

First Unitarian Society of Westchester – December 10, 2023

Pursuing Liberation: UUSC and Global Solidarity – Rev. Laura Randall

Hello, First Unitarian Society friends! It is a joy to be with you this morning, especially as today is World Human Rights Day, which celebrates the ratification of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10th 1948. Some of you may know that the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, or UUSC, grounds its mission on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the values of Unitarian Universalism.

As a staff member of UUSC, one of the great privileges of my work is traveling to UU congregations to thank UUSC members in person. To the members of First Unitarian who are also members of UUSC through your financial support, thank you. We truly could not continue our mission of advancing human rights and resisting oppressive systems without you. For those who are not yet members, or who have not given a gift in a long time, I hope you will consider renewing your support today. A gift of any amount makes you a member.

UUSC, known at its founding in 1940 as the Unitarian Service Committee, has always depended on the generosity and vision of UU congregations. And, in a very tangible way, the values of the UU Service Committee are at the center of our congregations.

Let me explain.

We share a vibrant, living faith. One that brings together a beautiful motley crew of people who are drawn together not because we all believe the same things but because we all long for a world in which everyone belongs, everyone is free to live lives of peace and contentment. We share a commitment to always be learning about and celebrating the incredible diversity of the human family.

More than a hundred years ago, Lewis Fisher, dean of the Ryder Divinity School in Chicago, famously said, "Universalists are often asked to tell where they stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move."

If you travel around the country visiting UU congregations, as I have the privilege of doing, you will notice that each UU congregation is unique. The

elements of the service, the configuration of the sanctuary, the special vibe of the community; all different everywhere you go.

However, there is one thing that solidly connects all UU's. In every single congregation, there is a chalice, and that chalice is lit to begin worship.

It is the chalice itself, the very thing that binds all UUs together, that most strongly calls us to the work of resisting oppressive systems, such as racism, sexism, and fascism, promoting human rights for all people, and caring for the precious earth we share.

Our chalice, as sacred as it is to us, wasn't always the symbol of the Unitarian and Universalist faiths. In 1940, Reverend Dr. Charles Rhind-Joy was sent by the newly created Unitarian Service Committee to Lisbon, Portugal which was the only open port in Europe at that time and was the preferred port for the many refugees that were fleeing the Nazi regime. Many of the refugees had to flee without any of the identification papers that were required to cross borders, so Joy decided to start making identification papers issued by the USC itself. This was uncharted water, but instead of focusing on the risks that he and the organization might be taking by doing this, Joy focused on saving the lives of those fleeing fascism.

He also decided that these papers needed a seal to look as official as other travel papers, and so he asked Hans Deutch, an Austrian refugee and artist working in Lisbon, to create one and the result was the basis of the flaming chalice as we know it now.

While this was happening, Waitstill and Martha Sharp were also sent to Europe by the USC - they not only falsified documents to get people out, but also laundered money if necessary!

So, you see, the thing that binds us all as Unitarian Universalists together - the chalice - was founded on our commitment to human rights and to fighting fascism. Since the founding of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, we have been committed to supporting the work of liberation, even when, and maybe especially when, it involves making holy trouble for the powers that would deny anyone's full humanity.

In the poem I read by the Rev. Julián Jamaica Soto, Rev. Soto tells us that liberation is the kind of freedom that celebrates the utterly unique and precious

life that is embodied in you AND honors the utterly unique and precious life that is embodied in each and every other person.

“But to actually be free,” Rev. Soto writes, “you must know and you must fight for the entire Universes inside of everyone else.

Being free is not a license, but a promise.”

It is this promise I want to talk about today. Because this promise of liberation is being threatened in so many parts of the world by the menace of fascism.

In the 2023 Berry Street essay, Rev. Cecilia Kingman describes the Ten Tactics of Fascism from the work of Jason Stanley, including the targeting of the poor, as part of the most vulnerable and as part of creating an enemy, which an authoritarian leader can then target and punish. Those familiar with the tactics of fascism, tactics that include things like the glorification of a mythic past, the reliance on unfounded fear to institute restrictive “law and order,” and the supremacy of a white, male, and able-bodied hierarchy, can recognize that these forces are hard at work around the world and in the United States.

We often say that we are in difficult times. Let’s focus that question. What times are we in now?

Rev. Kingman frames the answer this way, “We all know that we are in a moment of grave danger. If anyone is left wondering how bad it is—it’s very, very bad. It’s alarmingly easy however for us to grow acclimated and numb unless we pay rigorous attention to the strategies and timelines used by fascists.”

Woof, will you take a deep breath with me? This is hard stuff.

So, what will be our response? How can we resist these forces? How can we use the power of imagination to imagine action that can lead to different and better futures?

UUSC’s grassroots partners are imagining better futures and working for them with all their might in pursuit of liberation. Getting to know the stories of the partners we highlight during the Guest at Your Table program each year offers us a chance to extend hospitality in a way we don’t often consider. It is an opportunity to open our hearts, to reach beyond ourselves, to marshal our resources, to be free to love and share, and, together, create new possibilities.

Let’s meet some of these partners, shall we

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee partners with the Foundation for Justice and the Democratic Rule of Law, or FJEDD, in Mexico City for the express purpose of supporting human rights and democracy, which includes accompanying, individuals, communities, families, who have been impacted by human rights violations.

