

**RIGHTS FOR WHICH HUMANS?**  
**A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene**  
**Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**September 14, 2003**

**Reading**

Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. (“For Whom the Bell Tolls,” by John Donne)

**Sermon**

Thomas Jefferson (a Unitarian), wrote in our country’s founding document that all people are endowed by the Creator with certain fundamental rights, primary among these being life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He called them “*inalienable*”—they are part of what human beings are born with, like our eyes or ears or hands.

We Americans believe with all our hearts that Jefferson’s words from the Declaration of Independence are true. We Unitarian Universalist Americans *really* believe them. Our principles—“we affirm the worth and dignity of every person; we affirm justice, equity and compassion for all; use of the democratic process”—flow directly from the founding principle of our country. (Plus, from the religious principle that there is God-given goodness in all people.)

Almost all of us realize that we enjoy more rights than many other humans, in our country and elsewhere, and we hold to the religious truth that no one is an island, entire unto itself. (We call it the interconnected web of all existence.) Therefore we have a responsibility to make it more likely that others’ inalienable rights may flower. The least any of us do to fulfill this responsibility is to live by our Unitarian Universalist principles, serving as an example to others. Those values are summarized so eloquently by Oakland UU Laila Ibrahim: 1) It is a blessing we were born. 2) It matters how we live our lives. 3) What each of us knows about god is a piece of the truth. 4) We don’t have to do it alone.

We try, at the very least, to embody and teach our children the respect, truth-seeking, compassion and genuine open-mindedness implied by our values.

Furthermore, many of us—probably the majority—also contribute our money and/or time and energy to organizations that work to bring more life and liberty and opportunity for happiness to people who suffer their lack.

We understand that life itself is an issue for some people—a person who is continually hungry probably isn’t going to worry much even about liberty (where do you have to go, when you are starving to death?), let alone pursuit of happiness. And so, we contribute to the abundance of life by sponsoring or walking on the Crop Walk—perhaps with our children—and we join the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, support the Heifer Project.

Many of us stay vigilant about issues of liberty. As well we might in our country, given the current tenor our times, with the Federal Government proposing and enacting

drastic curtailments of our civil rights. (How would you like to go to the library and check out, say, the Communist Manifesto, or a little classic Henry Miller eroticism, or the video *The Birdcage*, with its “flaming” gay men—only to find out the government had required your librarians to tell them you did so? Then forbade the librarians from letting you know.)

For freedom issues, we join the American Civil Liberties Union, Southern Poverty Law Center, Americans United For Separation of Church and State, and other excellent organizations. We support immigrant organizations, to help newcomers adapt to freedom.

A high quality of both life and liberty help ensure the pursuit of happiness, as does a clean, safe natural environment, in which all resources are used wisely and lives are in balance. For these we join the Sierra Club and Greenpeace and the Snake River Alliance and others.

I suspect that the great majority of us belong to one or some or a whole bunch of the kinds of organizations I’ve just listed. (If you don’t, don’t beat yourself. Do it if you’ve been meaning to. If you don’t want to, get comfortable with your own reasons and just relax.)

A few of us devote a lot of our lives to systemic change—not just helping those less fortunate than we are, but trying to change the systems that bring on the injustice of poverty and illiteracy and hunger. The old “teach them to fish” approach—by doing that, as opposed to just giving them fish, you give them a lifetime gift and change their lives. United Vision For Idaho is an organization that works for systemic change: Mary Knodell, of our congregation, is its Board chair; Roger Sherman from our church is a staff member.

Betsy Dunklin works for another systemic-change organization, a foundation called A Territory Resource.

[Parenthetically: I only picked a few organizations to highlight, and undoubtedly left out your very favorite. I suggest you pick up a copy of this sermon, which has at the end a list of such organizations and their contact information, and e-mail the office with information on ones we’ve missed. We’ll add them on to subsequent copy runs.]

