. A little dose of reality, I thought, is an excellent cure for a middle class mother's pity party.

I have had similar thoughts seeing homeless people on the street. But, the pang of guilt didn't pass as quickly this time. This woman was obviously not going anywhere soon, with the icy rain hitting the window, and sitting across from her, I had plenty of time to contemplate. I couldn't quite tell if she was a street person, or perhaps just living in a shelter without access to laundry facilities. Either way, she was undoubtedly down on her luck, her left shoe held together with duct tape. As I watched her randomly tearing page after page out of the magazine without even looking at them, I wondered, "Is she mentally ill, or just eccentric?" If she **is** living on the street, what could have happened to make her life get so far off track? Does she have family? I noticed that she had nothing in front of her except the magazine, and wondered, "Is she hungry?" I thought of a cousin, who is schizophrenic, that my family has lost contact with. He has told his sister of times when he was living on the street and relied on the kindness of strangers.

I decided to buy her breakfast. The thought made me happy. I would lighten her load, and my own spirits both. I just knew it would make me feel good for the rest of the day.

But as I clutched the money in my hand something stopped me from approaching her. What if she does have mental health issues and she becomes violent? What if she makes a scene or hits me? What if she isn't mentally unstable and is incredibly insulted? Then, another thought hit me. What if she isn't even homeless?

I thought of my own appearance. I had pulled on my sweatshirt and jeans in the dark, careful not to wake my husband, and jumped in the car without much attention to personal hygiene. I suddenly realized I probably had remnants of last night's mascara running down my own face. I almost giggled at the thought of my act of charity being rebuffed in perfect English, and then running into her picking up her child from swim class.

I sat there for a long time, unable to go through with my decision to buy her breakfast. I imagined if my husband was there, he would talk me out of it. "You don't **know** that she is hungry," he would say (But, this would just be his way of avoiding a risky and uncomfortable interaction)." It was risky. I decided that it could be a very positive experience or a very negative one.

I decided to take the risk.

I walked over and touched her on the sleeve. "Hi," I said.

She looked up, startled. "I couldn't help but notice you're tearing pages out of magazines, just like I am. I don't know about you, but I usually end up throwing most of them away," I said.

She smiled.

Not having planned this out completely, I awkwardly blurted out "Could I buy you breakfast?"

She looked down, embarrassed. "Oh, no. That's okay," she said, wrinkling her brow.

My worst nightmare had come true. I had insulted her! I felt like an idiot. I mentally planned to slink back to my seat, but suddenly I started talking again. Not usually quick on my feet, I was surprised to hear myself say, very naturally, "Well actually, you would be doing me a favor. You see my sister and I have decided to each commit three random acts of kindness this month, and I just realized I am behind and the month is almost over. And you are the only other person here. So, I can't take no for an answer. Please, I insist." I put a twenty dollar bill on the table and turned back toward my seat.

But, before I reached my seat a loud voice came from behind me. "Hey," she said gruffly. "Oh my god," I thought. Here's the part where she causes a scene or smacks me in the face or throws my money back in my face, calling me "uppity" or worse.

But when I turned around, her face had softened. "Thanks," she said, looking right at me. And then, as if summing up in one word her whole story and how much this money would help, she added ... "a lot."

SERMON How many of you have ever encountered a person seemingly in need, and felt the same complex feelings as Maura's sister/Mary's aunt? How many know that truly awful things are going on in Darfur? How many know that Darfur is in the Sudan, not Somalia, as my poorly-named sermon might otherwise suggest? How many of us feel guilty because we aren't doing more— locally or globally or both— but we're so busy or exhausted or depressed or burned out that hearing about one more deserving cause may actually discourage, rather than energize, us?

Jesus was one of the first Trickster prophets. According the scholars of the Jesus Seminar, his parables generally had a surprising twist to them. I think he was trying to *wake* his listeners up, get them to understand reality in a different way, something like Zen teachers do with their koans.

So, when a lawyer asked Jesus about the greatest commandment, Jesus turned the question back to him, asking "what is written in the law?" Jesus was also a pretty good at debate. The lawyer said something like, "Love your god with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus agreed. But the lawyer, for whom I have a great fondness, because I have the same question, asked, "but *who* is my neighbor?!"

That's when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, after which he asked the lawyer, "who was a neighbor to the person who needed help?" "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus responded, "Go

and do likewise.” The classification of “neighbor” does not depend, according to this parable, on geographic proximity or theological or cultural similarity. Rather, our neighbors are those toward whom we show mercy. Jesus has again turned the question around, on us: there is no external limit on neighborliness. Through our own behavior, we control who is or is not our neighbor.

There is no easy way off the hook; no predetermined criteria: we have to decide for ourselves, at each and every opportunity, can I treat this person as a neighbor?

If there were an external criterion, the situation in Darfur would probably meet it. They are far away from us, they are significantly different from us in some ways, and the circumstances are extremely complex. All the various characterizations of the conflict, government v. rebel forces, nomads v. farmers, Arabs v. Africans, Muslims v. Christians, all these categories break down upon closer inspection. There is no easy way to determine who the “bad guys” are.

There is an easy way to tell who the victims are, however. They are the 300,000 who are already dead, or the two and a half million who’ve been forced to flee their homes, who are now starving, with no way of supporting themselves except depending upon outside aid, which is often blocked or stolen or blown up.

You may recall, last week I said that we cannot know what happens in the afterlife, so we must focus our efforts on this life; that we are capable of creating a hell or a heaven on this planet. Well, the folks in Darfur, with government bombs falling on their villages, and rebel forces waiting to rape and kill them in the jungle, are living in a very real hell-on-earth. The neighboring nation of Chad has opened up its borders, and its stores of food for the refugees fleeing Darfur. But Chad is one of the poorer countries in Africa, and its ability to help may soon become overwhelmed, and its own system soon fail.