FJEDD's executive director, Ana Lorena Delgadillo, says of their mission, "We want to combat regional agreements that violate the right of people to migrate, that violate the right of people to request asylum, that violate the right of migrants to live without violence, that violate the rights of migrants to achieve justice and reparations."

To that end, FJEDD labors extensively to search for disappeared migrants, which includes defending cases and following up on human rights violations. Ana states that in this work, UUSC has "felt like a family. We feel less alone, and we also feel strengthened."

You, my friends, through your support of Guest at Your Table, are a part of this family, a part of this strength.

Sometimes, your resistance to the things going wrong in the world needs only to be that you are completely yourself.

What about others, our trans and queer beloveds, and their communities? Can they be themselves? This is a crucial question for Unitarian Universalists confronting fascism and for the lovers and workers of human rights. The answers are as simple as doing what you know, as loving who you love, and loving those you may not yet understand.

The United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner makes it plain that gender expression of trans people is part of their human rights, with these words: "At the root of the acts of violence and discrimination, including lack of access to gender recognition by the state and violence in healthcare settings, lies the intent to punish based on preconceived notions of what the victim's gender identity should be, with a binary understanding of what constitutes a male and a female, or the masculine and the feminine. These acts are invariably the manifestation of deeply entrenched stigma and prejudice, irrational hatred and a form of gender-based violence, driven by an intention to punish those seen as defying gender norms."

One of the many ways UUSC is acting in solidarity with our trans kin is partnering with Queer Svit. “[S]ince Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, more than 62,000 people have died, nearly 60,000 have been injured, and roughly 14 million have been displaced. What follows is that racism, homophobia, and transantagonism impact which evacuees receive help escaping danger. Two Black non-binary people came together to found Queer Svit. Their aim is to assist BIPOC and LGBTQ+ people impacted by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Queer Svit provides evacuation, temporary housing, and relocation support, along with legal support; and physical and mental health resources.”

Queer Svit’s co-founder, Anna-Maria Tesfaye, says that they are working for a world in which “there’s no homophobia, transphobia, racism, and sexism. About the partnership between Queer Svit and UUSC, Anna-Maria says, “UUSC took a chance on us and recognized the potential of our work. Our partnership with UUSC has been transformative. Our organization is sustainable, allowing us to continue our mission, which is to empower marginalized communities by providing opportunities to voice their concerns and needs.”

The mission of the National TPS Alliance is much the same. TPS here stands for Temporary Protected Status, which is an immigration status granted to some people who come from countries where they are unable to return safely due to conditions like armed conflict or environmental disaster or epidemic. The benefits of TPS include protection from being deported, or removed, from the United States, legal authorization to work, and authorization to travel. These are all things that demonstrate the value of human lives, even lives in migration.

Rev. Kingman explains that “fascist propaganda . . . makes a distinction between friends and enemies; it casts “the other” as a threat and presents the idea that these “others” are fundamentally opposed to the nation.” We hear many fascists now vilifying migrants and asylum-seekers as these “others” who are a threat to our nation.

In this way, “The Trump administration moved to radically scale back the TPS program and cancel TPS for hundreds of thousands of immigrants. In some cases, parents who held the suddenly revoked TPS status had to face the devastating choice of leaving their US citizen children behind with friends or

relatives or taking them back to a dangerous country their children had never known.

The TPS alliance works to change that by restoring TPS protections and securing a path to permanent residency for all TPS holders.

Lidia Palma, National Coordinator for the TPS Alliance, says they are pursuing liberation by “building collective power among TPS holders to fight harder to achieve social justice for immigrant populations.” Speaking about our partnership, Lidia says, “Our connection with UUSC has been a very special and important collaboration.”

All of UUSC’s partners are engaged in powerful acts of resistance to forces that would deny people their full humanity. We at UUSC, and by extension, all of us gathered here, are committed to these acts of resistance as well. Just as our spiritual ancestors were at the founding of UUSC, when the image of a flaming chalice was created to symbolize courage, resilience, defiance, and, yes, joy. One aspect of resistance that is sometimes overlooked as frivolous, when it is actually critical, is joy.

In this season when joy is often commercialized and performative, I invite you to take the time to reflect on what actually brings joy into your life. Theologian Frederick Buechner says that you will find your calling where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.

As the year draws to a close and we look to another year of challenges and possibilities before us, may we encounter joy in the beauty and delight of being of service. May we cultivate joy by embodying our dearest values, a beautiful feast at a bountiful table.

On the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, may we continue to proclaim that human rights are for all people, everywhere.

Let’s close by reflecting on the possibilities offered by Robert F. Kennedy in, “Prayer for Our Country”:

“Let no one be discouraged by the belief that there is nothing one person can do against the enormous array of the world’s ills, misery, ignorance, and violence. Few will have the greatness to bend history, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events. And in the total of all those acts will be written the history of a generation.

It is from numberless, diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time [people stand] up for an ideal or act to improve the lot of others or strike out against injustice, [they send] a tiny ripple of hope. Crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples can build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression.”

So may we live.

Amen and Blessed be.