

Time to be Global in Troubled Times

Bruce Knotts

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Faith, I'm delighted to be with you at the Unitarian Universalist meeting of South Birshire. I so very much admire the work you all do to create The Beloved Community. Our last Spring Seminar in April this year was on Climate-Forced Displacement. Our keynote speakers were the Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change. Two of these students are at the United Nations and working with the Mission of Vanuatu to the UN. Vanuatu is one of 15 Pacific Island states threatened by rising sea levels caused by climate change. The Indigenous peoples of these islands have a profound connection to their land where they and their ancestors have lived. Vanuatu has been called the world's densest linguistic landscape. There are 145 languages spoken by fewer than 300,000 people. Each linguistic group has its own culture and connection to the land where they live and where their ancestors are buried. All this is to say, that these are people not easily moved to Australia or the United States. Such displacement is a profound cultural injury. Island states in the Pacific preserve fresh water in pools and wells. This water is what they drink and what they use to grow the food they eat. With sea levels rising, the salt water inundates the freshwater reserves contaminating the fresh water making it impossible to drink or to use for agriculture.

We see the effects of climate forced displacement around the world and in our own country. I'm from California and my husband and I joined other family members to distribute the ashes of my cousin Carol's late husband, Glen, at Trinity Lake in northern California. As we drove from San Francisco to Trinity Lake we saw thousands of acres destroyed by forest fires caused by climate change. Trinity Lake has lost much of its water as have other lakes and rivers in the West due to climate change. There have been 8,100 recorded forest fires in California destroying 4.5 million acres of land including farmland and residential areas in 2020 alone. People have lost their homes and livelihoods which insurance has failed to fully recompense.

This displacement in California and in the Pacific Islands is taking place everywhere in the world. Floods in British Columbia Canada. Homes washed away in Germany. And we haven't touched the part of the globe that are poorest and most vulnerable to climate change. These climate events force people to leave the land where they live and seek refuge elsewhere. Sometimes that's elsewhere within their home country, but with increasing frequency, these catastrophic climate events cause people to seek refuge in another country.

Current refugee and migration law comes from the experience of the Second World War. You need to demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution by your government due to your ethnicity, politics, religion, and other factors. This kind of persecution was what resulted in millions of Jews and others being killed in Germany and millions of people fled oppression and war.

Refugee and migration law have not been updated to consider climate change. Furthermore, there is no political appetite to expand the circumstances under which people can claim refugee status. However, regardless of the inadequacies of the law, people must move. My own experience with refugees is that people move mostly out of concern for their children. What parent can watch their children suffer and do nothing. Parents who see their children starving, in danger, without hope for a decent life will do whatever they can to get their children to a safe place where they have hope for a safe and dignified life.

What to do? We must fight climate change. Recently the UN General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to make a safe environment a human right. We also expect the Vanuatu resolution to pass which will call on the International Court of Justice to provide an advisory opinion on the legal obligation of nations to ensure a safe environment for everyone everywhere. Addressing climate change is no longer optional. It is mandatory.

It is urgent that we preserve our forests, especially the Amazon Forest in Brazil. Forests are our best hope of absorbing carbon emissions which cause climate change. The United Nations has made it clear that to survive more of the earth's service needs to be covered by forests and far less can be devoted to industrial animal agriculture. That means we need to change what we eat.

In 2011 the UUA enacted the Ethical Eating: Food & Environmental Justice Statement of Conscience. This statement calls on us to eat a plant-based diet as much as possible and eat food that is locally grown.

The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation took notice, and they promote Ethical Eating Day every January 11 (1 1 1). Since January 11, 2019, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation has gathered 1,229,998 pledges to eat ethically in order to protect the environment. So, while the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation promotes Ethical Eating around the world based on the UUA's 2011 Statement of Conscience, UUs are largely oblivious to our own initiative. I am a proud Unitarian Universalist, and I'm also a proud follower of Dharma Master Chen Yen and I am a Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation Commissioner.

So, we need to fight climate change by every means at our disposal, beginning with our own eating habits.

Secondly, we need to share what we have. We need to be more generous and giving. We need to open our doors and borders to those seeking refuge from disastrous conditions caused by the polluting industrialized nations of the world. We need to embrace the concept of **loss and damage**. When a country like Pakistan is inundated by flooding that covers a third of the country destroying homes and precious agricultural land, we need to use our wealth to compensate for the loss and damage our industrial wealth has caused around the world.

We have a serious labor shortage in the USA and elsewhere. We have jobs and we can accommodate more migrants who are eager to work hard to have a safe place to live for themselves and their families.

Moving on from Climate forced displacement, let me touch on the global political situation.

I have long observed that we need to dismantle many hierarchies: White Supremacy, Religious Nationalism, English language supremacy, Patriarchy and much more. Patriarchy oppresses us all. It is only by dismantling Patriarchy that we can all breath free.

I have retired from my position at the UUA, giving me time and opportunity to focus my advocacy on issues of concern for me. I am currently the Director of International Engagement at the Community Church of New York where in 1962 the Unitarian Universalist Office at

the United Nations began its 60-year history of advocating UU values at the United Nations.

If you'll indulge me, I'd like to recall the three initiatives at the UU@UN that I feel were the most significant over the past years. I hope discussing **how** these achievements were accomplished might prove a guide as to what we need to do going forward in globalizing our advocacy to counter the very aggressive and well-resourced forces of autocratic religious nationalism which seek to destroy human rights, democracy, diversity, and inclusion. These are the folks that make it a crime to say gay, that ban books and won't allow a discussion of slavery and what was done to indigenous peoples around the world because telling the truth might disturb some bigots' sense of superiority.