When I took a lifesaving class, back when I was a lifeguard at a summer camp pool, one of the first things they taught us was how to escape from a desperate drowning person, who might otherwise take us down with them.

However, that decision was not to be made from out on shore, or up on the lifeguard chair. It was never an option not to *try* to help— we were only to save ourselves AS PART OF trying to save others.

Becky and I traveled to Chicago two weeks ago, to see Bret Lortie get ordained into professional ministry by the Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation. Bret served his internship at the same congregation I did, and we both had the same internship supervisor, the Rev. Dr. Lindsay Bates.

Lindsay offered an ordination prayer for Bret, which included the following paragraph: “We know that the path of the [professional minister] is often very difficult. May Bret’s be no rougher than he can, with effort, continue to walk, and no smoother than it needs to be, that he may continue to grow in skill and in judgment, in patience and in determination.”

Two things struck me about this prayer. First, it is true for all of us, ministerial professional or not. All of our paths are difficult, at least once in a while, and it would be great if they were no rougher than we can, with effort, continue to walk, and no smoother than they need to be, either.

Second, the most important phrase in the whole prayer is “with effort.” May our path be no rougher than we can WITH EFFORT continue to walk.

We’re not asking for our lives to be easy; we do not expect the world to cater to us. And we do *hope* that the amount of effort we have to give will be enough to accomplish our main goals and objectives.

“With effort” is a very subjective thing. It can mean different things to different people, and it means different things at different times, for the same person.

If it takes all the effort you can give, just to get out of bed some mornings, then you are living up to Lindsay’s “with effort” standard. Please understand that you are doing enough, and that politely declining to serve on a church committee, or to help feed the homeless, or to advocate for ending the genocide in Darfur, is entirely appropriate at this time.

We hope that your situation will change, and that someday, you'll have some effort to spare, but we affirm you in your struggle. We truly desire for you that your path be no rougher than you can with effort continue to walk.

If, on the other hand, you could, with effort, write a letter to a congress person or to the paper, then the situation in Darfur would be an excellent topic for that letter. And if you could, with effort, find a few hours per month to help feed our homeless neighbors, or to teach religious education to our young people, then I celebrate with you that effort.

Each Sunday that I preach, I remind us that “some of us may be struggling this morning...” It is not a breach of confidentiality, because it has been true in every church I've served. There are single moms and single dads trying to raise their families; people contemplating—or coping with the pain of—divorce; people whose partner has died; single folks who want a partner; people who are close to someone serving in Iraq or Afghanistan; people close to someone who is, or has been, in jail; people who do not know how they'll pay their bills; there are people with addictions— to alcohol, illegal drugs, painkillers, food, sex, overwork...; folks with mental illness, such that any progress made at all is achieved while their brain is fighting against them; people who have been mentally or physically or sexually abused; folks who are physically ill, with cancer, or heart disease, or Alzheimer's, or multiple sclerosis or any other disease or condition; there are people who suffer oppression, because they are different from cultural norm: bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgendered people, or people of color or older folks or people with disabilities; there are people whose parents or children or other family members are facing these kinds of struggles; and there is the simple reality of over-stressed, over-scheduled, over-caffeinated life in the 21st century United States. The difficulties are real, and more of us are struggling than we might imagine. People are being tortured and raped and starved to death, in Darfur; and people are dying and suffering here.

MUSIC We must be strong ourselves, in order to give aid to others. Let us now listen to a lullaby, sung in hopes of rest and release and rejuvenation for all those who need it: in Darfur, and in the rest of the world, on the streets of northwestern lower Michigan, and in the living rooms and bedrooms of our own homes... {VE/combo sings *Thula Baba Thula Sana*}

CLOSING HYMN May our paths be no rougher than we can, with effort, continue to walk. And if our paths are currently smooth, may we reach out to those whose journey is more difficult.

If, on any given day or hour or moment, it takes all the effort you can give just to keep on keeping on, then hang in there, and know that we are with you, in spirit.

If, with reasonable effort— and by “reasonable effort” I mean that which is disclosed in your deepest heart of hearts, ignoring the tapes in your head that say you cannot do one more thing, cannot do one single thing, correctly, ever... and/or ignoring the tapes that say you *must* do one more thing, in fact three more things, or maybe four, because you must be perfect to be worthy... Ignore all of those voices. If, with reasonable effort, as disclosed by consultation with your deepest, truest self and the Spirit of Life that pulses inside you, you can survive the day and make an effort to change your life circumstance, then I invite you to do that.

{Kevin begins playing, underneath}

If, with effort, you are able to help a homeless person, or commit some other random act of kindness today, do it.

If you can, with effort, join the first-ever organized campaign to stop genocide *while it is occurring* then please do it. Join the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee; donate to Darfur, through the UUSC or any other reputable agency; write to your congresspersons, or to the *Record-Eagle*, or do any of the other good ideas that are available at the social justice table out in the narthex.

There is more love, somewhere, and with effort, I can keep on until I find it. There is more hope, somewhere, for the Darfuri people, for the homeless in our community, and for each of us in this room today. I'm going to keep on, 'til I find it; there is more joy, somewhere.

Please rise as you are willing and able, and join in singing *There is More Love, Somewhere* Please remain standing for our benediction.

{singing}

BENEDICTION May we, without guilt and without self-criticism, accurately determine how much effort we can truly give, and may we give as much as we can, as well as we can, as often as we can.

So may we be.