

Bringing a Guest to Our Table.
Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker
April 27, 2014

Thought to ponder at the beginning:

*Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would
still plant my apple tree.*

- The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting

Adapted from #438, "Morning," by Clinton Lee Scott

*This reading was used by travelers to the eco-villages of Haiti in March 2012. The
images have been slightly adapted to express some of what they witnessed during that
experience.*

From the east comes the sun, bringing a new and unspoiled day.
*It has already circled the earth
and looked upon distant lands and far-away peoples.*

It has passed over mountain ranges
and the waters of the seven seas.
*It has shone upon laborers in the fields,
into the windows of homes, and shops, and factories.*

It has beheld proud cities with gleaming towers,
and also the hovels of the poor.
*It has been witness to both good and evil,
the works of honest men and women,
and the conspiracy of the selfish and greedy.*

It has seen the ruins of flooded valleys,
the ruins of shaken buildings, the ashes of burned landscapes.

*It has seen flowers planted by survivors
at the entrance of emerging villages,*

the naked soil, plowed by the survivors,
ready to receive the seeds of the future.

*Now, unsullied from its tireless journey,
the sun comes to us, messenger of the morning,*

Sermon *Bringing a Guest to Our Table* © Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

Every year our congregation hosts a Justice Sunday, during which we celebrate and support the work the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) does all over the world. Usually we take a special collection during our Justice Sunday service to benefit the UUSC. This year we will take a special collection for that purpose, but we will do so on May 18, the day the Guest at Your Table boxes are returned.

Every year I say it – and I really do believe it – the UUSC is one of the best things Unitarian Universalists do together. It's not a missionary society – whose goal it is to “convert the natives,” using charitable and justice work as a kind of ruse to draw people in. It's not a charity – theoretically, and even actually, fixing problems, but while telling people what to do and how to live.

Instead, the UUSC identifies human rights organizations at the grass roots level in communities all over the world and partners with them and supports them in their work. Their aim is to create a world free from oppression and injustice. Their work is centered in the belief that all people have inherent power, dignity, and rights. The UUSC is a non-sectarian group, based on Unitarian Universalist principles and on the Universalist Declaration of Human Rights.

The UUSC website clarifies that they work specifically with people who are denied their rights because of who they are – women, people of color, religious minorities, for example – who are not served by mainstream human rights organizations.

Unless you spend a lot of time reading Unitarian Universalist news from various sources, the UUSC may seem remote to you. (And some of you may be hearing about it for the first time today.) That's all the more reason to devote one Sunday a year to their work. But actually every single week we devote part of our service to a ritual that comes directly from the UUSC – and that is to light our chalice. Where did that ritual come from?

Throughout history, people in cultures all over the world have used cups for religious rituals – often rituals that symbolize sharing, love, generosity. And throughout history, people have used fire for religious rituals, too – rituals that symbolize illumination, wisdom courage.

In 1939, (back in the days before Unitarians and Universalists had merged into one denomination) the American Unitarian Association sent the Rev. Waitstill and Martha Sharp to Europe to help to rescue refugees being persecuted by the Nazis. Initially they worked in Czechoslovakia, fleeing just in time to avoid capture themselves. Later they helped to move refugees over the Pyrenees, into Spain.

In 1940, the American Unitarian Association formally created the Unitarian Service Committee – the forebear of the UUSC – to continue their freedom and justice work. The Rev. Charles Joy was placed at the helm. The Unitarian Service Committee contracted with a displaced Austrian artist by the name of Hans Deutsch to create a symbol for the new organization. In an article about the history of the chalice, Dan Hotchkiss writes:

The USC was an unknown organization in 1941. This was a special handicap in the

cloak-and-dagger world, where establishing trust quickly across barriers of language, nationality, and faith could mean life instead of death. Disguises, signs and countersigns, and midnight runs across guarded borders were the means of freedom in those days.

[The Reverend Charles] Joy asked Deutsch to create a symbol for their papers "to make them look official, to give dignity and importance to them, and at the same time to symbolize the spirit of our work.... When a document may keep a man out of jail, give him standing with governments and police, it is important that it look important."

Deutsch created the first flaming chalice. With time, it became the symbol not just of the Unitarian Service Committee, but of Unitarianism itself. When Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961, they took the flaming chalice their symbol.

So, every week, when we light our chalice, we once more illuminate the hopes and dreams of a brighter, fairer, more just world. We once more try to cast light into the shadow places where injustice and oppression flourish. We join, once more, with a long line of people who have worked to help make a vision of equality, freedom, hope, and justice into reality.

This year the UUSC has asked our congregations to spend some time on Justice Sunday thinking about food security and food sovereignty – or, as one writer, Beverly Bell, put it in her book *Fault Lines: Views from across Haiti's Divide*:

“Food sovereignty is the view that every person has the right to make decisions about, produce, and consume their own local, healthy, and culturally-appropriate food.”

