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CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Why Human Rights Are *Inalienable*, But Not Inevitable

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A few weeks ago, I preached a sermon about Artificial Intelligence in the near future, titled “Immigrants Aren’t Coming for Your Job, *Robots* Are.” My sermon next Sunday, on “Malthus, Earth Day, & Global Population,” will wrestle with the implications of the fact that the number of human beings here on planet Earth has *septupled* (increased sevenfold) in a mere two centuries, from approximately 1 billion people alive in 1800 to more than 7.6 billion people today. This morning, I am preaching about “Human Rights.”

I planned these three sermons—in addition to a fourth sermon in early June on “Utopianism”—as a “sermon series” on “building the world we dream about.” Our UU 6th Principle calls us to work toward “The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” That is a beautiful vision of what is sometimes called “Liberal Internationalism”—and a stark contrast to a reactionary nativism that chants “Build that wall!”

But, beautiful vision or not, I don’t want us to be naive about what it would mean

to pursue that high goal of “world community with peace, liberty, and justice”—not merely for some, but for *all*—in a world buffeted by the "rise of robots," the rise of human population, and the rise of tides and temperatures from global climate change:

- The rise of robots challenges us to ask “If we human beings are worth only the value our labor can provide to corporations, then will most of us be left out when robots displace us?”
- The rise of human population challenges us to ask if increasing numbers of people mean that there is increasing pressure to provide the resources that will allow each person to lead a dignified life.
- The rise of tides and temperatures means that global climate change will make all of this more difficult—and perhaps reach crisis points much sooner.

To pursue world community at such a time as this, I’m reminded of a riposte to the United States moving toward Liberal Internationalism: instead of “Make America Great Again,” Liberal Internationalism might say, “Make America Great (*Britain*) Again.”

There are at least two major red flags with that prospect. The first red flag is from the *past*: although there could be some advantages to “Making America Great (Britain) Again”—such as universal health care and maybe recognition that a parliamentary system isn’t so bad after all—history also reminds us that the specter of British Colonialism didn’t always go so “great” the first time around.

The second red flag, from the *present*, is the irony of an internationalist slogan of “Make America Great (Britain) Again” in the age of “Brexit”; only months before Donald Trump was to ride a wave of nativist resentment to become the 45th President of the United States, citizens of the United Kingdom voted by a slim margin of 1.9% to

withdraw from the European Union in early 2019, a major shift from internationalism to isolationism.

As the Indian essayist Pankaj Mishra has traced in his book Age of Anger, both Brexit and the election of President Trump are signs of how demagogues can use evolving technologies to manipulate increasingly cynical, bored, and discontented populations. In our increasingly globalized world, we misunderstand these events if we see them as isolated aberrations. Instead, we need to consider the ways Trump's election and Brexit reflect trends similar to the election of the Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi as Prime Minister India, the election of the authoritarian Recep Erdoğan as President of Turkey, and the far right politician Marine Le Pen winning 33% of the vote in France. Mishra writes that we need to be honest about the situation at hand:

- China, though increasingly market-friendly, seems further from a western-style democracy than before, and closer to expansionist nationalism.
- The experiment with free-market capitalism in Russia spawned a kleptocratic regime [under Vladimir Putin]. It has brought to power explicitly anti-Semitic regimes in Poland and Hungary....
- Authoritarian leaders, anti-democratic backlashes, and right-wing extremism define the politics of Austria, France and the United States, as well as India, Israel, Thailand, the Philippines, and Turkey. (8-9)

All that being said—and as important as our present moment is—I don't want to unduly extrapolate our civilization's likely future from only current negative world trends. Many factors impact cultural changes over time. Let's consider a few other relatively

recent historical moments. A little more than a hundred years ago, in the late nineteenth century, many of our Unitarian forebears were quite optimistic about the hopes of achieving their utopian aspirations quickly—the same dreams many of us share of a “world community” in which there is “enough for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.” Many of our nineteenth century Unitarian predecessors speculated about the “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.” But the stark truth is that their utopian social hopes about steady, inevitable progress were dashed in the twentieth century, starting with the horrors of the first World War and continuing through World War II, the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the Rwandan genocide, the September 11 terrorist attacks, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and more (21).

I don’t want to be unduly depressing. I know some of you are familiar with writers like [Steven Pinker](#), who remind us of the many reasons for hope and the many ways that things have gotten better for many people overall. And I will get to some of that in my June sermon on “Utopianism, Then & Now.” But my invitation this morning is for us to pay attention to the many, often deceptive, oscillations in trends over time.

