Liberté, égalité, fraternité: Liberty, Equality, Fraternity

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Thank you for inviting me to your lovely congregation and for your welcoming hospitality.

Your Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office brings our Unitarian Universalist values to the global work of the United Nations every day. So what do we advocate at the United Nations? Here’s an example:

Leading up to the American Revolution, Patrick Henry said, “Give me Liberty or give me death.” Liberty is the watch word of the United States. A few years after the American Revolution, the French had theirs. The French motto is Liberté, égalité, fraternité: Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. I want to delve into these three words and propose that we need more than Liberty. We need Equality and Fraternity as well. During the French Revolution, égalité, meant equality before the law. It meant the same in the American Revolution. However, how equal is our legal system? We see violations of anti-discrimination laws, even to the point of people being killed because of the color or their skin or their sexual orientation. Despite the laws on the books, there is little justice. It takes money to access the laws which are supposed to protect us all.

When the United States invaded Iraq, U.S. Government officials said that we were bringing “Freedom” to Iraq. When asked what “Freedom” meant, I heard one U.S. Government official say that “Freedom” means free trade and freedom to do business. Many talk about Freedom and Liberty. However, you need to ask these people to define their terms. Often people will scream to be free of taxes, and free to do what they want with their money, but they want to **criminalize what you put in your body** or **whom you love,** your **decisions about your reproductive health** and **other aspects of your personal life.** For them, freedom applies to money, but not the **agency you have over your own body.**

Perfect liberty means that everyone gets to do what they want. Perfect equality is some kind of classless utopia.

Perhaps the answer to balancing Liberty with Equality is in the concept of Fraternity. America is the most individualistic nation on earth, with very little fraternity. Even comparing America with Canada, our closest neighbor, there is more community feeling in Canada than here in the individualistic United States. Canada, of course, has single payer national healthcare coverage, generous old age benefits and they have the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which is perhaps the most comprehensive such national human rights charter in the world. However, **even here** in the United States, we accept such concepts as social security to **care for the elderly,** Medicare to provide some medical coverage to **those most in need,** and caring for our wounded service men and women. Many nations have more generous safety nets than the United States. Even though Fraternity does not carry the same weight in the United States as it does in France, we do understand that there is the need to balance the **needs** of the **weak and the poor** against the **liberty** of the **powerful and the rich**. However, we are among the most unequal nations in the world and we are at one of the most unequal points in our history.

It is Fraternity or love and care for others that provides the needed balance between the absolute necessity of having both Liberty and equality in our communal life. Caring for others provides the necessary bridge between liberty and equality. We Unitarian Universalists need to cultivate the most needed fraternité that will make our society more equal. It is obscene that the richest 1% of the world’s population now owns 50% of its total wealth, according to Credit Suisse.

Credit Suisse says wealth inequality **was** actually falling before the financial crisis in 2008, but income inequality has increased every year since 2008. The U.S. created 903 new millionaires between the 2014 and 2015, while median wealth has stagnated.

Experts agree, especially Thomas Piketty in his 2013 book, Capital in the Twenty-First Century, which I highly recommend you read, despite its prodigious length. We are at about the same level of inequality as was Europe in the 18th century. Inequality with visible signs of the rich getting richer and the poor standing still or getting relatively poorer **was** a main cause of **revolution** **then** and it is a **main** cause of **instability** **today**.

Another cause of inequality is the brutality of military force. The concept that weapons and the projection of military and police power is the answer to every problem solves nothing and creates more problems. The war on drugs, the war on terror, mass incarceration, breaking down doors in black neighborhoods and spraying mace in grandma’s eyes and killing her grandson and doing the same in Iraqi neighborhoods and expecting these military solutions to produce anything good is **madness** of the first order. What this projection of brutality and military and police power has done in our cities and around the world is to produce deep and profound **hurt** and **implacable** **resentment**. It produces an **us-and-them** division between those who have the brute force and those who don’t. Those who don’t have the power will **not** bow down and submit forever. They will and **must** find a way to fight back against overwhelming odds. The solution to drugs is not mass incarceration, it’s education and treatment. The solution to foreign conflicts needs to be much more about improving the quality of life and much less about bombs and guns. We really don’t need to confront every challenge with increasing the military and police budget. Assertion of power just creates another profound inequality which can only result in protracted and brutal conflict. We need to break down the stereotypes and expectations that to be “masculine” you have to be aggressive and **actively decisive** in response to conflict. Research has shown that planning teams which include women and men in touch with **social and emotional learning** come to more productive, thoughtful and balanced decisions than is the case when **only men** steeped in **aggressive** patterns of behavior make the decisions. Social and emotional learning teaches people self-regulation, critical thinking and compassion in solving problems and conflicts.