Some of us here today may feel we do not really have to worry about food. We bring our money to Hannafords or Shaws or the farmers' market and exchange cash for food. Some of us may even grow our own food. Some of us here today worry a great deal about food – counting every penny, maybe even skipping meals to make ends meet, or

visiting the food bank to get at least some of what we need for ourselves and our families.

All of us are probably aware of the increase of homelessness in our nation and in this very community. And we would do well to consider that – as bad as things are in our region for some folks – in some parts of our world, access to food is limited indeed. That is less true in the Global North, where we live, and far, far more true in the Global South. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, if you look at the demographics, a disproportionate number of people of color are hungry.

Unitarian Universalists are called to respond to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which says, in part:

Article 25.

- (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

And we are called to respond to the UU Statement of Conscience on Ethical Eating, which reminds us that daily our world produces over 4 pounds of food for every man, woman, and child – enough for everyone to be overfed! Yet in 2003, 853 million people in the world did not have enough to eat. That's the equivalent of the combined populations of Japan, Europe, Canada, and the US.

The Statement of Conscience reminds us that *“In the United States we waste about*

3,044 pounds of food per second. According to the US Department of Agriculture, each year 27% of US food produced for human consumption is lost at the retail, consumer and food service levels. That's nearly 1.5 tons of food for every man, woman, and child in the United States who face hunger.” (http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/washingtonoffice/ethicaleating/human_rights_ej.pdf)

It would seem, given the amount of food produced worldwide and the number of people alive to consume it, that hunger is a problem we could solve. One way to solve the problem – the way of simple charity – is to provide some food to those who are hungry. When that happens, all the power usually remains in the hands of the purveyors of the food, and the decisions are made by the people who have the food. The people who are hungry may be fed, but the systems that have caused them to be hungry in the first place are not addressed, and hunger remains a long-term problem.

Another way to solve the problem is to address the issues that cause hunger in the first place. That second way is how the UUSC works.

These last few years, ever since the 2010 earthquake that devastated much of Haiti, especially in the populous area of the city Port au Prince, the UUSC has been working with a 40-year-old peasant empowerment movement called Mouvmman Peyizan Papay (MPP) whose mission is to support sustainable agriculture in rural Haiti. Its founder, Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, is known in the developing world as a “champion of peasants' rights, economic development, food sovereignty, and self-determination.” (<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/293241.shtml>)

In the wake of the 2010 earthquake, thousands of people fled from Port au Prince to the countryside seeking food and water. Farms in the countryside were unequipped to handle the deepening disaster. Chavannes Jean-Baptiste's organization, MPP, helped to provide short-term crisis assistance, but began immediately to work on long-term solutions to the problem. One was to teach people how to construct and farm tire gardens – gardens placed in tires that have been elevated above the ground so that

animals cannot get into them and farmed using organic gardening practices. The system reuses available resources, re-purposing materials that might otherwise be thrown away. Gardens planted in five tires can feed a family. An additional five tires can bring in some modest extra money. It takes \$250 for one family in Haiti to receive the materials and training they need to start their gardens. Oftentimes our congregation's annual collection for the UUSC brings in at least that amount if not more.

Even more exciting from my viewpoint, MPP also began building self-sufficient eco-villages of groups of ten families that grow their own food. The villagers built their villages with help from UUSC volunteers, learning the art of construction in the process. Volunteers also helped MPP to plant fruit trees, which not only provide food, but also help to reforest land that has been stripped of its trees for fuel.

The villagers themselves take care of each other, making way for others to join their self-sufficient communities. For example, in the first village – completed in December 2011, almost two years after the earthquake – MPP gave each family a male and a female goat with the understanding that the resulting baby goats would be given to the residents of the next village to be completed. MPP provides a larger support network outside the villages as well, by way of health clinics, vocational training facilities, and workshops for furniture making and solar panel construction.

MPP's work – and the UUSC's partnership with MPP – is about making into reality a vision of a world where the people have power over their own lives and learn to live in harmony with each other and the earth. One thing I particularly love about MPP's work and the UUSC's partnership with them is the emphasis on sustainability. Human beings can easily be so species-centric that we sometimes forget our justice problems are part of something much bigger than human systems, communities, and cultures. I like this more holistic approach to justice work – an approach that recognizes that the world of human beings and the problems of human beings are inextricably linked to the rest of the earth.

When we light our chalice each week, we light it not only to represent our own

individual seeking for truth and wisdom, for love and illumination – and not only to represent those same things for this community of gathered, beloved souls, but also for a vision of just such a world, where the people live with dignity, in harmony with each other and with the earth.

We light our chalice as a beacon of hope that we can be co-creators of a world of justice and peace, a world of clean air and waterways and strong biodiversity, a world of compassion in the face of tragedy and solace in the face of loss, a world where hand reaches out to hand and heart reaches out to heart.

As we light our chalice, so may we devote our lives.