For instance, I was eleven years old in 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell. At that time, the rising tides of authoritarianism today—almost three decades later—were difficult to predict. In the early 1990s,

With the collapse of Soviet Communism, the universal triumph of liberal capitalism and democracy seemed assured.... The words ‘globalization’ and ‘internet’ inspired...more hope than anxiety as they entered common speech. American advisors rushed to Moscow to facilitate Russia’s makeover into a liberal democracy; China and India began to open up

their economics to trade and investment; ...the enlarged European Union came into being; peace was declared in Northern Ireland; Nelson Mandela ended his long walk to freedom; the Dalai Lama appeared in Apple's 'Think Different' advertisements; and it seemed only a matter of time before Tibet, too, would be free. (6-7)

The larger point is that none of these various trends—neither movements toward a more open society then, nor movements toward authoritarianism now—are the inevitable, final, “end of history.” Progress and liberty aren't inevitable, and neither are fascism and global war (38). It is up to us to build the world we dream about, to turn our “dreams into deeds.”

So why have I taken the time to sketch out the lack of inevitability in history in a sermon about human rights? The main reason is that human rights are also not inevitable. The open secret in the human rights movement is that the concept of human rights is not a transcendental ideal handed down from on high. Like the social construct of inalienable rights long enshrined in the Declaration of Independence—long an American ideal—human rights are a social construct. In the terminology of historian Yuval Harari, human rights are a “fiction.” They are a particularly great piece of fiction, but they are nonetheless something we humans made up. (Of course, another open secret is that all of ethics and morality are socially constructed, as evidenced by the ways societal mores shift over time and among various cultures.)

Here's the way the political science professor Jack Donnelly puts it in his widely-regarded textbook on Human Rights (Cornell University Press, 2013):

Human rights ultimately rest on a social decision to act as if such “things”

existed—and then, through social action directed by these rights, to make real the world that they envision. This does not make human rights “arbitrary,” in the sense that they rest on choices that might just as well have been random. Nor are they “*merely* conventional,” in roughly the way that driving on the left is required in Britain. Like all social practices, human rights come with, and in an important sense require, justifications. Those justifications, however, appeal to “foundations” that ultimately are a matter of agreement or assumption rather than proof. (22).

So, while there is no guarantee that human rights will be respected, there is immense value in advocating for a world order based on universal human rights.

And although human rights are not inevitable, the power of human rights lies in the fact that human rights are, by definition, *inalienable*. Nothing anyone can do can make anyone more or less worthy of their human rights (10). Note the word “alien” in the middle of the word “inalienable.” From the perspective of the Human rights movement, your human rights cannot be made “alien” from you; they cannot be separated from who we are as human beings. They are universal, equal rights for all human beings—without exception. As with our UU First Principle (“the inherent worth and dignity of every person”), at the root of human rights is our belief and our deep value that all human beings—no matter who, no matter what—deserve “minimum conditions for a dignified life” (Donnelly 16).

At the risk of belaboring the point, I want to emphasize that this concept—this value (which may seem incredibly obvious to twenty-first century Western liberals)—has been far from accepted by most human beings who have lived. Historically, the

prevailing view has much more frequently been that the ones granted and treated with dignity—the ones perceived as having intrinsic “worth”—were the elite, monied and powerful few: royalty, the aristocracy, those at the top of various political, social, or religious hierarchies (121). The rest of us—the huddled masses, the commoners, the *hoi polloi*—were more often perceived either *paternalistically*, “as objects to be provided for, passive recipients of benefits rather than a creative agents with rights to shape his or her life” (35)—or as sub-human fodder for cannons, cogs in the wheels of production, or merely obstacles to the agendas of the powers that be.

Too often, the implication was that we commoners (who lacked intrinsic worth and dignity) should be grateful for anything we received from those who had not only already stolen from us our birthrights to equitable opportunities, but also believed that they owed us nothing. (This worldview continues to underlie debates about whether our various social safety nets are really just “entitlements” exploited by “takers.”)

Indeed, scholars have shown that—although there are various limited precursors — our modern conception of universal, international human rights dates back only seventy years to the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, written in response to the horrors of World War II (75ff). Indeed it is helpful to remember that it was precisely the horrors, authoritarianism, and fascism of the Second World War —which so starkly demonstrated that there was no inevitable guarantee that basic human dignity would be respected—that motivated the passage of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Donnelly 170-171).