Today we have 65 million refugees and others on the move and unable to go home. We cannot sit idle while millions suffer. With climate change and repressive governments, we see an erosion of the wealth, health, safety, and comfort for **most** people while a **tiny few** enjoy **unparalleled wealth, luxury, power and privilege** which is as visible and as ostentatious as it was in the monarchies of old. This paradigm will only produce more refugees and poverty. I’ve never understood why coach passengers must be forced to walk through first and business class while boarding and exiting the plane. It’s like the rich want to rub our noses in it to make us see what we don’t have and **will never have**.

Let me repeat that last bit, because that’s the bit that most **don’t** believe. If we don’t have it, it is more likely than not that we will never have it and neither will our children nor grandchildren nor great grandchildren. The Economist and other publications document that social mobility is declining in America. In spite of this low social mobility, Americans have had the highest **belief** in meritocracy, despite evidence that **success is determined more by wealth and privilege than by merit**.

Most of us work hard just to barely scrape by while the wealthy don’t have to work, at all. Sooner or later, the 99% will bring down those with undeserved wealth and privilege. This can happen peacefully and democratically if **that option** is available. However, when that option is not available because the rich have **rigged** the system to make peaceful change impossible, then violence will occur as it does already with ever more frequency.

Another critique of capitalism is in a recent book by Edward Baptist, The Half that Has Never Been Told, which built on a lot of historical research done since the 1940s. That research demonstrates that American capitalism and capitalism in other countries is built on slavery. This wealth was built as much by northern bankers as by southern slavers in the United States. This wealth and privilege has been passed down from generation to generation, just as slavery, Jim Crow and mass incarceration has kept African Americans in poverty from generation to generation. The 13th amendment to the Constitution which abolished slavery has loophole in it which today is being exploited thus enslaving more Americans than in the 1860s. Prisoners are enslaved and forced to work making products for stores like Walmart and Victoria Secret, fighting fires and harvesting potatoes, just to name a few occupations. Currently we have over 2 million Americans thus enslaved and about 6.5 million who are denied voting rights. Black people comprise less than 10% of the population but over 40% of the **prison-slave** population. It’s estimated that one in three black males will be convicted of a felony, while whites can literally get away with murder and the theft of millions. What about reparations for slavery? Every Caribbean nation has a reparations commission, while the United States, the United Kingdom, France and every other slave-owning nation does not even want to discuss an apology for their crimes. What should be done to repair those crimes? How else would you describe the kidnapping, torture and sale of men, women and children? It’s a crime. The crimes go even further. Haitian independence which caused Napoleon to sell his Louisiana territories to America for 15 million dollars did bring prosperity to Haiti. France charged Haiti 120 million francs for its independence which Haiti continued to pay until 1947. Similarly, newly independent black nations in Africa had to assume the debts of the colonial administrations. Debt and unfair trading relationships have kept predominantly black nations from escaping poverty. Old habits of oppression have changed names, but the effects remain the same. White people retain wealth and privilege, while black and brown people are kept poor and powerless and enslaved.

Adolph Hitler appealed to the German people to support him to end government paralysis and class struggle. In coming to power, he substituted government paralysis with dictatorship and class struggle with racial and religious Genocide. Gross inequality and government paralysis often prompt people seek a savior to fix things. This usually ends up very badly, as Germany found when they trusted their future to Adolph Hitler. Ethnic and religious strife are invariably bad, while class conflict **can** be managed by maintaining shared opportunities for better standards of living with shared sacrifices. At the moment we have **income growth for the 1%** and only **sacrifice for the 99%**. That has led us to where we are today, which isn’t good for anyone.

Up to now, I’ve been primarily talking about income inequality. However, there are other types of inequality which also translate into wealth inequality. These are inequities due to oppression and discrimination based on more than just race, but also include gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, national origin and the like. We have seen these inequities on visible display in the 2016 election campaign. The rhetoric of this campaign is not new. From our beginnings the **owning** class has successfully divided the working class along the lines of race, religion, national origin, ethnicities and other artificial constructs to **get** us to hate each other and **prevent** worker solidarity to obtain decent lives for ourselves and our children. These better standards of live currently exist in many other parts of the world. Look who's instigating the divisions in the United States. It’s the owning class who **fear,** more than anything, the solidarity of working class people of all colors, races and ethnicities.

Part of that owning class is the military industrial complex. The U.S. Government plans to spend over $1 trillion to upgrade and miniaturize its nuclear arsenal. What we used to call nuclear deterrents, are in fact, assured global suicide. So instead of health care, education, infrastructure repair, high speed and safe rail systems, we will spend our money on better, smaller machines to destroy the planet. The U.S. Government just approved $38 billion for Israel’s military, the biggest military gift in history. Imagine if we used even part of that money to improve the lives of the poor with jobs, education, health care, providing decent and productive lives. Wouldn’t that be more effective in combating terrorism than bombing towns and villages? We have been providing military aid to Israel, Egypt and Jordan for years. Russia has done the same for Syria. Which do you think will bring peace faster? We’ve tried the military option for a long time. How’s that working? What’s the definition of stupid? Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Investing in people rather than military hardware might just produce the peace, prosperity and security for Israel which has eluded us with all we spend on supporting the military industrial complex.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with the words, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” “Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.”

