

4/11/10 Sermon

“And the Stars Were Snuffed Out”

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

I remember it well. It was a beautiful sunny day 10 years ago when I walked with some trepidation into the cool, dimly lit Yad Vishem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. I had been enjoying my 10-day tour of the Biblical sites of Israel, but dreaded entering this monument to the slaughter of six million of my fellow Jews. I knew in my bones that I had no real choice but to enter and face my own anger, despair and deep sadness about that event and other modern day genocides. I had to pay homage to my history and faith.

I imagined that each room was like the Stations of the Cross that Jesus, the Jew, walked. My journey brought me to the abyss, from a mockup of a cattle car, to piles of shoes and clothes, to the haunted faces of those gassed and burned. Each step more devastating than the one before – closer to doom.

In the final room, I lost what composure I still had. It was a simple room, bare of all furniture, devoid of light save for stars on the ceiling twinkling on and off. Each star represented thousands of the murdered innocents. In that moment, I broke down and sobbed as did many others. Collectively, we were shocked into silence and grief stricken by the tragic, grotesque representation of human cruelty that each snuffed out star represented. The night was filled not with stars in that moment, but six million of the murdered; six million corpses. It was too enormous, too horrible to fully grasp. It seemed all hope was lost. The web of life laid in tatters; the worth and dignity of all made into a mockery, a joke. All I believe seemed ruined. My devastation felt complete.

I had to get out of there. I couldn't breathe. I staggered unseeing through my tears until I found my way back into the light. Perhaps in the light there was relief and hope again. It did not come back immediately. It took me days before I could remember the room of heroes. There on the walls were people, the Righteous among the Nations, Jews and non-Jews alike who risked everything to save strangers. These were true heroes; representing the kind of person I hoped I could be.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are each called to be righteous people willing to stand on the side of justice and to act with conviction and courage to face down tyranny and injustice.

So few of the world's people did anything when it came to the Jews of Europe. Courageous people were hard to find but not impossible. While we cannot all be heroes, we can make a difference in our own way.

We can learn from the sacrifices of such heroic people. Two of these righteous people were Unitarian Universalists Martha and Rev. Waitstill Sharp who served as the minister of the UU Society of Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, in 1939.

Last year, these extraordinary non-Jewish Unitarian Universalists were posthumously awarded the designation of Righteous among the Nations by Yad Vashem, for their dangerous, heroic feats in rescuing Jews, children and dissidents from the Nazis between 1939 and 1945. They were only the second and third Americans to be so honored. They went to Europe in 1939, long before the rest of the world awoke to the full extent of the perils of the Nazis. It was just three months after the infamous Kristallnacht, which began active persecution of the Jews – before Germany attacked Poland, before the Nazis opened the death camp at Auschwitz. The Sharps perceived the real danger and realized that refugees would need to flee Nazi Germany.

Nancy Kaufman of the Jewish Community Relations Council reflected that the Sharp's story "is not one of presidents or dignitaries or superheroes. Waitstill was a 37-year-old minister; his wife, 34, was trained as a social worker and was raising their two young children."

In the wake of the Holocaust, Kaufman said, we continually ask, "How could the world have stood by and done nothing?" The legacy of the Sharps, she said, "is one of people who saw the need to act and did."

They were asked to go to Prague by the forerunner of the UU Association to help the large Unitarian Church there in Czechoslovakia and to conduct rescue and relief efforts. They left their two small children in the hands of parishioners for six months in both 1939 and 1940 and helped hundreds escape a sure death in the camps.

On more than one occasion, their work put their own lives in immediate jeopardy. On one such trip, they led 29 children on a walk over the Pyrenees Mountains from France into Spain and then onto a waiting ship in Lisbon, Portugal, to take them to America and safety. More than once, they were almost caught by the Gestapo.

The selfless courage of the Sharps is an inspiration to all of us today to get involved. How they found the inner strength and courage to act as they did

is a tribute to them as people. It also is testament to how important our shared values and principles are as a motivational force for the good. Out of their experiences, they founded the UUSC, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee).

While we can't all be heroes and go to Europe or Darfur today, we can act in our own unique ways and help those who take a more activist role. We can, writes Don Skinner, join and become involved with the "UUSC that works to defend civil liberties, protects access to democratic processes, and advances economic justice and promotes environmental justice. The Service Committee also responds to disasters, especially when human rights are concerned."

As we learned from the Sharps and others, we are not hopeless in the face of evil; and, sadly, there is no shortage of need for concerted action. Genocide is ongoing. More than 400,000 people have been killed in Darfur and over two million made into displaced refugees. Because there is no let-up to such evil, it is critical for people of conscience to get involved. The suffering there and in too many other places is beyond heartbreaking.

Who among us are the Sharps today? What are we going to do to stop the death and oppression in Burma, Iraq, and Afghanistan and God knows where else across this planet? I do find hope in knowing that we have the power to alleviate this misery and to stop genocide wherever it occurs. Life is made of righteous moments, not a grandiose moment, writes the Sharp's grandson.

In the end we must – each of us – must decide what a life is worth. Former UUA President Sinkford asks us, "How will we respond to today's tragedy? Will we be able to find the spiritual health and depth to respond? (Extending his hands) These are the only hands on Earth that can move the Blessed community. Will we answer the call?"