

Beyond Borders – Living UU Values Through Service & Social Justice

Christine Hart | Keynote Address | NYSCU Annual Meeting | Little Falls, NY | October 26, 2013

Good morning. Thank you all for being here today; it's a privilege to have the opportunity to share a little bit about my background and experiences as they relate to Unitarian Universalism. I was raised UU, in a congregation in Western New York, the Unitarian Universalist Church of East Aurora. My grandparents were charter members of a neighboring congregation in Hamburg, NY. My dad taught religious education. My aunt is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. Today, I attend All Souls, one of the largest UU congregations in the country, in Washington, DC. Needless to say, my UU roots run deep, and so it feels especially meaningful to be here, with you, to share a little bit about my journey as it relates to global citizenship, service, and solidarity in the context of Unitarian Universalism.

I'd like to share some stories from my current work and previous experience as a Peace Corps volunteer and then I'll talk about how the lessons I've taken from these experiences relate to Unitarian Universalism.

I want to start by sharing with you one of my favorite quotes, which, for me, gets at the heart of service, social justice, and the critically important concept of solidarity. Lilla Watson, an aboriginal elder, offered these thoughts:

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

When I first read these words, as a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa, it felt like a light bulb went on. These two sentences got at the heart of what I knew to be true but had yet to effectively articulate. All of us, spinning around on this great green and blue planet, are bound up, as Martin Luther King, Jr. described, in ***an inescapable garment of destiny, a network of mutuality, so that whatever affects one directly, affect us all indirectly...our interdependent web of existence.***

Since then, I have posted Lilla Watson's words on a wall in every place that I've lived. I try to carry them with me, always, to inform my work and the ways in which I approach the world.

A complementary idea that I carry with me is one that we refer to constantly at All Souls--Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s concept of ***“the beloved community.”*** He spoke often of this idea of redemptive reconciliation, of seeking justice through dialogue, understanding, and forgiveness. King invoked this concept largely with respect to race relations in America, though he did travel to places like India, where his commitment to nonviolent resistance and the redemptive power of love were reinforced.

Dr. King said, ***“Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives.”***

For me, this concept is relevant to the expressions of injustice that we encounter in the world, from the domestic to that which occurs an ocean away, from a global economic system that keeps poor countries poor to the political assault on the social contract that we are experiencing in the U.S., with the rise of extreme political factions that promote the opposite of people-centered policies. King's conception of ***the beloved community*** is, for me, both an end goal and a means to achieving a more just and equitable world.

Let me expand upon this idea and my personal vision of mutuality and solidarity by sharing an experience I had about a month ago, when I traveled to Haiti for two weeks with Women Thrive Worldwide, the Washington,

DC-based non-profit organization I work with. Women Thrive is a small policy and advocacy organization with the central goal of bringing the voices of women and girls around the world to decision-makers in Washington, DC.

We focus on the ways in which U.S. foreign policy impacts women and girls, and we work to amplify their voices, stories, and experiences in order to ensure that international development assistance truly reaches the poorest, most vulnerable, and most marginalized communities around the globe, and that it benefits women and men, girls and boys, equally.

My colleague and I traveled to Haiti to facilitate a training on gender advocacy in Port-au-Prince with about 30 grassroots and gender-focused civil society organizations from all around the country. We also spent about ten days traveling through the countryside to interview women and men on barriers to women's livelihoods and economic prosperity.

This was my first trip to Haiti, but I've lived and traveled all over the world. After college, I served as Peace Corps volunteer in Burkina Faso, a tiny land-locked country in the heart of West Africa. I've backpacked through India, trekked in the Himalayas, swum in the rivers of central Guatemala, conducted field research in post-conflict northern Uganda, and worked with organizations combating human trafficking in the Philippines. But Haiti affected me in a way I have never before experienced. It brought into acute focus some really challenging issues, both in terms of international justice, the global economy, and geopolitics, and on a very personal level.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with Haiti's history and recent catastrophe, but let me back up and provide a little context. Christopher Columbus landed on Hispaniola, the island that, today, is comprised of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, before he ever touched the shores of the present-day United States. With the advent of Columbus and European interest in the Caribbean, Hispaniola became central to colonial-era commerce and the slave trade. By the late 18th century, African slaves outnumbered Europeans on the island almost ten to one.

In 1804, after several failed attempts, Haiti's slave population threw off the chains of bondage and declared their country the first independent black republic of the colonial era. In contrast, the first African colony would not achieve independence until a century and a half later.

