

Transforming Our Trash Into Treasure:
Working together to put our values into action
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It started with an e-mail from the UUSC in which they offered to send materials, samples of which you see here about Darfur: “Tents of Hope” which provides key facts and actions steps and a postcard you can sign and return to me to be submitted *en mass* to the chairman of the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee. There is also an information sheet called “Drumbeat for Darfur: Connect, take action, end the genocide.” I hope you will take one of each of these from the East Room table before you leave today.

When I received the e-mail from the UUSC, I thought maybe I was supposed to talk today about the ongoing genocide in Darfur. I talked about this in the past, and it is remarkable that it has continued to go on for so long, despite an international commitment after the *Holocaust* to “never let it happen again.” Once what was occurring in Darfur was called what it is, “genocide”, I really thought it would be brought to a peaceful end. There have been peace talks, U.N. sponsored sanctions against arms sales, divestment of funds, and commitments to fund and send peacekeepers. But armaments are still being sold to Darfur, and the violence persists. We need to continue to push for peace in this region. The UUSC is spearheading an effort to keep the pressure on, and we can all help with that effort.

As I contemplated what message the congregation needed to hear this morning, I realized that, large and important as the genocide in Darfur is, it is symptomatic of an issue which is even larger. Sometimes issues like the genocide in Darfur seem so far away, so big, and so intractable, that we wonder what we can really do to make a difference. The UUSC tries to help us get a handle on it, by outlining steps we can take, and making it relatively easy for us to take those steps. But there are so many issues of concern these days, from the economic meltdown, to the lack of affordable health care, foreboding environmental crises, the rising costs of

seemingly everything, the loss of jobs, and the lead up to the presidential election. The list, even while incomplete, can be overwhelming.

And then, in the midst of this, we had a big rummage sale here yesterday. So, I thought I would broaden my topic and talk about: "Transforming Our Trash Into Treasure: Working together to put our values into action."

As many of you know, my family moved last November from Parish to Central Square. It has been great to live in the Village of Central Square, so close to the church and my husband's school, and other amenities. We are ten minutes closer to almost everything than we were in Parish. The snow is more manageable, and the house is more accessible. What many of you may not know, is that we are still moving. Yes, we still own the house in Parish, and we are still clearing stuff out of it, and will need to fix it up before selling it. All this connects to the church rummage sale.

As I have been sorting things in Parish, I have had a recycling bin, a trash bin, a box for the rummage sale, and a box of things to save for my family's use. The goal has been to put as much as possible into the first three containers, and save as little as possible. Easier said than done. Sometimes I would come across something which I hadn't seen in a long time, but which I once treasured. There were some things which were still in mint condition, never having been used. I needed to decide whether I would treasure such things again myself, or pass them on. The outfit I am wearing today is one such item. First I had put it in our yard sale, then I tried to give it to a friend, thinking it would suit her. When she saw it, she recognized the make and loved it, but it wasn't her size; she convinced me to keep it and have the pants altered so that I could wear them. I'm so glad it turned out this way, rather than selling it for much less than it was worth at a yard sale. If I had followed the simple rule of "If I haven't worn it in the past year, just get rid of it" then I would have gotten rid of it. But life is complicated, and requires subtlety rather than simple rules. But many things I have just had to let go of and pass on.

Sorting stuff has been a good exercise, and something worth reflecting upon. It can influence our ongoing relationship with things, with their acquisition, and their retention. Now I am unlikely to buy anything unless I have a clear idea of how I am going to use it and where it is going to be put in my house. I remember the words of one man who came to a

yard sale years ago. He said, "I don't see anything I can't live without." Words that have been helpful to me, but not a sentiment we wanted to share with those who shopped at our rummage sale yesterday. As Janie has mentioned in her column in the church newsletter, there is a cost to cluttering our living spaces. Clutter drains energy from us, and makes it more difficult for us to be clear in our thinking and actions. So, it is great to simplify and de-clutter our lives.

As I have been sorting things, I have also had *set asides*, like a bag of mittens, gloves, hats, and scarves for the Christmas collection here for the *Lioness Club*. Some warm coats and jackets were given last November to *Downstairs Scotty*, so that they could be used right away by someone else, rather than continuing to hang in my closet. *Women Transcending Boundaries* collects different items at their meetings each month, as part of their service mission - school supplies in September, supplies to set up college dorm rooms, and so on. Today they are collecting warm clothes to be given to *New Americans*, many of whom are refugees from warmer climates who will be experiencing a Central New York winter for the first time. *Brrrrr*. I find that this is a perfect way to clear out the rest of the winter clothing that we no longer need.

For the past month I have noticed boxes piling up in the back of the community room downstairs. From time to time I would observe Ronna sorting and stacking the boxes to make them neater. Then clothing started to appear on the rack, and more and more boxes crept out into the room. People's generosity was evident! Then last week several people worked together to bring a semblance of order to the chaos. Tables were set up and items were sorted. I heard that the volunteers had a lot of fun working together. And their accomplishment was obvious.

A deadline was set for contributions to be brought to the church by Thursday evening at 7:00. It's a good thing that there was a deadline, as there was lots of stuff and limited time to sort it all. Thursday evening I was here for a Membership workshop in the dining room, and there was a group of volunteers working very actively in the community room to continue to sort and price items. And when I stopped by the church on Friday afternoon, a group was continuing to sort and price the items for the rummage sale. It was truly a labor of love, as well as a test of people's ability to work together, amidst tight quarters, tight timeframes, and fatigue.

