

## **INALIENABLE RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS**

Human rights Sunday, December 9, 2007

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**READING:** Lynn Hunt, *INVENTING HUMAN RIGHTS*, New York, Norton, 2007; 39F.

### **SERMON:**

What a wonderful privilege! What a cause for praise when a family brings its child to us for dedication! They come to us saying, it takes a village to raise a child, and you/ we are our village. This Sunday we dedicate Sylvie Martin; the Sunday before Thanksgiving, Marlena Rosalynd Anthony Holland Hitchcock, Sophia Shepperd and Lindsey Yunker

Why do we present a child to the congregation in a Unitarian Universalist congregation? We do it honoring their inherent worth and dignity. Our first principle calls us to affirm and promote "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." So it is that UU Religious Educator Sophia Lyon Fahs wrote in her Christmas reading:

**Each night** a child is born is a holy night –  
A time for singing,  
A time for wondering,  
A time for worshipping.

When you read over the Seven Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association you can see that they make up a human rights document. They begin with the affirmation of "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with the same affirmation. The first sentence of the Preamble reads,

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

Yet if human rights are really universal and truly equal, their rationale cannot be limited to our own Western Enlightenment faith. Human rights find other grounding in other faiths. For example, a variety of reform Buddhism is represented by the followers of Phutthathat in Thailand. They are strong advocates of human rights and democratic politics. However their rationale for these ideals is not our standard Western one centered on the inherent dignity and equality of human beings. The advocacy of Phutthathat's followers is rooted in the grounded Buddhist value of non-violence, which calls for a

respect for the autonomy of each person and rejection of coercion in human affairs. [Yersu Kim, page 97]

We need to recall from time to time the rights recognized in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**. Perhaps no time is better than on Human Rights Sunday. It was fifty nine years ago, on December 10, 1948, that the General Assembly of the United Nations, with the leadership of that great woman, Eleanor Roosevelt, proclaimed this Declaration. In the past sixty years it has become the basis for much national and international dialogue. Let's consider just a very few to see their continued relevance.

Article 25 declares that "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,"

Now, I ask you, does that have anything to say about your life, the lives of friends of yours? How about a friend of yours with AIDS? Have they been able to maintain a standard of living, of health insurance adequate to their needs? How about our fellow human beings in south Africa who have AIDS? Relevant? Yes, I'd say relevant!

What about housing? Do you have a standard of living adequate for housing? Any predatory lenders been knocking at your door? Knocking at the door of an aunt or uncle? A neighbor? Is this human right relevant to us today? I'd say so!

Article 5 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment." This is America. Do we torture? Is water boarding torture? Only when we don't destroy the video tapes? Relevant? You bet!

Article 10 declares "Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him." Except Muslims in Guantanamo; except African Americans in American prisons? Relevant? We have set a great light before us which we have yet to attain.

On Nov. 14 a Democratic Presidential debate was presided over by Wolf Blitzer. He posed the question, "Are human rights more important than American national security?" Most of the respondents seem to have lost sight of what we are about as a people. To quote Thomas Jefferson, "We hold these truths to be **self-evident**, that all *men* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain **unalienable Rights**, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." It is not enough that we humans survive, we must flourish as well. And the ground rules in our modern world for flourishing are these human rights.

Appalled at the outpouring of white hatred during the civil rights era, Archibald MacLeish wrote

... the American idea, quite literally and realistically, is America. If we had not held these truths to be self-evident, if we had not believed that all men are created equal, if we had not believed that they are entitled, all of them with certain unalienable rights, we would never have become America, whatever else we might have become (THE AMERICAN IDEA, 2007, page 605]

Our American Declaration of Independence is the first of the great declaration of human rights. The second is the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1789 and the third, the Universal Declaration of December 10, 1948.

Human rights are not just doctrines formulated in documents. Much more they rest on fundamental dispositions toward other people, our attitudes towards our neighbors, towards strangers. Human rights are grounded in a set of convictions about what people are like and how they know right and wrong in our day to day world. [Hunt 27]

Let's turn again to Article 25 of the Universal Declaration. We read, "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." Of course, we would amend that by adding "fatherhood!"

As we have dedicated a child this day, we know that being a parent, being a child are no random abstractions. Special care and assistance are required. A single working mother, who has to get up in the middle of their night to hold her coughing baby, and then get up early, take her infant to child care at perhaps her own mother's and then go to work has many burdens.

