

“Turn the World Around”
The Reverend Shawn Newton
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
21 October 2012

Introductory Remarks

I am honoured to bring to our pulpit this morning three different voices to join with me in conversation about why we, as Unitarians, support the ongoing work of our Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office.

You’ve already met Evelyn.
Our own Sarah McLaughlan and Eryl Court will join me, as well, in describing why each of us is committed to the UU-UNO.

All four of us had the privilege of attending the UNO’s Spring Seminar together last April.

These conferences take place each year in Manhattan, at both our UNO building and, across the street, at the United Nations headquarters itself.

Each conference focuses on a topic of great import—to both the work of the United Nations and the efforts that we, as Unitarian Universalists, are making to create a more just and sustainable world.

As we undertake sharing *our* reflections, I invite you to give thought to your own thoughts about the UN and the UNO.

What do you think about them both?
What do you really know about each of them?
And, what might you still have to learn?

Reflection by Evelyn Hope

Good Morning, thank you for the lovely introduction. As Shawn said my name is Evelyn Hope and the UU-UNO is very close to my heart. When Eryl asked me to speak here I was absolutely honoured. Thank you for having me.

I have been going to the UU-UNO for three years and each year has had one thousand amazing experiences. The seminar lasts 2 and ½ days, but as a youth we are involved with activities for 5 full days. We leave on the Wednesday morning and come back home Sunday. The seminar is so much fun, and what makes it even better is that on top of the opportunity to go to the UU-UNO you also get to see New York City with other UU youth from all over North America. In 2010 the spring seminar was based on Climate Change. One speaker that really stood out to me was Dr. Broccoli. He gave an over view of what climate change is and shed a lot of light on the ways we can reverse it. In 2011 we went to learn about Women's Empowerment. One of the speakers was a Queen Mother of Ghana and she spoke about her experiences with the women and children in her community. This past year, 2012, was on racism and immigration. The most memorable speaker for me was a young woman who was an undocumented American. This meant that she was born in another country, Mexico in her case, but was brought up in the USA. Due to this she has no American rights, but had no idea she didn't until she was 18 years old.

Every day of the seminar there are multiple speakers. These panels are made up of 3 to 6 people and they each speak about a specific topic that pertains to the over all topic of the conference. There are about 3 panels a day. The amount of information we take in during this seminar is incredible and the world view that we are given is profound. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to go for the past three years.

This brings me to the spring seminar in 2013. This coming year's topic is revolutionary. The fact that the UU-UNO is taking on such a touchy topic is wonderful. This year's topic is stopping violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. We have Bruce Knotts, the head of the UU-UNO, to thank for this. Bruce has brought LGBTQ rights to the forefront of UN issues, so thank you Bruce.

Another amazing opportunity we are given at the UU-UNO is to become an envoy. To me being an envoy means that you are an advocate for the UN. You are given the opportunity to contribute to the action the UU-UNO is taking and bring all the wonderful things you've learned back to your community. You can form UU-UNO working groups if your congregation does not already have one, and you are also responsible for your congregation's UN Sunday service. In my case I am lucky. At first Ottawa we have more than one envoy and even better we have 2 youth envoys which is why I was able to come here today.

Every year at the UU-UNO the experience is life changing and I look forward to going for many years to come. This year things are changing a little with how the UU-UNO works logistically. The UU-UNO and the CUC signed a partnership agreement in April 2011. This was needed due to a shift with the UUA and the UU-UNO relationship. This, in turn, has a direct

effect on how UU-UNO work is carried out in Canada. To make a long story short we will be having a larger and more direct Canadian focus moving forward. I know I look forward to seeing what this means for Canadians and the UU-UNO.

The UU-UNO spring seminar is honestly one of the most important parts of my life and I am so honoured to have been able to share some of my experience with you. Thank you for having me.

Reflection by Sarah Sackville-McLauchlan

N. B. – Sarah spoke without a written text.

Reflection by Eryl Court

At the founding convention to establish the Charter of the forthcoming United Nations, President Franklin Roosevelt affirmed that what “we seek” in founding this organization was – not merely an end to the Second world War, but “an end to the beginning of all wars”.

The first words of the UN Charter are that “We, the peoples of the United Nations” are “determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of War”.

Another President, and former General, Dwight Eisenhower, at the end of his term of office, affirmed that “this world at arms” represented “humanity hanging from a Cross of Iron”. His book concerning his work during his last term was entitled “Waging Peace”.

Lester Pearson, who represented Canada at the U.N., and was subsequently our country’s Prime Minister, gained the Nobel Peace Prize for his dedicated and determined leadership and initiative during the Suez Crisis of the 1950’s, working through the United Nations, for averting hostilities already under way, which were leading to a Third World War. Accepting this merited Prize, he affirmed “We prepare for War like precocious giants, and for Peace like retarded pygmies.”

President John Kennedy learned much during his 1,000 days in office. Shortly before he was assassinated, he told the UN General Assembly “Mankind must get rid of War, or War will get rid of Mankind”.

How far have we come towards achieving that goal in the more than 50 years since he spoke?

We certainly have not got rid of War, and humanity stands constantly under the threat of annihilation. The prospects for our children, for all Earth's children, are grim.

Yet the only hope of achieving a world free from war- Humanity's imperative - still lies with the United Nations, the centre of our Global Village.