From 1804, the trajectory of Haiti's history reflected the sheer will, determination, and courage of conviction of that early revolution, but also frequent turmoil born of a political structure and leadership that has oscillated from democracy to dictatorship and back again. Add to this unmitigated intervention by foreign powers, most notably the U.S., and frequent natural disasters exacerbated by almost total deforestation. This toxic combination has resulted in instability, endemic poverty, and the exploitation of Haitian citizens from within and without.

This was evidenced most recently with the devastating earthquake of January 2010 that decimated Port-au-Prince, killed a quarter of a million Haitians and, three years later, has left some 300,000 Haitians still displaced.

In the wake of the 2010 earthquake, Haiti's people once again found themselves at the mercy of outside actors. Unprecedented commitments of funds for reconstruction from governments around the world have yet to be fully disbursed. By and large, international organizations built parallel systems for service delivery and relief, instead of working to strengthen Haiti's public institutions. In turn, few Haitians felt the benefit of immediate relief efforts or long-term development projects.

While some development and relief assistance has been sustainable and well-integrated with government systems, most has not, leaving a majority of Haitians without access to schools, health centers, and safe water.

The Haitian government, severely weakened after the quake, which destroyed the majority of government buildings in Port-au-Prince, has in turn abandoned most Haitians.

In an attempt to amass wealth for the political and economic elite, President Martelly declared Haiti “open for business” with a focus on creating a favorable environment for export-oriented multinationals. Needless to say, these activities do not benefit most Haitians.

Fast forward to September 2013. I sat in an SUV driving down a road in northern Haiti with several of our Haitian partners, leaders of a peasant organization that represents tens of thousands of small-holder farmers throughout Haiti. We drove past an industrial park funded by the US government, international financial institutions, and multinational corporations. The development of these projects, on some of the country’s most arable land, has displaced hundreds of families.

Continuing on, our colleague pointed out 1,000 hectares of land, much of which was smoldering, as developers burned off crops and vegetation to make way for the cultivation of bananas for export. This land, occupied by hundreds of small-holder farmers growing food to meet domestic needs will soon feed far away strangers, instead.

As we drove on, we noticed piles of rubble scattered along the roadside and evidence of bulldozers and other heavy machinery. We pulled up in front of several family plots, where members of two households stood next to rubble piles where buildings had once stood. Bulldozer tracks greeted us as we descended from the cars. We listened as Josette, the matriarch of one family, explained how the machines had appeared one day, with no warning. How in subsequent days government mercenaries—hired thugs—had come to intimidate them, even committing physical violence against some of the men. She said that no information had been provided, no explanation for this sudden seizure of the land these families had rented from the Government of Haiti, had built on and farmed, scratching a meager but decent living out of the earth, for some 25 years.

As we walked with Josette and her family around their home and land, a bulldozer approached. Soon after, some of the mercenaries I described showed up to intimidate us and discourage us from talking with these families. As we prepared to leave, bestowing little but words of support and a promise to raise these issues with decision-makers as best we could, Josette became overwrought. Her tears provoked my own.

After we had driven a mile or two from Josette’s house, we were stopped and questioned at a police checkpoint that had appeared, quite likely, due to our presence. As we drove on, all I could think about was the reality of living in this environment, where rule of law is fragile and security tenuous. I pondered the role that foreign actors play in Haiti, how export-oriented development wreaks havoc in the lives of people like Josette and the 70% of Haitians who engage in small-scale subsistence farming.

While this was perhaps the most striking and disturbing experience of the two weeks, so many conversations I shared with small-holder farmers and women working in the informal sector evoked similar questions. I thought constantly about my own freedoms and immense privileges, juxtaposed with the fragility and uncertainty of so many Haitian lives.

Why did I choose to share this story with you today? That experience, standing by the roadside with a family who would soon lose so much—their home, their livelihood, their sense of place and purpose—brought into focus a theme that emerged and reemerged consistently throughout the course of my time in Haiti. Solidarity.

It's a concept that I pondered and puzzled over during the two weeks. It's a concept that recurs frequently in the context of our work with grassroots organizations fighting to claim their rights from governments that largely ignore them.

How do we dispel with false conceptions of "us" and "them"? How do we reconcile ourselves to our mutuality and, in my belief, the random chaos of the universe that bestows upon one person immense privilege and another unyielding hardship? How can we work to identify and name edifices of injustice and structural, systemic violence? How do we educate ourselves and our children in a way that is revelatory?