I make this almost painfully-obvious summary of the UU approach to human rights, because I want to affirm that we are a people imbued with the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, for ourselves and others. We know for whom the bell tolls.

At the same time, there is something about the whole area of social action that evokes ambivalence—sometimes active resistance—from UU congregations. This becomes especially apparent when social action is brought into the whole-church realm, as opposed to what the minister and/or the Social Action Committee does. When a Social Action Minute is introduced on Sunday, for instance.

I have heard comments by members of other congregations to the effect, “That church just does too much social action.” (It’s not a charge anyone could with any fairness level at our congregation.)

I have heard many times, here and elsewhere, comments like, “I don’t come to church to be told what I should do for the starving Afghans or the oppressed migrants or the disappearing whales. I hear bad news all week, and I come to church to get renewed, not to hear more bad news.” Sometimes it will be expressed as, “I come to church for spirituality, not social action.”

Way more than once, people have told me (again, not many here, in my time), “I quit going to that church because they always made me feel guilty about not being socially active enough.”

What is this all about?

The discomfort is often expressed by people who are, in fact, generously addressing social justice and human rights issues in a number of ways in their personal lives. So the objections do not stem from a me-first, let-them-eat-cake kind of hard-heartedness.

It could, of course, be sheer UU cussedness. You may have heard about the copy machine repairer who came into the office awhile ago, glanced at the machine and said, “Look, the flashing sign says, ‘Add paper.’ All you had to do was follow instructions.” The three of us on staff replied as one, “If we followed instructions, we wouldn’t be Unitarian Universalists.”

It’s probably more than that....

What is this guilt about which we are so sensitive? I once preached a sermon about how we UUs tend to make off-the-cuff, general, disparaging remarks and jokes about Mormons. I said we had no business doing it and that we ought to stop it. A number of people (disappointingly few, to my face) got incensed at the “guilt trip” I was laying on people. No question, guilt is an issue for a lot of us, usually because of bad experiences when we were younger.

I suggest we deal with it. If someone in church has been overbearing about their particular issues, or has implied that *anyone who cares about anything* will do so-and-so (I’ve had it happen to me), talk to the person. Take somebody else with you if you feel you might get railroaded in the conversation—but don’t talk about it behind the person’s back, and don’t let it “make” you leave an otherwise good situation.

If you already do feel guilty, see if you can move toward easing that for yourself. Perhaps with the help of a friend, or counselor, or your journal, or—whatever—you may be able to find what you *want* to do and are truly *able* to do. You may be able to let go of old guilt experiences. If you can do that, you will be able to articulate for yourself the perfectly-good reasons you do and don’t do certain things. Then, you will be much more likely to listen with an open mind, make an uncoerced decision, and feel fine about it.

I would love it if we, as adults, all took responsibility for our own guilts, hard as that can be sometimes.

I am more concerned, however, by the either-or thinking about “spirituality” vs. social action which includes of course, “human rights.” It is one of those notorious false dichotomies, and can be solved by lifting our perception to a higher, more inclusive level.

Last week, I looked out on the sea of your faces, packed into this too-small room, shining with delight at our being back together. I nearly wept when I looked—really looked—at you all. So many of us have helped each other become what we have become, these past 15 years. So many of you have allowed me into the intimate moments of your lives, those precious griefs and births, and we have felt the wings of the Holy enfold us. Some of you blessed souls have possessed the courage and the generosity to confront me in my various follies, calling me to my higher self.

I saw faces entirely new, rapt with intensity as they felt, and thought, and wondered, “Is this a place I could call my spiritual home, a place where my unique vision of the Mystery will be honored?” I saw gleams in eyes and a mischievous joy on faces

who knew they were at home and exulted in the energetic welcome their whole, warts-and-all selves receive here. I saw the light of hope faintly glimmering in the faces of some who suffer, hope that peace and love will return. I saw resignation on a few countenances, those who were able to let down the assumed cheeriness and just experience the hard things they are going through—supported by caring others and a sense of the embracing Divine. I saw blinding joy on the dozens of faces who have worked so hard in this so-human institution, and who on that day got to revel and rejoice that we are who we are, and that we keep on keeping on. I saw and felt love spilling all over the place, a shimmer hovering over and among us.