I began my time at the UU@UN by meeting Rev. Bill Sinkford in Boston. I said, "I hope you don't mind, but I intend to follow a very aggressive LGBTIQ+ program at the UN." Bill said, if you don't follow such a program, then I will mind. I felt the wind in my sails. **It's that kind of support from the top that empowers dedication and concerted action.**

The UN was planning a conference in Paris to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human rights. The UN planned to discuss the human rights of just about everyone. Men, women, the Dalits in India, and Roma in Europe. Everybody except LGBTIQ+ people. I raised my hand and asked, "What about the human rights of LGBTIQ+ people? I was told, "We'll take that under advisement." I kept asking the question, week after week and I recruited allies. Finally, I was given the first ever workshop on LGBTIQ+ issues in any conference like the one we were planning in Paris. My workshop in Paris was well attended including a Swedish diplomat who told me that the European Union planned to present a draft resolution at the UN General Assembly calling for the end of violence and discrimination against people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Later, I was invited to speak to a much larger "Breakout Session" by Sister Joan Kirby, a Catholic/Buddhist nun. After that speech a Catholic Monsignor told me that he was gay and supported everything I was doing.

When I returned to New York, I worked with many others at the Norwegian Mission to the UN to ensure the UN General Assembly draft

resolution would succeed. It did.

In 2015, I got a call from one of the lawyers representing the family of Tamir Rice. You remember Tamir was a 12-year-old boy playing alone in a park with a toy gun. Timothy Loehmann, a white police officer drove up to Tamir and shot and killed him with no warning. The lawyer wanted to know if I could host an event at the UN to highlight this police brutality. I said of course. I mentioned that I expected to have an event with about 50 people. Then another lawyer called, and he said he knew Harry Belafonte. I said that if you know Harry Belafonte, then it will be a much bigger event. It was! 500 people were in the audience. The event was live webcast worldwide on UN webTV. I called Harry Belafonte UN royalty. Belafonte thanked me for my “warm embrace.” He was magnificent. Alicia Garza of Black Lives Matter was also a featured speaker. The High Commissioner for Human Rights and a host of luminaries also spoke. We launched the UN Decade of People of African Descent. This was not an easy event to stage. We got pushback from the American mission to the UN who feared we’d be too critical of the United States. The UN didn’t have the money to send a car to pick up Harry Belafonte and his wife both advanced in age, so I paid for the car service. In the end, the event was an enormous success, and the UN Decade of People of African Descent at the UN continues and will continue until 2025. On December 5 The Community Church of New York will host a similar event with the families of George Floyd and other victims of police violence, together with Colin Kaepernick, Kerry Washington, Craig Mochiber Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights at the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and we hope Rev. William Barber and many others to address police violence.

I did what I could to help Taiwan to become the only nation in Asia to enact legal recognition of same-sex marriage. I began as the Chair of the Department Public Information (DPI) executive committee which represented 2,000 NGOs at the UN affiliated with the Department of Public Information (DPI) which has changed its name to the Department of Global Communications (DGC). I was invited to speak at a huge event sponsored by the World League of Freedom and Democracy. I went with my husband and together we met the President of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and I advocated for same sex marriage in my speech and in my conversations with the President, Foreign Minister, and many others in Taiwan. I talked with LGBTIQ+ activists in Taiwan.

I also spoke with Master Chen Yen, Dharma Master of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation. She made it clear that she wanted to stay out of politics, and she asked me not to say she was either for or against same-sex marriage. I agreed, but I said, “Can I tell people that you and your entire Tzu Chi Foundation have been gracious and kind to both me and my husband? She said yes, and I did. I also told people that actions speak louder than words. Over the course of years, I met with members of the National Assembly, and I met with clergy who were for, against and neutral about same-sex marriage. The Presbyterian Church of Taiwan which is mostly very conservative forced a referendum on same-sex marriage which resulted in a majority voting against same-sex marriage. There were demonstrators against me and my husband.

People shouted, “We are not guinea pigs, don’t experiment on us.” I gave a speech which instantly became front page news in all the major publications. I said that you can’t vote on human rights. The majority will always vote against the minority. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we are all born free and equal in dignity and rights, and those rights can’t be voted away by any majority. Later, when the National Assembly debated same sex marriage many referred to the results of the national referendum on same sex marriage. Others quoted me saying that you can’t vote away the rights of the minority.

The motion passed and Taiwan is the only nation in Asia that has same-sex marriage.

Charlie Clemens, former head of the UU Service Committee said, “Bruce you were the right person and the right time in the right place.” That is my story. In every example above and in all I do, I see an opportunity, and I seize it when it happens to appear. I network, build support, and I do my best to persevere with patience, persistence, and professionalism. Some say, well, since you have this ability, help the Rohingya and Uyghurs. I do and I advocate for much more, like the important issue of nuclear disarmament. However, if the time isn’t right, and if I’m not the right person, in the right place, at the right time, then I’m just an advocate doing my best. However, if I happen to be the right person, in the right place, at the right time, I seem to have the ability to accomplish advancements of lasting importance. You can do this too.

Keep awake. Be alert to opportunities to make a difference. Even when the time is not right, stay engaged and be ready when your time comes to make history. Together we can change the world for the better. I will never retire from this work. Leaving the UUA has freed me to do what I do best when the opportunity presents itself. No one person can ever do

this work alone. We all need allies, help, advisors, and mentors. Let's do that for each other as we work together to create the beloved community. Amen and blessings on you all.