And I find it incredibly significant to be part of a religious movement that draws its First Principle directly from the opening of both the Preamble and the first article of the

U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Preamble reads that, "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." And the opening of Article I says, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Sounds pretty UU—or perhaps I should say that UUism sounds pretty "human rights-y."

So in light of these ideas we have been tracing, how might we best pursue the high bar of our UU Sixth Principle ("The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all")? One proposal is a Global New Deal with at least five main parts:

1. A global "Marshall Plan" (similar to the economic aid given to help rebuild European economies after World War II) that would include blanket forgiveness of all Third World Debt.
2. A tax on international financial transactions that would benefit the global South.
3. Abolition of offshore financial centers that offer tax havens for wealthy individuals and corporations.
4. Implementation of stringent global environmental agreements.
5. Implementation of a more equitable global development agenda.

(Steger 118)

These are high bars to reach. But if we are to have any hope of achieving our goal of "world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all," I invite you to consider that it will require more than the bumper sticker slogan of "Think globally, act locally." While

acting locally will remain vital (“All politics is local!”), the goal of world community will require us not only to “think globally,” but also to “act globally.” For instance, this goal may require “Global Welfare,” paid for by a “Global Wealth Tax” (Moyn 219).

Along these lines, a Yale University professor of history and law recently published a compelling book titled Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World (Harvard University Press, 2018). Although Moyn admires this “sturdy floor” of the human rights movement (seeking to carve out a basic minimum for everyone), he has come to view this goal as *not enough*: human rights are *necessary, but not sufficient* for building the world we dream about (xii).

Moyn highlights that, “Human rights, even perfectly realized human rights, are compatible with inequality, even radical inequality” (213). He challenges us to wrestle with the question of whether we can truly have a “world community with peace, liberty, and justice for *all*” if we also allow extreme income and wealth inequality. This is not to say that we need to have complete egalitarianism. Profit motive will likely remain a major factor in almost any successful version of world community. But he *is* saying that *extreme* inequality is arguably incompatible with “peace, liberty, and justice for all”—because extreme inequality of money and other resources puts too much power in the hands of too few.

Moyn’s argument is that we need, not only the sturdy *floor* of human rights to ensure a basic minimum of dignity for all, but also a *ceiling* at some point to protect against extreme inequality. He calls us to “save ourselves from our low ambitions”—to set our sights higher if we are ever to have any chance of building the world we dream about (220).

So as we continue to discern how we might be led individually and collectively to turn our “dreams into deeds,” it is appropriate—on this Sunday in which we have been reflecting on the Universalist Declaration of Human Rights” as a response to the horrors of World War II— that we are also celebrating the annual UU ritual of Flower Communion.

The practice of Flower Communion reminds us of both the importance and the risk of working for justice. Flower Communion originated in 1921 in a Unitarian congregation in Prague, which at that time was the capital city of Czechoslovakia (now called the Czech Republic):

Under the leadership of its minister, Norbert Capek, it grew into the largest Unitarian congregation in the world with a membership in 1932 of more than 3,000 members. In 1941, Capek was arrested by the Nazis on charges of treason; a year later he was executed at the Dachau concentration camp in Germany.

Capek was martyred for standing up for individual liberty in the face of fascism. And the continuation of Flower Communion today affirms the heart of the original ritual, that

as no two flowers are alike, so too no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make. Together the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet. Our common bouquet would not be the same without the unique addition of each individual flower, and thus it is with the Beloved Community of this congregation: it would be lessened if any one of us were absent.

In a few moments, we will sing together our Flower Communion hymn #305, “De

Colores.” As we sing, you may remain seated. But once we start singing, I invite you to begin coming forward row-by-row — starting at the front and moving toward the back. Don’t be shy. There’s a lot of you, so once the singing starts, go ahead and start coming forward.

Each individual is invited to take a flower that is different from the one you brought. Select a flower that particularly appeals to you. And as you take your chosen flower, note its particular shape and beauty. (If you didn’t bring a flower, feel free to come forward and take a flower anyway. Some folks brought a bouquet so we would have extra.)

We’ll continue singing “*De Colores*” until everyone has come forward, including the Spanish verse, which we will sing as the equivalent of “verse 4.”

So I invite you, as we practice Flower Communion, to continue discerning what part you individually or we collectively are called to play in working to build the world we dream about—a world with peace, liberty, and justice (not merely for some), but for *all*.