Last weekend, I had the privilege of hearing Beverly Bell, the founder of an organization called Other Worlds and one of the fiercest advocates for grassroots social movements I know, read from her new book "Fault Lines: Views across Haiti's Divide." The epilogue to Bev's book articulates the concept of solidarity in a way that I cannot. She writes, of Haiti after the earthquake:

[Begin excerpt]

"Historian Rebecca Solnit tells us that the written Chinese word for "crisis" combines the ideograms for "disaster" and "opportunity."

Given the bleak landscape, the rest of us might be tempted to think that the Haitian people are losing their shot at the opportunities in the disaster. But any number of factors could reverse the recent downward trajectory of the majority's well-being and power. It may well be that the final-drop phenomenon is at work. Many small gestures of noncompliance and resistance, some almost invisible and weightless on their own, are slowly rising. Who knows how or when the spread of the reservoir, from the accumulation of all those drops, may break the dam and change the landscape altogether?

But regardless of what changes social movements are able to force within their country, Haitians will remain trapped as long as the rules of global political and economic power remain unchanged. For that reason, how the disaster/opportunity dyad plays out is up to us, too. We all have an important role in it, for Haiti and our country. Yannick [a Haitian friend] said to me, "As Haiti alone, we can't get to the radical solutions that we need. It has to be a worldwide movement, in America, Europe, and Africa. This is why solidarity is so important. One hand has to give to the other."

Those of us from the United States carry an added burden because of the disproportionate power our country has over everyone else. People throughout the world have told me that the most useful action U.S. Americans can take is to work for change at home, because altering popular belief systems and government policies in this country will reverberate around the planet.

If for no other reason, we have to work together because we are all strapped to one globe. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that none of us is free until all of us are free. None of us is environmentally or economically or physically secure, either, until all of us are. We are all living the blowback of pollution, climate change, undemocratic global governance, corporate control, and war. None of us can save ourselves in isolation given the globalized, systemic nature of the problems. Personal or local acts alone won't cut it.

Ricot Jean-Pierre of the Haitian Platform to Advocate Alternative Development presented another way to think about this when I interviewed him a few weeks after the [earthquake].

"How can we as peoples develop ways to support each other when we have common problems? How can we get together to show that the battle is against a common enemy, which is the source of poverty and marginalization?"

We want to create another world that's based on solidarity and equality between women and men, rich and poor, North and South—not just one above and another below being exploited. We need to develop other forms of cooperation between and among peoples. We need to learn how we each can complement and learn from the other.”

Close collaboration between peoples from Haiti and other countries make at least two additional contributions. First is what we get to learn from Haitians' long and powerful organizing experience that we can use to fortify our own. Haitians are superb teachers in how to refuse to believe the lies, refuse to be silenced, refuse to be intimidated, refuse to accept the unacceptable, refuse to acquiesce. They are masterful examples of the potential of imagining what we are told is unimaginable, and of changing what we are told can't be changed. They are vivid reminders that we don't have to have money or connections or influence to make a difference. We just need hope, conviction, and the knowledge that none of us is alone.

Second is that we become part of an alternative model of human relationship, in which we recognize that we are all sisters and brothers except for an accident of birth and all compatriots except for an accident of history. We get the chance to experience what Malians refer to as *maaya*, meaning both “being human” and “relationship to others.” A common Malian saying is, “Life is a cord. We make the cord between ourselves, and you have to hold on to it. Don't drop the cord.” What can we do so that we don't forget this lesson? How can we take the concepts of interdependence and unity further so that people dedicate themselves to good global citizenry beyond the catastrophe, from New Orleans to Haiti and beyond?

Together, we have the chance to disprove Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum that “there is no alternative” and create another world. Transformation is afoot in Haiti, just as it has been across the United States with Occupy, the Middle East with the Arab Spring, Europe with anti-austerity protests, and in a surge of movements all over, where people know that we are not condemned to live in the world as it is. We are many and everywhere and energized, those who know that the time to be on the right side of history is now.”

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This brings me back to the concept of solidarity because this is what I think putting UU principles and values into action is really all about. Gregory Boyle, author of “Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion” wrote:

“No daylight to separate us. Only kinship. Inching ourselves closer to creating a community of kinship such that God might recognize it. Soon we imagine, with God, this circle of compassion. Then we imagine no one standing outside of that circle, moving ourselves closer to the margins so that the margins themselves will be erased. We stand there with those whose dignity has been denied. We locate ourselves with the poor and the powerless and the voiceless. At the edges, we join the easily despised and the readily left out. We stand with the demonized so that the demonizing will stop. We situate ourselves right next to the disposable so that the day will come when we stop throwing people away.”