Assessing the value of items is a sensitive balancing act. Shoppers expect bargains at rummage sales, and if you want to sell them, you need to make the prices low. But most of the items donated were once treasured by someone in the congregation, who donated it to help raise money for the benefit of the church. So, you want to honor the donors. When I looked over the things on the tables, I saw a ceramic pie plate I had donated, and it was marked \$1.00. It was new and attractive, and I was surprised; I would have kept it to put under a plant if I had known it would bring a \$1.00 or less to the church. But I realize that different people value things differently, and that whatever I had donated to the church I had to let go.

Then there is the sale day itself. This requires working together and maintaining a light and supportive attitude, even when the day seems long and the work may become tedious. It can be helpful to remember the larger vision, and the purpose for which we are working. The main reason we have a rummage sale, or any fundraiser, is because we love our church and want to help it thrive. So much inconsideration and difficulty can be put in perspective if we keep our focus on that. But the other thing to remember, when we feel a bit snippy, is that the way we are with each other is more important than the work itself. I'll repeat that: the way we are with each other is more important than the work itself.

And then after the sale, it will be time to give away any leftovers. The Baptist church in Central Square had a big rummage sale last weekend, and passed their leftovers to us for our sale. We will pass our leftovers on to other charitable groups which will get them into the hands of those who can benefit most from them.

As I thought about the themes involved in the rummage sale, these are the ones that came to mind:

- 1) assessing value- determining whether to keep something or whether to give it away. Does it have personal value to us, or would it have more value to someone else, and if so, who?
- 2) letting go- are we ready to let something go? What are the costs of doing so? What are the costs of hanging on?
- 3) re-gifting- a Native American concept that anything that we have is just temporarily resting with us, rather than something that we own. It involves

holding things lightly, with the awareness that that thing might need to go to someone else.

4) seeing the true value within- within ourselves, within each other, and within those we do not know.

As you can see, these themes transcend the rummage sale, and go to the heart of our relationships not only to things, but to people, and to ourselves.

As we reflect on these themes and think about the bigger picture, other themes come to mind.

1) We begin with a vision.

What do we hope to attain? How do we hope to be together? What kind of world do we want to live in, and to leave for our children, our grandchildren, and all who will come after us? First we have to envision it, before we can hope to create it.

2) Working together.

As most of us have experienced, we can't accomplish much alone..... certainly not anything big. We all need to pitch in and work together. Some people will bring certain skills, abilities, and passions to the work. Some will be leaders and will help organize others in the effort. Some will mainly do the "grunt work". Some will work more independently; others will need and want more direction. All will need to communicate with one another... to share their ideas, their dreams, and their hopes as well as practical things involved in accomplishing a common task. As we work together, it will be helpful to remember that it takes many people working together to reach our goals, and that different people will offer different things to the team. This remembrance is important, so that we will respect the differences among us. Even though the differences may be aggravating at times, they enrich the tapestry of our life together, and enable us to do things we couldn't do if anyone was absent from the team.

3) Transcending boundaries.

It is helpful when we can think "outside the box" and transcend our usual boundaries. This is facilitated by having a diverse team with many different ideas, and truly being open to listening to and considering the different ideas. Taking another's point of view can be very helpful. In

some circles there is an *empty chair* to represent those stake holders who are not sitting at the table. Sometimes during check-in at the beginning of a meeting it can be helpful if those present identify what unseated group of stake holders he or she will represent during the meeting. This highlights the fact that we represent many who are not present, and makes us more open to considering their needs.

4) Celebrating the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

This theme connects with all the other themes, but is worth mentioning. It is the first principle of Unitarian Universalism, the principle on which the others are based. As such, it is the heart of our movement and all that we do. If we just got that one principle right, the rest would follow.

5) Making our actions match our values.

As I just said, if we truly embody the first principle: *We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person*, our actions will fall in line with our values. Some examples are:

a) Through the rummage sale, we contribute to the church and the community. We are providing food and clothing to those who might need it. We are helping people dispose of their worn out flags in an honorable way. ARISE is providing information about local services available to people with disabilities.

b) The Green Committee is helping people in the church move toward a greener life style which will honor our earth. The highway cleanup is a great representation of our church. The Green Minute column in the church newsletter encourage us to reuse, reduce, and recycle and to do simple things like reducing our driving speed, lowering our thermostat, and using energy efficient Compact Fluorescent light bulbs.

c) We can be informed and motivated voters in the upcoming election, and can make our voices heard before the election.

d) This church has a wonderful DVD called *Heroes of the Spirit*, put out by the UUSC, which highlights the early work of Waitstill and Martha Sharp in

saving Jews and others in Europe before World War II, and connects it to the work of the UUSC to end the genocide in Darfur. If you haven't yet seen the DVD, I recommend that you borrow it.

e) We can all do our part to work with the UUSC to stop the genocide in Darfur, and torture everywhere. As Charlie Clements, the President of the UUSC has said, "You can make a difference. That's what it takes to build a movement. That's what it takes to end genocide, hundreds and thousands, or perhaps a million people believing they can do it."