Equality is important. Without it, the world tends towards violence and oppression. When men feel superior to women, violence and abuse follow. When white people feel superior to people of color, violence and oppression result. When one nationality feels superior to another, it ends in war and destruction. When one religion feels it is superior to another, even religions which claim to be about peace and love, they end up as violent oppressors of the most vicious sort, on a global scale. Look at slavery, colonialism, and several world wars all done in the name of a loving God, who is also a jealous God, intolerant of all other forms of belief or non-belief.

When people of one sexual orientation feel superior to other sexual orientations, they beat, bully, oppress those unlike themselves. The cycles of violence and oppression continue as long as we maintain our illusions of superiority and inferiority. We must learn to see ourselves as equals.

With our feelings of superiority, we feel we are right, and others are wrong. We think it is our duty to punish those who are wrong. We punish those who have the wrong religion, the wrong gender, the wrong color, the wrong nationality, the wrong sexual orientation, the wrong ideas, the wrong politics, the wrong gender identity or the wrong something.

When asked, many school girls in Pakistan replied that it is OK for a husband to beat his wife. When we believe that it is ever OK for us to be violent or to oppress, there is something seriously wrong with our system of education. This faulty education begins at home, continues in our schools, places of worship and beyond to our society. We must educate for equality, inclusion, and diversity. Being different is not wrong. It’s just different.

Rosa Parks, an American Civil Rights leader said,

“I was born in the South 50 years after slavery, and racial segregation was legally enforced. Racial pride and self-dignity were emphasized in my family and community because of the **seeming** **insecurities and concerted efforts of many whites to make blacks feel and act inferior.**

**I was, therefore, determined to achieve the total freedom that our history lessons taught us we are entitled to, no matter what the sacrifice**. To this day, I believe we are here on the planet Earth to live, grow up and do what we can to make this world a better place for all people to enjoy freedom. Differences of race, nationality or religion should not be used to deny any human being citizenship rights or privileges. **Life is to be lived to its fullest so that death is just another chapter. Memories of our lives, our works, and our deeds will continue in others.”**

At the June 2016 conference in Gyeongju, South Korea on Education for Global Citizenship to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, I said that we cannot all be of the same religion, the same color, the same nationality, the same sexual orientation, the same gender, and the same gender identity. We are all different. **No** **amount of violence and oppression** can make us all the same. We either educate for inclusion and diversity or we resign our world to violence, abuse, and death.

We face a challenging future with war and climate change standing before us. We can bicker like silly children over petty and insignificant differences, or we can stand together in solidarity, different as we are, to face the very real challenges that confront us. In our differences, we will find the answers we need to solve the problems ahead.

When men beat women, just because they can, we lose the talent and brilliance both the men who are lost to brutality and the women who are lost to violence. When we bully students into leaving our schools or drive them to suicide because they are different, we miss the creativity and innovation they could have given the world and lose our humanity in our stupid feelings of superiority. Different as we are, together we can turn suffering into joy and compassion.

So if you hear information which conflicts with what you believe, make sure you listen. That is what we do when we act as equals. When we feel superior, we ignore, disdain, bully, oppress and kill those we consider inferior. Never let anyone’s insecurities make you feel or act inferior because of who you are, what you believe or whom you love. Everyone deserves a safe and dignified life.

When we live as equals, we listen, discuss and learn from each other. We are equal, and we are here to listen and learn so that together we can make this a better, kinder, more compassionate world. Let us affirm, “We are all free and equal in dignity and rights.”

This is the message that I gave in Korea, and Taiwan this year, and will deliver in Vietnam, China, and Ghana next year and that I deliver every day at the United Nations and at ever higher levels and to ever wider audiences. We have changed the UN and the world in the areas of human rights and working on climate change. Working together with our allies and with an office like ours at the United Nations, we have every reason to be optimistic for a better world to come, despite all the problems we face today. Please join this important advocacy and support the work of the UU-UNO, your voice at the United Nations and beyond. We invite you to be a Blue Ribbon congregation in 2017 by having a UU-UNO Envoy team in this congregation to engage in our joint work to make a better world, to make a congregational contribution, have a UN Sunday which you’re having today and have at least 5% of your members support the UU work at the UN. We want you to attend and support your youth to attend our April Seminar on ending the violence of weapons in the world. To learn more about our programs, please check the literature on the table. We are making a big difference in this world.

When I started, George W. Bush was president and we got 66 nations (not including the United States) to support ending violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity on December 18th 2008. Your office at the United Nations has built relationships with governments, such as that of Norway, which consistently share our values and with other governments, such as the United States, which sometimes share our values and sometimes don’t. We have demonstrated our ability to be effective at the United Nations regardless of who currently occupies the White House. Please remember that our work depends on your generous support, now more than ever.