Solidarity is a difficult concept to pin down. It can be elusive, particularly in the context of privilege. It is, by its very nature, challenging and discomfiting.

The twenty-seven months I spent as a Peace Corps volunteer marked the first experience during which I really started to consider solidarity and privilege in the context of my own life, in a way that moved beyond a conception of the “other”—of people far away, whose realities were so removed from my own that, in some ways, they did not truly seem real to me.

People have varied perceptions of the Peace Corps. Volunteers get branded “do gooders” and “idealistic” and are praised. In turn, they are criticized by those who consider the practice of sending young U.S. citizens abroad to serve and learn as demonstrative of the last vestiges of colonialism or indicative of a continued economic and political imperialism.

Reality is rather simpler than any of this. Peace Corps volunteers who speak well of their service have typically faced challenges unexpected, developed deep relationships that transcend race and language, culture and religion, and have learned to question preconceived notions, assumptions, and the status quo in new and difficult ways. Typically, volunteers will tell you that they’ve taken away from the experience so much more than they’ve given.

For me, serving as a volunteer in a rural West African village did something rather incredible to my worldview. In effect, the experience “flipped the script.” With limited language skills and just three months of training, I was dropped off in my village, knowing not a soul, nor what to expect from the two years to come. At the outset, the endeavor seemed terrifying and foolish.

I battled bats, mice, and giant spiders, as well as a language barrier, uncertainty, and, at times, a lack of confidence. In the end, joining the Peace Corps turned out to be the best decision I ever made.

Integrating into my community meant building trust, coming to understand people and all the trappings of their lives, and identifying the common threads woven through our respective identities and personalities. Cheryl Strayed, one of my favorite writers, puts it perfectly:

“The healing power of even the most microscopic exchange with someone who knows in a flash precisely what you're talking about because she experienced that thing too cannot be overestimated.”

My safety, security, and happiness depended on people whose reality was so different than the one I’d left behind in the U.S. I came to understand the challenges facing young mothers, my friends, who earned a pittance selling cakes or household wares in the market. But those same women possessed remarkable skill in managing money and running a household. They were clever, thrifty, creative, funny, and immensely generous.

Living among people changes the way you see them. The people in my village no longer conformed to my previously limited notions of poor, rural Africa. I saw the complexity of their lives and circumstances and started to question deeply all the factors and actors that shaped the landscapes of their lives.

In turn, my neighbors became friends who were as deeply invested in my well-being as I was in understanding their lived experiences, their dreams, and the challenges they faced.

One of my favorite Peace Corps memories occurred on a moonless night. Having just settled into my tent—the makeshift bedroom I occupied for two years because it was too hot to sleep inside my house, even at night—I realized I had forgotten my water bottle. As I stepped out of my tent and went to open the door to my house, the light from my headlamp illuminated the biggest, fastest spider I have ever seen scuttling across the door. I screamed. A blood-curdling, silence-piercing scream. Needless to say, my neighbors came running. Several men from neighboring family compounds, shirtless and wiping the sleep out of their eyes, piled into my courtyard. “Il y a quoi?” (What is it?) they demanded. I sheepishly revealed the source of my terror, pointing to the sand colored scorpion-carrier. After much laughter and shaking of heads, my neighbors took great pains to hunt

down and vanquish the spider. Regardless of the seemingly ridiculous cause of my fright, my neighbors cared enough to ease my fear. This is solidarity.

On another sultry evening, I sat in the village market with Salimata, one of my closest friends. Sali sold watermelon to the adults and children who loitered around the market in the evenings, socializing, selling cakes and sweet fruit drinks, or playing foosball. As we sat and chatted with passers-by, a local school teacher, notorious for his drinking habits and cruel demeanor, pulled up on his motorcycle and approached us menacingly. He'd made rude and inappropriate comments to me before and this time was no different. As he came closer to me, obviously drunk, Sali grabbed the enormous butcher knife she used to slice the watermelon and drove him off with threats that if he ever bothered me again, he'd have her to answer to. While I'm no advocate of violence, that moment meant more to me than I can convey. With no other reason to come to my aid beyond the deep human bond between us, Salimata put herself at risk to protect me. This is solidarity.

Travel and international issues are my passion. But solidarity doesn't require traveling thousands of miles to live in a mud hut. It is adopted, adapted, and realized in myriad ways, from approaching each and every person with respect for their dignity and humanity to engaging in service on any scale. It requires questioning structures and systems, thinking deeply, and acting with compassion.