Can you identify with this single mother? Can you walk in the cold mornings to the bus stop as she huddles her child close to her? Do you see her wake her own mother to drop off her child and then get another bus? Waiting for the bus, she wonders why her sweet one has been coughing so deeply these past few days? Does she need to go see a doctor? Where will she find the money? More to the point, where will she find the time to take her child to the emergency room? She's scared. Do you imagine her life; can you walk in her shoes?

In INVENTING HUMAN RIGHTS, Lynn Hunt argues that an increasing ability to identify with others, brought about by literature, novels helped people identify with one other and was one factor leading to the emotional sense that human rights are indeed, **self-evident**. Walking in the shoes of a single mother, we

sense that her life should be better. She deserves, as the Universal Declaration says, special care and assistance.

It is this empathy, this identification with others that is the emotional grounding of human rights and makes them more than empty words on dusty papers. Hunt writes,

What might be termed “imagined empathy” serves as the foundation of human rights.... It is imagined, not in the sense of made up, but in the sense that empathy requires a leap of faith, of imagining that someone else is like you. [page 32]

One of the busiest French philosophers at the time novels were enhancing empathy in people was Denis Diderot. Fascinated by the whole thing, he saw that you recognize yourself in the characters of the novel; you imaginatively leap into the midst of the action, you feel the same feelings the characters are feeling. In short you learn to empathize with someone who is not yourself and can never be directly accessible to you and yet who is in some imagined way also yourself. [Hunt 55]

The Golden Rule has asked for this same imaginative leap. One form states it negatively, as Rabbi Hillel in the time of Jesus said, “That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole [Torah](#), and the rest is commentary, go and learn it”

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Quote/hillel.html> Jesus stated it positively in the Gospel of Luke, "*And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.*" Luke 6:31 [

<http://www.religioustolerance.org/reciproc.htm> this website is a list of the golden rule as given in a number of religions ]

These sources do not emphasize the Golden Rule requires imagination, creativity, as Ralph Waldo Emerson does in *Self-Reliance*. There he says, “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — **that is genius.**”

Whether stated negatively or positively, the Golden Rule is all too often misstated. Instead of, “I’ll do to you what I would like you do to me,” it becomes “I’ll do to you what you did to me.” This is the old law of revenge. You gave me dirt so I’ll dish it back to you. Not the Golden Rule, we could call it the Leaden Rule. The Golden Rule turns the law of revenge upside down. The law of revenge, the Leaden Rule, makes us the passive reactor to others’ actions. The Golden Rule calls upon us to be proactive, to imagine how our actions effect others. As Lynn Hunt says, human rights rest not on dusty pages but in the human heart, on our willingness to identify with others. It is in our hearts that we know the inalienable rights of all people

When I was in seminary, at Meadville/Lombard Theological School I had the privilege of taking a course with the major Unitarian Universalist theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Henry Nelson Weiman. Weiman was an empiricist theologian. His thought, much simplified, went something like this: God is what changes lives. Whatever changes lives then, must be God. Deep, meaningful conversation causes personal transformation. Therefore he called this God, naming it **creative interchange**. Or, again to be simplistic, love.

Weiman asked us to write a paper for the course. At the time I was most interested in the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty was a friend and associate of the better known Jean Paul Sartre. I wrote my paper about an argument that Sartre and Merleau-Ponty had, an argument close to the heart of Weiman's theology.

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty argued about what it meant when two people looked at each other. Sartre said that looking at another person was hostile, a threat. Merleau-Ponty said it was in an invitation to dialogue. I did not resolve the debate in my paper. Perhaps it is irresolvable.

What was then clear and remains so to me now is that something mystical, magical, awesome happens when we look into each others eyes. Perhaps it is like Moses approaching the burning bush, when he was told to take off his sandals as he approached sacred ground. Looking into each others eyes we approach the sacred ground of each others souls

More than that, we can often see another oneself. That is what can make looking into each others eyes, as we did earlier in our brief welcoming exercise, unsettling, as are sacred moments. Another French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur has a book entitled, ONESELF AS ANOTHER. The title could be just as well as reversed: ANOTHER AS ONESELF.

This is what we see when we encounter others; ourselves.

Human rights rest, I believe, not on dusty pages, but in the fundamental experience called for by the Golden Rule, taught to us by reading novels and in so many other ways. When we identify with others, a child held up for dedication, a couple at their wedding, a person on their death bed, we know the unity which binds us and calls us to treat everyone equally, with respect.