Through our UU-UNO, which is about to commemorate its 50th anniversary, every one of us has the unique opportunity to take our part in achieving a world in One Peace. Unless we, together, "wage Peace" effectively, the prospects for the World's coming generations are virtually nil. We have the opportunity, during our lifetimes, to play our part, and establish a World "fit for children" (in the terminology of UNICEF). Then, perhaps by the time our UU-UNO reaches its Century, we shall have done our share to establish a civilized global community, under the rule of law – free from the scourge of War. There is no greater legacy we can leave for those who follow us.

Reflection by Rev. Shawn Newton

Perhaps the first thing I should say about the United Nations is how deeply disappointed I have been with the Security Council's meager response to the appalling carnage unfolding in Syria.

For more than a year, the world has sat idly by, as the scourge of war devours the people of Syria from Damascus to Aleppo and beyond.

There are reasons for this. Some better than others.

Fatigue from decades of conflict in that corner of the world.

Global economic uncertainty.

And, of course, the continued refusal of China and Russia to allow the United Nations to intervene.

It seems, at this point, that the best hope for action rests with NATO electing to try to stem the tide without UN approval—though this is almost certain not to happen

before the US presidential election is over.

This inexcusable impotence,
this failure of will and failure of imagination
at such a pivotal moment points up for me
the most serious shortcoming of the United Nations.

It, quite frankly, fills me with anger
that something more cannot and may well not be done—
especially since we have promised so many times before,
in the wake of the Holocaust and Rwanda and Yugoslavia,
that we would not let such atrocities happen again.

And, yet, as angry as I am, though,
I must confess that I find my commitment to the United Nations
only deepening.

With all of its imperfections and its problems,
I still believe the United Nations to be the best bet that we have.

In a world awash in weapons and rife with ideology run amuck,
we need a common place of meeting
to hammer out the most pressing problems that we face.

We need a table where we can sit and engage.

A place where we debate the most serious of questions—
questions upon which the very future of life on this planet hangs.

Even with all of the UN's flaws and follies,
I would rather live in a world as complicated as ours *with* that table
than to live in a world this complicated *without* it.

I would much prefer to see us sitting at a table
with Iran, or North Korea, or the Congo,
than to not have the opportunity to work toward common cause,
no matter how halting that journey turns out to be.

While I didn't appreciate the Prime Minister's recent decision

to blow off the opening session of the United Nations,
even though he was in New York that week
to accept the World Statesman Award...

I did, appreciate John Baird's challenge from the podium to the
General Assembly that the United Nations
needs to stop just talking about reform and get on with it.

What I hear him saying is that the table needs to be made stronger
if it is to be effective and if it is to endure.

It's not often that I find myself in agreement with Tory cabinet ministers,
but I believe John Baird is right.

And the way that I have found to personally push that agenda
is through the work of our United Nations Office.

Though I had been aware of the work of the UU-UNO for years,
it wasn't until I attended the Spring Seminar two years ago
on the status of women in the world
that my eyes were truly opened
to the enormous range of issues in which the UN is involved—
and, more importantly, to the untapped potential that we, as UUs,
have to influence conversations of global significance.

Recent examples include Elaine Harvey,
who was the envoy from her Unitarian congregation in Kingston.

She headed the Canadian delegation that led a faith-based caucus
to establish the International Criminal Court
which brings to justice those who commit
the most heinous violations of human rights around the globe.

In recent years, the UU-UNO's executive director, Bruce Knotts,
drawing on his past experience as a US diplomat,
has served and continues to serve
as a strong UU voice on the Conference of NGO's
in the areas of disarmament, sustainable development,
UNICEF, and human rights.

Bruce has worked relentlessly to help bring about the first truly international conversation about lgbt rights at the UN Human Rights Council, which last year, not only debated but passed a resolution that stated the UN Declaration of Human Rights must recognise violations that involve sexual orientation and gender identity.

As has so often been the case across the course of our history, we, as Unitarians, have had and can continue to have outsized influence.

That's why I recently agreed to serve as one of two Canadian representatives on the UU-UNO's Advisory Board.

A few months back, someone casually mentioned that, as a gay man, I must have decided to serve on the board because of the UNO's recent leadership on LGBT issues.

The comment surprised me.

Not only because there's so much more to me, but because there's so much more to the United Nations and to our United Nations Office.

Most importantly, for me, there is that table: where conversations range from the status of women, to climate change, to trafficking and modern slavery.

Where the insidious power of poverty and the crime of human hunger are not merely discussed but, ever so slowly, being eradicated.

I have high hopes for the United Nations, and am committed to our part in it, because I have, in recent years, moved beyond the overly-idealized frame in which I had, for far too long, tried to squeeze the very messy work of human progress.

I am committed to the United Nations, not because it's perfect,

but because it's quite simply the best way I know through the mess.

This morning, we are seeking your commitment to the ongoing work that we collectively undertake as UUs at the United Nations.

We have shared the story of our frustrations and of the satisfactions we have found.

We have told you how and where we invest the hope of our hearts.

If you're searching for the sermon in all of this—here it is:

Where do you turn when hope is hard to find?

When you despair for the desperate state of global affairs and the future of life on this planet, where do you invest your life's energy to make a vital difference?

There are, of course, many ways to answer that question.

So, may we, this day, each commit ourselves anew to living out our most meaningful answer, with passion and purpose that we might turn this world around.

Amen.