This is where Unitarian Universalism enters the story—for me and, I think, for all of us. The foundation and framework embodied in UU principles and King's conception of "*the beloved community*" are tools that have equipped me to navigate some of the really profound issues and experiences that have challenged me along my own journey.

When I was little, I'll be totally honest, I sometimes felt a little weird, like I existed somewhere squarely outside of what was typical. Unitarian Universalism was not really a known entity among my grade school and adolescent cohorts. Catholicism and, to a lesser extent, Protestantism, were the norms where I grew up. When I would go to mass or youth group with friends, it felt so *easy*. Mass was predictable, the requirements of religious education were universal, the thinking, in large part, was left up to authority.

I got over that in high school—that magical period of young life that is deeply challenging and profoundly formative. I started to surround myself with peers who thought that Unitarian Universalism sounded pretty cool when I explained it, who were questioning their own religious and ethical frameworks, and their relationships to the world around them. I think it was at this point that I really understood what a gift it was to be a UU.

I truly believe that Unitarian Universalism has a critical role to play for young people. I see it every time I walk into All Souls on a Sunday and the congregation is teeming with 20 and 30-somethings. Granted, DC is a unique context, but it is amazing to see how many young people are searching for a community and spiritual home, even in the midst of the chaos of starting careers and families, pursuing graduate degrees, and the sometimes-manic pace of urban existence.

I think this is true everywhere, not just in a place like Washington. I make it to church maybe twice a month but, when I do, I am usually overwhelmed with appreciation for the experience of sitting in community listening to words that resonate on some deep level. Without fail, sitting in those pews helps me to firmly re-orient myself and make course corrections when I've inevitably become bound up and mired in the details and petty frustrations of daily life.

I know that many UU congregations struggle with attracting young people to their community. But I would challenge the notion that Unitarian Universalism doesn't or can't appeal to younger generations, because experience has convinced me that there are young people who seek what Unitarian Universalism has to offer.

I've thought a lot about what attracts so many young people to All Souls in relation to the congregation I grew up in and the congregation my grandparents helped to create. Some things are specific to the capacity and resources of a large congregation—parenting classes, social activities geared specifically to younger congregants, and opportunities to take service trips to places like Haiti or Ghana or New Orleans' Ninth Ward. But I think, more than these things, something that keeps young people coming back is the desire for a community of justice-seeking, like-minded individuals, a place for spiritual inquiry and exploration, and a place that facilitates a connection to the wider community and provides opportunities to translate values into action and activism.

At All Souls, our congregation is deeply connected to the surrounding community, from offering English classes to local immigrant populations to engaging regularly on issues of local and national political importance, particularly since Congress resides in our backyard. But activism and political engagement do not require immediate access to the halls of power. DC's marriage equality law was signed on the pulpit at All Souls because our community was an integral part of the critical interfaith efforts that resulted in passage of the law. During coffee hour, congregants interested in environmental and fair trade issues provide information on fair trade products, composting, and the benefits of solar electricity. Those who are politically engaged provide information on local elections and ballot initiatives. Others rally their peers to engage in local service projects.

This, I think, gets at the heart of what Unitarian Universalism has to offer, for young and old. A people- and justice-centered faith. A community of individuals who seek out what is revelatory, who are committed to realizing values through collective action from the local to the global. We are called to turn rhetoric into reality, in ways great and small, and to build community in the process of seeking justice.

And so I would conclude with words that were shared by All Souls' Reverend Rob Hardies during last Sunday's sermon.

“The world we live in is too beautiful to praise with just one voice. The world we live in is too broken to fix with just one pair of hands.”

The biggest challenge that I believe we face as Unitarian Universalists is putting our principles and values into action in a way that embodies Lilla Watson's assertion that, “our liberation is bound up together.” This is a challenging endeavor. It requires confronting the racial and socioeconomic homogeneity of many of our congregations. It requires creative thinking about ways to engage with our communities and pursue service and social justice in a way that moves beyond “helping” to, instead, standing beside those who are voiceless, powerless, and oppressed, in our own communities and oceans away.

I can provide no exact roadmap for how we more fully embody the concept of solidarity as individuals and communities. There is no panacea for confronting privilege and engaging in the discomforting work of moving beyond what is comfortable to what is challenging and transformative. But I believe that, in trying, we can demonstrate the best of what Unitarian Universalism has to offer to congregants and whole communities and this, in turn, will attract people with energy and vision to join us in our quest to create King's “beloved community” and work toward social justice in this broken and beautiful world.