I saw the spirituality we long for, embodied in our human community. I looked around and said, “We are the people who have brought each other closer to God.” It was and is so clear: our open-hearted presence with each other, oldsters and newcomers alike, opens the door to the possibility of the Holy entering in, however each of us envisions or feels that Mystery.

Need that spirituality be apart and separate from our church’s work in the world? Is it not possible that we can take nourishment from our fellowship here, let it lighten our hearts and souls, and let it enlarge our sense of the spiritual to include supporting church action in the world? Is it not possible to understand that it is all connected, and how tragically we curtail our spiritual growth if we do not work that other people’s inalienable rights are as assured as ours? Can we relax into that larger picture of a UU community’s spiritual life, acknowledging that it is vital to our collective soul? What if each of us participates a little, or at the very least gives our support to those who work to make this Fellowship a force for justice—based on a so-solid spiritual foundation?

We can do it, for we have changed and grown before. We can, without losing one whit of our precious holy spirit, become a congregation that shines as a beacon of justice, equity and compassion for all. We who enjoy so many of the fruits of democracy—we who are blessed with so much life, liberty and happiness—can with light hearts do the work of helping our fellow humans come into their Creator-endowed rights.

We can embody the interconnected web of all existence. When the bell tolls the death of one, each of us is diminished. No one is an island, apart and unto itself, and no community is an island, apart and unto itself. When a hungry child is fed—when a beaten-down population rises in pride—when the terrified immigrant finds compassion in our towns: we, too, rejoice, for our lives, too, are enriched. When our courage and generosity bring life and joy into the lives of others, we all closer to the Great Harmony that dwells within, among and beyond us, calling us to itself

**Arbitrarily-chosen List of Organizations Dedicated To Preserving Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness**

### **A Territory Resource**

603 Stewart St., Suite 1007  
Seattle, Washington 98101-1264  
(206) 624-4081

*Local contact: Betsy Dunklin, 336-8201*

[betsydunklin@msm.com](mailto:betsydunklin@msm.com)

**Americans United for Separation of Church and State**

518 C Street, NE Washington, D.C. 20002

202-466-3234 telephone

202-466-2587 fax

<http://www.au.org>

**Southern Poverty Law Center**

400 Washington Avenue

Montgomery, Alabama 36104

334/956-8200

**American Civil Liberties Union**

125 Broad Street, 18th Floor

New York, NY 10004

ACLU of Idaho Web Site: <http://www.acluidaho.org>

Executive Director: Jack Van Valkenburgh

P.O. Box 1897

Boise, ID 83701

Phone: (208) 344-5243

**The Sierra Club**

910 Main

Boise ID 83702

208 384-1023

*Local contact: Bernie Zaleha, 342-1717*

**Snake River Alliance**

104 S. Capitol

Boise ID 83702

208 344-9161

**UU Service Committee**

*Main Office:*

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

130 Prospect Street

Cambridge, MA 02139 Phone: (617) 868-6600

Fax: (617) 868-7102

Toll-free: (800) 388-3920

*Public Policy Office:*

Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

2000 P Street NW, Suite 505

Washington, DC 20036-5915

**United Vision for Idaho**

Box 2181 • Boise, Idaho 83701

208 331-7028

*Local contact: Roger Sherman, 208 713-2778*

[uvidaho@rmci.net](mailto:uvidaho@rmci.net)

**The Interfaith Alliance**

1331 H Street, NW

11th Floor

Washington, DC 20005

Phone: 202.639.6370

Fax: 202.639.6375

*Local contact: Pam Baldwin, 208 331-7028*

**Idaho Food Bank**

3562 South T.K. Ave.

Boise, Idaho 83705

PH: 208-336-9643